

# Narratives of Food Consumption and Food Insecurity: Zimbabwean Migrants in Windhoek, Namibia

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## Abstract

Decades of interlocking economic and political crisis have generated significant out-migration from Zimbabwe to other countries. Neighbouring countries with relative political stability and better livelihood opportunities, such as Namibia, have witnessed increased inflows of Zimbabweans. While there are studies documenting these movements, far less attention has been paid to the food security of Zimbabwean migrants in other countries. This paper investigates the changing dietary and food consumption patterns of recent Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, Namibia, and the impacts of these changes on household food security. The narratives of 35 Zimbabwean migrant households in Windhoek show that they face numerous food security challenges, including an inability to access desirable foods, the high cost of traditional foods, and reliance on ultra-processed foods, with negative consequences for their households.

## Keywords

diets, food consumption, food security, international migrants, Namibia, Zimbabwe

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## Cover Image

Bream fish being air-dried near a fish market in Kariba, Zimbabwe. Credit: Imago/Alamy



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## Introduction

While migration is a global phenomenon, much of the international migration literature disproportionately focuses on the movement of people from the Global South to the Global North. However, close to a third of global international migration occurs between countries in the Global South (Leal & Harder, 2021). Close to 70% of such South-South movement is estimated to be intra-regional (Dweba et al., 2017). In Africa, people move between countries due to a complex range of factors, including socio-economic disparities, political conflicts and violence, governance issues, natural resource depletion, and environmental challenges (Fofack & Akendung, 2024; Saaida, 2023). Zimbabwe is not immune to many of these challenges and generates significant migrant streams in the Southern African region. The country has therefore been a major source of migrants to other African countries in the past five decades.

In the pre-1980 period, many black Zimbabweans migrated to neighbouring countries due to prolonged conflict between the white settler government and liberation movements fighting for independence (Madebwe & Madebwe, 2017). There was an exodus of the white population from the country after 1980 fearing reprisals from the new black majority government and (Mlatsheni & Zvendiya, 2023). There have been numerous studies of subsequent post-independence migration from Zimbabwe to neighbouring countries (Crush & Tevera, 2010; Garcia & Duplat, 2007; Mlambo, 2010; Munyoka, 2020). Crush et al. (2012) periodize these post-1990 large-scale migration flows into three waves with distinct drivers, beginning around 1997, 2005, and 2010.

The Government of National Unity (GNU) temporarily stabilized the economy and introduced a period of relative political stability between 2009 and 2013 which slowed down emigration (Biti, 2014; Dodo et al., 2012; Mapuva & Makaye, 2017). However, this relative stability did not last. The elections of 2013 and 2018 were heavily disputed, and the fallout resulted in worsening economic conditions which fueled further emigration. A coup d'état in between these two elections also engendered political and economic uncertainty and did little to stop the emigration. Although many Zimbabwean migrants settled in South Africa (Crush et al., 2012; Zhou, 2018), some have moved to other countries within the region and even to Europe, North America and the Middle East. A significant number of Zimbabwean migrants have also settled in Namibia, drawn to the country's relative political stability and economic viability.

The migration flows from Zimbabwe have been mixed in the sense that they consist of refugees, asylum seekers, and others migrating in response to governance and economic issues (Crisp & Kiragu, 2010). In addition, Zimbabwean migrations are mixed in terms of motivations and flows, age, gender, and other dynamics (Crush et al., 2012). While earlier migration streams from the country were male dominated, present-day migration streams consists of both men and women (Mlambo, 2010). Zimbabweans of all socio-economic backgrounds migrate in search of better livelihoods. However, the situation that they find themselves in in their

destination countries is challenging in that not all migrants easily find employment or experience improved living conditions. 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.

Food security and international migration are deeply interconnected (ActionAid, 2017). Food insecurity is a key driver of migration where household members migrate as a coping strategy to address existing deficiencies in food availability and consumption (Carney & Krause, 2020; Crush & Caesar, 2017; Sadiddin et al., 2019; Sharma, 2020; Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020; Warner & Afifi, 2014). Moreover, food insecurity can be an important consequence of migration. Migrants may be disproportionately affected by food insecurity and food shortages on the way to and in the destination due to their migrant status and its impact on their economic resources. Migration also has consequences for sending households through remittances. Numerous studies have documented the positive effects of remittances on the food security of households in the areas of origin (Abadi et al., 2018; Barnabas et al., 2024; Crush & Tawodzera, 2023; Mora-Rivera & van Gameren, 2021; Zingwe et al., 2023).

However, studies are lacking that interrogate the food security of South-South migrants in their destination countries. The few available studies are exploratory and require complimentary research to understand the nature and dynamics of food (in)security among South-South international migrants. In a study carried out in South Africa, Crush & Tawodzera (2016) highlighted the vulnerability of Zimbabwean migrants to food insecurity due to factors ranging from precarious employment, low incomes, and the pressure of remitting to their household members left back home. Maharaj et al. (2017) found heightened food insecurity and elevated risks of mental health issues among refugees in Durban, South Africa. Similarly, Napier et al. (2018) explored the serious problems of food insecurity of women asylum seekers and refugees in Durban.

More recently, Ramachandran et al. (2024) evaluated the food security of female-centred Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study found that many of these households lived with precarity tied to food insecurity before the pandemic and that the pandemic worsened this situation. Orolunrana & Odi (2024) conducted a literature review of the food security of African immigrants in South Africa and identified several key aspects that shape migrant food security, notably low earnings, xenophobia, and reduced access to preferred foods. They further underscore the need for more studies to fully capture migrants' food security experiences in the destination settings. This is an important point considering Osei-Kwasi et al's (2022) recent observation that migrants largely move to environments where the foods they regularly consumed 'back home' are not easily accessible or available. As a result, migrants adapt and shift to other available foodstuffs to maintain their food security (Osei-Kwasi et al., 2022). The dimensions of cultural appropriateness

of food consumption or 'cultural food security' remain under-researched, especially in the context of migration and its effects on the diets of migrants as well as the broader consequences for their food security.

In this context, the main aim of this MiFOOD study was 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 of the migrant households 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.

## Conceptual Framework

There have been numerous studies of migrant food insecurity in the context of North-South migration. However, far less work is available on the linkages between food security and South-South migration. For example, Ahmed et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review of materials on the food security of international migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. They reviewed 46 papers and found that only six were on Africa, while the majority focused on South-North migrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America in the USA and Canada.

In the Global North, studies on the relationship between international migration and food security have often been framed by the 'healthy immigrant paradox'. The paradox can be traced to the work of Markides & Coreil (1986) who noted that Mexican immigrants exhibited better health outcomes than African Americans in the United States. They concluded that migrants had a foreign-born advantage, which was lacking among poorer non-migrants. Other studies focusing on low-income Mexican migrants in the US have affirmed this healthy-immigrant effect, relabeling it the 'Hispanic paradox' (Franzini et al., 2001; Markides & Eschbach, 2005). The better health outcomes among the non-native born arrivals are largely attributed to the selective nature of migration (Singh & Siahpush, 2001).

Migrants tend to be a self-selected group, who are often healthier and more motivated to move than their non-migrating counterparts. Households with higher incomes are also more likely to migrate (Clemens & Mendola, 2020; Langela & Manning, 2021). Other studies have shown that resilient individuals with higher economic and social capital are more likely to migrate than those with fewer resources and a poorer health profile (Markides & Coreil, 1986). Hence, in the initial period after arrival, migrants exhibit better health and food security outcomes than the low-income local population, owing to these pre-existing background factors. However, such advantages do not remain in perpetuity (Tietler et al., 2017). These advantages decline or fade with time, so that the health and food security outcomes

of migrants eventually mirror those of the local population (Gonzalez et al., 2009; Rivera et al., 2016; Unger et al., 2004).

A key question is why the health and food security outcomes of the migrants ultimately decline? The healthy immigrant paradox literature provides some likely explanations. First, this decline may occur due to acculturation (Raza et al., 2017; Riosmena et al., 2017; Unger et al., 2004; Vu et al., 2016). As migrants 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 (Stanek et al., 2020; Vu et al., 2016). Second, dietary changes may also occur due to the inability of migrants to access and to afford foods that are culturally appropriate (Carney & Krause, 2020; Mellin-Olsen & Wandel, 2002). Third, the food environment in the destination country may be fundamentally different than in the country of origin, affecting the availability of healthy foods (Holdsworth et al., 2017; Osei-Kwasi et al., 2022). This aspect is especially important as migrants may settle in 'food deserts' or 'food swamps' (Berggreen-Claussen, 2022). Fourth, migrants can face challenges of socioeconomic integration in the destination countries, including unemployment, underemployment, and low and erratic incomes. These challenges limit their access to healthy foods with negative impacts on their food security and physical health (Adler & Newman, 2002; Aguilera & Massey, 2003). Finally, migrants may lack the social support and networks that are critical to providing information and resources necessary to maintain their food security (Karnik & Peterson, 2023; Ramsahoi et al., 2022).

Several authors have questioned the validity of the healthy immigrant paradox hypothesis. Farley (2005) has pointed out that the results from studies with migrant cohorts are sometimes inconsistent, making it difficult to conclusively support the healthy immigrant paradox hypothesis. John et al. (2012) have argued that empirical testing rarely yields consistent results. Hadley et al. (2007), for example, studied the food security of West African refugees in the United States and found that refugees that had lived there for less than one year were twice as likely to be food insecure compared to those that had been residing there for at least three years. As Dharod et al. (2013) note, the conclusion that one can draw from such studies seems 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 migrants from low- and middle-income countries residing in high-income countries, Berggreen-Claussen (2022) concluded that newly arrived migrants are likely to display worse outcomes. These negative outcomes are tied to the various challenges they face in accessing fresh foods, traditional foods, and other healthier foods. These difficulties in food accessibility are tied to other challenges that migrants face related to low incomes, time scarcity, and mobility issues. Moreover, the weak social support structures available to migrant new arrivals is likely to place them at higher risk of food insecurity

in comparison with those that who have been in the country for longer periods. This is largely because social networks enable longer-term migrants to access food from friends and family, access more affordable foods from outside the neighbourhood, and share information about where to access cheaper foods (Hammelmann, 2018).

While there is much literature on the food security outcomes of South-North migration, little is known about the food security of South-South migrants in their destination countries. Not much is known either about migrant adaptation to the change in food environments, how they access food, the challenges they face, and the changes that they have to make. There is thus an urgent need for studies that explore the changing dietary and food consumption patterns of recent migrants and the impacts of these changes on household food security.

## Research Methodology

This section outlines the methods used to collect data from Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, Namibia over a two-week period in November and December 2022. Namibia is home to many migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced populations. Zimbabweans have migrated to Namibia for various economic, social and political reasons. For asylum-seekers, refugees, and other forcibly displaced persons, the Namibian government hosts them at Osire Refugee Camp, just outside the town of Okahandja. In 2022, only 1.3 percent of refugees and asylum seekers in Namibia were from Zimbabwe, with the majority being from the DRC, Congo and Angola (UNHCR, 2022). The majority of Zimbabweans in Namibia self-settle among the Namibian population. Identifying these migrants is, therefore, not an easy task.

The study was carried out in four townships in the Greater Katutura area of Windhoek - Havana, Soweto, One-Nation and Okuryangava. Katutura is a low-income residential area and one of the older residential areas in the city. It was created in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the apartheid administration moved people from the old location (now Hochland Park) to the northern part of the city, further away from the city centre. Katutura now incorporates some of the largest informal settlements in Windhoek. As a low-income residential area, it draws newly arrived migrants owing to the affordability of accommodation rental, a crucial consideration for newly arriving migrants, as many have meagre financial resources. Like migrants from elsewhere within the SADC region, Zimbabwean migrants also exercise financial prudence by settling in Katutura. Here, they will likely spend little money as they struggle to establish themselves in a foreign land. The choice of Katutura as the study area was therefore strategic. The researchers were aware, through their social networks, that there were larger numbers of Zimbabwean migrants living in Katutura compared to other residential areas of Windhoek, which made it easier to locate study participants there.

Okuryangava township was randomly selected as the starting point and contact was established with two Zimbabwean migrants engaged in the informal trade business in this area. These respondents became starting points for the study. After interviewing these participants, we asked them to refer us to other Zimbabweans in the area. These respondents were, in turn, asked to refer the next respondents. The research team repeated this process of snowball sampling until a sufficient sample was identified and interviewed. The research team then moved on to the next location where the process was repeated until research was completed in the four selected study sites in Katutura: Havana, Soweto, One-Nation and Okuryangava.

The research team conducted 35 in-depth interviews with Zimbabwean migrants in Katutura. Of the total sample, 30 households were recent arrivals, who had migrated to Namibia in 2018 or afterwards. The focus on recent migrants was because we envisaged that they would be the ones generally exposed to shock in terms of dietary changes and face difficulties in accessing employment and other challenges that negatively impact food security. The remaining five households had migrated to Namibia in 2017 or earlier. The rationale for including migrants who had arrived in Namibia at different times was to assess the impact of their duration of residence on dietary preferences and food security. As Pillarella (2006) points out, the longer migrants live in a host country, the more likely they are to acculturate their diet and, with time, their food security habits will mirror that of their hosts. The study sampled participants from these four sub-areas to capture any diversity resulting from migrants' residing in these different areas of Katutura: Okuryangava (10), Havana (10), Soweto (10) and One-Nation (5).

The research team interviewed 16 men and 19 women from the sampled households. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 56 years. Household size varied from single-person households to those with four members. The participants were engaged in a wide variety of occupations including traders/vendors (9); 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). Five were unemployed. The participants were relatively educated including ordinary level (24), advanced level (4), post high-school diploma (2), and undergraduate degrees (2). Three of participants reported having acquired a Grade 7 qualification only.

Data was collected from the identified households using an in-depth interview guide. At each household, the respondents were generally an adult member knowledgeable about household diet and food consumption patterns. Each household was asked to select an informant themselves. Where households were hesitant to make the selection, the researchers assigned numbers to potential respondents within the household and selected the informant randomly by rolling a dice. The interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. The researchers took notes during the interview and recorded the interviews with the respondents' consent.

The qualitative data collected from the respondents' interviews was analyzed thematically. As Braun & Clarke (2006) note, this exercise involves identifying the main themes and patterns using the qualitative materials to offer a coherent narrative. The first step involved listening to the recorded interviews to familiarize the author with the collected data. After that, the interviews were transcribed and coded to generate the main themes and sub-themes. Both the main themes and sub-themes were reviewed and confirmed for validity. The write-up process involved a simultaneous engagement with the data and linking the various themes and sub-themes. Direct quotes are used here to foreground the voices of the participants, lending authenticity to household food security experiences.

The following sections discuss the results based on the various themes explored in the analysis study. While the study specifically focussed on the dietary and consumption changes and the impact on household food security, the next section delves into the migration histories of the selected households. These histories lay the groundwork for understanding much of the dietary and food security experiences of the households in Namibia.

## Migration Histories

At the heart of most of the migration narratives were the challenging economic and political circumstances in Zimbabwe and the difficulty of securing livelihoods. Zimbabwe's economic circumstances began to deteriorate in 2000 after the fast-track land reform program and continued to worsen in successive years (Madebwe & Madebwe, 2017). High inflation rates, sky-rocketing food prices, and other escalating living costs pushed many households into extreme poverty (Hanke, 2009; Mlatsheni & Zvendiya, 2023; Zanamwe & Devillard, 2010).

Although Zimbabwe has an excellent education system (Garwe & Todhlana, 2023; Oyedele & Chikwature, 2016), producing thousands of graduates every year, employment opportunities are limited. Many find it extremely difficult to penetrate the local job market (Bhebhe et al., 2020; Jengeta, 2020). As a result, many graduates remain unemployed or engage in self-employment in the country's burgeoning informal sector (Jengeta, 2020). For example, a 25-year-old male university graduate who moved to Namibia in 2019 gave a stark account of the situation in Zimbabwe:

*I left the country because of the economy. The economy was bad, man. I graduated from university with a finance degree and never worked in a formal job for even a single day in the country. My parents spent a lot of money paying for my education. We are four in my family and I am the first born. 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. I had*

*enough of being a loafer. So, I came here to try my luck (Participant No. 12, 27 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

A 32-year-old female electrician who left the country in 2018 confirmed the role of unemployment in her decision to exit Zimbabwe:

*I never thought I would leave Zimbabwe. I always wanted to stay in the country, close to my mother. She is old and needs someone to constantly check up on her. I tried to make it work in Zimbabwe, but I failed. I am an electrician and have a diploma from the polytechnical college. I really never got stable employment. It was a series of short-term jobs and long periods of unemployment. A job here for 3-4 months, then you are unemployed for the next year or so. I had no choice, but to leave. Even my mother urged me to leave and so I left. 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 No. 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

Another participant pointed out that that it ceased to make sense to go to work even if employed:

*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. I had a good job in Rusape. That is where I grew up. Then I joined a local construction company after high school and was trained inhouse as a plumber. I am a journeyman – I passed my trade test. From 2003 or so, things were getting tough. But, I did a lot of side jobs and managed to send my kids to school. But the year 2007 and 2008 were very tough – the side jobs dried up. The salary was just a salary in name. It did not buy anything even though it was trillions of dollars. 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. I have been here since then (Participant No. 34, 6 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).*

Finally, a third participant in this study said that she had no choice to migrate given the survival needs of her family:

*Zimbabwe was tough. We could not make enough money for our expenses such as rent, school fees, water and electricity. We were always short. The first thing you pay is the landlord. The little that is left you try and make it work, but it would not. I told my husband that I was leaving. Unfortunately, I arrived when COVID-19 had just started and it was terrible. But, some relatives here helped me and the little I made I sent home. Now it is better, but it is still a struggle (Participant No. 19, 30 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

Ranga (2015) has documented the migration of teachers from the country due to political persecution, harassment, and violence. However, in their study of Zimbabwean migrants in Limpopo, South Africa, Mupondi & Mupakati (2018) discussed the role of political persecution in out-migration. They found that only a few Zimbabwean migrants attributed their exit to political persecution. They argue that this may be because periods of extreme political violence in Zimbabwe coincided with periods of economic adversity. Most migrants view these challenges as taking precedence over political ones in their out-migration (Mupondi & Mupakati, 2018). Some participants in this study did leave for Namibia for fear of political persecution in Zimbabwe:

*Sometimes things work out the way you never imagine. 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. I constructed that house myself, but some people started a rumour 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 No. 24, 3 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

Many households in Zimbabwe struggle to raise income and maintain food security and, not surprisingly, some participants identified food challenges as central to their movement from Zimbabwe. For example, a 30-year-old female hairdresser underscored the role of food shortages in her migration to Namibia:

*As a single mother I struggled to look after myself and my two children. We could not afford enough food. It is very difficult to look at your children when they are hungry. I experienced a lot. I was always crying and asking the Lord what would happen to us. I could not take it anymore in Zimbabwe. It was hard. A friend who came here a few years ago invited me to come. 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 No. 27, 4 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

While the research uncovered various motivations for movement to Namibia, one theme was consistent in the narratives, i.e., the need to search for better livelihoods and improve the well-being of their households. For many, the triggers worked simultaneously, compelling them to migrate. However, food insecurity is a recurrent theme in most of the interviews.

## Pre-Migration Food Consumption Patterns

While it is difficult to pinpoint a single diet for a diverse group of people, the population of Zimbabwe has an array of foods and food habits. These foods range from traditional (or cultural) foods to Westernized (or modern) diets. Rocillo-Aquino et al. (2021:8) define traditional foods as

those “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.” They add that traditional foods generally carry symbolic significance that derives from the culture that produces them. A traditional African diet generally consists of small grains such as millet and sorghum, starchy stems, root tubers, wild fruits, fish, game meat, and 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, most households do not consume a typical traditional diet because of the nutrition transition which has involved an increase in the consumption of wheat, rice, and other so-called ‘exotic’ or non-traditional foods (Chopera et al., 2022). Most dishes are a blend of traditional and Western-influenced dishes.

The participants said they ate a variety of foods in Zimbabwe prior to migration. For example:

*I grew up eating sadza (cornmeal porridge) and so our main dish consisted of that meal. We would generally have beef or chicken as relish. Pork meat is not my favourite, 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 favourite (Participant No. 32, 5 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).*

*Our diet consisted of a variety of foods. In the morning, we would generally have porridge. This could be made from maize meal or from sorghum. Its usually the time when children go to school, so it is part of their breakfast. Later we would have tea before mid-day. There could be bread, but also sweet potatoes. These are seasonal so only when they are in season. The main meal would be in the evening, mostly sadza with meat and vegetables. During the day, we could just have whatever is available, any fruits that we had at home, fizzy drinks or Mazoe Orange Crush (Participant No. 2, 23 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).*

*Breakfast was usually tea with bread or chimodho (traditionally made bread). In the rainy season, we could make bread from green mealies or just substitute green mealies for bread. If it was after the rainy 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 leftovers 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 No. 22, 2 December 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

These narratives indicate that their diets were a mix of traditional and modern foods. Migrant participants from the urban areas of Zimbabwe tended to consume modern diets that were more likely to include processed foods, rice bread, and fizzy drinks. In contrast, participants from rural areas generally indicated the consumption of more traditional foods.

*We ate many things back there. There was 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 in season we had these avocados. 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 healthy those days, unlike what I am doing now (Participant No. 26, 3 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

*I liked porridge, the one made from sorghum. We grew up with that food and even today we grow sorghum and millet at home. So, it was porridge in the morning. Sometimes we mix it with milk if the cows are being milked, otherwise we just eat like that. Our breakfast was usually around mid-day because we would be working in the fields and so you do not want to come back early otherwise you do not do much in the fields. The breakfast depends on the season. During the rainy season there are many foods: maize meal, potatoes, yams, cassava. No lunch, because the breakfast is late. But our supper is early around 6 pm. Its sadza and the relish is anything that is available, it can be vegetables, it can be a chicken, or a turkey. But the turkey is only on special occasion. Otherwise, it's chicken. Beef we could have only if someone went to the growth-point (Participant No. 5, 24 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).*

Some participants also indicated that they would consume traditional drinks and foods that were only popular in certain areas of the country. These included *samp*, *mahewu* (fermented beer), *rupiza* (grounded peas), *hohwa* (wild mushroom), *ishwa* (winged termites), and *chimodho* (traditional bread):

*We brew mahewu and consumed a lot of throughout the day. It did not matter whether there was sugar or no sugar, we just prepared mahewu most of the days. When they are a bit sour, you will not even notice that there is no sugar. I don't know the last time I had mahewu, maybe last year. The malt that you buy here is not good. We also ate chimodho but it's been a long time since I ate that bread (Participant 14, 28 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

*I ate a lot of samp in Zimbabwe. In my home area, we mix the crushed maize with roundnuts or beans. This is the food I liked most and we could eat any-*

*time we wanted. There were no restrictions like with other foods, because there is plenty of it. The roundnuts were big and tasty and not the GMOs that we are eating now. We also ate rupiza which was made from peas (Participant No. 26, 3 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

One participant noted that they consumed some foods on a seasonal basis. These included *derere* (okra), *mufushwa* (dried vegetables), *matemba* (dried *kapenta*) and *manyanya* (a tuber similar to cassava). The first two are vegetables that are dried during the rainy season and stored for consumption through the lean periods and times of need during 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 said to have a taste that approximates meat:

*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 No. 29, 4 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 for later (Participant No. 14, 28 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

Some foods were only consumed on special occasions, such as weddings, holidays, and cultural gatherings or for visitors:

*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).*

*We had a few turkeys and they were special. Even now they are, we do not just kill them every time. When we have an important visitor, then we can kill one and show them that they are very welcome (Participant 26, 03 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

Sometimes, a special event demands the preparation of large quantities and varieties of food. On these occasions, such as weddings, households cook many kinds of foods that they rarely cook and consume on a daily basis. This includes preparation of salads and meals with many courses. On graduations and birthdays, food is prepared with extravagance, and this is the same at cultural gatherings.

## Post-Migration Food Consumption Patterns

Studies have shown that migrants in the Global North tend to adopt the foods and food habits of the destination countries (Mainous et al., 2008; Pillarella, 2006; Satia-Abouta et al., 2002; Vu et al., 2020). One key reason for this dietary change is that migrants may find it hard to easily obtain their familiar foods. Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek were asked to describe the foods that they were consuming after migration to Namibia. The majority indicated that they were consuming a predominance of highly processed foods, suggesting a diet more Westernized than before their migration:

*In the morning, I usually eat cereals. I like cornflakes though I can also [eat] Weetabix. I can eat these for breakfast every morning unless I run out of milk. This usually happens towards the end of the month when I am running low on food supplies. I eat my lunch at work – a bunny-chow or a burger. There is a tuck-shop close to my work place where I buy. 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 No. 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 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 from a fish and chips 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 No. 22, 2 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

Most of the foods being consumed are highly processed. Since migrants spend much of their day working, newer eating habits are partly related to the inability to prepare meals during work hours. Many participants bought their lunch at work since it was easier and more convenient to purchase ready-to-eat food from the various food places around the city. Especially if they worked long hours, food preparation for supper depended on whether they were tired. If they were, supper was also purchased from the take-aways:

*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 am every morning and come back around 7pm. 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, emphasized that his work schedule determined what and when he ate. The only time he could consume a regular healthy meal was when he was not working, which was one day a week 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 am, I have to leave here at 5 am 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 pm. So, most of my food I eat on the road (Participant No. 1, 23 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).*

When participants had time to prepare their meals, their diet was shaped more by the types of foods they could afford. One participant indicated that their diet is monotonous because it is limited and unchanged. She would buy food that is cheaper and involves a limited diet of bread, sadza, spaghetti, and meat.

*The diet is the same every day. Its 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 No. 11, 27 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

The presence of fast food outlets has also meant that some migrants eat more often than before migration. One participant indicated that she often went with her family to eat at restaurants to access the diverse variety of foods:

*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, but we enjoy there (Participant 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

Another participant claimed that the presence of many street traders selling kapana (braai meat) in her area meant that they could prepare rice or sadza at home and buy kapana for their meals. This made their food preparation easier. Thus, in as much as the food choices of Zimbabwean migrants are shaped by choice, they are also determined by time constraints and the need to buy cheaper food.

## Food Access Challenges

When people migrate to a new country, the possibility that they will experience challenges in accessing certain preferred foods is high. The participants indicated that although they can access most of the foods they want to consume, other foods are not found in Namibia or are slightly different from those they consumed in Zimbabwe. For example, a common Zimbabwean food is *dovi* (peanut

butter) and some participants indicated that it is integral to many of the meals that they prepare. *Dovi* is consumed by adding it to porridge, spreading it on bread, and using it in place of cooking oil when preparing dried vegetables, dried meat, and other dishes. Many participants complained that the peanut butter they purchase in shops in Namibia was inferior in taste:

*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 No. 2, 23 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

While migrants have the option to purchase the food from traders that sell Zimbabwean products, they are always in short supply. During the COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions meant a limited supply of foods from Zimbabwe and even no availability at some points. Another challenge is that those selling Zimbabwean peanut butter in Windhoek adopt premium pricing for this product, especially since it is a popular food among Zimbabwean migrants. As a result, it becomes unaffordable for migrants with limited means and low income. The sellers argue that they pay a lot of money to import the peanut butter and need to increase the price to recover their costs. One participant said the high prices had made it difficult for some migrants to consume this food:

*Peanut butter from Zimbabwe is expensive. They buy it for less than US\$1 (N\$19) in Zimbabwe and then they sell it here for between N\$30–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* (Participant No. 8, 25 November 2022, Okuryangava, Windhoek).

Some migrants resort to buying the local variety of peanut butter which they find less appealing. Another food that is difficult to access in Namibia is *mbambaira* (sweet potatoes). Most migrants indicated that sweet potatoes are a common part of their diet in Zimbabwe. Sweet potatoes serve as a substitute for bread at breakfast and can also be consumed as a snack when needed. Participants noted that some varieties of sweet potatoes are available in the market locally, but these were not firm and less sweet than those they ate in Zimbabwe.

*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 realise when you start cooking them that they are not good. They start losing shape very quickly and are watery. You end up eating with a spoon like you are eating mashed potatoes. The taste is not okay. There is nothing sweet about them* (Participant No. 35, 6 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

*The sweet potatoes here are not good. I tried several varieties – the ones that are reddish, the whitish ones and so on. It is the same – they are not tasty. I am used to the ones that we grow in Zimbabwe that are very firm and sweet. I also tasted some that were said to come from Zambia. Those were better, but still not as good as I know mbambaira to be* (Participant No. 24, 3 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

Some traders import sweet potatoes from Zimbabwe using cross-border buses. However, the supply is said to be irregular and unreliable.

One participant expressed frustration at being promised *mbambaira* only to be informed that they were bought out by a few other people. Zimbabwean sweet potatoes are definitely a commodity in demand, with the few suppliers failing to satisfy the large market. Like peanut butter, *mbambaira* is also expensive as traders capitalize on shortages and high demand to drive the price of this commodity upwards.

Namibia is known for its fish industry and a wide variety of fish species – including mackerel, tuna, hake, and pilchards – are sold in the market. However, most Zimbabwean migrants commonly eat bream, specifically the freshwater bream from Lake Kariba in the Zambezi Valley. Some participants said they miss the Kariba bream. While they will eat other varieties of fish, many still look for fresh-water bream. Some Zimbabwean migrants do manage to locate supplies of bream from the Zambezi region and traders also bring dried bream from to sell to the Zimbabwean migrant community in Namibia:

*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 No. 32, 6 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Among the most sought-after foods by Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek is Mazoe Orange Crush, a cordial made from oranges. While some supermarkets in the city occasionally sell this product, some participants claimed that it is different from the original. Most migrants purchase Mazoe from informal traders who bring it directly from Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, it sells for approximately N\$47 (around US\$2.50). However, traders who bring it to Namibia sell it for between N\$60–N\$80 per 2-litre bottle. One participant said why they still prefer to purchase from these traders:

*I buy my Mazoe from traders that come with it straight from Zimbabwe. The variety that is sold here is not the authentic one. It does not taste the same. And some of it is made in Zambia and not Zimbabwe. So, they are different. I prefer the original one* (Participant No. 20, 2 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).

Many of the participants grew up in areas where avocados are grown by most households. Avocados are also relatively cheap and easily available in Zimbabwe. Avocados on sale in Namibia are imported from South Africa and sold at a premium. In the interviews, they lamented that the avocados in Windhoek are small and very expensive. Some only eat avocados when they are sent from home. However, the logistical challenges of transporting these delicate foods means they are easily damaged. One participant remarked that they miss eating Zimbabwean avocados and only indulge in this delicacy when they go home.

In Zimbabwe, dried *kapenta* is a common food and easily accessible. It is also a substitute for households that cannot afford meat. In Windhoek, *kapenta* is hard to find and expensive:

*I do not remember the last time that I ate dried kapenta. It is one of my favourite foods, but it is difficult to get here. If you get it they sell in very small packets. If you are a family of four people, then you will need two or three packets to suffice. For \$N10 a packet if you buy three packets then that's \$N30 and you may as well buy meat (Participant No. 26, 3 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

A few of the participants reported that they grew up eating home-grown brown rice rather than the white rice or par-boiled rice in the shops:

*One thing that I miss here is brown rice. I grew up in the rural areas and my grandmother and then my parents grew brown rice. Now my parents still grow it, but less than they did in the past. When I was living in Zimbabwe I would make sure that I send for some brown rice every few months. It is the kind of rice that you cook and mix with peanut butter and the taste is good. Now it is difficult for me to get it here. I have asked around, but I have not found it (Participant No. 19, 30 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

The absence of brown rice in Windhoek means that they can only access it on infrequent visits home. One participant described how a trader promised to bring them brown rice from Zambia, but it turned out it was not the traditional variety and had actually been purchased from a supermarket in Windhoek:

*When you miss some foods, you try by all means to get it. Unfortunately, you may fall victim to unscrupulous traders who just want to make money without regard to other peoples' concerns. This trader gave me a fake product. I knew it was fake when I cooked it and it started popping and I could see it was slightly whitish. Even the peanut butter that I added could not stick to it and I realised that I had been duped (Participant 27, 04 December 2022, Soweto, Windhoek).*

Another participant described how he was tricked when he wanted to obtain some mice, a food delicacy in Zimbabwe:

*Some 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 \$N50 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 realised that these may not be mice, but rats. They were big – very big. There is nowhere that a mice could grow that 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).*

These anecdotes illustrate how much migrants miss the foods and dishes from home and go to great lengths to acquire them. Sadly, their desperation can be exploited by unscrupulous traders and other migrants out to make money.

Some participants said they have other ways to access Zimbabwean foods. One of the most common methods is to ask their friends and relatives in Zimbabwe to send the foods with cross-border transporters (*omalayitshas*) on the regular buses traveling the Namibia-Zimbabwe route. These transporters charge a fee depending on the contents and weight of the food package.

## Conclusion

When asked about their household food security situation compared with that prior to emigration, most agreed that their situation had improved. As one participant noted, “when I left Zimbabwe, I was struggling, unable to put food on the table. A whole mechanic failing to buy basic food-stuffs. 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 No. 34, 6 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek). Another agreed that moving to Namibia had had a marked positive effect on her mental health. She believed that she would have suffered depression and even committed suicide if she had not migrated:

*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 not buying anything (Participant No. 16, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).*

Others acknowledged that the challenges they currently faced in Namibia were better than what they would have encountered had they remained in Zimbabwe:

*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 No. 17, 29 November 2022, Havana, Windhoek).

However, the participants still face significant food security challenges in Namibia. Most highlighted the high costs of rented housing and argued that they were spending more money on rent than on food. While they accepted that rent is a part of urban living, it left them with very little money to purchase food. They were forced to buy and eat cheap food which they did not want to consume:

*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 that it is just a health hazard to us. But we have no choice* (Participant No. 30, 5 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

Some mentioned the health problems they experienced from some of the local foods they were consuming. As one participant pointed out, this defeated the whole purpose of migrating to Namibia. The little money they earned ended up paying the higher 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 No. 32, 6 December 2022, One-Nation, Windhoek).

One participant said that she had gained a lot of weight after she moved to Namibia and attributed this to the consumption of junk foods. She argued that this would not have happened if she could consume healthy foods.

Diet and food security are closely linked as food (in)security is the outcome of what is consumed both in terms of quality and quantity. The types of foods consumed determine whether a household can be considered food secure. Health status is also an indicator of food security. For example, Ford (2013) shows that there is a strong relationship between household food insecurity and diet and a number of health-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and heart diseases. Migrants in precarious employment, are likely to have low incomes, less access to healthy food, and higher levels of food insecurity compared to the local population. The healthy-immigrant paradox argues that newly arrived migrants exhibit better food security and health outcomes than the local population, but there was little evidence of this in the current study.

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