Pandemic Precarities and Remittance Narratives in the Global South

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Migration & Food Security (MiFOOD)

Paper No. 26

Series Editors: Sujata Ramachandran and Jonathan Crush

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as a great disruptor of global migration leading to a crisis of immobility caused by public health lockdowns, closed borders, and the suspension of visa processing. Layoffs and retrenchments of migrant workers led to widespread hardship and an intensification of pre-pandemic precarity, as well as disrupted remittance channels and flows. Against this backdrop, the paper provides an overview of current debates about the relationship between COVID-19 and international migration in the context of South-South migration. We assess how pre-pandemic South-South migration flows were disrupted by the pandemic and the evidence for a crisis of immobility. We advocate use and measurement of the new concept of 'pandemic precarity' to draw attention both to the negative impacts of the pandemic on migrants and the ways in which pre-pandemic vulnerabilities were exacerbated by COVID-19. Finally, the paper focuses on the apparent paradox of increased remittances despite a reduced capacity to remit.

Keywords

COVID-19, mobility, immobility, pandemic containment measures, remittances, return migration, South-South migration

Suggested Citation

Crush, J. and Ramachandran, S. (2024). Pandemic Precarities and Remittance Narratives in the Global South. MiFOOD Paper No. 26, Waterloo.

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Cover Image

Migrant workers forced to return to Bangladesh due to the COVID-19 pandemic protest outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka on 5 January 2021. They demand that the government facilitate their return to the Middle East so that they can resume work and receive wages. Photo credit: ZUMA Press Inc./Alamy

This is the 26th Working Paper in the MiFOOD Working Paper series published by the Hungry Cities Partnership, an international network of cities and organizations that focuses on building sustainable cities and urban food systems in the Global South. The seven-year collaborative MiFOOD project is funded by a Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Published by the Hungry Cities Partnership at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Introduction

The COVID-19 control and mitigation strategies adopted by governments around the world created a 'worldwide crisis of immobility' (Martin & Bergmann, 2021; Lin & Yeoh, 2021; Newland, 2020). The pandemic has also been called a 'great disrupter' of all forms of regular and irregular migration and mobility (McAuliffe, 2020; McAuliffe et al., 2022). Before the pandemic, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) estimated that there were 164 million migrant workers who made up nearly 5% of all workers worldwide. One third of all migrant workers were in the Global South, including 33 million (20%) in Asia and the Pacific, 23 million (14%) in the Arab states, 13 million (8%) in Africa, and 4 million (3%) in Latin America and the Caribbean. In total, almost 75 million international migrant workers were affected in some way or another by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disruptive impacts of border closures and lockdowns on migrants are increasingly well documented, as are the hardships they experienced being locked down in crowded and unsanitary conditions far from their home countries, families, and communities (Ullah et al., 2021). A growing body of work has analysed the multiple consequences of the pandemic for migrants and mobile populations (Cairns & Clemente, 2023; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021; Sirkecki & Cohen, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2022). Much of this focuses on the challenging circumstances encountered by migrants and refugees in destination countries during successive waves of the pandemic and on return to their home countries.

In this paper, we provide an overview of current debates about the relationship between COVID-19 and international migration with reference to the phenomenon of South-South migration. First, we assess how pre-pandemic South-South migration flows were disrupted by the pandemic and the evidence for a crisis of immobility. Second, we advocate the concept of 'pandemic precarity' in order to draw attention to the negative impacts of the pandemic on migrants, and the ways in which pre-pandemic vulnerabilities were exacerbated by COVID-19. Third, we examine the debate about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on remittances to and within the Global South.

A Crisis of Immobility

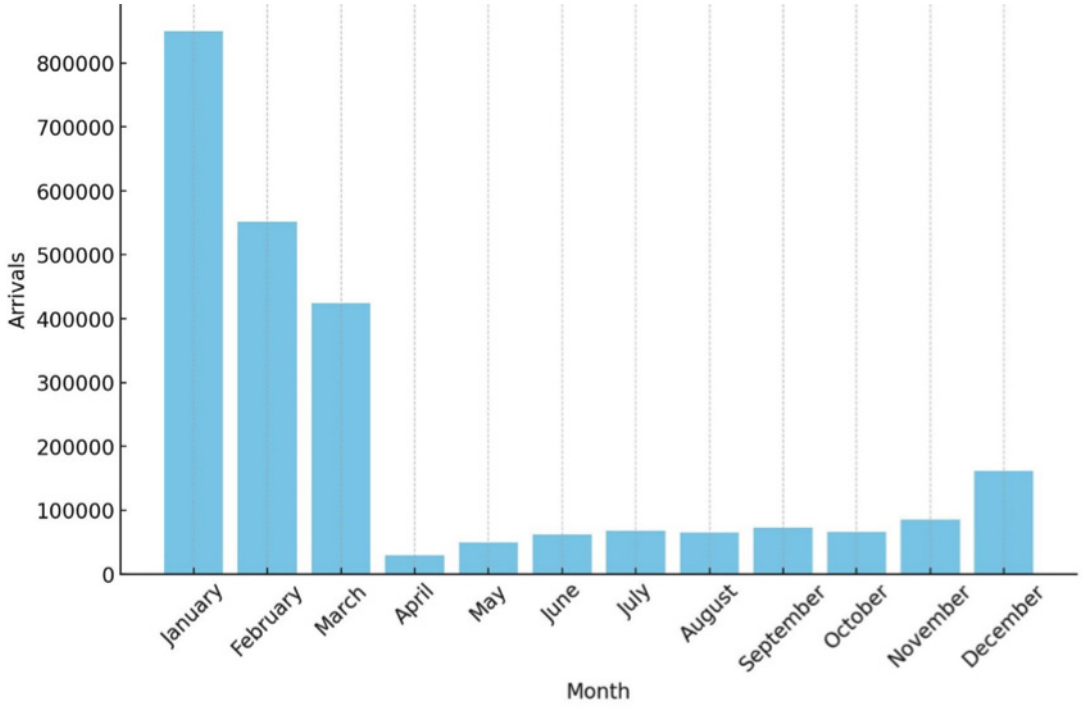
In March 2020, governments responded to the threat of COVID-19 by instituting travel bans, flight suspensions, and border closures, most of which remained in place for many months (Hale et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2021). As of the end of 2021, more than 100,000 travel-related measures were active (Benton et al., 2022). The sheer volume of rules, regulations, and prohibitions meant that moving across borders remained costly and complex, and tourism, business travel, and many forms of migration remained well below pre-pandemic levels. Internally, many countries issued national lockdown and stay-at-home orders of varying length, although none quite as severe as China's 'Zero- COVID' policy (Keng et al., 2023) or South Africa's militaristic response (Fourie & Lamb, 2023). Border closures and lockdowns resulted in a challenging situation where many migrants were trapped in the receiving countries, while others were required to return to their sending countries, and many other migrants decided to return after losing their jobs and incomes (Newland, 2020). At the other end of the supply chain, the recruitment and mobilisation of new migrant workers ground to a halt (Jones et al., 2021). For example, around 1.6 million potential migrants from Pakistan could not leave the country in 2020 due to COVID-related restrictions (Farooq & Arif, 2023). The Philippines also experienced a 75% reduction in the deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in 2020. Bangladesh saw a 69% decline in labour outflow from 700,000 in 2019 to 218,000 in 2020 (Rajan & Arcand, 2023).

Even when governments did not issue outright travel bans, many suspended the processing of visas. The international refugee system was also affected by the closing of borders and tightening of migration regimes (Crawley, 2021). Of the 120 countries that instituted some form of border closure, only about 30 were still considering asylum-seeker claims in mid-2020. Furthermore, many resettlement programmes came to a halt. Restrictive mobility measures also disrupted the deportations of irregular migrants. As Guadagno (2020, p. 110) notes, many countries stopped deportation processes of irregular migrants 'given the impossibility to logistically and physically proceed due to many travel restrictions passed by countries all over the world'. However, others continued with deportations including the US, which expelled 185,000 migrants during 2020 (Cénat, 2020).

The impacts of the crisis of immobility on migration flows have become increasingly evident in the analysis of big data, such as Google Mobility (Sadowski et al., 2021). Official arrivals and departures data provide other measures of the impact of closed borders and attendant restrictions on cross-border mobility. In the case of South Africa, the dramatic impact of COVID-19 is clearly visible in the administrative data. Table 1 shows that there were over 15.7 million international arrivals in pre-pandemic South Africa in 2019 compared to only 4.3 million in 2020 and 3.1 million in 2021. The number of arrivals at the height of the pandemic from April to December 2020 was just 630,000 (compared to 11.7 million in 2019 and 2.6 million in 2021). In April 2020, during the hard lockdown, the number plummeted to less than 30,000 (compared to 1.35 million in April 2019). There was a slight increase from May to July 2020, as South Africa relaxed its more draconian mobility restrictions. These began to recover towards the end of 2020, although successive waves of the pandemic ensured that the numbers did not rebound to their pre-COVID levels throughout 2021. With reference to South-South immobility, there was a dramatic decline from 850,000 arrivals from other African countries in January 2020 to less than 30,000 in April 2020 (Figure 1). The numbers slowly increased during the rest of 2020 but remained relatively static at less than 200,000 for most of 2021. The reason why the numbers did not go down to zero in 2020 was that some borders remained open for essential transport such as food imports and exports. Mushomi et al. (2022) and Moyo (2022) suggest that despite border closures, they remained relatively porous and irregular border crossing was disrupted but did not cease altogether.

Table 1: International Arrivals in South Africa, 2019-2021			
Month	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**
January	1,561,510	1,595,388	195,861
February	1,205,901	1,218,468	136,510
March	1,301,855	863,232	223,135
April	1,350,167	29,341	248,314
May	1,213,675	49,481	258,521
June	1,163,574	62,841	253,857
July	1,238,165	68,914	217,373
August	1,377,914	67,051	268,946
September	1,219,616	75,273	291,042
October	1,211,758	124,165	337,611
November	1,336,068	152,694	371,649
December	1,559,368	279,539	347,188
Total	15,739,570	4,307,128	3,150,007
Source: Statistics South Africa (2019-2021)			

Figure 1: International Arrivals in South Africa from Other African Countries, 2020



Source: Statistics South Africa (2019-2021)

Migration restrictions and disruptions in transport services impacted the ability of international migrants to return voluntarily to their countries of origin. However, the COVID-19 containment and mitigation measures also led to increased mobility in some parts of the world. In different parts of the world, the first response to sudden loss of employment and draconian lockdowns was to head for home. This had the unintended consequence of disseminating the coronavirus from one country to another and from urban hotspots to rural communities. In the early months of the pandemic, for example, an estimated 100,000 Venezuelan migrants in Colombia made the decision to return home, many on foot (Turkewitz & Herrera, 2020). In the Philippines, nearly 800,000 Filipinos had returned home by the end of 2020 (Opiniano & Ang, 2023). As many as 200,000 Bangladeshi migrants may have returned in early 2020 before the Bangladesh government suspended incoming flights (Rahman et al., 2023). In the Gulf States, countries in South Asia were pressured to repatriate their citizens, primarily because they were not prepared to provide for the basic subsistence and health needs of retrenched migrant workers (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021; Farooq & Arif, 2023; Weeraratne, 2020). During 2020, the number of repatriation requests from desperate Indian migrants in the Gulf and elsewhere soared, and by September, over one million had been received (Rajan & Arokkiaraj, 2022; Rajan & Pattath, 2022). In May 2020, the Indian government launched the Vande Bharat Mission for the safe return of Indian nationals and by the end of the year, over 9 million Indian nationals had been repatriated to all parts of India (Table 2)

Table 2: Repatriation of Indian Nationals to India During 2020	
State	**No. of repatriates**
Delhi	2,760,000
Kerala	2,399,688
Maharashtra	1,009,619
Tamil Nadu	905,845
Telangana	638,225
Uttar Pradesh	487,682
Karnataka	593,321
Gujarat	210,417
Punjab	151,064
West Bengal	133,567
Rajasthan	111,370
Andhra Pradesh	94,244
Goa	36,798
Bihar	11,914
Chandigarh	11,617
Odisha	5,425
Madhya Pradesh	1,393
Other	381
Total	9,562,570
Source: Rajan & Arokkiaraj (2022)	

Migrant Pandemic Precarity

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely credited with a dramatic increase in precarity for migrants within the Global South (Chan & Piper, 2022; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2023; Pichler & Küffner, 2023; Ramachandran et al., 2024; Srivastava, 2020; Tan & Lim, 2021; Yeoh et al., 2022). Precarity itself has been called a 'muti-stranded concept' (Kasmir, 2018), and only in the last decade has the language of precarity entered migration research. Originally, precarity referred to any precarious work conditions characterised by job insecurity, casual or part-time employment, the absence of social protection, and low wages (Millar, 2017). While this framing has persisted in the migration literature, it has also come to refer more broadly to the lived migrant experience of temporariness, insecurity, unpredictability, and the absence or denial of labour and other basic rights.

In the context of South-South migration, precarity manifests itself in multiple forms (legal, social, economic) along a spectrum of exploitation (Piper, 2022). Perry et al. (2021) suggest that the defining elements of 'pandemic precarity' are disparities in material deprivation and economic anxiety, and draw attention to the pre-pandemic social inequities that weakened economic resiliency and reinforced disadvantage. Pandemic precarity therefore refers to the intensification of pre-COVID precarity and the increased incidence and severity of its symptoms, such as poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity during COVID-19 (Choonara et al., 2022; Suhardiman et al., 2021; Sumner et al., 2020; Tan & Lim, 2021). Jones et al. (2021, p. vii) argue that migrant workers were 'structurally vulnerable' to the economic shock triggered by the pandemic because they were largely working in precarious low-wage sectors and were very likely to rapidly experience job losses ahead of national workers. In the formal sector, mass layoffs and furloughs of migrants characterised the first year of the pandemic as employers downsized their workforce or temporarily or permanently shut down altogether in sectors such as mining, construction, hospitality, and manufacturing. In the informal economy, domestic work and informal vending were particularly affected. The ILO (2021) calculated that around 9% of global working hours were lost in 2020, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs. Global labour income declined by an estimated 8% equivalent to USD3.7 trillion.

The job loss equivalents by major region in the Global South include 140 million in Asia and the Pacific, 39 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, 22 million in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 5 million in the Gulf (ILO, 2021). Global data on migrant job losses are unavailable but regional case studies are certainly indicative of the impact. Many of the over four million Venezuelan migrants in other Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Peru and Colombia lost their jobs in 2020 and attempted to return to Venezuela despite border closures and the restrictions on mobility (Mazza, 2020). And 20% of Nepal's 2.8 million workforce abroad were threatened with unemployment, including 900,000 migrants in 'elementary occupations' and 750,000 service and sales workers (Abella & Sasikumar, 2020; Baniya et al., 2020; Sreejith & Sreejith, 2021). In a troubling number of cases, migrants who lost their jobs were deprived of the wages due to them and left with empty pockets (Foley & Piper, 2021; Rajan & Akhil, 2022; Weeraratne, 2023).

In many countries, migrants work in precarious jobs that were deemed essential in the context of the pandemic, including in front-line services and supply chains. These jobs include care and health care work, cleaning services, and processing, distribution, and delivery of food. This made them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, especially in circumstances where protocols and safety equipment were not provided. Furthermore, millions of migrants are employed or self-employed in the informal economy throughout the Global South. In addition to working in conditions that made social distancing virtually impossible, PPE was often not supplied or readily available (Egas et al., 2020; ILO, 2020). Many migrants also reside in accommodation and neighbourhoods that made them more vulnerable to transmission and infection. In the large urban slums or informal settlements that characterise many cities in the Global South, migrants and disenfranchised citizens live in overcrowded quarters, and in homes lacking access to running water and hygiene products.

As Corburn et al. (2020) observed, informal settlements of the Global South were the most unprepared for the pandemic because basic needs of water, toilets, sewers, drainage, waste collection, and secure and adequate housing were already poorly available or non-existent. Other characteristics

of these settlements, prominent among them being space constraints, violence, and overcrowding, made physical distancing and self-quarantine difficult and impractical, and the high likelihood of rapid spread of infection. Lockdowns were particularly ineffective in containing the spread of COVID-19 in such marginalised environments. Migrants are also housed in spaces that are particularly prone to the spread of the virus, including camps, reception centres, compounds, hostels, dormitories, and precarious housing for migrant farmworkers (Alahmad et al., 2020; Alkhamis et al., 2020; Haley et al., 2020; Yi et al., 2021). In such spaces of infection, enforced immobility substantially increased the vulnerability to COVID-19 after the virus had been introduced.

Migrant women have been impacted by pandemic precarity in particularly negative ways (McAuliffe & Bauloz, 2024; Ramachandran et al., 2024). First, women migrants are well represented in social care and health care work, which have been frontline occupations during the pandemic. Second, many migrant women domestic workers have been dismissed by employers due to fears of infection. Unable to find another source of income or return to their countries of origin due to closed borders, hardships have dramatically intensified (Ansar, 2023; Jamil & Dutta, 2021). Third, in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, losing their job has automatically meant losing their accommodation and work permit, as they are contractually tied to their employers and unable to find other work.

The ILO (2020) argues that migrant workers are often the first to be laid off but the last to gain access to testing, treatment, or pandemic relief measures such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, or social protection grants. Some countries tried to include international migrants (regardless of their formal status) in national programmes of COVID-19 testing, screening, and treatment. This allowed migrants who were not entitled to health coverage before the pandemic to receive testing and treatment for COVID-19. Countries that adopted this approach include Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. In South Africa, for example, undocumented migrants, temporary migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless people have all been largely excluded from access to COVID relief packages (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Informal businesses operated by migrants were similarly excluded from the South African government's business relief funds, thus exacerbating prior vulnerabilities.

Many migrants in the Global South are employed or self-employed in the informal economy of cities and towns. Therefore, pandemic restrictions on informality and mobility had a major negative impact on such workers and their small enterprises. In Africa, as Onyishi et al. (2021), note survival depends on daily earnings from outside the home, and constant and regular movement and interactions with customers in markets and on the streets. Under pandemic lockdowns that affected two-thirds of informal sector workers across the continent, 'the large informal workforce, consisting of street vendors, petty traders, artisans, cart pushers, waste pickers, commercial motorcycle operators, roadside motor mechanics among others' were 'deprived of their income and rendered vulnerable' (Onyishi et al., 2021, p. 1228). One of the challenges confronting researchers is to accurately quantify the extent of the harm done as a prelude to developing interventions to aid post-pandemic recovery.

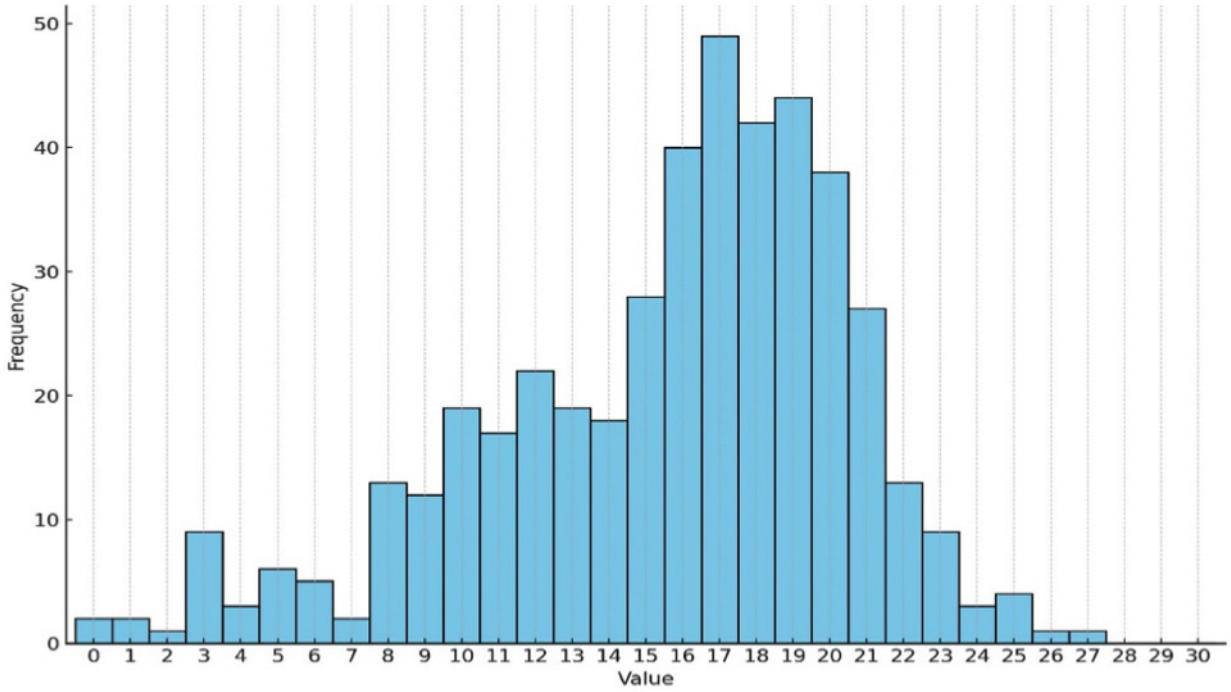
A recent case study of migrants working in the informal sector in South Africa suggests one way forward (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024). Migrants work informally selling food, handicrafts, clothes, and imported goods, as well as engaging in activities such as hairdressing, sewing, vehicle repair, car-guarding, transport of goods and remittances, Uber driving, and domestic work. Most of these activities require a high degree of everyday mobility to and from work sites, and while working. As a result, they were extremely hard hit by pandemic restrictions. Crush and Tawodzera (2024) measure the severity of the damage via a 30-question Informal Pandemic Precarity Index (IPPI) and Informal Pandemic Precarity Scale (IPPS). An IPPI score is calculated for each enterprise and then plotted on the IPPS that ranges from 0 (no pandemic precarity) to 30 (extreme pandemic precarity). As Figure 2 shows, the bulk of IPPI scores fall into the mid-range, with few enterprises experiencing little or no precarity.

Remittance Narratives

The severe economic disruptions of the pandemic in migrant destinations coupled with migrant unemployment, return migration, and the hold on recruiting were widely predicted to have a major negative impact on remittance flows. The earliest estimates predicted a global 'remittances crisis' that would involve a sharp contraction of 20% in 2020 (Ratha et al., 2020). The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and numerous researchers predicted that the pandemic would lead to a significant decline in remitting (Ratha, 2021). The World Bank projected that remittances to LMICs would suffer 'the steepest decline in recent history' by 7.2% in 2020 followed by a further decline of 7.5% in 2021 (Ratha et al., 2020, p. 7). The impacts of the drop in remittances in recipient areas would be acute. The IMF, for example, warned that the general economic shock of COVID-19 would be 'magnified by the loss of remittances' (Sayeh & Chami, 2020). Ratha (2021) predicted a 'plunge' in the volume of remittances that would trigger spikes in poverty. Others predicted that the decline in remittances would lead to a substantial increase in food insecurity in migrant-sending communities (Ahmed et al., 2021; Akim et al., 2024).

In many regions of the Global South, the anticipated decline would be even more severe than the overall global picture: for example, Sub-Saharan Africa (minus 8.8%), the Middle East and North Africa (minus 8%), and East Asia and the Pacific (minus 10.5%). Alarmist predictions about the shock of remittances to livelihoods were also heard in Latin America (Del Real et al., 2023; Zamora, 2020), Asia (Diao & Mahrt, 2020; Gupta et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2020; Murakami et al., 2021; Withers et al., 2022) and Africa (Bisong et al., 2020; Kalantaryan & McMahon, 2020; Kassegn, 2021; Mathe, 2020). This decline was expected to be particularly severe in major temporary migration corridors. For example, in

Figure 2: Migrant Enterprise Pandemic Precarity Scores on IPPI Scale



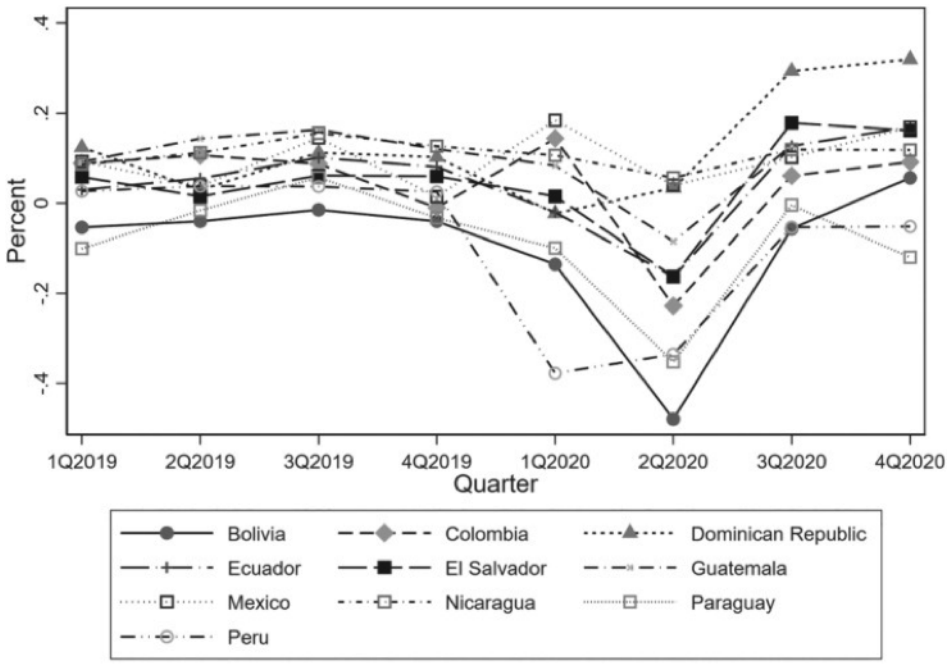
Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2024)

the Saudi-Arabia-India migration corridor. The aggregate effect of COVID-related job losses was expected to reduce remittances by USD2 billion (Abella & Sasikumar, 2020). Household surveys in some countries supported the story of remittance shocks: in six ASEAN Asian countries, for example, 60% of the remittance recipients surveyed reported a decrease in August 2020, and 17% experienced a decrease of more than 75% (Morgan & Trinh, 2020). Survey data in remittance recipient communities also consistently report a pandemic-related decline in remitting (Dinarte-Diaz et al., 2022).

The 'remittance shock' narrative was quickly supplanted by a 'remittance resilience' narrative in 2021 as macrolevel data indicated that remittances had not suffered the predicted collapse. The World Bank revised its gloomy 2020 predictions, reporting that global remittances had declined by less than 2% in 2020 (Ratha et al., 2020; World Bank, 2021). Remittances to Latin America and South Asia had remained steady in many countries and increased by 6.5% and 5.2% respectively overall. In some countries, including Mexico, remittance inflows increased during 2020 (Ambrosius et al., 2023; Babii et al., 2022; Ventura & Garcia, 2023). Although remittances to Africa had declined by 12.5% overall, this was almost entirely due to a 27.7% decline in remittance flows to Nigeria (Akim et al., 2024). Excluding Nigeria, remittances had increased by 2.3 percent overall and by much more in Zambia (37%), Mozambique (16%), Kenya (9%), and Ghana (5%) (Ratha et al., 2020). In Asia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan and South Korea had all experienced increases, while the Philippines and Thailand had remained relatively stable (Philippines and Thailand) (International Organization for Migration, 2021).

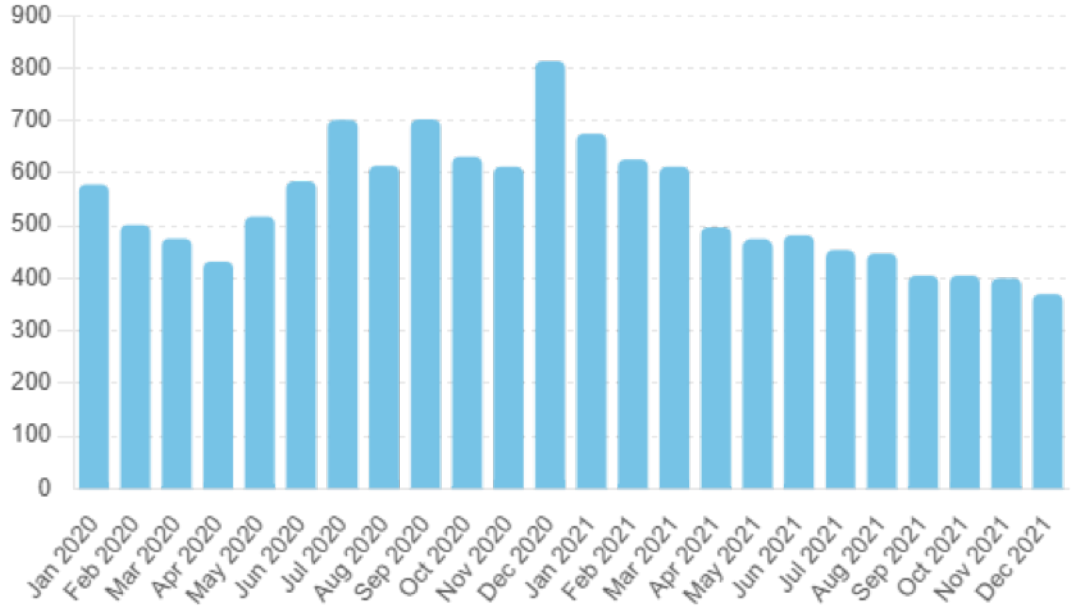
Two explanations have been offered for the resilience of remittances: the 'rebound effect' and 'migrant altruism.' According to the rebound effect, all countries experienced an initial decline in remittance receipts in 2020 but this was more than compensated for by a 'rebound' in the second half of the year that continued into 2021. In Latin America, the rebound effect is clearly visible (Figure 3). A similar rebound in formal remittances was seen in Asia (Abbas et al., 2024). In most countries, the rebound continued into 2021, except in Sri Lanka, where there was a steady decline throughout 2021 (Figure 4). In the altruism sub-narrative, migrants sent more money home by sacrificing their own needs, reducing consumption, and drawing on savings, as well as accessing government programmes that provided them with the extra funds to increase remittances. Ventura and Garcia (2023) also suggest that migrants in the US expanded the pool of remitters to include extended family members, especially US citizens, authorised immigrants, and those who were more financially stable, in response to job loss and income instability within remitting households. The obverse of migrant altruism was migrant hardship. For example, for Venezuelan migrants in Chile and Argentina, 'sending remittances became a social stressor when immigrants struggled to simultaneously sustain their livelihoods and send financial support to relatives experiencing hardships in Venezuela' (Del Real et al., 2023).

Figure 3: Remittance Receipts by Latin American Countries in 2020



Source: Cardozo-Silva et al. (2021).

Figure 4: Recorded Remittances to Sri Lanka, 2020-21 (USD Million)



Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Reports

Dinarte-Diaz et al. (2022) suggest that the paradox of increased remittances despite the pandemic shock to migrant employment, incomes, and livelihoods may be resolved by distinguishing between formal and informal remittances. Prior to the pandemic, informal unrecorded remittances were estimated at anywhere between 35% and 75% of formal remittances (Fernandes et al., 2023). The ratio of formal to informal remittances varied from migration corridor to corridor depending on variables such as geographical proximity, ease of travel, remittance cost, financial inclusion, and the existence of informal transfer mechanisms outside the banking system, such as the hawala system in Asia or the malayisha couriers in South Africa (Khan, 2020; Thebe, 2015). The 'remittances rerouting' narrative suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic narrowed or eliminated informal remittance channels and prompted a shift towards greater use of formal mechanisms such as banks, money transfer operators (MTOs), and digital platforms. On the one hand, informal remitting channels were significantly disrupted by lockdowns, border closures, and travel bans. On the other hand, the rise of digital transfers and an associated decline in remittance costs offered migrants incentives for using formal channels. As Dinarte et al. (2021) note, strict restrictions on mobility made it extremely difficult for migrants and their families to carry cash across borders. Consequently, digital payments became the only option for many migrants.

The pandemic-related changes possibly reflect both a reduced capacity to remit and a simultaneous increase or rebound in recorded remittances (following a shift from informal to formal remitting by migrants). Therefore, the remittance rerouting narrative offers a plausible means of reconciling the remittance shock and remittance resilience narratives. In other words, the remittance rebound in 2020 may simply reflect a digital shift from unrecorded to recorded remittances, even as the total remittance envelope (of formal plus informal remittances) continued in a state of shock. Furthermore, the shift to digital remitting likely occurred at different rates in different countries and corridors, which could help explain the different country-level outcomes (Rodima-Taylor, 2023). Because there is no reliable data on informal remitting, it is difficult to test this narrative in the aggregate. However, case study evidence from different regions may help us to begin building a detailed picture of the overall nature and sustainability of the pandemic-related shift to digital remitting (Elmi & Ngwenyama, 2020; Gascón et al., 2023; Guermond, 2022; Mannan & Farhana, 2023).

Mbiba and Mupfumira (2022) contrast the remittance options available to Zimbabwean migrants in the United Kingdom with those in South Africa and note that transfers from Europe largely move through formal channels, whereas transfers from South Africa are a mix of formal and informal. Prior to the pandemic, the remittance corridor between these neighbouring countries was highly informal. In addition to personal conveyance of cash by migrants and their friends and relatives, they used taxi and bus drivers and conductors and private transporters (known as omalayisha) in Zimbabwe. Makina (2013) reported that 98% of Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg used informal channels. Tevera et al. (2010) found that 60% of Zimbabwean households received their remittances through informal channels. Both Crush and Tawodzera (2017) and FinMark (2018) calculated that 60% of pre-pandemic remitting was informal in nature.

Mlambo (2021) observed that prior to the pandemic, the Southern African market had failed to optimise the various benefits presented by mobile technology because of weak telecommunications infrastructure, poor financial awareness, and lack of business-friendly legislation. Several new digital transfer operators made inroads into the market prior to 2020, but patronage soared during the pandemic (Sithole et al., 2022). A survey of Zimbabwean migrant remitters in South Africa found that the use of digital platforms and MTOs had increased from 18% to 68% in the first year of COVID-19. Bank transfers declined (from 11% to 4%), as did the use of informal money transfer operators (from 30% to 25%). Crush and Tawodzera (2023) estimate that informal remittances may have fallen by half between 2019 and 2020, while formal remittances (driven by digitalisation) increased by 77% year-over-year. There was an 8% decrease in the total formal plus informal remittance package flowing to Zimbabwe in 2020. Thus, there was a significant shift toward the digital remittance services offered by MTOs and digital Remittance Service Providers (RSPs). In sum, the COVID-19-related increase in formal remittances was, at least in part, the product of the greater use of digital remitting. Overall, however, the impact of the pandemic was a remittance shock that reduced remitting from South Africa to Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

There have been global pandemics before (including most recently HIV) and sudden shocks to the global economy (including the 2007-08 financial and food price crisis) that have influenced and been influenced by international migration in the Global South. However, none have had such rapid and disruptive impacts on migration as COVID-19. Nearly all the eight billion people in the world experienced some form of mobility restriction or change in their patterns of movement in the wake of government efforts to contain or eliminate SARC-CoV-2. However, for a significant sub-section of that population, over 200 million in number, restrictions on mobility have been particularly profound and damaging; that is, on the world's migrant workers who toil in factories, fields, and on the streets of countries other than their own. Most of these workers regularly share the fruits of their labour with family members and local communities 'back home' at the other end of bilateral and multilateral migration corridors. As a result, any dramatic change in their circumstances quickly and directly impacts the lives of over one billion people.

In this paper, we focused on the increasingly important flows of migrants within the Global South. These are extremely complex movements with migrants from any one country scattered among many others, and migrants in one country commonly drawn from a variety of others. What this means, in effect, is that migrants from any one country have had highly variable pandemic experiences, since host governments responded in different ways to the pandemic and to protecting and supporting migrants themselves. What the evidence reviewed in this paper shows, however, is that migrants have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 with higher risk of exposure to the virus, greater likelihood of working in sectors that have experienced major economic downturn and retrenchments, lower rates of access to social support mechanisms and healthcare, and increased vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity. Migrant-sending families and communities experiencing the downstream impacts of the pandemic seem unlikely to be prioritised in post-pandemic economic recovery. In sum, one of the major longer-term consequences of the pandemic is likely to be further entrenchment of marginalisation, precarity, and inequality.

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