Considering the Migration and Food Security Nexus in African Cities

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Abstract

International migration and food security are still treated as separate policy and research domains, yet they are deeply intertwined in the African urban context. This paper unbundles the nexus between migration and urban food security by examining how migrants and refugees navigate food systems, cope with vulnerabilities, and deploy resilience strategies to mitigate food insecurity. As rapid urbanization reshapes African cities, migrants are becoming actors in informal food economies, both as consumers and vendors. However, economic exclusion, weak social protection, and precarity often expose them to heightened food insecurity. The paper explores how migrant food security is shaped by urban food environments, informal markets, and social networks. While migrants demonstrate agency in securing food through adaptive coping strategies, structural barriers such as xenophobia, legal restrictions, and economic volatility persist. The role of remittances in migrant food security is also critically examined, with a comparative analysis of Somali migrants in Nairobi, who are primarily remittance recipients, and Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, who are predominantly remittance senders. By unbundling the migration-food security nexus, this paper highlights the complex, yet essential, role of migration in shaping African urban food systems and livelihoods.

Keywords

international migration, food security, cities, food system, urban food environment, informal economy, Africa

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Cover Image

Somali Café in Bellville, South Africa. Photo credit: Jonathan Crush

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Introduction

Migration and food security are frequently approached as if they belong to separate and distinct research and policy domains (Crush, 2013). Migration is seen as the preserve of researchers in the field of migration studies, international organizations such as the IOM and UNHCR, and national departments of immigration, labour and home affairs. Food security is viewed as the brief of researchers studying rural development and smallholder farmers, organizations such as the FAO and IFPRI, and departments of agriculture. Research on food security in Africa still displays a rural bias, while research on borders, mobility, and migrant experiences barely mentions food security (Crush & Riley, 2019). As Mulazanni et al. (2020, p.19) note, "we continue to know little about the complex causal-effect relations that link these aspects and, in particular, how much migration patterns are affected by food security issues and how much, as a feedback, migration can affect food security, on both the origin and destination areas." Over the last decade, there are some signs of a recognition that migration and food security linkages in urban Africa are both direct and deeply intertwined (Chikanda et al., 2020; Ramachandran & Crush, 2023). Migration fundamentally reshapes urban demographics, labour markets, and cultural practices, altering how, where, and which foods are sourced and consumed. Simultaneously, food insecurity drives migration across borders, compelling families or individuals to seek refuge in urban areas offering the promise of improved living conditions and more stable food access (Martin-Shields & Stojetz, 2019).

Rapid urbanization in Africa is a defining process that is reshaping social, political, and economic conditions across the continent (Collier, 2017; Fox, 2012; Hoelscher et al., 2023; Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). Cities are expanding at an unprecedented rate, becoming magnets for internal and cross-border migrants in search of improved livelihoods, greater social mobility, better economic prospects, and sustainable food security (Awumbila, 2017; Chikanda et al., 2018; Fox, 2017). Between 1980 and the present, for example, the proportion of the African population living in urban areas increased from 28% (135 million) to 47% (705 million) (Galal, 2024). The most recent World Migration Report notes that around 21 million migrants live in other African countries, a substantial proportion of whom settle in urban areas (IOM, 2024). The demographic surge towards cities means new opportunities for migrants, but can also negatively impact their living conditions, general welfare, and food security (Cleland & Machiyama, 2017). Exclusion from the formal job market leaves many with little choice but work in burgeoning urban informal economies (Young & Crush, 2020). In cities, most migrants purchase their food rather than producing it, and unexpected price hikes, unpredictable income, and weak systems of social protection can leave households acutely vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition (Frayne et al., 2014; Holdsworth & Landais, 2019; McCordic & Frayne, 2017).

In Africa, accelerating urbanization, shifting mobility patterns, and evolving food economies are recasting the nexus between migration and food security (Chikanda et al., 2018; Crush & Tawodzera, 2017; Mulazzani et al., 2020). In concert with explosive in-migration and urban growth, African food systems have become markedly more complex (Battersby & Watson, 2019; Crush & Battersby, 2017; Moustier et al., 2023; van Berkum et al., 2020). Formal supply chains, anchored in large-scale supermarkets and wholesalers, coexist with an extensive informal food economy of street vendors, local kiosks, and open-air stalls (Crush & Frayne, 2011; Smit, 2016)). Informality provides "poorer households with better opportunities to achieve food security by being spatially accessible and specifically serving such households by doing things like offering credit or breaking bulk" (Giroux et al., 2021, p.2). However, their precarious legal and regulatory position exposes both food vendors and buyers to the threat of clampdowns, high transaction costs, and accusations of criminality (Adama, 2020; Bandauko & Arku, 2025; Dragsted-Mutengwa, 2018; Resnick, 2019). Within this precarious urban environment, migrants and refugees are regularly singled out for harsh treatment and are also vulnerable to xenophobic attack and internal displacement (Bamidele, 2024; Crush et al., 2015; Maharaj, 2023; Moyo, 2017; Moyo & Gumbo, 2021; Ramachandran et al., 2017, 2025). Still, they display remarkable creativity and agency, forging transnational social networks, establishing small-scale enterprises, and drawing on multiple income sources to meet household needs (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017).

Studies of the food insecurity challenges confronting forced migrants in Africa have tended to focus on rural camp settings -- spaces where international bodies tightly coordinate in-kind food aid. However, recent research in several countries including Ghana (Inusah et al., 2025; Nanfuka et al., 2025); Kenya (Gichunge et al., 2020; Njenga et al., 2022; REACH, 2021; Singh et al., 2015, 2017), Namibia (Oliver & Ilcan, 2018), and Uganda (Kamugisha et al., 2024) has found extremely high levels of vulnerability to food insecurity in protracted camp settings. This literature does not address two important questions of relevance to this paper: What are the food security experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees who move to countries with no camps, who by-pass camps, or who relocate from camps to cities? Do refugees in camp and city settings have better or worse food security outcomes as a result of migration? As evidence mounts of urban self-settlement among refugees, it is becoming clear that displaced individuals and households are neither passive victims nor idle recipients of aid nor confined to closed settlements. Instead, they forge robust local and transnational linkages that reshape urban neighborhoods and retail environments (Pavanello et al., 2010).

In this paper, we examine the current state of knowledge about the food security experiences and challenges of cross-border migrant and refugee households in African cities. Comprehensive information on the food security of the millions of migrants and refugees living in urban areas in other African countries is sparse, confined in the main to scattered case studies and small area studies and concentrated in the southern part of the continent. The next section of the paper therefore provides an overview of what can be gleaned from the current case study literature about

the food security status and challenges facing international migrants in African cities. As an organizing framework, we show how migration relates to the various established dimensions of food security and the impact of COVID-19 on migrant food security. The final section of the paper focuses on a case study of Somali migrants in Nairobi, Kenya, which shows similarities and differences with the food security situation of migrants in other African cities.

Pillars of Migrant Food Security

The 1996 World Food Summit provided a succinct definition of food security that is still widely accepted. In this definition, food security exists "when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe food to meet their dietary energy requirement needs and food preferences for a productive and healthy life" (FAO, 2006). This definition was later disaggregated into four "pillars" of food security – food availability, food access, food utilization, and food stability – which are seen as essential for achieving food security for all (Aborisade & Bach, 2014; Vink, 2012). Availability refers to the overall physical presence of food in a food environment, whether through domestic production or imports. Access focuses on the ability of a person or household to obtain food -- economically, physically, and socially. Utilization underscores how well people use the food they acquire, including nutritional uptake, food preferences, food safety, and hygiene practices. And stability ensures that these conditions -- availability, access, and utilization - hold over time, independent of short-term shocks (Jones et al. 2013). These four pillars undergird much of the existing literature on Africa, notwithstanding recent arguments for the construction of additional pillars (Clapp et al., 2022).

While migrant journeys to another country are fraught with challenges relating to the availability of food en route, once they arrive at an urban destination food is more generally available (though not necessarily accessible). To understand where food is available to migrants means looking at the operation of the urban food system and the food environment in their immediate neighbourhood. For example, Zimbabwean migrants in urban South Africa rely on three main sources: supermarkets (96% of households), informal vendors (93%), and small food outlets (21%) (Table 1). Around one-third obtain food from their social networks. A mere 1% grow any of their own food which reflects the low levels of participation in urban agriculture by migrants more generally. Nearly 40% source some of their food from informal vendors daily, many of whom are also migrants.

In many African cities, migrants embed themselves within the informal spaces of the urban food system, leading to complex challenges in food security and governance. Many migrants rely on these informal networks for food but often face higher food insecurity than non-migrants. Some capitalize on clan or ethnic loyalties to create small-scale businesses, while others reside in under-resourced slums where precarious housing and weak social services intensify food insecurity (Jonah & May, 2020). The informal food sector thus operates as both opportunity and liability for migrants; allowing flexible entry but subjecting them to economic risk, police malpractice, and citizen hostility. Thus, migrants co-produce parts of city-level food systems despite limited institutional support and in the face of outright antagonism and xenophobic hostility (Akinola, 2018; Crush et al., 2015; Bbaala & Mate, 2016; Tawodzera & Crush, 2023).

Research on migrant food security to date has focused on the second pillar, using metrics such as the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP) classification (Haysom & Tawodzera, 2018; Jones et al., 2013). A survey of 450 migrant food traders in Cape Town and Johannesburg in 2011 found higher levels of food security among Zimbabwean migrants compared to households in urban Zimbabwe (Table 2). In Kenya and South Africa, economic access to desirable foods is frequently undermined by volatile market prices and unstable wages, a reality magnified for migrant communities whose legal status can restrict employment avenues (Asquith et al., 2021). Legal status significantly impacts migrants' access to resources in urban settings, particularly in Kenya where explicit policies for urban migration are lacking (Pavanello et al., 2010). Despite facing discrimination and legal challenges, migrants and refugees in some cities have established successful transnational trade networks and businesses, contributing to the local economy

Table 1: Migrant Food Environment in South African Cities

Food sources	% of households using source	% of households using source on daily basis
Supermarket	96	21
Informal market/street food	93	38
Small shop/restaurant/take away	87	21
Borrow from others	33	3
Share meals with neighbours and/or friends	29	5
Food provided by neighbours and/or other households	24	4
Food aid	9	8
Community food kitchen	6	1
Remittances (food)	6	1
Grow it	1	0

Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2016)

(Campbell, 2006; Carrier & Lochery, 2013). However, 'illegality' can permeate migrants' everyday lives, affecting their social interactions and activities and food security (Sigona, 2012).

City governance also shapes migrant food accessibility, with local authorities often ill-prepared to manage large migrant concentrations. Deficits in municipal service provision – water, sanitation, electricity – impinge directly on households' ability to spend more on food and maintain nutritional standards. Colonial legacies continue to influence urban food systems, with central governments historically controlling food-related issues (Duminy, 2018). Migrants are also generally excluded from accessing social protection grants which can reduce food insecurity (Nzabamwita & Dinbabo, 2022). Efforts by migrants formalize businesses or secure legal housing are hampered by structural barriers, sustaining precarious living conditions. As a result, even when migrants exhibit entrepreneurial zeal, and improve food access for citizens, they still face significant challenges, including xenophobia, administrative roadblocks, and outright corruption. Mlambo & Ndebele, 2020).

Migrants rely on a variety of coping strategies when food is short (Figure 1). These include reliance on less expensive foodstuffs (84% of households), poorer quality food (78%) and less preferred but cheaper foods (74%). Over half said that they reduced the number of meals eaten per day, borrowed money to buy food or solicited the help of a friend or relative. Nearly 50% said that they reduced portion sizes while 20% responded by buying food on credit and reducing the amount of food consumed by adults in the household.

Even when food is available and accessible, poor utilization can lead to food insecurity. As the third conventional pillar of food security, utilization, refers to how individuals and households use food to achieve nutritional well-being, encompassing food safety, dietary diversity, health status, good hygiene, cultural preferences, and nutritional knowledge. Metrics such as the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) have been used to provide insights into the nutritional quality of migrant household diets. Zimbabwean migrant households in South African have low dietary diversity (Figure 2). The bulk of the food being consumed by households is high in starch and with high concentrations of sugar and oils. Protein and vitamin-rich foods are consumed in only a minority of households.

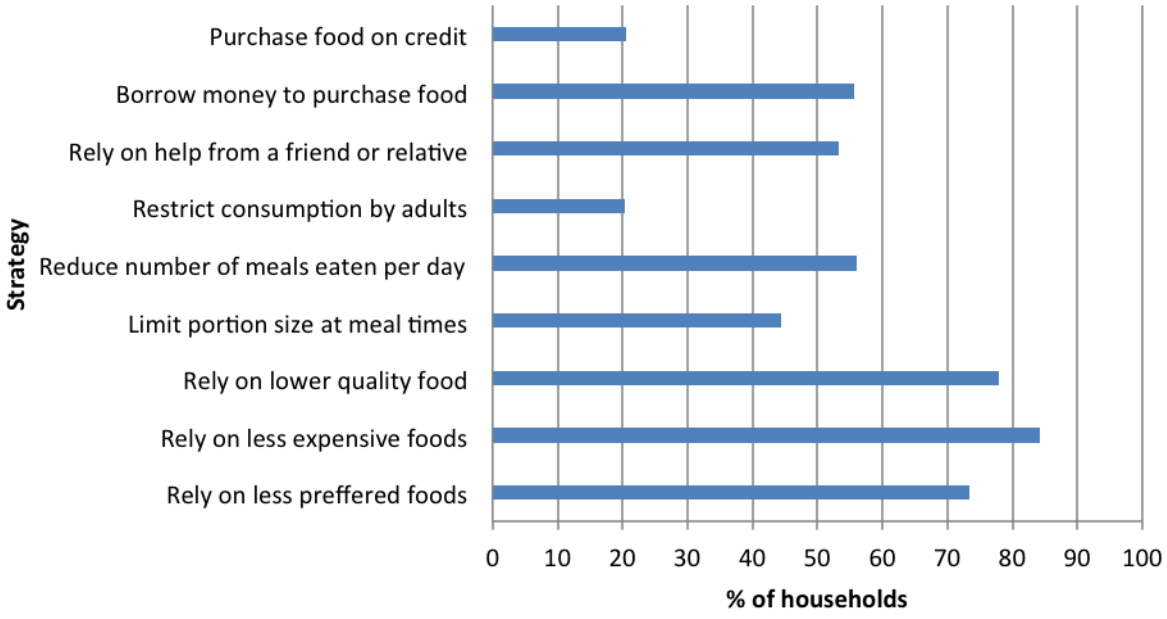
Migrants indicated that when the situation is tough, they do not think much about the quality of the food that they are buying. Rather they are preoccupied with simply getting enough food for the household to survive. The foods that they eat may not be preferable, but if they are able to put a meal on the table, they are successful in their quest to keep the household intact. One respondent explained the trade-offs between the quality and quantity of food in this way:

Table 2: Migrant Household Food Security Status

	Migrant households in Cape Town and Johannesburg %	Households in urban Zimbabwe %
Food secure	11	2
Mildly food insecure	5	3
Moderately food insecure	24	24
Severely food insecure	60	72

Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2016)

Figure 1: Dietary Strategies Used by Households



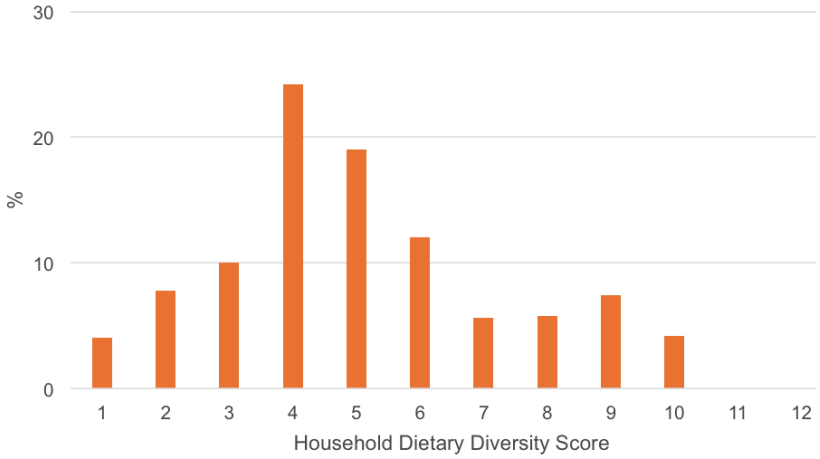
We know a lot about food quality and the desirability for us to have such good food. That we know. Our only problem as a household is that we do not have the money to buy such foods. So, when I go to the market or shops, I make sure that what I buy is enough for a long time, be it a week or two weeks. I now know where the bargains are. In some of the shops they sell food that is about to expire and if we are lucky, we get some before other people grab the lot. When I go to the vegetable market, I get a lot of food by buying the breakages – tomatoes that have been squashed, onions that are dirty, carrots that are damaged, and so on. These are cheap so I get more. A hard time teaches you how to survive and I can say I have been taught by experience.

Because households purchase the bulk of their food, adjustments are also made to the household budget as a way of coping with food shortages. These strategies include diverting money from paying bills, rent and utilities to purchase food, using savings, and changing their residence (Figure 3). An increasing number of migrants were also combining households to save money.

Food security is not solely about the availability or accessibility of food; cultural preferences also play a crucial role in how migrants and refugees utilize available food sources to maintain dietary diversity and nutritional well-being. For many migrant households and communities, food is deeply intertwined with identity, memory, and social cohesion. For example, Hunter-Adams (2017) explores how Congolese, Somali, and Zimbabwean migrants navigate their food environment, often prioritizing culturally familiar foods despite economic constraints. Also, Nyamnjoh & Rowlands (2013) and Nyamnjoh (2018) highlight how Cameroonian migrants maintain transnational food practices, using food to reinforce community ties and cultural belonging. Tawodzera's (2024) study of Zimbabwean migrants in Windhoek, Namibia, illustrates how culturally preferred foods are not always available at their destination. Many migrants struggle to access Zimbabwean staples such as brown rice, dried kapenta fish and peanut butter. While some migrants attempt to procure these items from informal cross-border traders or specialized markets, high costs and limited availability often force dietary shifts toward more processed foods.

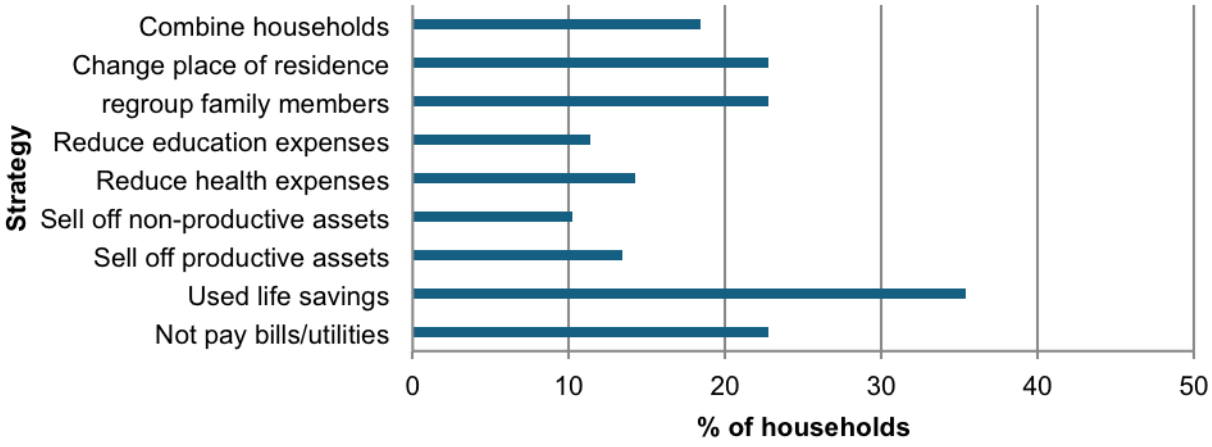
The struggle to access familiar foods often leads migrants to establish ethnic food markets and restaurants, contributing to the broader urban food economy while simultaneously reinforcing cultural foodways. However, barriers such as high costs, limited availability, and legal restrictions on informal food vending can impede the ability of migrant

Figure 2: Household Dietary Diversity Among Migrants in South African Cities



Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2016)

Figure 3: Migrant Household Coping Strategies



Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2016)

households to fully realize their cultural food preferences. These findings suggest that food utilization, particularly in migrant communities, extends beyond mere nutritional intake to encompass cultural adaptation, economic constraints, and social integration.

Stability, as a pillar of food security, refers to the consistency and reliability of food availability, access, and utilization over time, and the importance of resilience against short-term and long-term stresses that can disrupt food systems. One metric for analyzing stability over the course of the previous year is the Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP). There was considerable variation from month to month in the adequacy of the household food supply among the Zimbabwean households in urban South Africa (Figure 4). Households had the lowest levels of food security in January on average, and the highest in April and December.

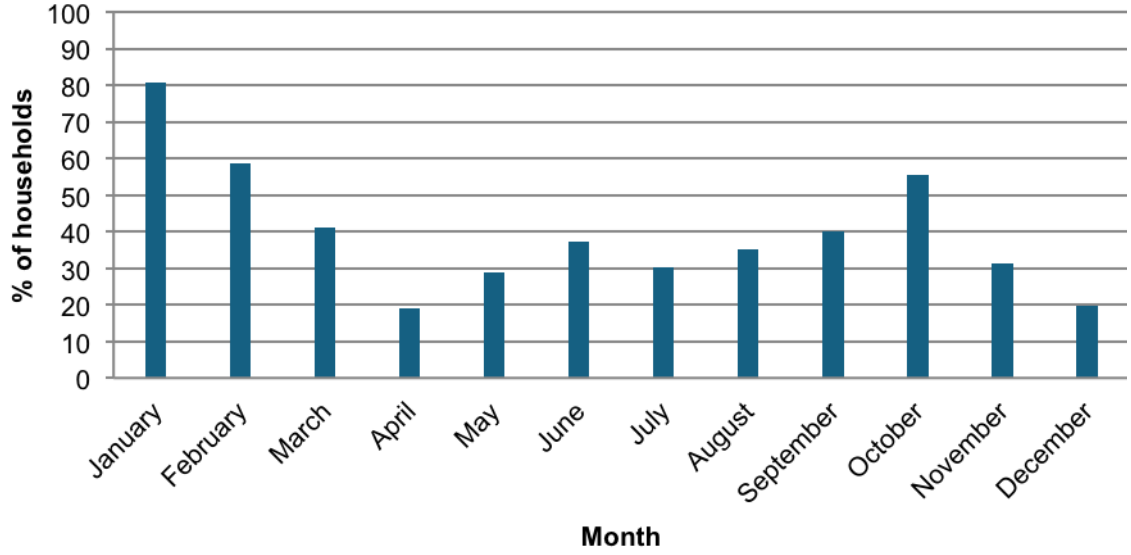
Remittances are at the heart of debates around migration and food security. These financial flows act as informal safety nets, helping families meet basic needs and cope with crises. Informal value transfer systems play a crucial role in facilitating remittances for migrants (Lindley, 2010). These systems remain popular among low-income migrants for their efficiency and accessibility. Studies in various contexts demonstrate that remittances enhance food security, especially during food crises (Abadi et al., 2018; Tapsoba et al., 2019; Obi et al., 2020; Owusu & Crush, 2024). However, the pressure to remit can affect migrants' own food security in destination countries (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). In 2020, established remittance patterns and routings were massively disrupted by COVID-19 (Masunda & Maharaj, 2023). Remittances to other countries fell drastically as unemployed and locked-down migrants struggled to survive. One consequence of pandemic disruption to informal remitting channels was a turn towards the use of digital remitting platforms by migrants (Crush & Tawodzera, 2023).

By exposing the vulnerability of urban migrant communities to food insecurity, COVID-19 has stimulated increased attention on the linkages between migration and food security in African cities (Crush & Ahmed, 2024; Hitch et al., 2023; Rudin-Rush et al., 2022). As Moseley & Battersby (2020) observed at the time, "there is another scourge that accompanies COVID-19, and that is a global hunger pandemic" (p. 450). The concept of "pandemic precarity" has recently been applied to capture how the scourge aggravated migrant food insecurity in urban areas (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Pandemic precarity refers to the ways in which COVID-19 disrupted livelihoods, exacerbated existing inequalities, and create new forms of vulnerability, particularly for marginalized groups. Pandemic precarity in urban Africa had profound effects on migrant food security across the continent, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new forms of food insecurity (Ahmed et al., 2024; Benavente& Diaz, 2023; Dinbabo, 2022; Odunitan-Wayas et al., 2021; Yazew et al., 2023).

Bans on international travel and border closures trapped many migrants who were unable to return to their home countries to weather the pandemic (Adegboyega, 2021). Migrants and refugees were affected disproportionately by pandemic precarity, as they were more likely to be in unstable employment, to live in overcrowded conditions with high rates of transmission, and to be excluded from government relief measures (Crush & Ahmed, 2024; Mukumbang et al., 2020). Independent female migrants and refugees were also more vulnerable to severe food insecurity (Mulu & Mbandza, 2021; Mutambara et al., 2022). In Zimbabwe, Bhanye (2023) shows how the ban on associational activity negatively affected the food security of Malawian migrants. Here, and elsewhere, migrants developed "nimble" coping strategies to weather the worst effects of lockdowns, mobility restrictions, unemployment, and income loss (Bhanye, 2024; Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021).

COVID-19 also visited considerable hardship on migrants who depended for income and food security on running businesses in the informal food sector (Chidau et al., 2022; Langry & Rena, 2023; Mbeve et al., 2020; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022) Across Africa, informal sector vendors, including

Figure 4: Inadequate Food Provisioning of Migrant Households in South African Cities



Source: Crush & Tawodzera (2016)

many migrants, were rarely considered an "essential service" and were forced off the streets or barred from markets during lockdowns (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024). They also bore the brunt of aggressive policing measures. Table 3 is taken from a survey of 450 migrant food traders in Cape Town and Johannesburg and shows that 90% were forced to close during the weeks-long national. Over 80% reported a reduction in the number of customers, a decline in sales, reduced cash flow and lost income/profit. Over 60% said that they had challenges accessing stock, that suppliers had increased their prices and stock was now unaffordable, that customers were not paying their debts, and that they had competition from supermarkets (who were designated as an essential service and remained open). As a result of these business challenges, 70% had remitted less money and 83% said that the loss of business income had led to greater food insecurity for their household. Almost all of the respondents had not received any of the government's pandemic relief funds.

The Nexus in Nairobi

This section of the paper looks at the case of Somali refugee food security in Nairobi based on a household survey of 268 households conducted in Eastleigh in 2022. As one of Africa's most vibrant and rapidly evolving cities, Nairobi attracts migrants and refugees from many other countries. Among Nairobi's diverse migrant population, Somali households occupy a distinctive position. Most live in Eastleigh, an area often referred to as "Little Mogadishu" (Carrier, 2017). Research and policy debates around Somali forced migration to Kenya traditionally focus on the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps. Yet a growing number of Somalis now pursue urban self-settlement in search of better economic prospects, social services, and strong diaspora ties. Somali migrants exercise considerable agency as co-creators of their food environment - organizing rotating savings clubs, fostering transnational financial links, and sustaining cultural dietary preferences. Yet food security remains fragile when confronted with changing municipal policies and protracted crises such as COVID-19. The Eastleigh case is of particular relevance to the issues raised in this paper for a number of reasons, some of which are similar to other urban areas and some of which are quite distinctive.

First, Eastleigh has become a vibrant ethnic enclave for Somali refugees coming straight from Somalia or via the refugee camps (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bhagat, 2019). It is therefore a contribution to the growing literature on the livelihoods and food security of urban refugees who now constitute as many as 60% of the forced migration population worldwide and 50% in Africa (Nisbet et al., 2022; Sanyal, 2014). Second, Eastleigh is an early example of the understudied ethnic clustering of migrants and refugees that is becoming increasingly common in many African cities, and the role of food in building associational life in migrant spaces. Cultural preferences play a crucial role in food choices, with Somalis integrating better when involved in culturally appropriate food value chains (Adekunle et al., 2021; Muhamad & Jaji, 2023). Third, in many African cities migrants working in the informal sector are dispersed to maximize business income. By contrast, Eastleigh is a space where migrant food system entrepreneurs cluster and their primary customers are other migrants. The key question is whether this produces better food security outcomes. Fourth, the existing literature reviewed above tends to stress similitude among migrants, pointing to their shared vulnerabilities, livelihood struggles, and high levels of food insecurity. In Eastleigh,

Table 3: Impacts of COVID-19 on Migrant Food Enterprises	
	%
Did not receive pandemic relief funds	99
Too few customers	90
Temporarily closed down	89
Cash flow was reduced	86
Household food insecurity increased	83
Lost income/profit	83
Challenges accessing stock	77
Prejudice against my nationality	76
Suppliers increased prices	74
Customers do not pay debts	74
Remitted less money home	70
Competition from supermarkets	69
Impacted by crime/theft	68
Lack of access to credit	65
Stock was unaffordable	62
Downsized operations	60
Physical assaults	40
Police confiscation of goods	38
Reduced employee salaries	31

there is considerable evidence that some are "more equal than others" a funding that may also apply to food security. Finally, Eastleigh is a hub for transnational trade and social networks, linking countries of refugee origin, asylum, and resettlement. As a result, it is an urban community that both receives remittances from Euro-America and South Africa and sends remittances to Somalia.

On food availability in Eastleigh, the food environment is dominated by wholesalers and small shops (Table 4). In Southern African cities, migrants rely on supermarket retailers for the bulk purchase of staples. In Eastleigh, wholesalers dominate bulk purchasing by households. Over half of the households (52%) said they normally obtain their supplies from wholesalers. The ability to buy staples in bulk at wholesale prices often proves vital for families juggling tight budgets and fluctuating remittances, yet not all can afford such larger, lump-sum purchases. Another one-third (31%) of the households rely on small local shops, primarily because they cannot afford to purchase in bulk. As many as 81% of the households do procure food from street and formal and informal market vendors at least once a week. Only 6% never obtain food this way. This finding is consistent with Eastleigh's dense network of stalls and hawkers offering flexible prices and small-quantity sales. These informal sources also extend short-term credit to trusted customers. Food on credit is particularly crucial for families awaiting remittances. However, reliance on street vendors can also be precarious: periodic crackdowns or policy shifts can disrupt these economic lifelines.

Table 5 shows the main sources of income of the Somali households. Full-time (17%) and part-time (6%) are relatively low, indicative of the challenges accessing the formal labour market in Nairobi. Informal sector income is much more significant with 44% either in self-employment or obtaining income from an informal business. Government grants and non-government aid are almost non-existent. And like migrants in most cities, few cultivate crops for sale. However, the most important income source is remittances from outside the country (received by almost half of all households surveyed).

Rent (33%) and food (22%) dominate household budgets, with school fees also posing a considerable burden (Table 6). One respondent noted that her family faces tough decisions whenever money from abroad is delayed, wondering whether to "pay school fees or buy enough rice for the week," clearly showing dependence on remittances while revealing how education spending competes directly with food purchase. Sending remittances to Somalia makes up just under 10% of average monthly expenditure, exceeding medical

Table 4: Food Environment in Eastleigh		
Where does this household normally obtain its food?	**No.**	**%**
Wholesale food store	110	52.4
Local Shops/kiosks/duka	65	31.0
Their own restaurant	14	6.7
Market	5	2.4
Supermarket	5	2.4
Street vendors	4	1.9
Informal markets	4	1.9
Food stores	2	1.0
Retail and street vendors	1	0.5
Total	210	100.0

Table 5: Sources of Household Income		
Source	**No.**	**% of households**
Cash remittances	149	47.0
Self-employment	68	21.5
Income from informal business	68	21.5
Full-time employment	54	17.0
Income from formal businesses	43	13.6
Income from renting dwelling units	25	7.9
Merry-go rounds (ayuto/chamas)	21	6.6
Part-time employment	20	6.3
Non- government grants and aid	12	3.8
Income from sale of farm products	3	1.0
Government social grants	1	0.3
Any other income (s)	28	8.8
Note: Multiple-response question		

expenses, transportation, and municipal services. Notably, 201 out of 268 Somali migrants surveyed (75%) reported that they send money to Somalia, underscoring the vital role remittances play in shaping both household budgets and difficult spending decisions.

Most of the respondents (87%) agreed that migration to Nairobi had improved their food security compared to back in Somalia. However, despite the availability of food from different outlets in Eastleigh, Somali households did not enjoy the same degree of access to food. The surveyed households had an accessibility HFIAS score of 6.8 on the scale from 0 to 27, and a utilization HDDS of 7.4 on the scale from 0 to 12 (Figure 5). This suggests that the households are relatively food secure overall and reasonable levels of dietary diversity. To illustrate, the HFIAS score for Zimbabwean migrant households in Cape Town and Johannesburg from an earlier survey was more than twice as high at 14.4 and the HDDS a much lower 5.1 (Table 7). However, there was considerable variation in the Somali household scores on the HFIAP but not as varied as the Zimbabwe households). For example, 43% of Somali households were completely food secure (compared with only 11% of Zimbabwean households). On the other hand, 38% of Somali households were severely food insecure (compared with 60% of Zimbabwean households).

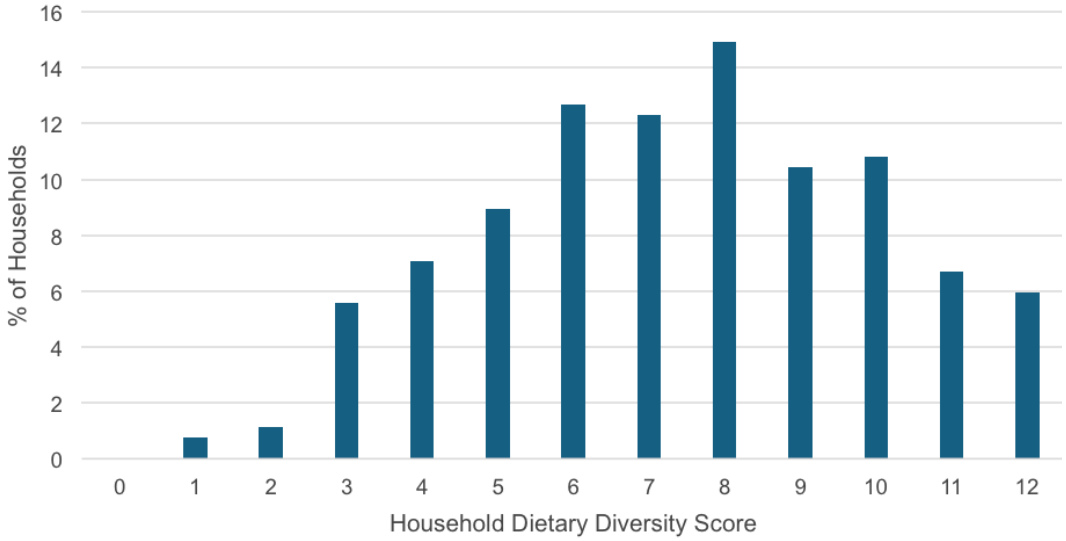
The key difference between the two samples is remittances. Somali households in Eastleigh receive remittances while Zimbabwean households are senders only. Even though some Somali households also send remittances, this is insufficient to outweigh remittance receipts. However, even among remittance recipients, there is no guarantee of food security stability. Some described occasional anxieties when financial support from relatives abroad came late or in smaller sums. One father, for example, explained that his brother overseas was "also struggling with bills," so some months they received no remittance at all, leading them to reduce meal portions or rely on credit from neighbourhood shops. A female respondent caring for her sister's children elaborated how remittances determine what foods they can afford to eat:

> *Some days we have enough to buy goat meat and fruits; other days, if my sister in Canada can't send money, we cut back to plain rice. The shopkeeper knows me, so he lets me pay later when I have money. This arrangement saves me from constantly worrying about what we'll eat tomorrow. It's really the only way I can manage these days with the price of everything going up. Sometimes I am worried about what I'll feed the children tomorrow if more*

Table 6: Average Monthly Household Expenses

Expenditure type	Amount (KES)	% of households
Rent	29,896	32.9
Groceries	20,319	22.4
School fees	16,750	18.5
Remittance expense	6,970	7.7
Medical expense	6,011	6.6
Cooking gas	3,657	4.0
Transport	2,721	3.0
Electricity	2,427	2.7
Water	2,001	2.2
Total monthly expenses	90,752	100.0

Figure 5: Household Dietary Diversity Among Somali Refugees in Nairobi



remittance money doesn't come in or the I still have debts to pay the shopkeeper and I can borrow more. Sometimes I skip my own meal to make sure there's at least something for them to eat.

Just over 60% of Somali respondents "strongly agreed" and an additional 22% "agreed" with the proposition that remittances improved their household food security status. These high approval ratings underscore how pivotal diaspora funds are in offsetting intermittent incomes or covering bulk purchases of staple foods.

Discrepancies in the food security status of Somali households are at least partly attributable to differences in remittance receipts (Table 8). In the year prior to the survey, 39% of recipient households had received over KES 200,001, while 22% had received below KES 50,000. Such disparities highlight why some families can afford regular protein sources or monthly bulk shopping, while others teeter on the edge of food insecurity. One father who routinely receives sums above KES 200,000 proudly noted that he can "buy enough flour for two months," whereas a neighbour dependent on sporadic, smaller inflows "sometimes ends up buying groceries day by day." This uneven remittance landscape, in turn, shapes how households manage rent obligations and daily meal planning, influencing both short-term coping and longer-term sustainability.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare these vulnerabilities and dependence on remittances for mitigating food insecurity. As many as 71% of the respondents agreed that the household had experienced a decline in remittances during the pandemic. Table 9 quantifies the frequency of household deprivation of enough food and cash income during the pandemic. Many families spoke of receiving initial help from neighbours who shared leftover staples, but as lockdowns extended, these communal safety nets were depleted. One respondent recounted:

I receive monthly financial support through remittances from my brother in the US to support my livelihood here in Nairobi. This money is crucial for paying rent, school fees, health expenses, and, most importantly, purchasing food for my family. When COVID-19 hit, my brother initially stopped sending me money because he lost his job due to the pandemic. This had a devastating impact on my ability to cover basic needs for my family. We struggled to make ends meet, and I had to borrow food on credit. However, it wasn't always possible due to the strict lockdown measures, which made it difficult to even find someone willing to lend us food. The situation was dire, and I felt helpless as I watched my children forego some meals (Interview No. 12).

Table 7: Comparative Levels of Migrant Household Food Security

Category		Households in Eastleigh	Migrant households in urban South Africa
Mean HFIAS		6.8	14.4
HFIAP	Food secure (%)	43	11
	Mildly food insecure (%)	8	5
	Moderately food insecure (%)	11	24
	Severely food insecure (%)	38	60
Mean HDDS		7.4	5.1

Table 8: Money Received in the Past Year

Total amount received in the past year	No.	%
KESH200,001+	63	39.1
KES150,001–KES200,000	39	24.2
KES100 ,001–KES150,000	13	8.1
KES50,001–KES100,000	11	6.8
Less than KES50,000	35	21.7
Total	161	100.0

Table 9: Household Deprivation During COVID-19

	Always (%)	Many times (%)	Several times (%)	Just once or twice (%)	Never (%)
How often did this household go without enough food to eat?	15.0	29.2	6.4	1.1	40.8
How often did this household go without cash income?	2.0	33.5	12.0	29.7	24.1

Conclusion

The complex intersection of migration and food security in African cities is shaped by multiple factors. This paper has sought to unbundle the nexus by examining how migrants and refugees navigate food systems, cope with vulnerabilities, and deploy resilience strategies to mitigate food insecurity, albeit with mixed success. As migrants settle in cities, they engage with both the formal and informal food system, often preferring informal vendors due to affordability, accessibility, and cultural familiarity. This also creates added opportunities for migrant economic participation in the urban informal food sector, which has the secondary effect of insulating migrant households from food insecurity. However, this can subject them to regulatory pressures, xenophobic violence, and economic instability. Although migrants play a growing role in urban food economies as consumers and vendors, their position remains precarious due to their insecure legal status and fluctuating economic conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this vulnerability by exacerbating food insecurity through job losses, market disruptions, and the criminalization of informal food vending.

The four pillars of food security – availability, access, utilization, and stability – offer a useful framework for assessing migrant food experiences in cities. While food is generally available in urban areas, economic access remains a significant challenge, particularly for migrants with limited employment opportunities. Migrants in informal employment experience income volatility, making them more susceptible to price shocks and food shortages. Utilization further complicates food security outcomes, as dietary diversity, food safety, and cultural preferences are often overlooked in assessments of food insecurity. Migrant agency is also evident in the strategies deployed to cope with food insecurity. In response to economic constraints, migrants employ adaptive strategies such as dietary adjustments, social networks, and credit-based food purchases. The case of Somali migrants in Nairobi illustrates how migrants leverage cultural and ethnic networks to secure food access, while Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa navigate economic hardships by engaging in multi-scalar food acquisition methods. However, such strategies are not always sufficient to guarantee long-term food security, as they are often reactive rather than transformative.

Remittances are a central factor in shaping migrant food security outcomes. The comparative analysis of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa and Somali migrants in Nairobi highlights the divergent roles of remittances: while Zimbabweans predominantly send money home, Somali migrants are major remittance recipients. This has profound implications for food security, as receipt of remittances enhances purchasing power and enables households to maintain food stability. However, reliance on remittances is a double-edged sword, as migrants face economic precarity when these financial flows are disrupted due to global crises, personal hardships, or shifting diaspora dynamics. Despite the advantages, remittance-receiving households are not immune to food insecurity, particularly when faced with rising living costs, unexpected expenses, or delays in funds.

Although not explicitly addressed in this paper, policy frameworks and urban governance significantly impact migrant food security. The lack of explicit policies addressing the intersection of migration and food security contributes to the marginalization of migrants in urban food systems. Many city governments either overlook migrant food needs or actively restrict their participation in food economies through regulatory enforcement, evictions, and exclusion from social protection programs. The absence of inclusive policies exacerbates food insecurity by limiting economic opportunities and reinforcing social vulnerabilities. Moreover, pandemic-related restrictions disproportionately affected migrants, further illustrating how crisis responses often neglect the specific needs of migrant populations.

To conclude, migration and food security are deeply interconnected phenomena that require a holistic, interdisciplinary approach in the context of African cities. The experiences of migrants in African cities illustrate the precarious yet dynamic nature of urban food security. While migrants demonstrate great resilience, economic and political obstacles constrain their food access, utilization, and stability. Addressing food insecurity among urban migrants and refugees requires short-term interventions and long-term structural reforms that foster economic integration, legal protection, and equitable access to food resources. By unbundling the migration-food security nexus, a more comprehensive urban food system can be envisioned that accommodates the realities of migrant livelihoods and promotes food security for all urban residents.

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