

# Pandemic Precarity and Food Insecurity: Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa During COVID-19

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## Abstract

A notable silence in the emerging literature on migrant precarity is any consideration of the relationship between precarity and food insecurity. The links between migrant precarity and sudden economic, political or environmental shocks are relatively untheorized. Researchers were thus conceptually under-prepared to understand how and in what ways the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with general forms of precarity and food insecurity. More recently, the concept of pandemic precarity has been proposed as a corrective. At its most basic, pandemic precarity refers to the increased incidence and severity of pre-pandemic conditions of poverty, inequality and economic insecurity during COVID-19. In relation to migration within the Global South, there is an urgent need to understand pre-pandemic migrant vulnerabilities and food security challenges and how these were reconfigured during the pandemic. In this paper, we demonstrate that the notion of pandemic precarity in the context of South-South migration needs to include the nature and drivers of intensified food insecurity for migrants and their trans-local households in countries of origin. The case study evidence presented in the paper comes from our 2021 survey of Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa. We suggest that the findings open the way for a new research and policy agenda at the intersections between pandemic precarity, food insecurity and South-South migration.

## Keywords

COVID-19, precarity, migrants and refugees, food security

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been credited with a dramatic increase in precarity for migrants and refugees within the Global South (Chan and Piper, 2022; Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2021; Srivastava, 2020; Tan and Lim, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022; Yeoh et al., 2022). Precarity itself has been called a “multi-stranded concept” (Kasimir, 2018), and only in the last decade has the language of precarity entered the lexicon of migration research and policy advocacy. Prior to that, as Jørgensen and Schierup (2016: 1) note, discourses of migration and precarity “largely belonged to separate departments.” The publication of Guy Standing’s influential *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class in 2011*, marked the onset of a rapprochement. Standing argued that a significant and growing proportion of the world’s precarious workers are migrants in other countries and that migration is growing and changing character in ways that are intensifying insecurities and putting many more into precarious circumstances (Standing, 2011: 93). Empirical support for this argument has since come from a wide variety of locales around the globe including Mexican migrant farm workers in Canada (Hennebry, 2014), transit migrants in Mexico (Basok et al., 2015), domestic workers in the Gulf States (Parreñas et al., 2018; Silvey and Parreñas, 2020), labour migrants in Singapore (Baey and Yeoh, 2018; Platt et al., 2017; Wee et al., 2019), Syrian refugees in Turkey (Baban et al., 2017; Oner et al., 2021), international students in Ireland (Gilmartin et al., 2021), Chinese migrants in Australia (Stevens, 2019), and Polish workers in the UK after Brexit (Duda-Mikulín, 2019).

The invention of precarity as an analytical tool is widely attributed to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s use of the term *précarité* to describe the experience of unemployed and underemployed workers in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s (Barbier, 2022). In the last 20 years, ‘precarity’ has enjoyed a dramatic upsurge in usage across the social sciences (Choonara, 2022). Google Scholar, for example, lists 65 publications containing the term in 2000, 569 in 2010, and as many as 15,700 in 2020. Originally, precarity referred to any precarious work conditions characterized by job insecurity, casual or part-time employment, the absence of social protection, and low wages (Millar, 2017). While this framing has persisted in the migration literature, it has also come to refer more broadly to the lived migrant experience of temporariness, insecurity, unpredictability and the absence or denial of labour and other basic rights. Despite its Algerian origins, precarity has been critiqued by some as too North-centric, while for most workers in the Global South “precarity has arguably always been the norm” (Millar, 2014).

In the context of South-South migration, precarity has several distinctive characteristics. Despite its ubiquity and protracted nature, “precarity manifests itself in multiple forms (legal, social, economic) along a spectrum of exploitation” (Piper, 2022). Precarity is also not an immutable status and condition, as it varies spatially and over time (Chacko and Price, 2021). While migrant precarity is generally associated with low-wage, temporary employment in the North, in the South it is a feature of migrant employment and self-

employment in the expanding urban informal economy as well. This sector employs over half of the non-agricultural workforce in many countries and is commonly associated with migrant precarity from formal labour market exclusion, economic exploitation, high turnover, erratic income, draconian state controls, and xenophobic hostility and violence (Crush et al., 2015; Brown, 2017; Young and Crush, 2021). A key lesson for South-South researchers, therefore, is that precarity needs to engage with “the long-standing analysis [and reality] of informality in the South” (Munck et al. 2022: 363; Munck, 2013).

In the Global South, most migrants and migrant households are responsible for more than their own survival and well-being. As Standing (2011) noted, “millions of migrants labouring as anything from nannies and dishwashers to plumbers and dockworkers are sending more money to low-income countries than is going in official aid.” Thus, as Green and Estes (2022) argue, transnational or trans-local precarity emerges simultaneously in places of migrant origin and destination. Trans-local precarity means that any increase in the severity of precarious living by migrants reverberates down migration corridors, impacting family and household members in origin communities as well. A further characteristic of precarity in the context of South-South migration relates to the growing feminization of migration. Here, the concept of gendered precarity highlights the labour market exclusions and employment vulnerabilities faced by independent female migrants on account of their sex (Mora and Piper, 2021).

A notable silence in the emerging literature on migrant precarity in the Global South is any consideration of the relationship between precarity and food insecurity (Chikanda et al., 2021; Crush, 2013). The links between migrant precarity and sudden economic, political or environmental shocks is also relatively untheorized. Researchers were thus conceptually under-prepared to understand how and in what ways the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with general forms of precarity and food insecurity in particular (Onyango et al., 2021). More recently, the idea of ‘pandemic precarity’ has been advanced as a corrective. At its most basic level, pandemic precarity refers to the intensification of precarity and the increased incidence and severity of its symptoms such as poverty, inequality and economic insecurity (Chinoora et al., 2022; Deshingkar, 2022; Sumner et al., 2020). Perry and Aronson (2021) argue that disparities in material deprivation and economic anxiety resulting from COVID-19 are defining elements of pandemic precarity and draw attention to the social inequities, pre-existing and current, that weakened economic resiliency and reinforced disadvantage. More specifically, in relation to South-South migration, Suhardiman et al. (2021) suggest a focus on pre-pandemic migrant vulnerabilities, challenges and opportunities and how these have been reconfigured during the pandemic. Finally, as Deshingkar (2022) notes, the end of the pandemic will not signal the end of precarity nor will it prevent pandemic precarity aftershocks as migrant lives continue to be “fraught with uncertainty.”

In this paper, we demonstrate that the notion of pandemic precarity in the context of South-South migration, needs to include the nature and drivers of intensified food insecurity for both migrants and their trans-local households in other countries. The case study evidence comes from our 2021 survey of Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa. Although relatively limited in geographical scope, we suggest that the findings open the possibility for a new research and policy agenda for South-South migration at the intersection between precarity and food insecurity. The next section of the paper provides a brief context for the case study by providing an overview of migration to South Africa in the last two decades, the nature of pre-pandemic precarity and food insecurity of Zimbabwean migrants, and the progress of the pandemic in South Africa. The following sections present the methodology and findings from the case study. The conclusion draws out the general implications for new directions in South-South migration research and policy.

## Pre-Pandemic Precarity

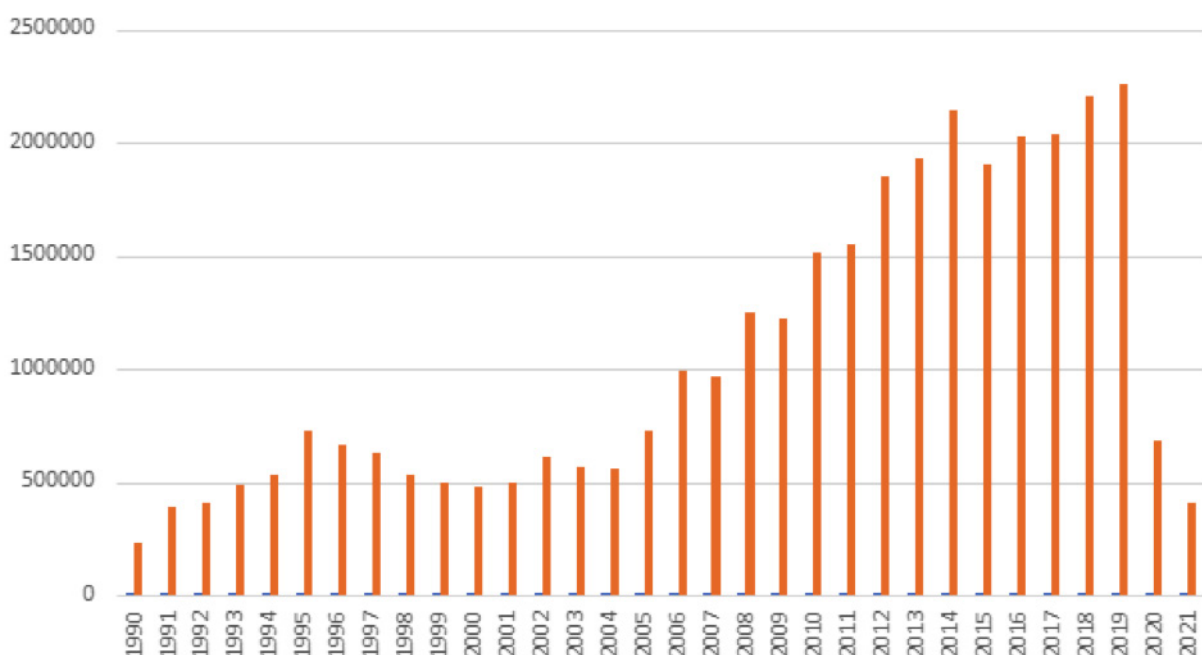
Migrant precarity has only recently been adopted as a research concept in South Africa (Anwar and Graham, 2021; Dodson, 2018; Jinnah, 2020; Moyo and Laine, 2021; Musariri and Moyer, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2022). For Jinnah (2020) precarity is a useful frame to analyze the everyday struggles of the marginalized and the transactional nature of survival. For Nyamnjoh et al. (2022) it recognizes the multiple fragilities that inhibit the everyday lives and livelihoods of migrants. However, neither migrant precarity nor South-South migration are recent developments in Southern Africa (Crush, 2000; Mlambo, 2010). Labour migration and all the defining features of migrant precarity date back to the mining revolution in the late nineteenth century, when young male migrants were recruited to work on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand under conditions of extreme coercion

and duress (Crush et al., 1992). By the 1940s, the mines employed almost 10,000 Zimbabwean male contract migrants with an additional unknown number working on commercial farms (Murray, 1997).

From the mid-1990s, migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa began to increase and diversify under the twin pressures of economic crisis in the former and new post-apartheid employment opportunities in the latter (Crush and Tevera, 2010). Mixed regular and irregular migration expanded and diversified to include migrants from all over Zimbabwe, young and old, male and female, educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled, married and single, regular and irregular (Crush et al., 2015). Figure 1 shows the growing volume of human movement through official border posts between Zimbabwe and South Africa and Table 1 the increase in intra-regional South-South migration since the turn of the century.

The everyday struggles and multiple fragilities that confront Zimbabwean migrants start from the moment they cross the border into South Africa (Musoni, 202; Vanyoro, 2022). Precarity in the last two decades is underwritten by uncertain and shifting legal status (Carciotto, 2018) and manifests in mass arrests and deportations (Machinya, 2019), exclusion from the formal labour market (Hungwe, 2020; Weda and de Villiers, 2019), insecure employment in low-wage sectors including commercial agriculture, domestic work and services (Baison, 2021; Bolt, 2015; Liu, 2018); exploitative casual day labour (Pretorious and Blaauw, 2015), insecure self-employment in the informal sector (Mhandu, 2020; Theodore et al., 2017); gender discrimination (Hlatshwayo, 2019; Ncube and Bahta, 2022; Thebe and Maombera, 2019), and xenophobic violence (Crush et al., 2017). Pre-pandemic surveys found that Zimbabwean informal business owners in Johannesburg and Cape Town were easily the largest

**Figure 1: Recorded Arrivals from Zimbabwe to South Africa, 1990-2021**



Source: Data from Statistics South Africa

**Table 1: South African Migrant Stock from Neighbouring Countries, 2000-2019**

| Year | Zimbabwe | Mozambique | Lesotho | Namibia | Botswana | Eswatini | Total     |
|------|----------|------------|---------|---------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 2000 | 128,983  | 237,813    | 113,578 | 44,274  | 17,593   | 31,743   | 573,984   |
| 2005 | 169,894  | 322,964    | 149,432 | 58,250  | 23,147   | 41,770   | 765,457   |
| 2010 | 505,932  | 266,144    | 234,089 | 91,250  | 36,259   | 65,433   | 1,199,107 |
| 2015 | 638,833  | 336,046    | 295,581 | 164,599 | 65,404   | 82,621   | 1,583,084 |
| 2019 | 716,057  | 376,668    | 331,312 | 184,496 | 73,310   | 92,608   | 1,774,451 |

*Source: UNDESA (2019). Note: UNDESA data for Mozambique and Zimbabwe for the period 2010-2019 is reversed in this table*

**Table 2: Origin Countries of Migrants in the Urban Informal Sector**

|            | Cape Town (2015) | Johannesburg (2016) | Johannesburg (2019) |
|------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Zimbabwe   | 22.8             | 30.1                | 28.3                |
| Somalia    | 13.5             | 2.6                 | 2.6                 |
| DRC        | 11.2             | 4.9                 | 6.3                 |
| Nigeria    | 9.3              | 6.5                 | 9.7                 |
| Malawi     | 7.5              | 3.2                 | 10.7                |
| Ethiopia   | 7.2              | 2.6                 | 5.4                 |
| Cameroon   | 4.3              | 2.1                 | 0.5                 |
| Ghana      | 3.3              | 1.0                 | 2.8                 |
| Congo      | 2.7              | 1.9                 | -                   |
| Pakistan   | 1.5              | 4.5                 | 5.9                 |
| Bangladesh | 0.8              | 1.8                 | 4.5                 |
| Mozambique | 0.8              | 14.4                | 14.9                |
| Lesotho    |                  | 4.5                 | 1.9                 |
| India      |                  | 3.7                 | 1.0                 |

*Source: Compiled from IOM (2021a), Peberdy (2016), Tawodzera et al. (2015)*

group of migrants in both cities (Table 3). Few studies to date have focused on a central characteristic of pre-pandemic migrant precarity; that is, the struggle of Zimbabwean migrants for food access and against food insecurity (Crush and Tawodzera, 2017; Sithole and Dinbabo, 2016).

## Pandemic Disruption

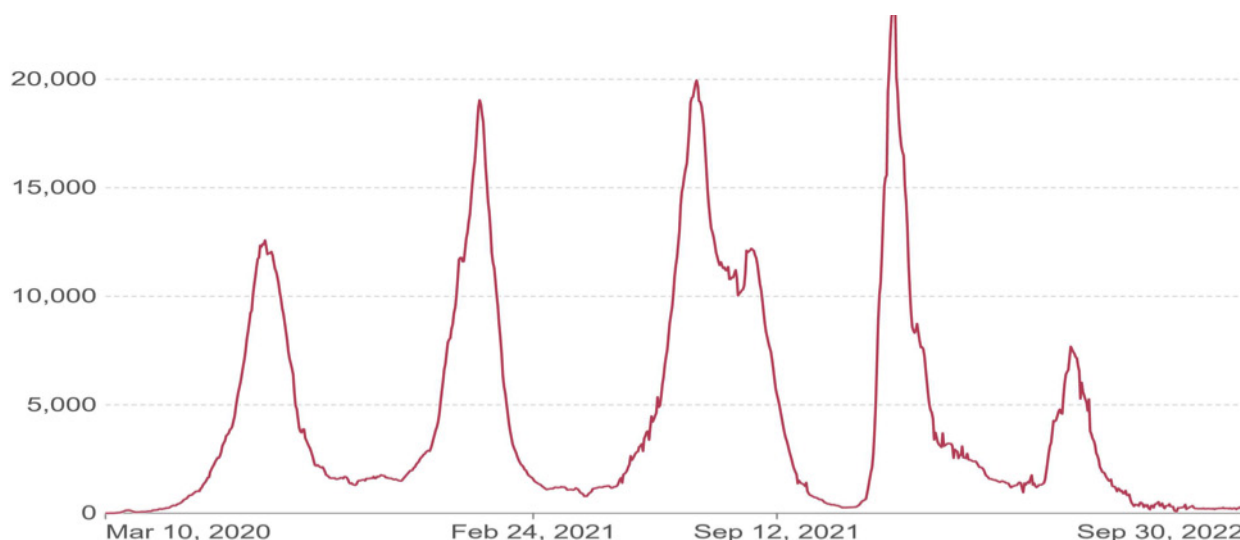
The first recorded case of COVID-19 in South Africa was on March 5, 2020, when a male South African tourist returning from Italy tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. At the peak of the first of five waves in July 2020, over 15,000 people per day tested positive (Figure 2). By 30 September 2020, 4 million cases and over 100,000 deaths had been recorded. These figures are widely regarded as underestimates. Table 3 shows the number of excess deaths during each wave, totalling almost 300,000. Seroepidemiological surveys in Gauteng Province (with a population of 16 million) found that 19% of the population was seropositive for SARS-CoV-2 in January 2021 (Madhi et al., 2022). By November 2021, this had risen to 68% for the two-thirds of the population who had not received a COVID-19 vaccine.

The government response to COVID-19 included a stay-at-home lockdown for 100 days, which was strictly enforced by armed police and the army. Arrests for breach of lockdown

were widespread with nearly 300,000 arrests by June 2020, more than in any other country globally (Business Standard, 2022). Pandemic restrictions were gradually relaxed between May and September 2020 and re-imposed in December 2020 during the second wave of the pandemic and again from May to July 2021 during the third wave. In April 2021, a total of 411,000 arrests for breach of pandemic lockdowns was reported in Parliament (Business Tech, 2021). Veteran South African journalist, Ferial Haffajee (2020) called lockdown enforcement “death by jackboot” with a “breathtaking level of police violence” while President Ramaphosa downplayed police assaults as “over-enthusiasm”. The pandemic response also involved closure of all land and air borders, most public and private transport, government and business shutdown, shuttering of all educational institutions, and alcohol and tobacco bans. Only essential services such as banking and food retailing were permitted to continue operation. A major consequence of border restrictions was a dramatic drop in cross-border traffic between Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 1).

The economic and labour market impact of rolling lockdowns was devastating for poorer communities. An estimated 15% of the workforce lost their jobs between February and June 2020 (amounting to 2.8 million jobs) and one-third of the workforce had lost earnings through temporary lay-offs

**Figure 2: COVID-19 Daily Infections in South Africa, March 2020 to September 2022**



|        | No. of Reported COVID-19 Deaths | No. of Excess Natural Deaths | Ratio of Reported to Excess Deaths |
|--------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Wave 1 | 18,457                          | 48,857                       | 38 (%)                             |
| Wave 2 | 33,128                          | 108,061                      | 31 (%)                             |
| Wave 3 | 36,268                          | 116,343                      | 31 (%)                             |
| Wave 4 | 5,333                           | 22,483                       | 24 (%)                             |
| Total  | 93,186                          | 295,135                      | 31 (%)                             |

Source: Bradshaw et al. (2022)

during the hard lockdown. By the end of 2020, despite two quarters of employment growth, the number of employed people had fallen by nearly 1.5 million from pre-pandemic levels, and the wages of workers who still had jobs had fallen by 10-15% (World Bank, 2021). The country's informal economy was particularly hard hit. The number of informal sector jobs decreased by about 25% in the early months of the pandemic, translating to a net loss of over 800,000 jobs. The number of domestic workers declined by 250,000 between mid-2019 and mid-2020. Many Zimbabweans in South Africa are informally employed in sectors such as street vending, casual day labour and domestic work (Skinner et al., 2021). Employment and incomes in all three sectors were severely affected by the pandemic (Blaauw et al, 2021; Mbeve et al., 2020; Rogan and Skinner, 2020). Informal food vendors in South African cities, unlike supermarkets, were forced to suspend all operations, evidence of the state's anti-informality bias in the pandemic response (Battersby, 2021; Wegerif, 2020). Women in the informal economy saw a decrease of 49% in the typical hours worked in the early months of the pandemic while men in informal employment saw a 25% decrease in typical hours (Rogan and Skinner, 2020). Among the informal self-employed who were working, average earnings decreased by 27% and typical earnings by 60%.

Pandemic precarity for migrants and refugees in South Africa took various forms and elicited different coping strategies. Migrants trapped in South Africa by lockdown and

mobility restrictions were unable to return home, although the IOM (2021b) claims that between 200,000 and 500,000 Zimbabwean migrants returned from various countries including South Africa. The primary reason for return was loss of income and employment. Mushomi et al. (2022) and Moyo (2022) suggest that despite border closures, they remained relatively porous and informal cross-border trade was disrupted but did not cease altogether. The essays in Angu et al. (2022) all demonstrate the particular hardships of the lockdowns on migrants and refugees. Several other case studies have demonstrated amongst the migrant population, asylum-seekers, refugees and irregular migrants felt disproportionate lockdown effects by virtue of their precarious legal status, informal employment, and class and gender position (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Nhengu, 2022). These were exacerbated by their exclusion from the South African government's allocation of ZAR50 billion (USD26 billion) for pandemic relief, which included a temporary increase in existing social grants and a new "COVID grant" (Bhorat et al., 2021). Ayuk (2022) and Dinbabo (2022) also show that migrant-owned informal businesses were ineligible for government relief programmes for the private sector. Pre-pandemic, Zimbabwean migrant remitting practices were dominated by informal channels. COVID-19 restrictions on personal travel and curtailment of cross-border movement by informal transport operators prompted migrants to make much greater use of digital transfers (Sithole et al., this collection). To date there have been few studies of one of the most significant pandemic impacts on migrants; that is,

food security. Odunitan-Wayas et al. (2022) point to a likely increase in “the triple burden of food insecurity, poverty and malnutrition compounded with social injustice and income inequality” but their hypothesis now requires empirical validation.

## Case Study Methodology

In this paper, we draw on the findings of a survey conducted in July and August in 2021 in Cape Town and Johannesburg with 500 Zimbabwean migrant households. The survey was conducted in the two cities during the third wave of the pandemic. Because there is no sampling frame, we selected areas of each city where lower-income Zimbabweans are known to cluster and used a modified snowball sampling to select households for interview. In each city, three sites were selected: Dunoon, Masiphumelele, Nyanga in Cape Town and Johannesburg Central, Alexandra Park and Orange Farm in Johannesburg. In each site, six migrant households were first located and assigned numbers. By means of a dice, a household starting point was established. This household was interviewed and identified one other household to approach. The process was repeated until the target number was reached before moving on to the next site where the procedure was repeated. Household heads were interviewed but, in their absence, any household member above the age of 18 with knowledge of household food economics was chosen for interview. The survey instrument combined questions from two previous surveys used by the authors: the Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) Migration and Remittances Survey and the Hungry Cities Partnership (HCP) Household Food Security Survey. Additional questions on the impact of COVID-19 were added to the instrument.

## Migrant Household Profile

The demographic profile of the Zimbabwean households surveyed indicates that the majority of household heads were male (70%), of working age (72% between 25 and 44), and single (53%) (Table 4). However, just over 40% of the household heads did not have a partner or spouse in the household. Household size was generally small with young children and parents in the larger households. Around 55% of households were either female or male-centred (that is, a sole household head without a spouse or partner present), while 39% were nuclear households (with a spouse or partner and immediate relatives) and only 5% were extended (with extended family members and/or non-members present). Housing in the six study areas was generally rudimentary rental accommodation in shacks and backyards. Very few household heads were unemployed, which suggests that when the research took place, most were back at work or had found new jobs, in stark contrast with the early months of the pandemic when many lost their source of income. Just over one-third were self-employed in the informal sector, while 44% were employed in low-income, often menial jobs in domestic work and the services industry. Another 7% were working as casual day labourers. As indicated above, these were all sectors of the South African economy that were very badly impacted by the advent of COVID-19.

| Table 4: Household Profile               |     |      |
|--|-----|------|
|  | No. | %    |
| <b>Age of Household Head</b>             |     |      |
| 16-24                                    | 22  | 14.4 |
| 25-34                                    | 70  | 45.8 |
| 35-44                                    | 41  | 26.8 |
| 45-54                                    | 14  | 9.2  |
| 55-64                                    | 14  | 9.2  |
| 65+                                      | 6   | 3.9  |
| <b>Sex of Household Head</b>             |     |      |
| Male                                     | 350 | 69.6 |
| Female                                   | 153 | 30.4 |
| <b>Marital Status of Household Head</b>  |     |      |
| Single                                   | 81  | 52.9 |
| Married                                  | 19  | 12.4 |
| Separated                                | 25  | 16.3 |
| Divorced/widowed                         | 23  | 15.0 |
| Other                                    | 5   | 3.3  |
| <b>Main Occupation of Household Head</b> |     |      |
| Domestic/service worker                  | 67  | 43.8 |
| Self-employed                            | 53  | 34.6 |
| Unskilled manual worker                  | 11  | 7.2  |
| Education                                | 5   | 3.3  |
| Skilled manual worker                    | 5   | 3.3  |
| Office worker                            | 3   | 3.0  |
| Employer/manager                         | 1   | 0.7  |
| Farm worker                              | 1   | 0.7  |
| Unemployed                               | 5   | 3.3  |
| <b>Household Profile</b>                 |     |      |
|  | No. | %    |
| <b>Housing Type</b>                      |     |      |
| Shack                                    | 136 | 27.0 |
| Room in backyard                         | 111 | 22.1 |
| Room in house                            | 88  | 17.5 |
| Room in flat                             | 64  | 12.7 |
| Flat                                     | 55  | 10.9 |
| House                                    | 37  | 7.4  |
| Other                                    | 12  | 2.4  |
| <b>Household Structure</b>               |     |      |
| Nuclear                                  | 197 | 39.2 |
| Female-centred                           | 153 | 30.4 |
| Male-centred                             | 130 | 25.8 |
| Extended                                 | 23  | 4.6  |

## Pandemic Precarity

The highly disruptive experience of pandemic precarity is captured in responses to COVID-19 livelihood impact questions. Table 5 indicates that around 21% of the households had a household member who became ill with COVID-19. As many as 72% of household heads had been unemployed at some point as a direct result of the pandemic (with 70% of households also experiencing unemployment of another household member). As a direct result of loss of employment, nearly 90% of households had experienced loss of income during the pandemic.

Despite the restoration of employment and incomes after the end of the hard lockdown in late 2020, less than 10% of household heads felt that the economic status of their household was the same or better than before the pandemic (Table 6). Over 90% indicated that their household economic conditions were much worse (67%) and worse (25%).

To distinguish between economic hardships that were specifically attributed to COVID-19 and others, respondents were asked to rank the most important challenges they had faced. As Table 7 shows, the pandemic was rated by over 80% of households as the most significant challenge they had faced. Loss of employment, reduced income and the increased cost of living were all rated by most households as their next most significant challenges.

## Pandemic Precarity and Remittances

Just over three-quarters of the surveyed households had remitted less money to Zimbabwe as a direct result of unemployment and lost income. Although there were variations in frequency and a decline in amounts sent, only 16% had not managed to remit anything (Table 8). However, only 22% had remitted frequently (at least once per month). Just over half had sent remittances a few times in the previous year. Around 40% of households had also remitted food to

Table 5: Pandemic Impacts on Employment and Incomes

|  | Agree (%) | Disagree (%) |
|--|-----------|--------------|
| Members of my household became ill because of COVID-19                 | 20.7      | 74.0         |
| I became unemployed and was unable to find a job                       | 72.2      | 20.1         |
| Others in my household became unemployed and were unable to find a job | 70.2      | 22.7         |
| My household experienced a loss of income because of the pandemic      | 86.9      | 9.7          |
| I sent less money to Zimbabwe because of the pandemic                  | 76.7      | 11.9         |

Table 6: Perceptions of Changes in Household Economic Conditions

|                                     | %    |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| Much worse than before the pandemic | 66.8 |
| Worse than before the pandemic      | 24.5 |
| Remained the same                   | 7.6  |
| Better than before the pandemic     | 1.1  |

Table 7: Ranking of Household Challenges

|  | 1st (%) | 2nd (%) | 3rd (%) |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| COVID-19                               | 83.9    | 8.8     | 3.4     |
| Increased cost of living               | 4.8     | 22.7    | 31.4    |
| Loss of employment of household member | 2.6     | 29.4    | 8.0     |
| Reduced income of household member     | 2.0     | 28.6    | 25.5    |

Table 8: Frequency of Household Remitting to Zimbabwe in the Previous Year

|                          | Cash |      | Food |      |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                          | No.  | %    | No.  | %    |
| More than once per month | 11   | 2.2  | 4    | 0.8  |
| Once per month           | 98   | 19.5 | 29   | 5.8  |
| A few times              | 278  | 55.3 | 135  | 26.8 |
| Once                     | 29   | 5.8  | 26   | 5.2  |
| Occasionally             | 7    | 1.2  | 1    | 0.2  |
| Never                    | 80   | 15.9 | 308  | 61.2 |



Zimbabwe during the pandemic, but much less frequently than they had sent money.

Overall, remittances were the third most important monthly expenditure by total spend (at 12% of the total, Table 9). The average monthly remit was almost ZAR1,000 per household and the total remit was just over ZAR267,000 per month (or ZAR3.2 million for the year prior to the survey). Food and groceries and the cost of housing (rent or mortgage payments) accounted for one-third of total expenditure each. Less significant expenditures included other basic needs such as transportation, utilities (electricity and water), education, and health. Only 20% of households had managed to save anything and those savings made up just 8% of the total spend. The fact that household food purchases consumed one-third of the average household budget is one indicator of the straitened circumstances of these households.

## Pandemic Food Precarity

Hart et al. (2022) document an 'unprecedented' rise in levels of hunger in South Africa during the pandemic. Zimbabwe-

ans are not included in their dataset so there is no indication of whether migrant households (and their exclusion from government pandemic relief measures) were especially vulnerable to pandemic food precarity. However, our survey results do suggest that food insecurity was a central feature of pandemic precarity for Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa. Three-quarters of the surveyed households had less food to eat as a direct result of the pandemic. Loss of employment income was one of the main causes but so too were rising food prices. Nearly 90% of household heads agreed that food had become much more expensive during the pandemic (Table 10). The informal food sector is an important source of foodstuffs for many migrant households (Crush and Tawodzera, 2017). As a result of pandemic restrictions on household mobility and informal vendors, 60% of households agreed that the pandemic had interfered with the supply of food from the informal food sector.

Despite the recovery of employment and income by the time of the third wave, most households were still experiencing serious food precarity. Only 8% were completely food secure with 83% either moderately or severely food insecure during

Table 9: Monthly Household Expenditure in South Africa

|                             | Total monthly spend (ZAR) | % of total | No. of households incurring expense | % of households incurring expense | Mean monthly amount (ZAR) |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Housing (rent, mortgage)    | 709,590                   | 31.9       | 465                                 | 92                                | 1,526                     |
| Food and groceries          | 708,224                   | 31.8       | 503                                 | 100                               | 1,408                     |
| Remittances*                | 267,632                   | 12.0       | 269                                 | 54                                | 995                       |
| Savings                     | 185,328                   | 8.3        | 104                                 | 20                                | 1,782                     |
| Transportation              | 181,956                   | 8.2        | 236                                 | 47                                | 771                       |
| Utilities                   | 135,408                   | 6.1        | 312                                 | 62                                | 434                       |
| Education*                  | 15,120                    | 0.7        | 143                                 | 28                                | 540                       |
| Fuel                        | 12,160                    | 0.5        | 32                                  | 6                                 | 380                       |
| Insurance*                  | 2,565                     | 0.1        | 73                                  | 15                                | 171                       |
| Medical/healthcare*         | 2,472                     | 0.1        | 61                                  | 12                                | 206                       |
| Goods purchased for resale* | 1,854                     | 0.1        | 11                                  | 2                                 | 927                       |
| Funeral costs*              | 1,456                     | 0.1        | 35                                  | 7                                 | 208                       |
| Debt repayment*             | 1,070                     | 0.05       | 12                                  | 2                                 | 535                       |

\*Monthly mean calculated from expenditure in past year. Otherwise, expenditure is previous month.

Table 10: Impact of Pandemic on Food Access

|  | Agree | Disagree |
|--|-------|----------|
| My household in South Africa had less food to eat because of the pandemic      | 76.7  | 11.3     |
| Food became much more expensive in South Africa during the pandemic            | 86.7  | 4.4      |
| It was more difficult to access food from informal traders during the pandemic | 60.0  | 29.2     |

Table 11: Prevalence of Household Food Insecurity

|                          | No. | %    |
|--------------------------|-----|------|
| Severely food insecure   | 214 | 42.5 |
| Moderately food insecure | 201 | 40.0 |
| Mildly food insecure     | 47  | 9.3  |
| Food secure              | 41  | 8.2  |

the month prior to the survey (Table 11). Table 12 provides a more detailed food precarity profile. Nearly half (47%) of the heads had worried that there would not be enough food in the household in the previous month and a similar proportion had eaten smaller meals or fewer meals because there was not enough food in the house. However, only a smaller number (20%) had experienced a time when there was no food at all in the house. Around 11% had household members who had gone to sleep hungry, while 8% had gone 24 hours without eating anything. By contrast, a major feature of pandemic food precarity was the poor quality of the household diet with 60% having to eat a limited variety of food and eating food they did not want to eat.

At the time of the survey, more than a year into the pandemic, many Zimbabwean migrant households were still forced to use coping strategies to manage the food security shock (Table 13). Most (nearly 80%) still relied on less desirable and less expensive foods. Over half were reducing the number of meals consumed in a day and nearly one-quarter were limiting portion size at mealtimes. Thirty percent were borrowing food or relying on help from their social networks. Return to Zimbabwe was not seen as a viable strategy to mitigate food insecurity as three-quarters of the household heads felt that this would only make their food insecurity and that of their family members at home even worse.

Table 12: Dimensions of Migrant Household Food Insecurity

| In the past 4 weeks:   | Sometimes/Often (%) |
|--|---------------------|
| Were you or any household member not able to eat the kinds of foods you preferred due to a lack of resources?  | 59.8                |
| Did you or any household member have to eat a limited variety of foods due to a lack of resources?   | 59.8                |
| Did you or any household member have to eat some foods that you really did not want to eat because of a lack of resources to obtain other types of food? | 57.9                |
| Did you worry that your household would not have enough food?  | 46.7                |
| Did you or any household member have to eat a smaller meal than you felt you needed because there was not enough food?                                   | 47.9                |
| Did you or any household member have to eat fewer meals in a day because there was not enough food?  | 48.1                |
| Was there ever no food to eat of any kind in your household because of a lack of resources to get food?  | 19.7                |
| Did you or any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?   | 10.5                |
| Did you or any household member go a whole day and night without eating anything because there was not enough food?                                      | 7.7                 |

Table 13: Food Security Coping Strategies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

| In the past 7 days, did you or your household:         | No. | %    |
|--|-----|------|
| Rely on less preferred and less expensive foods        | 398 | 79.1 |
| Reduce number of meals consumed in a day               | 279 | 55.5 |
| Borrow food or rely on help from friends and relatives | 147 | 29.2 |
| Consume food from food vending business                | 133 | 26.4 |
| Limit portion size at mealtimes                        | 118 | 23.5 |
| Purchase food on credit                                | 92  | 18.3 |
| Go a whole day without eating                          | 20  | 4.0  |
| Beg for food   | 10  | 2.0  |
| Restrict adult consumption so children can eat         | 5   | 1.0  |
| Send household members to eat elsewhere                |     | 0.6  |
| Gather wild/indigenous food                            |     | 0.4  |
| Feed working before non-working household members      |     | 0.2  |

*Note: Multiple response question*

## Conclusion

The concept and reality of migrant precarity is now well entrenched in the migration literature and has recently entered discourse on South-South migration to South Africa. There is a danger that unreconstructed, the latter development will uncritically reproduce a significant silence in the more general North-dominated view of migrant precarity; that is, the relationship between precarity and food insecurity. Food insecurity may be viewed either as an outcome of precarity or essential to its very definition. Because food security is so closely tied to labour market access, employment and unemployment, and individual and household income, in our view it needs to be integrated more firmly into the conceptualization of migrant precarity. That migrant food precarity is an essential feature of South-South migration is indisputable (Crush and Tawodzera, 2019). However, there are very few empirical studies available to test this proposition.

The utility of precarity as an analytical tool has been sharpened by COVID-19. Thus, the concept of pandemic precarity has recently been advocated as a way of understanding the unprecedented but unequal socio-economic impact of COVID-19. We can safely predict that pandemic precarity, like precarity before it, will find its way into the migration literature including in studies of South-South migration. However, the emerging literature on pandemic precarity pays little attention to food security and insecurity and this, too, may well be mirrored by migration scholars. In this paper, we therefore propose that the concept of 'pandemic food precarity' is an essential addition to the conceptual toolbox of South-South migration researchers working on COVID-19 and its impacts. The paper utilizes data from a recent survey of Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa during the pandemic to show that COVID-19 has had a profound and enduring impact on household incomes, remitting behaviour and food insecurity.

In terms of new directions for research and policy advocacy, four obvious lines of enquiry suggest themselves. First, a key argument of pandemic precarity advocates is that pre-existing economic and social conditions are integral to any explanation of the variable and unequal impact of COVID-19. In the case of pandemic food precarity of migrant populations this would also hold true. In other words, research is needed into whether and how pre-pandemic levels and drivers of food insecurity were exacerbated by the pandemic. Second, the evidence presented in this paper indicates that the initial shock of the pandemic and accompanying lockdowns exercised a strong downward effect on migrant food security. However, vaccinations, economic recovery, and a return to full employment by migrants has not mitigated food insecurity which continues to be extremely high amongst migrant households. The enduring impact of COVID-19 on migrant food security therefore needs more research attention. Third, South-South migrants are not the only population groups to experience pre-pandemic and pandemic food precarity. In many countries, citizens are also exposed to the unequal impacts of COVID-19 and internal migrants have experienced intense disruption of lives and livelihoods. A fruitful future line of enquiry would

be to juxtapose the pandemic experience of international and internal migrants to uncover any similarities and differences. Fourth, a pandemic of global proportions had been widely predicted by virologists and epidemiologists in the run-up to COVID-19. Experts now predict that future shocks of this nature are all but inevitable. Further research on the dimensions of pandemic food precarity during COVID-19 would shed light on the determinants of food insecurity and how these could be much better anticipated in emergency preparedness policies and frameworks.

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