

‘We Help Each Other When We Can’: Somali Migrants, Urban Livelihoods, and South-South Migration in Nairobi’s ‘Little Mogadishu’

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Introduction

Migration within the Global South is increasingly shaping the social and economic contours of urban areas, underscoring the profound ways in which people’s mobility intersects with broader livelihood strategies and resource management (Chikanda et al., 2020; Tacoli & Mabala, 2010). In East Africa, Somalia’s longstanding instability – characterized by political fragility, civil conflict, and recurring environmental crises such as drought – continues to drive outward migration (Maystadt & Ecker, 2014; Lindley, 2014). Kenya, owing to its geographical proximity and perceived economic promise, has consequently become a major hub for Somali migrants (Scharrer, 2020). Within Kenya’s capital, Nairobi, the Eastleigh neighbourhood has emerged as a pivotal site for Somali settlement, evolving from a residential suburb into a bustling East African commercial center (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). This transformation draws on pre-existing cross-border trade networks and diaspora capital, reflecting larger trends in South-South mobility (Carrier & Mathews, 2020). Popularly called “Little Mogadishu,” Eastleigh illustrates the interplay between migrant mobility, economic strategies, and resource management in an urban environment (Carrier & Scharrer, 2019). Its development highlights the intricate relationship between Somali businesses and the Kenyan state, a balance of informal practices and formal integration (Carrier & Lochery, 2013).

Although Eastleigh prospers as a commercial enclave for South-South migrants, significant questions remain about the everyday struggles and strategies of these communities. While studies on Somali refugees in formal camps like Dadaab and Kakuma – established in the 1990s – have shown that protracted living conditions, insecurity, and dependency on minimal aid contribute to a “limbo status” under containment policies (Abdi, 2005; Chkam, 2016; Hyndman, 2013; Le, 2021), there is



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comparatively little research on the food security of Somali families who pursue self-settlement in urban settings. This knowledge gap is especially significant given that food security – a multidimensional concept encompassing access, availability, utilization, and stability (Abo-risade & Bach, 2014) – sits at the intersection of livelihood diversification, urbanization, and socio-economic processes in the Global South (Crush et al., 2020).

Understanding this phenomenon necessitates a focus on South-South migration, the movement of people between developing countries, which remains a substantial yet understudied driver of urban change. Contrary to common assumptions, this form of migration is more frequent than South-North migration, with nearly half of all migrants from developing countries living in other developing nations (Ratha & Shaw, 2007). Such movement plays a formative role in shaping urban identity, spatial organization, and socio-economic dynamics (Purohit et al., 2024), and it also fosters human development through income generation, skill enhancement, and broader political transformations. Although a city like Nairobi may provide advantages compared to conflict-ridden or rural regions, Somali migrants in Eastleigh nonetheless grapple with social exclusion, limited formal employment, and other barriers to fully sustaining their livelihoods. Still, Eastleigh’s ambiguous legal and administrative status – where official regulations intersect with informal practices – enables Somali migrants to engage in taxation, licensing, and other civic affairs with the Kenyan state (Varming, 2020). Through these interactions, they effectively “claim urban belonging,” positioning themselves as recognized participants in Nairobi’s economic and social landscape rather than remaining on the margins of governance structures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these vulnerabilities Somali migrants face by triggering lockdowns that stifled informal trade and small enterprises, while global economic downturns curtailed remittance flows (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ratha et al., 2020). Mounting evidence links food price spikes, job losses, and declining incomes to heightened food insecurity (Onyango et al., 2021). The crisis has been particularly severe for female-headed households and for those with minimal education or fewer financial resources (Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021). These pandemic-driven shocks are compounded by ongoing public health and climatic challenges, intensifying susceptibility to food insecurity in places receiving large numbers of migrants (Ahmed et al., 2023; Matlin et al., 2021; Rasul, 2021).

In light of these interconnected factors, this research brief aims to illuminate the experiences of Somali migrant households in Eastleigh by examining their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, food procurement strategies, levels of food security, and the coping mechanisms they adopt during periods of adversity. By grounding the discussion in the context of South-South migration and urban food security, this study engages wider debates on integration, resource governance, and migrant resilience in the Global South. Its findings offer practical insights for policymakers, humanitarian agencies, and local stakeholders seeking to bolster social protection and equip migrant communities with the resilience needed to overcome the evolving challenges of urban life.

Methodology

To capture the multidimensional nature of household food security among Somali migrants in Eastleigh, this study employed a mixed-methods approach. Between July and August 2022, enumerators proficient in Somali, Swahili, and English conducted surveys with 318 systematically sampled households across three administrative sections in Eastleigh North and South. Of the 318 individuals surveyed, 268 reported being born in Somalia, 33 in Kenya, and 6 in another foreign country, underscoring the predominance of South-South migration within this community. The questionnaires were administered using a secure digital survey platform, encompassing detailed modules on household composition, employment status, food access, and key indicators such as the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS). This approach provided a nuanced, evidence-based snapshot of the variation in food security levels among Eastleigh's Somali migrant population.

A qualitative component, including in-depth household interviews and key informant consultations, supplemented the survey findings. Households were purposefully chosen to capture different livelihood patterns, such as reliance on informal trade, formal sector employment, and remittance-based income. Community elders, religious leaders, and representatives from Somali business associations offered deeper contextual insights into the socio-economic structures shaping migrant life in Eastleigh. Their reflections illuminated how collective support systems – such as neighbourhood savings groups (*ayuto*) and mosque-based initiatives – operate alongside individual household strategies to secure adequate food.

Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were generated using Python, allowing for a clear illustration of patterns in household characteristics and food security outcomes. Meanwhile, a thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified recurring motifs associated with migration histories, coping mechanisms, and the role of community networks in sustaining food access. By integrating these analytic approaches, the study situates quantitative indicators – such as average household income and coping strategies – alongside participants' lived experiences, thereby offering a holistic portrayal of food security dynamics among Somali migrants in Eastleigh.

Demographic and Socio-Economic Overview

Survey data confirmed that the Somali migrant population in Eastleigh is both diverse and predominantly young. The mean age of household heads was 37, and a substantial number reported post-secondary education, albeit not always recognized or easily translated into local employment opportunities. As shown in Table 1, 58.6% of respondents were male and 41.4% were female, illustrating a significant female presence in the migratory context. Household compositions frequently featured extended kin, reflecting cultural norms that emphasize communal living arrangements. Although men often assumed the status of household head, a considerable proportion of households depended on women's income-generating activities – ranging from home-based catering to entrepreneurship in local markets – underscoring

the vital role of women in household economies (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). As one female respondent explained:

I run a small retail shop. Most of my customers are my neighbors. Without them, I wouldn't have enough money to buy what my family needs (Interview No. 26).

TABLE 1: Household Profile

Sex of household respondents	No.	%
Male	157	58.6
Female	111	41.4
Marital status of household respondents		
Married	144	53.7
Single	63	23.5
Divorced	41	15.3
Widowed	11	4.1
Separated	8	3.0
Abandoned	1	0.4
Household structure		
Nuclear	104	38.8
Male-centred	78	29.1
Female-centred	27	10.1
Extended	59	22.0

Table 1 further reveals that 38.8% of households are nuclear, while 29.1% are male-centred and 10.1% are female-centered, highlighting varying family structures in Eastleigh. The educational profile, presented in Table 2, shows a significant segment (42.1%) have post-secondary qualifications but not a university degree, signaling potential challenges in skills recognition and formal employment absorption. The employment data in Table 3 indicates that nearly 46% of respondents are unemployed (combined categories), reinforcing the precarious nature of labour opportunities in the urban setting.

TABLE 2: Education Profile

Highest level of education	No.	%
Post-secondary qualifications but not university	101	42.1
Primary (completed)	50	20.8
No formal schooling	34	14.2
Primary (not completed)	19	7.9
University (completed)	16	6.7
Secondary (completed)	13	5.4
University (not completed)	3	1.3
Postgraduate	2	0.8
Secondary (not completed)	2	0.8
Total	240	100.00

TABLE 3: Employment Status

	No.	%
Unemployed (not looking for work)	66	25.9
Unemployed (looking for work)	51	20.0
Full-time employment (informal sector)	44	17.3
Unemployed (in school)	37	14.5
Part-time employment (formal private sector)	18	7.1
Full-time self-employed (formal sector)	15	5.9
Part-time employment (informal sector)	10	3.9
Full-time employment (formal private sector)	9	3.5
Part-time employment (public sector)	4	1.6
Full-time employment (public sector)	1	0.4
Total	255	100.00

Patterns of Food Insecurity

Analysis of HFIAS scores indicates a stratified picture of food security. Over half of the participating households reported minimal concern about running out of food in the previous four weeks, suggesting a relatively stable situation. However, a significant subset faced intermittent and even frequent challenges, prompting them to compromise the nutritional quality of meals, reduce portion sizes, or skip meals entirely. The average HFIAS score is 6.8 (on a 27-point scale), indicating a moderate level of food insecurity. Nonetheless, the HFIAP result shows that 38.4% of the households were severely food insecure, prompting them to compromise meal quality and reduce portion sizes (Table 4). Another 11.2% were moderately food insecure. In total, less than half of the surveyed households were food secure. Many respondents noted that while they could occasionally access staple foods like rice and flour, they struggled to purchase meat or fresh produce on a regular basis. One middle-aged father of five explained:

Staple foods like rice and beans are usually accessible, but fresh produce and fish are too expensive to buy regularly. Sometimes, we have to share smaller portions so the children can eat first. . It's not easy to balance our budget and ensure everyone has something on their plate (Interview No. 8).

TABLE 4: Levels of Household Food Security on HFIAP

HFIAP	%
Food secure	42.5
Mildly food insecure	7.9
Moderately food insecure	11.2
Severely food insecure	38.4

The HDDS findings pointed to similarly uneven dietary diversity. While staples and dairy featured prominently in household diets, fewer families regularly included fruits, vegetables, and fish. These nutritional gaps underscore the need for interventions that address both the quantity and the quality of food consumed by Somali migrant households in Eastleigh.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic negative impact on food security in Eastleigh. Table 5 shows that 46.6% of households reported that their economic situation during COVID-19 was “much worse” compared to before the pandemic, reflecting the widespread loss of informal employment. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents also indicated receiving less remittance support during this period (Table 6), intensifying the strain on household finances. Table 7 reveals households frequently going without adequate food, clean water, or cooking fuel, with one out of five saying they encountered these hardships “many times” or “always.” A young woman engaged in selling clothes in a small stall recalled:

Before the virus, I worked every day. My children ate well because we could buy chicken or sometimes goat meat. When the curfews came, no one needed my service. We tried to manage with cheap maize flour, but even that became expensive. It felt like survival mode all over again, like we were back in Somalia during a crisis... When the lockdown started, I couldn't open my shop for days at a time. There were no customers at all. Because of that, we had to cut back on the foods we normally buy. We ended up buying only basics like flour and cooking oil (Interview No. 15).

Although religious institutions and community-based organizations, including the Eastleigh Business District Association, endeavoured to mitigate the impact by distributing food parcels or providing monetary assistance, these measures were insufficient for numerous individuals.

TABLE 5: Comparison of Pre-Pandemic and Pandemic Economic Conditions

	No.	%
Much worse	125	46.6
Worse	75	28.0
Much better	37	13.8
Better	21	7.8
The same	10	3.7
Total	268	100.0

TABLE 6: COVID-19 Impact on Remittances

Household received less cash remittances due to COVID-19	No.	%
Agree	111	41.4
Strongly agree	80	29.9
Neutral	46	17.2
Disagree	28	10.4
Strongly disagree	3	1.1
Total	268	100.0

TABLE 7: Household Deprivation During COVID-19 Pandemic

	Always (%)	Many times (%)	Several times (%)	Just once or twice (%)	Never (%)
How often did this household go without enough food to eat?	15	29.2	6.4	1.1	40.8
How often did this household go without clean water for home use?	0.4	48.3	21.1	14.0	16.2
How often did this household go without medicine or medical treatment?	0.8	48.9	10.2	26.3	13.9
How often did this household go without electricity?	13.6	44.2	23.6	8.6	10.0
How often did this household go without cooking fuel (kerosene or gas)?	20.0	47.4	6.4	11.2	15.0
How often did this household go without cash income?	2.0	33.5	12.0	29.7	24.1

Strategies, Community Networks, and Resilience

Despite prevailing vulnerabilities, Somali migrant households in Eastleigh demonstrated significant adaptability and self-sufficiency during periods of economic difficulty. Economic security hinges on hybrid livelihood strategies, combining informal trade, casual labour, and remittance inflows. According to the survey, 32.9% of households rely on remittances as their primary income source, while others blend remittances with local earnings. The mean monthly household income stands at KES98,782 (approximately USD765), underscoring the presence of a modestly stable economic base for some families. Yet, Table 8 indicates that a significant portion of household expenditure (32.9%) goes to rent, followed by groceries (22.4%) and school fees (18.5%), which can strain food budgets.

TABLE 8: Average Monthly Expenses

	Amount (KES)	%
Rent	29,896	32.9
Grocery	20,319	22.4
School fees	16,750	18.5
Remittance expenses	6,970	7.7
Medical expenses	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 expenses	90,752	100.0

Remittances, often channeled through informal hawala networks or mobile money platforms like M-PESA, serve as a critical buffer against financial shocks for many migrant households, helping cover essential expenses such as food, rent, school fees, and medical bills (Bettin et

al., 2014; Yang & Choi, 2005). However, the timing and consistency of these funds are often unpredictable, as they depend on factors such as job stability of relatives abroad, fluctuating exchange rates, and transfer delays. In many households, the responsibility of managing these remittances falls disproportionately on women, who must stretch limited resources while ensuring that both immediate household needs and extended family obligations are met. As one respondent commented:

My husband decides how much money we send to his family each month, but I'm the one who has to stretch what's left to cover our own needs. Sometimes, I worry we won't have enough for a balanced diet here in Nairobi, but I know it's our duty to support his relatives back home. My brother in South Africa also tries to send money whenever he can, and that extra help is crucial for groceries and bills. But when the remittance arrives late, we are forced to cut back – we skip meals, reduce portions, or go into debt just to keep food on the table. The financial pressure is constant, and even though remittances provide a lifeline, they are unpredictable, making it difficult to plan for stability. (Interview No. 11).

Table 9 highlights how households in Eastleigh typically secure their daily provisions, revealing that more than half (52.4%) of respondents purchase most of their food from wholesale stores – likely reflecting the benefits of bulk buying and consistent availability. In contrast, 31.0% depend on smaller local shops or kiosks (*duka*), underlining the convenience and familiarity these neighbourhood retailers offer. Notably, 6.7% rely on their own restaurants, illustrating how entrepreneurial ventures can serve both as income streams and food sources. The remaining options – ranging from street vendors to formal supermarkets – account for smaller shares (each under 2%), suggesting that while a few households use these niche channels, they are less central to overall food provisioning. Taken together, these patterns underscore how cost, convenience, and social networks shape the shopping choices and dietary habits of Somali migrant households in Eastleigh.

TABLE 9: Normal Sources of Food Provisioning

	No.	%
Wholesale food store	110	52.4
Local shops/kiosks/duka	65	31.0
Their own restaurant	14	6.7
Street vendors	4	1.9
Informal markets	3	1.5
Food stores	2	1.0
Market	2	1.0
Supermarket/wholesale shops	2	1.0
City market	2	1.0
Supermarket	2	1.0
City market	1	0.5
Supermarkets	1	0.5
Local markets	1	0.5
Retail and street vendors	1	0.5
Total	210	100.0

The in-depth interviews revealed the widespread use of flexible budgeting techniques and rotating savings schemes (*ayuto*), where small groups pool funds on a weekly or monthly basis to provide one member with a lump sum – a mechanism that boosts purchasing power and also cements social bonds. Several respondents mentioned obtaining food on credit from local shops, a practice enabled by community-wide trust. One woman remarked:

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. (Interview No. 29).

Others relied on transnational remittances to adopt more strategic purchasing practices. One respondent observed:

My family in the USA sends money every month. We buy food in bulk – flour, rice, and cooking oil – as soon as it arrives. It's cheaper that way, and it helps us manage during lockdowns. (Interview No. 4).

Another participant discussed the lengths she had to go to sustain her family during COVID-19:

My children needed to eat, and it broke my heart to see them hungry. I ended up selling my gold earrings just so we could buy groceries that week. I never imagined giving up something so precious, but there weren't any other options left (Interview No. 6).

Beyond these individual and household strategies, religious organizations - particularly local mosques - also played a crucial role in providing spiritual and material support. One interviewee mentioned how her mosque organized food drives during Ramadhan, saying,

The *imam* and mosque volunteers collect donations and distribute flour, rice, and sugar to families who need it the most especially in Ramadhan during pandemic. It helps keep us going, especially during tough times (Interview No. 27).

Even though religious gatherings were curtailed during the pandemic, mosques remained a source of spiritual fortitude, reinforcing the collective sense of duty to provide mutual aid.

Nonetheless, not all households can rely equally on these informal support systems, underscoring the need for more formal policies and institutional measures to complement the culturally rooted coping strategies already in place. As one female entrepreneur succinctly summed up the community's predicament:

We help each other when we can, but sometimes everyone is struggling (Interview No. 18).

Conclusion

This research brief highlights the diverse and evolving landscape of Somali migrant life in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood, showing how households grapple with and adapt to food security challenges especially during the pandemic. While many migrants benefit from established community networks, entrepreneurial ventures, and remittance inflows, systemic barriers and external shocks – from restrictive employment policies to the COVID-19 pandemic – have amplified vulnerabilities. The HFIAS and HDDS findings underscore both the adequacy and limitations of current food access, revealing a spectrum of experiences ranging from relative stability to acute insecurity. Survey data indicate that nearly half of households experienced a worsening economic situation during COVID-19, with frequent job losses in the informal sector and late or reduced remittance inflows pushing families to adopt precarious coping strategies. In many cases, even minimal disruptions – such as a short delay in receiving funds – could disrupt meal plans and intensify food insecurity.

The complexity of food security among Somali migrant households in Eastleigh calls for coordinated, multi-level interventions that respond to both immediate and systemic needs. First, there is a need to strengthen formal and informal employment pathways, particularly for youth and women. Supporting small-business entrepreneurship, offering vocational training, and facilitating access to microcredit could reduce households' reliance on precarious incomes (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2020). Second, public health and nutrition outreach programmes can address critical dietary gaps by promoting affordable produce markets, nutrition education, and possibly food voucher systems aimed at marginalized households (Garrity et al., 2024). Third, policy frameworks should safeguard and streamline remittance flows – particularly during crises – by recognizing hawala networks within regulated financial systems, ensuring migrants' efficient access to vital funds at low cost to maintain crucial lifelines (Lindley, 2009; Orozco & Yansura, 2013; Paul et al., 2015). Finally, integrating urban migrant populations into broader social safety nets – such as emergency cash transfers or healthcare subsidies – would provide a vital buffer against economic downturns and public health emergencies like COVID-19. Ensuring these policies are inclusive of migrants, irrespective of their legal status, is essential for equitable service delivery and bolstering community resilience.

In conclusion, Somali migrants in Eastleigh exemplify the dynamic interplay between urban migration, social networks, and livelihood adaptation in the Global South. Their experiences underscore a pressing need for integrated policy actions that address economic, nutritional, and social dimensions of well-being. By fostering stronger livelihood pathways, encouraging dietary diversity, protecting essential remittance flows, and embedding migrants in national social protection measures, Kenyan authorities and international partners can help ensure that these households advance beyond precarious survival. This approach can serve as a replicable model for other urban contexts where migrants face similar challenges, thereby contributing to a more resilient and equitable global landscape of South-South migration.

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