South-South Migration, Pandemic Precarity, and the Informal Food Sector in South Africa

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Abstract

The analysis of COVID-19 pandemic precarity in Africa should focus on the ways in which pre-pandemic migrant vulnerabilities were reconfigured in ways that weakened economic resiliency and reinforced disadvantage. This is the first paper to apply the concept of pandemic precarity to the impact of COVID-19 on migrants working in the informal food sector of African cities. The paper develops a new method for measuring pandemic precarity and applies this to data from a 2021 survey of migrant-owned informal food enterprises in the city of Cape Town. The Informal Pandemic Precarity Index (IPPI) and Informal Pandemic Precarity Scale (IPPS) are used to rate the severity of the pandemic on the business operations of migrant enterprises. Most enterprises score in the mid-range of intense pandemic precarity with smaller numbers experiencing severe and low precarity respectively. The proposed methodology has potential wider application as a way of capturing and quantifying enterprise, household, and individual precarity during times of crisis.

Keywords

pandemic precarity, food insecurity, informal sector

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Cover Photo

Zimbabweans being deported from South Africa through the Beitbridge border post. Credit: The Herald, Zimpapers

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Introduction

The term 'pandemic precarity' has recently been advanced to describe the negative social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations (Choonara et al 2022, Pichler and Küffner 2023, Tan and Chan 2023). Defining elements of pandemic precarity include unstable employment, material deprivation, economic anxiety, and food insecurity arising directly from COVID-19 (Prakash 2021, Sumner et al 2020, Tan and Lim 2021). Pandemic precarity also refers to the exacerbation of pre-existing poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity (Perry et al 2021). The analysis of pandemic precarity demands a focus on the ways in which pre-pandemic migrant vulnerabilities, challenges, and opportunities were reconfigured during the pandemic and the social inequities that weakened economic resiliency and reinforced disadvantages (Sumner et al 2020). In an assessment of the key drivers of pandemic precarity, Prakash and Borker (2022) maintain that 'institutions in the realms of the state, market, and civil society interacted and created conditions of precarity unique to the pandemic.' Furthermore, as Deshingkar (2022) notes, the end of the pandemic does not signal the end of pandemic precarity, nor has it prevented precarity aftershocks as migrant lives continue to be 'fraught with uncertainty'.

International migrants working temporarily in other countries proved to be extremely vulnerable to pandemic precarity (Chacko and Price 2021, Jamil and Dutta 2021, Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2023, Suhardiman et al 2021, Yeoh et al 2022). As Jones et al (2021) note, they 'had their employment in countries of destination summarily suspended or terminated as the pandemic spread, leaving them without a source of income. These workers often found themselves stranded due to travel restrictions and border closures as well as directly or indirectly excluded from COVID-19 related social security packages made available to national workers. The pandemic also exacerbated debt burdens carried by migrant workers.' Another group that was disproportionally hard hit by the pandemic was workers in informal employment and self-employment (Cassian et al 2022, Matilla-Santander et al 2021). As Schwettmann (2020) observes, 'lockdowns, workplace closures, travel bans, and social distancing measures sharply reduce(d) the economic opportunities for informal economy actors who rely to a large extent on the personal contact with customers.' In Africa, informal employment accounts for 86% of all employment and 90% of all female employment (ILO 2020). However, most COVID-19 economic mitigation policies focused on the minority of workers in formal employment. In many countries in the Global South, international migrants have a significant presence in the informal economy.

In their study of poverty and precarious work in Bolivia during the pandemic, Hummel et al (2021) note that 'informality, inequity, and overlapping health disparities and pre-existing conditions of specific groups are systemic and persistent issues that amplified the impact of the pandemic and explain outcomes observed across the country.' In the case of migrants and others in the informal sector, 'pre-existing conditions' included state policies toward informality in general and the participation of migrants in particular. In Africa, before the pandemic, the informal sector was widely seen by states as a site of pre-modern disorder and criminality, and as a direct threat to public health (Adama 2021, Crush et al 2017, Kamete 2020, Okoye 2020). There is now a large literature documenting the (largely unsuccessful) efforts of central and local governments to clear pre-pandemic streets through harassment, arrest, confinement, and confiscation (Dragsted-Mutengwa 2018, Kamete 2013, Kazembe et al 2019, Lindell et al 2019, Resnick 2019). However, far from being allowed to operate undisturbed during a time of unprecedented crisis, informal vendors were regularly vilified as vectors of COVID-19, subverters of lockdown regulations, and in need of still more draconian controls (Anazonwu et al 2022, Mwonzora 2022, Tirivangasi et al 2022).

The heterogenous nature of the informal enterprise economy meant that the nature and intensity of pandemic precarity varied substantially, with some better positioned to weather the storm than others. For example, the informal economy is highly gendered, which means that enterprises run by women have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and the assault on informality (King et al 2023, Mũrage et al 2022, Skinner et al 2021). Migrants working in the informal sector experienced a form of 'double jeopardy' by virtue of also being perceived by governments as undesirable 'outsiders' undeserving of any kind of pandemic assistance and support (Ramachandran et al 2022). Food enterprises have a significant presence in the informal sector and play a critical role in the provision of low-cost and accessible food to the urban poor. As a result, pandemic disruption of informal food vending had a significant spin-off effect on the food security of the mass of households in low-income communities. However, as Cassiman et al. (2022) suggest, we need to go beyond the stereotypical idea of the 'suffering precariat' and understand that 'the discourse on precarity is often misleading and patronizing, pointing to the ways humans either suffer or transcend victimhood.' Therefore, it is important to balance the disruptions of COVID-19 with awareness of the tactics and strategies of informal vendors to bypass state controls and intensified harassment (Kiaka et al 2021, Kushitor et al 2022, Mushonga and Makwara 2023).

In focusing on informal pandemic precarity in South Africa, this paper has three main objectives. First, it shows why the South African government's policy response to COVID-19 increased the precarity of migrant enterprise in the urban informal sector. Second, drawing on data from our survey of informal food sector enterprises in the city of Cape Town in 2021, we investigate the ways in which migrant food enterprises differ from one another and assess their relative vulnerability to informal pandemic precarity. And third, we examine the ways in which pandemic precarity affected food enterprises run by migrants from other countries in Cape Town, and their prospects for post-COVID recovery.

Policing the Pandemic

The deep antagonism of the South African state and citizenry to migrants from the rest of Africa and elsewhere in the Global South is now well documented (Crush et al 2015, Matsinhe 2016, Nyamnjoh 2006, Rugunanan and Xulu-Gama 2022). Over time, opposition has increasingly manifested as hostility, often extremely violent, to the growing presence of migrants employed or self-employed in the urban informal sector (Carciotto 2020, Crush and Ramachandran 2015, Gastrow 2022, Maharaj 2023). Murderous mob attacks and police extortion of migrant enterprises are now common currency in the country's major cities and smaller urban centres (Ramachandran et al 2017, Tawodzera and Crush 2023). Governance of the informal sector has increasingly been directed at controlling, regulating, and disadvantaging migrant entrepreneurship (Crush et al 2017, Gastrow 2018, Skinner 2019). Under the guise of fighting crime, the government periodically unleashes the national police and army on informal migrant businesses in militaristic "operations" with telling names such as Operation Clean Sweep, Operation Hard Knock, and Operation Fiela ('sweep' in SeSotho). Taking its cue from the state, a populist vigilante movement called Operation Dudula ('push out' in isiZulu) has vowed to drive migrants out of the sector and out of the country (Hlatshwayo 2023).

The advent of COVID-19 provided the South African government with new impetus to its longer-term twin policy goals of formalizing the informal economy while excluding or targeting foreign nationals (Skinner and Watson 2020). South Africa's COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is widely viewed as one of the harshest worldwide, not least by the South African government itself (South African Presidency 2021). On the eve of the hard lockdown in March 2020, the South African Minister of Police described it as 'war against a common enemy, the coronavirus. Whoever breaks the law and chooses to join the enemy against the citizens, will face the full might of the law and police will decisively make sure that we defend the people of South Africa' (South African Government 2020). More than 24,000 South African Police Services armed police officers (SAPS) mobilised to enforce lockdown regulations, augmented by municipal police departments and thousands of troops from the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) (Fourie and Lamb 2023). Kriegler et al (2022: 241) note that the enforcement of lockdown by armed police and the army resulted in 'a dramatic expansion of police duties, surveillance, and visibility'.

Breach of lockdown regulations was a criminal offence punishable by a fine or up to 6 months imprisonment. The dissemination of 'fake news' about the pandemic was also a criminal offence. The police interpreted their enforcement role as if it were a mass crime-fighting operation, seeing large sections of the South African population as 'potentially criminal (who) should be targets of aggressive forms of policing' (Fourie and Lamb 2023: 142). The on-the-ground enforcement by police and army focused on informal settlements and other low-income neighbourhoods. Apprehensions for breach of lockdown reached 300,000 by June 2020, more than in any other country globally. By April 2021, the total number of arrests exceeded 400,000. Most received fines, but more than 20,000 cases ended up in the courts.

When the lockdown was first imposed, informal enterprises in South African cities were forced to suspend all operations on pain of arrest and prosecution despite their central importance for livelihoods in poorer communities (Duma and Utete 2023, Khambule 2021, Sinyolo et al 2022). Despite being an 'essential service' for millions, anti-informality bias meant that only supermarkets were deemed essential and remained open for food purchase (Battersby 2020). Following intense lobbying from civil society and the spectacle of looting of supermarket food trucks by the hungry, the government moderated its stance three weeks into the lockdown and allowed some informal food retail businesses to re-open on condition that they obtained a municipal permit and did not sell cooked food. The chaotic permitting system erected another barrier for informal food traders allowed to operate.

Many municipal offices were closed during lockdown and there was an absence of information on where to access them (Skinner and Watson 2020). When they went to municipal offices, they found that some had no system in place for issuing permits or officials made unreasonable and obstructive demands (Wegerif 2020, 2023). Other difficulties facing informal food vendors included the closure of fresh-produce wholesale markets, transport problems, and confiscation of stock by the police (Skinner and Watson 2020). In many municipalities, only South Africans were issued with permits, and law enforcement began aggressively shutting down migrant-owned businesses. Migrants who were denied or did not have permits adopted various methods to continue to operate while trying to avoid the long arm of the lockdown law (Mbeve et al 2021, Rwafa-Ponela et al 2022).

The South African government responded to the dire economic consequences of its COVID-19 lockdown policies in late April 2020 with a trade-off ZAR500 billion relief package, including ZAR370 billion to registered businesses in the form of loan guarantees, tax and payment deferrals and holidays, and ZAR40 billion for a COVID-19 employment relief scheme for employees of businesses (Carlitz and Makhura 2021). Support was restricted to registered businesses 100% owned by citizens and whose employees were at least 70% South African which effectively precluded most informal enterprises (including those owned by migrants) from applying. Later, a Township and Rural Enterprise Programme (TERP) was launched to provide a loan and grant package of up to ZAR10,000 to small business and in September 2020, a token grant of ZAR1,000 was added for fruit and vegetable vendors. However, to qualify for TERP funding, enterprises had to be registered with the South African Revenue Service, and the Unemployment Insurance Fund, which again excluded most informal enterprises through anti-informality bias (Battersby 2020, Köhler and Hill 2022).

The government's war against COVID-19 and the absence of support for informal enterprise had a devastating, and under-documented, impact on 'locked out' small informal enterprises and their employees (Rogan and Skinner 2020). Wegerif (2020) reported that 'the pandemic has ravaged informal businesses to the extent that most of them have been liquidated while those that are still operating struggle to stay afloat.' In Cape Town, de Villiers (2022) found that 'COVID-19 and the associated lockdown regulations led to unexpected and prolonged closures of informal street trading enterprises, characterised by no income, no or minimal remittances, and exposure to food insecurity.' A WIEGO survey in the city of Durban found that 97% of street vendors, 95% of market traders and 74% of waste pickers stopped working in April 2020 (Reed and Skinner 2023, Skinner et al 2021). Eighty-one per cent of informal workers reported incidents of hunger among adult members of their household during lockdown. In households with children, 90 per cent reported incidents of hunger among children. Female self-employed workers and all migrants were disproportionately hard hit by measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The essays in Angu et al (2022) vividly demonstrate the hardships visited on migrants and refugees by rolling lockdowns. Migrant-owned informal enterprises were ineligible for government wage support and financial relief for small businesses. Registered refugees in South Africa were eligible to apply for some programs, while asylum-seekers and other migrants received little or no government support (Kavuro 2021). Several case studies have demonstrated that asylum-seekers, refugees, and irregular migrants felt disproportionate lockdown effects by virtue of their precarious legal status, informal employment, and class and gender positions (Mukumbang et al 2020, Mutambara et al 2022, Odunitan-Wayas et al 2021). As Chekero (2023) observes, "this inevitably placed many migrants and forced migrants in a worse position than nationals. Thus, with refugees losing their livelihoods, particularly in the informal economy, and civil society and international agencies unable to assist all, many were stranded and unable to meet their own and their families' needs.' As a direct result, they experienced a rapid increase in 'the triple burden of food insecurity, poverty and malnutrition compounded with social injustice and income inequality' (Odunitan-Wayas et al 2021).

Measuring Pandemic Precarity

The City of Cape Town was selected for this study for three reasons: first, the pandemic lockdown 'disrupted livelihoods, mobility and food provision, deepening food insecurity' in the city (Kroll and Adelle 2022). Second, the pandemic 'disrupted various Cape Town food system components, including informal retail (Kroll and Adelle 2022). And third, Cape Town is a major destination for migrants from other countries and who have a significant presence in the informal food system of the city. Our 2017 survey of the informal food sector in Cape Town estimated that 52% of food vendors in the city were migrants and, of these, 72% were male and 28% were female (Tawodzera and Crush 2019). However, the precise number and distribution of migrant food enterprises in 2021 was unknown so there was no population from which to draw a representative sample. As in 2017, we adopted a strategy of maximum variation sampling to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. First, six different types of land use area in Cape Town were identified: commercial, formal residential, informal residential, mixed formal and informal residential, and industrial. Within each of these contrasting types, research sites were identified where there was a heavy presence of informal food trading activities. In total, 11 separate areas were sampled including formal townships, informal settlements, low-income formal housing areas, and commercial districts (Table 1).

Table 1: Cape Town Study Sites

Research site	N	%
Bellville	80	17.8
Dunoon	73	16.2
Masiphumelele	70	15.6
Cape Town CBD	61	13.6
Wynberg	41	11.1
Salt River	37	8.2
Imizamo Yethu	34	7.6
Parow	30	6.7
Maitland	15	3.3
Other	9	2.0

Sampling within the selected areas was performed along streets, starting from north to south or west to east, depending on the direction of the main streets in the area. In each street, informal food vending businesses were selected randomly by rolling a dice and picking the business corresponding to the rolled dice. Thereafter, the dice was rolled again to select the next informal food vending business to be interviewed. If a non-migrant business corresponded to the rolled dice, it was substituted by the next migrant business. Once a street was covered, the process was repeated in the next street until the whole area was covered. The survey was conducted in November 2021 and captured detailed information on 450 migrant-owned food enterprises and their owners.

The survey instrument was previously developed and used in a 2017 survey of the informal food sector in Cape Town by the Hungry Cities Partnership (Tawodzera and Crush 2019). The questionnaire was loaded onto an online platform, Kobotoolbox, downloaded onto tablets, and administered electronically in the field by the research team. The use of the online platform and tablets allowed the research team to simultaneously collect and capture data that was later downloaded for analysis. A wide range of information was collected on the migration history and demographic characteristics of migrants, enterprise characteristics and business strategies, and operational challenges. To capture additional statistical data for the analysis of informal pandemic precarity, a section was added on experiences during the pandemic. Respondents were asked to respond to a list of 30 impact questions where yes=1 or no=0 (Table 2). Each enterprise was then scored on a scale ranging from 0 to 30 in which the higher the score the greater the precarity. We call this score the Informal Pandemic Precarity Index (IPPI) and the scale the Informal Pandemic Precarity Scale (IPPS). If an enterprise was unaffected by the pandemic, we would expect them to score low on the IPPS. Conversely, enterprises that were more negatively affected were expected to have higher scores,

Informal Food Enterprises

Most migrants in the informal food sector came to South Africa comparatively recently, with 70% arriving in the last decade (since 2010). Only 10% arrived in the country before 2005 (Figure 1). In general, women tend to be disproportionately represented among the more recent arrivals. Figure 1 suggests that there were two periods of relative decline in numbers (between 2010 and 2012, and after 2016), possibly as a response to an upsurge in xenophobic violence. The migrants come from a wide array of countries, of which 22 of the 25 are in different parts of Africa (Table 3). The main countries of origin (supplying nearly 60% of the migrants) are Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Almost 50% of the migrants are from other countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (which generally enjoy visa-free entry) and 41% are from other African countries in East and West Africa and the Horn (which do not). Only 10% are from the three Asian countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India.

Table 2: Metrics of Informal Pandemic Precarity Index and Scale		
General pandemic impacts on business		
1. Business temporarily closed to comply with lockdown regulations	Yes=1	No=0
2. Business sales declined due to lockdowns and social distancing	Yes=1	No=0
3. Business downsized its operations due to the pandemic	Yes=1	No=0
4. Cash flow in the business was reduced due to the pandemic	Yes=1	No=0
5. Lost income/profit because of COVID-19	Yes=1	No=1
6. Business temporarily closed because stock was unaffordable	Yes=1	No=0
7. Business temporarily closed because rent was unaffordable	Yes=1	No=0
8. Relocated the business to a cheaper location due to the pandemic	Yes=1	No=0
Impact on business operations		
9. Business had challenges accessing stock	Yes=1	No=0
10. Suppliers increased prices because of shortages in the supply chain	Yes=1	No=0
11. Business permanently laid off workers due to lack of money for wages	Yes=1	No=0
12. Business temporarily laid off workers due to lack of money for wages	Yes=1	No=0
13. Business reduced workers salaries due to the pandemic	Yes=1	No=0
14. Business has competition from supermarkets	Yes=1	No=0
15. Business has lack of access to credit	Yes=1	No=0
16. Business has too few customers	Yes=1	No=0
17. Customers do not pay their debts	Yes=1	No=0
Other impacts		
18. Sold my other business(es) to survive	Yes=1	No=0
19. Household food security increased because of reduced business income	Yes=1	No=0
20. Remitted less money home because of the pandemic	Yes=1	No=0
21. Had to borrow money in past year for business operations	Yes=1	No=0
22. Did not receive any COVID-19 government relief funds	Yes=1	No=0
Treatment by South Africans		
23. Business impacted by crime/theft	Yes=1	No=0
24. Prejudice against my nationality	Yes=1	No=0
25. Prejudice against my gender	Yes=1	No=0
26. Police confiscation of business goods	Yes=1	No=0
27. Police harassment/demands for bribes	Yes=1	No=0
28. Police arrest of owner or employees	Yes=1	No=0
29. Physical assaults by police	Yes=1	No=0
30. Physical assaults by South Africans	Yes=1	No=0

Figure 1:Year of Migration to South Africa

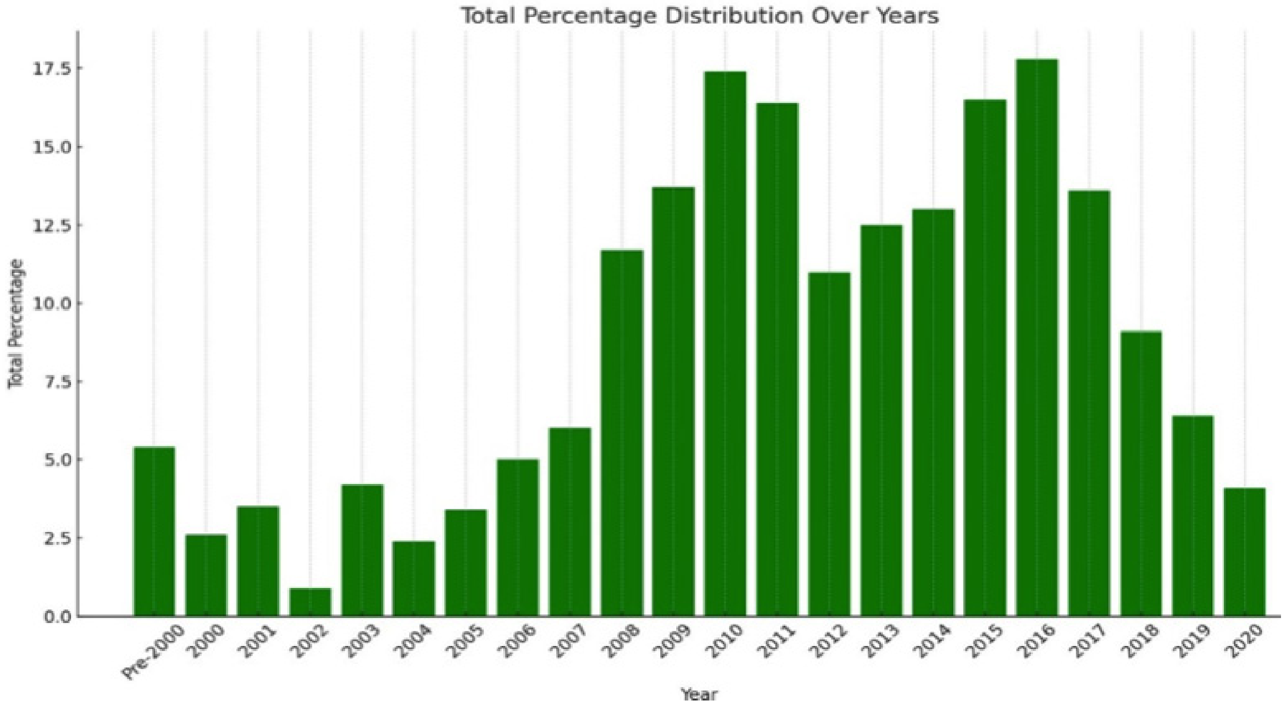


Table 3: Country of Origin of Migrants in Cape Town

Country	N	%
SADC countries		
Zimbabwe	125	27.8
Malawi	27	6.0
DRC	25	5.6
Mozambique	18	4.0
Tanzania	14	3.1
Zambia	7	1.6
Angola	2	0.4
Eswatini	1	0.2
Lesotho	1	0.2
Namibia	1	0.2
Sub-total	221	49.1
Other African countries		
Somalia	100	22.2
Ethiopia	41	9.1
Nigeria	10	2.2
Burundi	9	2.0
Congo	8	1.8
Uganda	5	1.1
Cameroon	4	0.9
Rwanda	3	0.7
Ghana	2	0.4
Egypt	1	0.2
Kenya	1	0.2
Sub-total	184	40.8
Asian countries		
Bangladesh	26	5.8
Pakistan	14	3.1
India	5	1.1
Sub-total	45	10.0

Further adding to the ethnic and language diversity of the food vendors are their demographic characteristics (Table 4). Males (58%) outnumber females (42%) in the sector and although most migrants are in their thirties and forties, almost 20% are youth in their twenties. However, there was no significant difference in the age profile of male and female migrants (Figure 2). Educationally, only 12% of the migrants have no formal schooling, while another 14% only have a primary education. Most migrants (almost 60%) have some secondary education or have completed high school. Only 12% have any post-secondary education.

Informal food services play a vital role in ensuring that Cape Town's low-income households have read access to affordable fresh, processed, and cooked food (Battersby, Marshak, and Mngqibisi 2017, Petersen, Charman, and Kroll 2018). Most migrants in our survey run their operations from temporary facilities (street vending) and more permanent structures known locally as spazas. Together, these enterprises constitute almost 60% of those surveyed (Table 5). Many spazas are converted shipping containers that offer a wide range of fresh and processed foods. The Cape Town spaza market is increasingly dominated by refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia and Ethiopia (Gastrow 2022). Most spazas are located in low-income settlements and, although they perform a vital service, they are often the target of looters during bouts of xenophobic violence (Charman and Piper 2012, Crush and Ramachandran 2015, Crush, Chikanda, and Skinner 2015).

Table 4: Demographic Profile of Migrants in Informal Food Sector

		N	%
Year migrated	Pre-2000	13	2.9
	2000-2004	29	6.5
	2005-2009	88	19.9
	2010-2014	158	35.7
	2015-2019	139	31.4
	Post-2019	16	3.6
Sex	Female	188	41.8
	Male	262	58.2
Age	20-29	83	18.5
	30-39	195	43.4
	40-49	134	29.8
	50-59	33	7.3
	60+	4	0.9
Highest level of education	No schooling	55	12.2
	Primary only	64	14.2
	Some secondary	156	34.7
	Secondary	111	24.7
	Tertiary	55	12.2
	Other (Madras)	9	2.0
Immigration status	No official documentation	164	37,8
	Refugee permit	108	24.9
	Asylum-seeker permit	88	20.3
	Passport but no permit	22	5.1
	Work permit	21	4.8
	Permanent resident	19	4.4
	Visitor's permit	10	2.3
	Business permit	2	0.5

Figure 2:Age Distribution by Sex in 5-Year Intervals

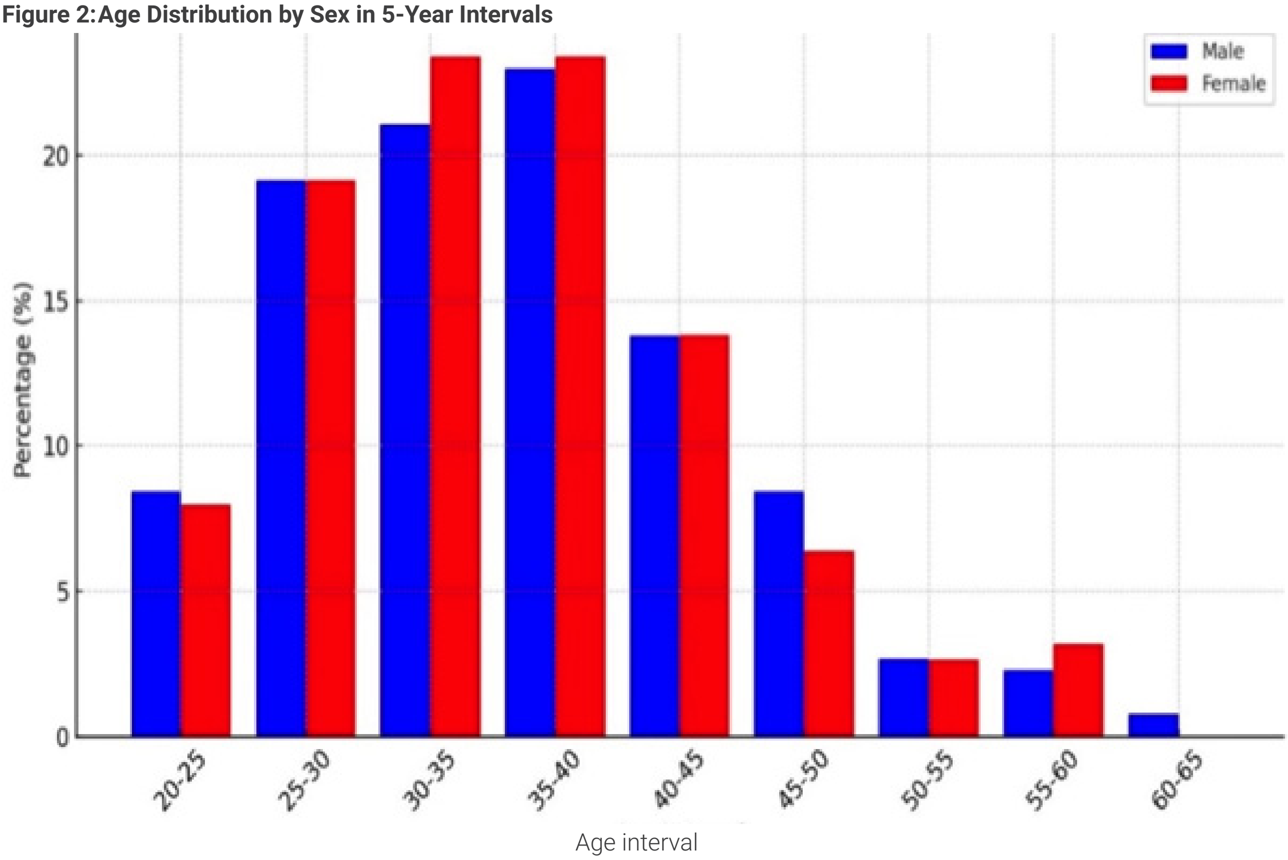


Table 5: Informal Foodservice Enterprises in Cape Town			
		N	**%**
Type of business	Temporary roadside stall	134	30.0
	Spaza	121	27.1
	Permanent market stall	51	11.2
	Houseshop	40	9.0
	Permanent street stall	37	8.3
	Taxi rank	25	5.6
	Workshop/shop	19	4.3
	Mobile/vehicle	12	2.7
	Restaurant	5	1.1
	Other	2	0.4
	Total	446	100.0
Business property ownership	Rent from South African	184	40.9
	Rent free (squatting)	74	16.4
	Rent free (with permission)	67	14.9
	Rent from non-South African	53	11.8
	Rent from municipality	43	9.6
	Own property	19	4.2
	Other	10	2.2
	Total	450	100.0
Rent	ZAR0-2,000	81	25.6
	ZAR2,000-4,000	58	18.3
	ZAR4,000-6,000	79	24.9
	ZAR6,000-8,000	48	15.1
	>ZAR8,000	51	16.1
	Total	317	100.0
Employees	Yes	217	48.4
	No	231	51.6
	Total	448	100.0
Remittances	Never	57	12.7
	Less than once a year	35	7.8
	At least once a year	202	44.8
	At least monthly	147	32.7
	Total	441	100.0
Profit	ZAR0-2,500	67	20.9
	ZAR2,500-5,000	96	30.0
	ZAR5,000-7,000	37	11.6
	ZAR7,000-12,000	67	20.9
	ZAR12,000-50,000	53	16.6
	Total	320	100.0

In some parts of Cape Town, spaza numbers are capped by legally problematic deals brokered by civil society organizations and the UNHCR (Gastrow 2022). In other areas, spazas operate relatively undisturbed under the aegis of powerful taxi associations to whom they pay protection money. Other types of food business surveyed included permanent stalls in markets or on roadsides (19% combined). The former are primarily located in the CBD in Greenmarket Square, where they operate alongside migrant handicraft stalls (Chikamhi 2011). Another group of enterprises target commuters at minibus taxi ranks, the main form of transportation to and from work. Shops run from rented houses are also relatively common (at almost 10% of the sample).

Most migrants rent their business property from South Africans (41%), other migrants (12%) or from the municipality (9%). Another 31% operate rent-free with or without permission of the property owner. Very few migrants (only 4%)

own their business properties. Rents vary considerably from less than ZAR2,000 per month to more than ZAR8,000 per month. Almost 50% of the enterprise owners are self-employed, single-person operations, while the other half have up to 5 employees (consistent with our definition of an informal enterprise). Only 12% do not send remittances from South Africa to their home countries. Around 70% reported that their businesses were still profitable, although there were wide variations in the level of profitability.

Informal Pandemic Precarity

While almost three-quarters of the migrant enterprises surveyed were making a profit in 2021, this does not mean that they had not suffered considerably since the onset of the pandemic in February 2020. To assess the overall impact of COVID-19 on these migrant food enterprises, we use the Informal Food Precarity Index (IPPI) and Informal Food Precarity Scale (IPPS), both of which were developed for this study. Here we present the IPPI and IPPS data in two ways. First, we show the ranked percentage of enterprises that experienced each one of the IPPI questions, divided into the four categories identified below (Table 6).

As the table shows, 83% of the migrants reported a fall in business income and profit as a direct result of the pandemic. Over 85% attributed the decline in sales and cash flow to lockdowns and social distancing regulations. Around three quarters said that they had challenges accessing stock and that suppliers had increased their prices, which led directly to 62% closing at times because stock was unaffordable. Problems with customers included a decline in patronage (experienced by 90%) and that they did not pay their debts (74%) which is a sign that business was also affected by the impact of the pandemic on low-income households at large. The impact on informal employment and salaries appears to have been less significant but is much more important if self-employed, single-person enterprises are excluded. Most businesses (69%) were also feeling the pinch from the formal food industry and its aggressively expansionist supermarket chains (Peyton, Moseley, and Battersby 2017).

Table 6: Responses to IPPI Questions

		N	%
General pandemic impacts on business	Business temporarily closed down to comply with lockdown regulations	401	89.7
	Business sales declined due to lockdowns and social distancing	387	86.2
	Cash flow in the business was reduced due to the pandemic	386	86.0
	Lost income/profit because of COVID-19	370	82.6
	Business temporarily closed because stock was unaffordable	277	61.7
	Business downsized its operations due to the pandemic	269	59.9
	Business temporarily closed because rent was unaffordable	76	17.0
	Relocated the business to a cheaper location due to the pandemic	62	13.8
Impact on business operations	Business has too few customers	403	89.6
	Business has challenges accessing stock	346	76.9
	Suppliers increased prices because of shortages in the supply chain	332	73.8
	Customers do not pay their debts	331	73.6
	Business has competition from supermarkets	311	69.1
	Business has lack of access to credit	292	53.8
	Business reduced worker's salaries due to the pandemic	138	30.7
	Business temporarily laid off workers due to lack of money for wages	94	20.9
	Business permanently laid off workers due to lack of money for wages	75	16.7
Other impacts	Did not receive COVID-19 government relief funds	446	99.1
	Household food security increased because of reduced business income	375	83.3
	Remitted less money home because of the pandemic	313	69.6
	Had to borrow money in past year for business operations	132	29.3
	Sold my other business(es) to survive	47	10.4
Treatment by South Africans	Prejudice against my nationality	340	75.6
	Business impacted by crime/theft	301	67.8
	Physical assaults by South Africans	180	40.0
	Police confiscation of business goods	172	38.2
	Prejudice against my gender	112	24.9
	Police harassment/demands for bribes	80	17.8
	Police arrest of owner or employees	47	10.5
	Physical assaults by police	47	10.5

The informal pandemic precarity challenges facing migrant food vendors were not confined to the economics of the business, but also extended to those who depended on them. Many food enterprises use profits and unsold stock to feed their households, so it is significant that 83% of associated households had experienced an increase in food insecurity due to reduced business income. Additionally, 70% had remitted less money out of the country during the pandemic. The exclusion of informal migrant enterprises from government relief measures is reflected in the 99% of respondents who had not received any COVID-19 relief funds. Migrant food enterprises had also experienced other forms of victimisation and exclusion. Three quarters reported that they had experienced prejudice due to their nationality and 25% of all migrants (and half of all women) had experienced gender discrimination. Two-thirds had been affected by crime/theft and 40% reported physical assaults by locals, partially a function of the looting of spazas for food during the lockdown. Police misconduct and criminality were also alarmingly high during the pandemic, with 38% of migrants having their goods confiscated and 18% being harassed with demands for bribes.

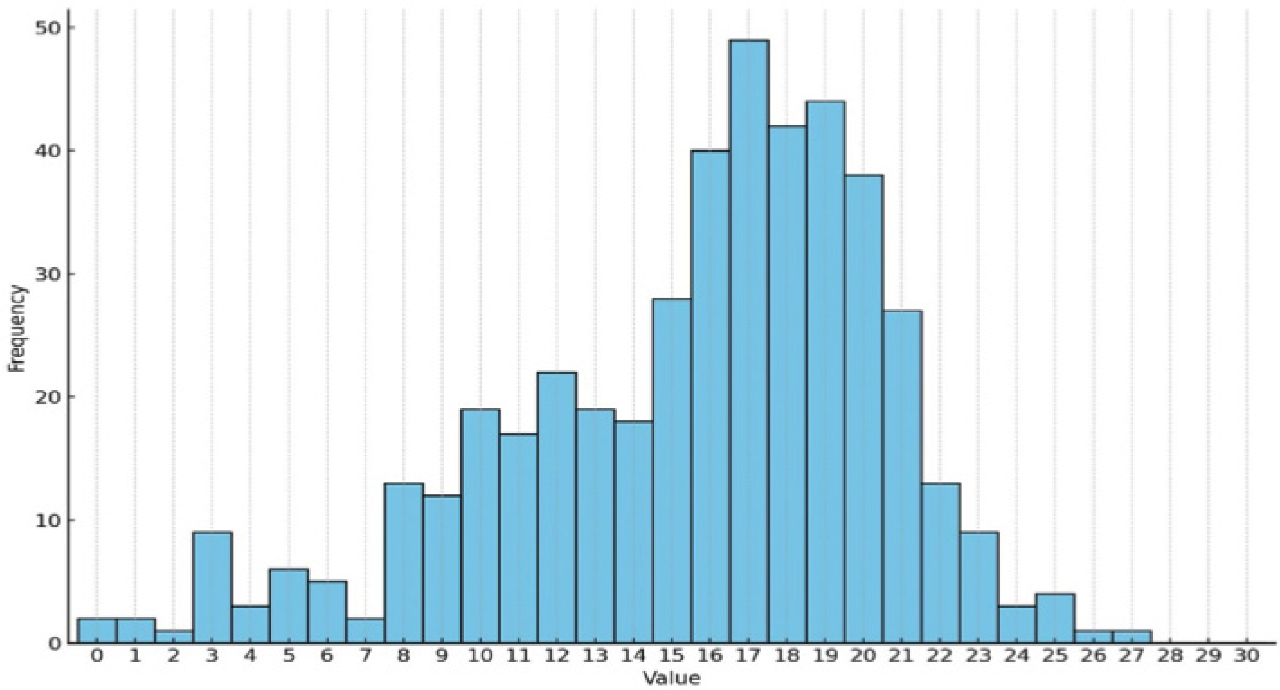
Second, to assess the general distribution of informal pandemic precarity, we plotted individual IPPI scores on the IPPS from 0-30 (Figure 3). The average IPPI score was 14.7. For purposes of evaluation, we divide the IPPS into terciles of low (0-10), intense (11-20) and extreme (21-30) informal pandemic precarity and calculated the percentage of enterprises in each category. The majority of enterprise IPPI scores (74%) fell into the middle tercile, with IPPI scores of 17 to 19 being the most common overall. A few enterprises (7%) experienced extreme pandemic precarity, while only 19% experienced lower levels of pandemic precarity.

Conclusion

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most migrants in South Africa lived in conditions of precarity. Their lives and livelihoods were constructed in an inhospitable economic and political context that hindered them from fully utilising the advantages or benefits that ordinarily accrued to local people (Crush et al 2015). Many came to South Africa to seek employment and provide support for family in their home countries. However, their status as migrants meant that it was often difficult to access formal employment and they ended up pursuing alternative livelihoods in the informal economy where incomes are variable and uncertain. And hence, migrants lived with multiple forms of economic marginalization and material deprivation, despite their overall positive contribution to the economy (Ngota et al 2019). This contribution went unrecognized by a national government generally indisposed to informality but also intensely opposed to migrants working in the sector (Crush et al 2017).

In this paper, we explore how the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pre-pandemic precarity of migrant informal enterprise in the City of Cape Town. The study results clearly show that the pandemic greatly intensified precarity among migrant entrepreneurs working in the informal food sector of the city who faced a myriad of new challenges including closure of businesses, decline in sales and profits, loss of income, loss of access to credit, difficulties in accessing stock, rising stock prices, theft of stock. and mistreatment by officialdom. While local entrepreneurs had the possibility of accessing COVID-19 relief funds, none of the migrants in this study had recourse to government support. This increased their vulnerability and reduced their resilience to pandemic disruption.

Figure 3:Migrant Food Enterprise Scores on IPPI Scale



The major methodological innovation of this paper is our development of a precarity scale with which to accurately quantify the phenomenon. Although our focus is on the measurement of precarity in the informal food economy, our Informal Pandemic Precarity Index and Scale are easily adaptable for use in other contexts. Our IPPS analysis shows that all migrant food enterprises were negatively affected by the pandemic but there was considerable variation across the sample in the intensity of the different dimensions of pandemic precarity. Future analysis will focus on exploring the reasons for these variations to determine which individual and enterprise characteristics are associated with greater or reduced resilience to precarity. The discourse on migrant entrepreneurship and informality is incomplete without delving further into the impact of unexpected calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A policy environment that exacerbates pandemic precarity also needs reform to become receptive to the specific needs of migrants in times of crisis.

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