

## Resilience and Adaptation: Struggles to Access Urban Food During the COVID-19 Pandemic by Zimbabwean, Somali and DRC Migrants in Cape Town

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### Introduction

South African towns and cities are common destinations for migrants from other African countries because of the employment prospects, economic opportunities, family and social networks, access to education and health care, relatively peaceful conditions, and political stability (Sithole, 2023; Sithole et al., 2024a). However, vulnerable migrants have long grappled with deep-rooted challenges such as unstable employment, low income, exploitation, discrimination, exclusion, xenophobia, hostility, harassment, restrictive immigration policies and limited access to essential services such as health care, education, and other social support systems, all of which aggravate their food insecurity (Crush & Sithole, 2024a, 2024b). Poor food access for migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers in South Africa is a serious concern in the context of the high cost of living, poverty, inequality, unemployment, irregular incomes, and the absence of social safety nets.

In the last decade, there have been a few studies exploring the links between migration and urban food security in South Africa (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017; Sithole & Dinbabo, 2016). However, the intersections between migration, urban food insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic are under-researched. The pandemic greatly intensified pre-pandemic economic challenges, significantly impacting vulnerable populations, including impoverished households and migrants. The pandemic health crisis precipitated widespread economic disruption characterised by layoffs, job losses, reduced working hours, and heightened income instability. Combined with stringent public health lockdown measures and mobility restrictions, these factors aggravated pre-pandemic systemic inequalities, precarity, and food insecurity experienced by migrant communities in South Africa (Crush & Ramachandran, 2024; Tawodzera & Crush, 2022).

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This research brief examines how the vulnerable circumstances and precarious conditions of African migrants in South Africa were exacerbated during the pandemic. The study is based on data from a survey of 844 migrants and refugees and 32 in-depth interviews conducted in 2023 in Cape Town. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilised to identify migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees from three countries: Zimbabwe, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The findings presented here underscore the urgent need for more research and policy attention to understanding food access and economic issues of migrants in the setting of pandemic and other precarious circumstances.

## Pandemic Lockdowns and Economic Impact

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and other regions of the globe introduced stringent public health measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus (Fauzi & Paiman, 2021; Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2021; Ataguba, 2020). These measures included residential lockdowns, travel bans, mobility restrictions, social distancing, contact tracing, quarantine, testing, screening, and, in the later stage of the pandemic, vaccinations. Three quarters of our survey participants had experienced both a complete lockdown (when they were not allowed to leave home except for medical emergencies) and a partial lockdown (when they were only allowed to exit in specified hours with a permit) (Table 1). Only 9% had avoided both measures.

**TABLE 1: Experience of COVID-19 Measures**

	No.	%
Complete lockdown (Not allowed to exit except for medical emergencies)	638	75.6
Partial lockdown (only allowed to exit in specified hours with a permit)	637	75.5
Neither of the above	77	9.1

Pandemic control measures severely disrupted global economic activity in many countries, including South Africa (Crush & Sithole, 2024b; Susskind & Vines, 2020). Pandemic public health measures led to widespread job and income losses, retrenchments, layoffs, and reduced working hours and income, significantly worsening pre-existing economic predicaments (Altman, 2022; Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021). Migrants and refugees in South Africa are active in both the formal and informal economies (Crush et al., 2015; Kalitanyi & Visser, 2010), and many in both sectors were negatively affected. Over half were negatively affected, with almost 30% losing their employment and a quarter experiencing a reduction in working hours (Table 2). The impact on income was severe, with 71% experiencing a loss of income or employment.

**TABLE 2: COVID-19 Crisis Effects on Migrant Employment**

	No.	%
I lost my job	248	29.4
I had reduced hours	220	26.1
My job stayed the same	163	19.3
I did not have a job at the start of the COVID crisis	129	15.3
I started a new job	33	3.9
I have had increased hours	31	3.7

Crush & Ramachandran (2024) and Tawodzera & Crush (2022) argue that the pandemic's stringent lockdown measures and mobility restrictions exacerbated the disparities and precarity experienced by African migrant communities. This conclusion is supported by the personal narratives of the migrants, who provide an invaluable perspective on the experience of lockdowns and mobility restrictions during the pandemic. Migrants from all three countries recounted similar economic challenges and difficulties:

We were affected a lot. We could not work. We were at home. Nobody was going to work. The children were not going to school. There were numerous problems (Interview with Somali migrant, 27 November 2023).

We faced a lot of problems. We could not work, and we could not have any income (Interview with Somali migrant, 29 November 2023).

Yes, we were affected a lot by the lockdown. We lost our jobs; work conditions were not good. People were also locked in their homes, so until now, the effects of the lockdown are present in our lives (Interview with Somali migrant, 23 November 2023).

We closed our business but had to still pay rentals. No other means of income. (Interview with DRC migrant, 27 November 2023).

It was difficult for me and my family because I could not work since I rely on tips, not salary; I had no income at all (Interview with DRC migrant, 28 November 2023).

Financially we struggled a lot as some days would allow us to work, whilst other days did not even permit us to work at all. Our income was low, especially during the complete lockdown, no one was allowed to travel unless you were an essential worker. (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 27 November 2023).

I lost my job, and I was now surviving on food hand-outs from well-wishers and other organisations (NGOs) (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 27 November 2023).

African migrants working in the informal sector corroborated the adverse impact of the pandemic lockdowns, especially mobility restrictions, which limited their businesses and economic activities. As migrants from the DRC recalled, "I lost my source of income as a vendor" and "I lost source of income as a car guard, and we were now surviving on hand-outs." A third remarked:

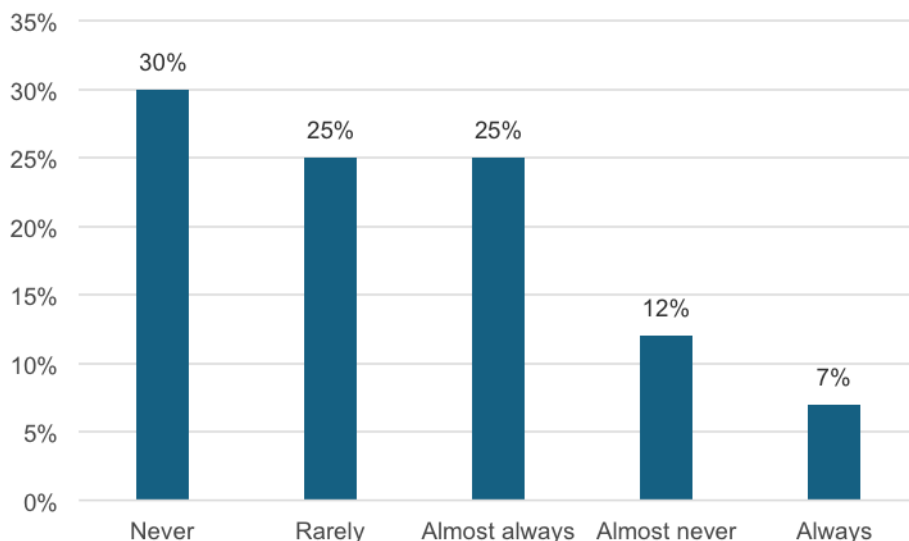
(I) lost income when my small business closed in pandemic and still now, I haven't been able to start again due to finances. This has negatively affected our ability to have enough food (Interview with DRC migrant, 28 November 2023).

Other narratives drew a similar connection between pandemic lockdowns, restrictions on employment, income loss, and access to food. As a Zimbabwean migrant explained, "I stopped going to work, and my salary was also stopped. This affected my life so much, and I was not able to afford food." A Somali migrant indicated that "There was no income, people were locked in their homes and told not to go out but, after that, people were allowed to go out. The first few days of lockdown were the hardest". A migrant from DRC stated, "I closed the shop, and even after opening in post-COVID-19, the business is still down."

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Food Access

Pandemic-induced lockdowns, mobility restrictions, job losses, and unstable income posed challenges for migrants and refugees in providing adequate food for themselves and their families. While two-thirds of the migrants said they had never, almost never, or rarely gone hungry during the pandemic, the remaining one-third had always (7%) or almost always (25%) experienced hunger (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: Experience of Hunger during the COVID-19 Pandemic**



The connection between the pandemic lockdowns, loss of work or income, reduced working hours and earnings, and food access was elaborated in the personal narratives. For example:

Shops were closed because the health officials did not want people to operate shops. So, we were affected. We could not buy food... Sometimes, we would go hungry. There was nowhere to buy. You could not get a relative to bring you food. You could not go to a friend to look for food. We were very much affected. Even right now, we still feel the effects of lockdown (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 28 November 2023).

We were affected greatly because I was not able to travel or go look for work. At times, it was a huge challenge to buy things in the shops because we were forced to present COVID certificates (vaccination proof) in order to enter the shop (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 28 November 2023).

Regarding the household’s experience of food price increases, 60% had gone without certain types of food because it was unaffordable) in the previous six months. Of these, 40% had gone without at least once a week and 17% once a month (Table 3).

**TABLE 3: Frequency of Going Without Certain Foods Because of Unaffordability**

	No.	%
Never	338	40.1
More than once a week but less than every day of the week	179	21.2
About once a month	144	17.1
About once a week	135	16.0
Every day	14	1.7

As noted in Table 4, the foods that were most unaffordable included meat (32% of households), milk products (28%), eggs (27%), vegetables (24%), fruit (21%), and cereals (21%).

**TABLE 4: Types of Unaffordable Foods**

	No.	%
Meat	272	32.2
Milk or milk products	233	27.6
Eggs	224	26.5
Other vegetables	201	23.8
Fruits	177	21.0
Cereals	173	20.5
Potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams	172	20.4
Fish or shellfish	149	17.7
Foods made with oil, fat, or butter	120	14.2
Sugar or honey	78	9.2
Foods made from beans, peas, lentils, or nuts	72	8.5
Other foods such as condiments, tea, or coffee	25	3.0
<i>Multiple-response question</i>		

In the in-depth interviews, several migrants commented on the challenges posed by food unaffordability:

Before Covid, we could go to a farm nearby where they sell vegetables. So, we could go buy vegetables, carrots, onions, cabbages. During COVID, the farm stopped production. No more vegetables and cabbages; this affected us greatly because no one was allowed to go to work. In this house we buy basics like mealie meal, meat, cooking oil, sugar. Sometimes it may take us up to two weeks; meat is now expensive, be it pork, beef, or chicken. We now see meat as luxury (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 28 November 2023).

And then, during COVID, things were no longer available in shops, because of that, prices went higher. We were obviously forced to buy because where else would we get the food from. Borders were closed, people could not outsource food from anywhere else. So, because of that, food was running out in shops (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 27 November 2023).

One Somali migrant confirmed that “foods such as rice, flour, sugar are very expensive,” while another noted: “You stop buying or change it to another food. Foods such as milk, bread, cheese, tuna/fish and meat all got expensive now.”

Previous research has shown that food expenditure is one of the main ways migrants in South Africa spend their resources (Tawodzera & Crush, 2022). Compared to the situation before the pandemic, the survey participants noted how much less or more the household was spending on food. Only 3% said they were spending less than before, with another 15% spending the same amount. The other 82% were spending more than before, with 40% spending more than double the pre-pandemic amount (Table 5).

**TABLE 5: Food Expense Comparison**

	No.	%
A little more than before the pandemic?up to twice as much?	347	41.1
Much more than before the pandemic?more than double?	334	39.6
About the same as before	127	15.1
Less than before	21	2.5

Half of the respondents noted that their current expenditure was close to half their total budget, with another 16% spending more than half on food. Additionally, 9% were spending virtually all their income on food (Table 6).

**TABLE 6: Food Expenditure as Proportion of Total Budget**

	No.	%
Close to but less than half the total budget	425	50.4
A small fraction of the budget	182	21.6
Close to but more than half the budget	136	16.1
Close to total expenditure	78	9.2

As the migrant community navigated the pandemic restrictions and economic crisis, many illustrated resilience by adapting to the challenging circumstances. Community support networks, mutual aid, solidarity through food parcels, and alternative sources of income were crucial. As one Somali migrant noted, “There was no income. Members of the community used to bring us parcels of food to support us.” Another recalled:

During the COVID-19 pandemic there was no food, people were not allowed to go out, there was no work. Our work is outside but we could not go out, so the community was giving out food parcels to us (Interview with Somali migrant, 24 November 2023).

Other strategies included buying from affordable shops, reducing the portions and frequency of meals, and consuming inexpensive and less preferred foods. As a migrant from DRC remarked:

We have changed the way we eat. We no longer eat everything that we used to eat before the pandemic. We did not have enough food during the pandemic...we are

not able to afford all that we want to eat, we just now eat a lot of starch just to fill the stomach, it is not quality food anymore (Interview with DRC migrant, 28 November 2023).

Several migrants commented on the practice of eating smaller meals and food they did not like in this way:

We do have concerns of food not being enough, so we make/eat small portions so it can last us for long (Interview with Somali migrant, 23 November 2023).

There are times when I cannot afford the type of food I want, and I completely leave it and eat whatever I have at home (Interview with Somali migrant, 27 November 2023).

We eat smaller quantities now so that we can all have something to eat. We eat morning and evening only... We now eat food that is only meant for us to survive, and we have cut out other foods that are not staples (Interview with DRC migrant, 27 November 2023).

We now eat fewer meals a day, sometimes only in the evenings... we now skip meals and have smaller portions due to lack of money and higher food prices (Interview with DRC migrant, 28 November 2023).

## Impact of COVID-19 on Food Sourcing

African migrants and refugees in South Africa typically purchase food from various formal and informal sources. Informal sources such as spazas and street vendors play a crucial role in the availability of affordable foods and making food accessible in low-income townships and settlements where many migrants reside. The most common food sources patronized by migrants included large supermarket chains (79%), markets (59%), spaza shops (52%), street vendors (52%); small shops (51%), and small independent supermarkets (51%) (Table 7). Urban agriculture was virtually non-existent, with only 2% sourcing food from home gardens. Asked whether they had ever grown their own food in Cape Town, 85% responded in the negative, with 5% having done so in the past and 6% growing food at the time of the survey.

In other contexts, there was a major pandemic-related upsurge in online food sourcing. Similarly, among the migrants and refugees interviewed for this study, pandemic disruption resulted in a notable shift in food buying from physical shops to informal sources and online services. Sithole et al. (2022, 2023; 2024b) show that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in South Africa disrupted the use of informal sources to access food and accelerated the adoption of digital-mobile remittance services and online food purchasing and delivery services. In the year prior to the survey, 28% of the migrants had ordered prepared food online, 13% had ordered fresh produce for delivery or pick-up, and 10% had ordered processed food online (Table 8). Nearly half of those ordering from online platforms picked up the food within walking distance of their home, while 24% relied on home delivery. A further 24% picked up the food in the CBD or another shopping area (Table 9).

**TABLE 7: Migrant Food Sources (Except Online Platforms)**

	No.	%
Large supermarket chains	666	78.9
Markets	495	58.7
Spaza shops	438	51.9
Street vendors	435	51.5
Small shops	430	51.0
Small independent supermarkets	429	50.8
Restaurants	326	38.6
Small grocery stores	276	32.7
Shared meals with neighbours and/or other households	87	10.3
Food provided at work	85	10.1
Borrow food from others	54	6.4
Food provided to children at school	48	5.7
Food provided by neighbours and/or other households	46	5.5
Food sent by relatives in other cities or towns	46	5.5
Food sent by relatives in another suburb/community	39	4.6
Food sent by relatives in rural areas	28	3.3
Household grows it in urban areas	20	2.4
Canteens for elderly residents	13	1.5
Begging	10	1.2
<i>Multiple-response question</i>		

**TABLE 8: Use of Online Platforms for Ordering Food**

	No.	%
Prepared food through online delivery service	237	28.1
Fresh produce self-pick-up through online platforms	114	13.5
Fresh produce delivered through online platforms	111	13.2
Packaged processed food through online platforms	84	10.0
<i>Multiple-response question</i>		

**TABLE 9: Delivery or Pick-Up Locations for Online Platforms**

	No.	%
Within my neighbourhood (walking distance)	262	45.9
Delivered to home	136	23.9
Downtown/central business district	90	15.8
Other shopping area	41	7.2
On the road to or from work	41	7.2
Total	570	100.0

On how they get to where they buy most of their food, 40% walk, 30% use a personal car or have access to a car, 20% rely on public transport, and 7% use Uber, Bolt or similar services of taxi apps (Table 10).



**TABLE 10: Means of Transportation to Purchase Food**

	No.	%
Walk	340	40.3
Use a personal car or have access to a car	251	29.7
Rely on public transport	168	19.9
Use uber, bolt or similar services of taxi apps	62	7.4

The personal narratives of the migrants provide other insights into shifts in food sourcing because of the pandemic lockdowns, including purchasing more from informal rather than formal outlets:

We have stopped buying our food items from Pick n Pay because it is now expensive. We purchase food from Shoprite, Spar, Giant, spaza shops and the Somalian shops because the prices are reasonable and diverse (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 29 November 2023).

I get my meat from spaza shops. Here I take risks because I am not even sure of the expiry date or where the food has been outsourced from. A second option is to check for shops online that are having discounts or specials, this is subject to the availability of data (Interview with Zimbabwean migrant, 29 November 2023).

## Conclusion

This research brief contributes to the literature on South-South migration and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security by examining the food access challenges experienced by African migrants in Cape Town during the pandemic. The key finding is that the pandemic lockdowns, mobility restrictions, travel bans, border closures, curfews, closure of businesses, and disruptions to economic activities significantly limited food access for African migrants and refugees in Cape Town.

The personal narratives of migrants provide insights into the experiences and challenges faced during the lockdowns and the mobility restrictions imposed during the pandemic. For many, the lockdowns meant an abrupt halt to their daily routines—enforced isolation prevented them from going to work, visiting shops, or accessing markets where they typically purchase essential food items. This loss of mobility severely undermined their ability to provide for themselves and their families, increased food prices and expenditure, and restricted access to familiar food sources, leading to increased food insecurity and economic stress.

Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety escalated as individuals grappled with the dangers of the virus while also contending with the harsh realities of poverty and limited resources. These personal accounts shed light on their struggles but also underscore the importance of community solidarity and mutual aid during times of crisis. However, as the migrants navigated these unprecedented challenges, many also demonstrated resilience and creativity. Some sought alternative means of income or accessed community support networks to ensure they

could meet their basic needs. In essence, the stories of African migrants during the pandemic reveal a complex tapestry of vulnerability and strength, reflecting broader societal issues and highlighting the human capacity to adapt and survive amidst adversity. Further research and policy attention must be directed to the under-researched interactions between South-South migration, food insecurity, and crisis resilience to better support migrant populations in future crises.

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