

Food Insecurity and Irregular Labour Migration from Northern Malawi to South Africa

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Abstract

The factors influencing migration decisions from Malawi to South Africa have changed with the end of contract migration to the mines and the new normal of irregular migration of both men and women to work in other sectors of the South African economy. Food insecurity is now one of the main drivers of migration as migrants seek to earn income to remit to family in Malawi to purchase food and to invest in agriculture. Food insecurity is normally associated with rural households, but this paper shows that it is also a driver of migration to South Africa from urban Malawi. Drawing on research in the northern city of Mzuzu, the paper traces migrant perceptions of remedies for food insecurity and also traces the challenges migrants face in securing their own food security while in transit and once they reach South Africa.

Keywords

irregular migration, labour migration, food insecurity

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Cover Photo

At the Mzuzu bus station, returnee migrants as well as migrants' families were picking up packages from an Intercape bus that had arrived from South Africa. Photo credit: Anil Dhakal



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Introduction

South-South labour migration is nothing new in the Southern African region. The migration of Malawian labour migrants to other parts of Africa began in the late 19th century and became so deeply rooted that male migration was characterized as a major export of the country (Chirwa 1997). The author of an article published in the early 1940s, for example, noted that “the chief export of Nyasaland [Malawi] in the past fifty years has been men” (Read 1942: 606). In the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods, the South African gold mines were the preferred destination for Malawian migrants. From the mid-1930s, Malawian labourers were recruited for the mining, farming, and manufacturing sectors of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) (Chirwa 1997, Groves 2020). A culture of migration had therefore developed during the course of the twentieth century and continued as a way of life for many Malawians (Groves 2020).

In the 1970s, contract migration to the South Africa mines was abruptly disrupted following a 1974 plane crash that killed 75 Malawian migrant workers returning from South Africa. The Malawian President, Hastings Banda, retaliated by recalling all 129,000 Malawian miners from South Africa. Although the recruitment of Malawians resumed in 1977, the number on the mines never again exceeded 16,000. A growing dispute between the governments of Malawi and South Africa over the screening of prospective Malawian labourers for HIV precipitated the final termination of mine migration from Malawi in 1988 (Chirwa 1997).

Since the end of mine migration, new forms of mixed South-South migration have emerged between Malawi and South Africa. Many mine migrants aspired to return to South Africa to work in other sectors (Chirwa 1997). Since the 1990s, labour movement from Malawi to South Africa has been dominated by the informal nature of migration (Banda 2019). Since 1990, women from northern Malawi have been increasingly migrating to South Africa. This includes male migrants’ wives and partners, widows, divorcees, and school dropouts (Banda 2019). In recent decades, therefore, both male and female Malawians have migrated to South Africa to work in sectors such as services, domestic work, commercial farming, transportation, and construction (Banda 2019).

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of South-South migration from northern Malawi in recent decades, focusing on the neglected area of Mzuzu. There have been some academic studies focusing on rural villages of Mzimba District in which Mzuzu is located (Andersson 2006, Banda 2019, Chirwa 1997), but international labour migration from Mzuzu has not been studied hitherto. To fill this gap, the paper explores the contemporary phenomenon of international labour migration from Mzuzu. Firstly, it assesses the decision-making factors of labour migrants. Secondly, it explores the ways in which migration actually occurs from Mzuzu. Lastly, it delves into the challenges faced by migrants before

leaving home, in transit, and upon arrival at their destination country, specifically South Africa. The research for the paper used qualitative methods including in-depth interviews with 42 migrant-sending household representatives (MHH) and 10 returnee migrants (RM). Moreover, the perspectives of 37 key informants (KI) were captured to better understand the context and policy-level issues. NVIVO 12 software was used to help with coding and generating themes.

The Drivers of Labour Migration

Various studies have documented that the livelihood of remittance-receiving households improves due to the increased capacity to access consumer goods, food, medicine and health care, education, investment in long-term capital projects, purchase of land, and construction of house and businesses (Adams and Cuecuecha 2013, Afaha 2012). The migration-focused human development report of 2009 notes that the major sectors where migration and remittances can bring positive effects include livelihoods, health, education, empowerment, civic rights, and participation (UNDP 2009). Successful migration helps people with increased capability and widened choices (de Haas 2010). According to de Haas (2010: 244) “migration has been increasingly recognized as one of the main elements of the strategies households employ to diversify, secure, and, potentially, durably improve, their livelihoods”.

The reasons for labour migration from Malawi vary depending on the situations and challenges faced by individual households and the strategies they deploy in response. The decision-making factors provided by the respondents emerged in the NVIVO 12 analysis of interview transcripts (Table 1). Food insecurity was seen as the most important reason for out-migration, followed by unemployment, low income, the search for better opportunities, and support for family and children’s education. Other relatively frequently mentioned drivers of migration included family and social issues, housing, poverty, and capital for investment.

Food insecurity has been identified as a crucial determinant of both the desire and the decision to migrate across Sub-Saharan Africa (Sadiddin et al 2019). Food insecurity is also a major concern among the urban poor in Southern African cities (Frayne et al 2010). AFSUN’s baseline surveys in Southern African cities showed that most households in low-income urban areas experience severe food insecurity (Crush and Frayne 2014). Improving household food security is a major reason for migration and Mzuzu, Malawi, is no exception to this trend. According to a recent city-wide household survey conducted by AFSUN, 45% of households in Mzuzu were severely food insecure (Riley et al 2018). This alarming situation is even more acute in the informal settlements of the city. In this context, households who can fund the costs of migration consider sending family members to work in South Africa as a strategy to address their food insecurity as well as other livelihood challenges.

Table 1: Decision-Making Factors for Migration

Sub-themes	Migrant households		Return migrants'	
	No. of respondents	No. of mentions	No. of respondents	No. of mentions
Problem accessing food	23	27	4	4
Unemployment	14	15	3	4
To support children's schooling	13	14	2	2
Low income	13	14	1	1
In search of better opportunities	13	13	4	5
To support family	11	11	0	0
Family and social issues	10	10	2	2
Housing	8	9	0	0
Poverty	8	9	0	0
Capital for investment	4	5	6	7
Peer pressure	4	4	1	1
Fertilizer	3	3	0	0
Utility bills	3	3	0	0
Low secondary grade	2	2	0	0
Business not working properly			2	2

Several respondents highlighted how problems in accessing food shaped their households' migration decisions. One female respondent, whose husband works as a migrant in South Africa, succinctly expressed the challenge they faced, stating, "We had problems with food. We didn't have enough food to feed the whole family." When asked about the circumstances leading to her daughter's migration to South Africa, another woman in her mid-fifties recalled:

You know after losing my husband, it was difficult for me.... I had to pay school fees for my children, buy food for the house, pay electricity and water bills, especially food was very difficult. She [the migrant daughter] saw that the whole family was under me...and said, "I don't want to be your burden, instead I want to help you. Let me go" (MHH26).

Returnee migrant shared similar stories. One man, who had a second-hand electronics shop in an informal settlement, reflected on the factors that drove his decision to migrate:

Sometimes no food, even for two days. Here we didn't have much money, even a tea...we could just drink once on Christmas day. So, I decided to go to South Africa (RM02).

Another returnee, who owned a clothing and cosmetic shop in Mzuzu's Taifa Market, added further detail to the food insecurity and migration narrative:

Finding food for the family was another reason because, I was thinking, "Now I can't manage to support the family." Then I talked to them, "It's better for me. I must go somewhere looking for a job. If God gives me a chance, then, maybe we will be helping each other (RM09).

Many respondents also recalled that their family members decided to travel to South Africa so that they could send support during the cultivation season. One woman simply said, "It was hard for us to buy fertilizer" as the reason for her daughter's migration to South Africa.

Accumulating funds for investing in agricultural inputs, mainly fertilizer, becomes a crucial factor influencing migration decisions and mitigating food insecurity. One respondent (MHH08) linked her household food insecurity to insufficient agricultural output as follows: "We had difficulty to meet food demand. At our farm field as well, we had difficulty to buy fertilizer. Consequently, we didn't have enough food to feed the whole family (MHH08).

Being food secure in the Malawian context means having sufficient stock of maize at home (Kerr and Patel 2015, Smale 1995). Given that maize is a staple food, even urban households prioritize cultivating maize when they have the means to farm. Additionally, there is a strong belief that the application of chemical fertilizer is a prerequisite for a good harvest. The importance of access to fertilizer was articulated by a female respondent in her early 60s who stated, "When we have enough production in the yields, I will be able to manage the household perfectly. When I have enough fertilizer for a year, I can harvest about 48 bags of maize each weighing 50 kilograms" (MHH05).

These excerpts all indicate the significance of access to food as a key decision-making factor. Food remains at the core of migration decisions: either to enhance household access to food through increased income for food purchase or to increase household access to agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer, that results in an increased supply of food through improved harvests.

Investment in human and physical capital is another major determinant of international labour migration from Mzuzu. Several respondents were concerned about providing better education for their children, siblings, and even members of their extended family. One woman in her mid-thirties had a daughter in Grade 8 who would be ready to join a secondary school (Form 1). Worried about their daughter's education, they decided her husband would migrate to raise school fees and provide food for the family in Malawi:

We have a daughter who is about to go to secondary school. We need at least MWK 40,000 to MWK 50,000 per year for her school fees. So, while he was here, we couldn't manage to support school fees. So, he decided to go to South Africa so that he would be able to raise some money to pay the daughter's school fees and buy food for the family (MHH42).

Another more complicated case was articulated by a widow in her late sixties who was living with HIV. Her eldest son and his wife both work in South Africa; the son migrating in 1997, and his wife following him in 2006. As she recalled:

When he finished secondary school, he didn't get good results ... and he didn't want to repeat. Because the whole family was here ... we were 6 ... he decided to go to South Africa. Also, because of my health status, he said "Maybe I have to go to South Africa and send you something so that you should have a good diet. If I want to work here in Malawi, I have to go further with my education. You, as a mother, can't afford to pay my school fees (MHH17).

On the plus side, he provided financial support to his two younger brothers for their studies. They both completed high school and started working, one in Lilongwe and another in Blantyre.

The significance of human capacity building as a migration motivator is affirmed by a World Bank (2010) report on the education system in Malawi which found that the share of household education expenditure is 17% and 44% on primary and secondary education respectively. The Malawi Integrated Household Survey I (HS4 2016) found that a lack of money for tuition and uniform fees was the main reason for 42% of the population aged 15 and older not completing their education in Mzuzu city; a figure close to 50% at the national level.

Building physical capital in the form of housing stock is another important reason for migration to South Africa. Many migrants spent a significant portion of their remittances on upgrading or building a new house. A male respondent in his late forties had one son in South Africa. He observed that the main reason for sending his son was "mainly building a house. As a large family, we wanted a bigger house" (MHH10). The family had started building a new house two years previously, but it was yet to be finished, despite a significant investment of remittances in its construction. Another woman's husband had gone to South Africa in 2014

because "farming was not giving him enough money. He wanted to build a house, so he decided to go to South Africa with his friends" (MHH16).

Migrants who fail to live up to this obligation are criticized in their absence. One household, for example, moved to Mzuzu from a rural village and were living in a rented house (paying MWK 25,000 per month) in the Chiputala area. The first migrant from the family was the third-born son who went to South Africa in 2013 at the age of 16, but the family was not satisfied with the very occasional support sent home. So they decided to send another family member, a 35-year-old daughter, in 2017: "The main reason was this younger brother is failing to assist us so we talked to the sister and said that Maybe you can improve our family, you have to go there, and we can also be able to build a house" (MHH35).

Another reason for migration to South Africa mentioned by several respondents was to collect capital for investment in income-generating activity back in Malawi. Some migrate to acquire capital or equipment to use in their actual or potential IGAs, while others migrate because their businesses did not work out as expected. The latter group decided to travel to South Africa so that they could generate more investment capital and start another enterprise. For example, one returnee migrant had his own business before going to South Africa in 2008:

I was doing small businesses but that was not working. And the business was just going down. Then I was left with small change. Then I said what I am going to do with this money? So, someone advised me to just go to South Africa before this money gets finished, to go to make a passport. So I thought, let's travel to South Africa, make good money, and then start a business back home again (RM04).

He stayed in South Africa for five years and returned in 2013. However, during his five years away he struggled to find work and a regular income. Another case of migration after failing to sustain a local business concerned a returnee migrant in his early forties:

First of all, I had a business here. I was selling some clothes right beside the market. So, my business didn't go well. Then I went to these associations (financial organizations) to lend some money. But I didn't make it. As a result, though I managed to finish the credit, my business was finished. Then from there, I went to the Vigwagwa market and was selling some fresh groundnuts. I was going to villages to get groundnuts and selling in the market. From there, life was tough. So, it's when I decided, maybe I should go somewhere to get capital as no one was here to support me (RN09).

He went to South Africa and returned from a five-year work journey in 2012 to establish a shop in the local Mtaifa market. The case of a female respondent in her mid-thirties whose husband was working in South Africa proved similar:

He wanted to open a bottle store selling beer. So, he wanted to borrow money from FINCA. I told him not to borrow from FINCA, because when you want a business of a bar you should have at least a little amount in your pocket so that money you borrow from FINCA should top up to the business money. Because when you just use the whole money from FINCA and end up making some losses, then those FINCA guys come and grab my house even my property. That's why we agreed that he should go to South Africa, raise some money, and come back and start the business (MHH34).

From these excerpts it is evident that migration (to South Africa) is a resort for not only potential entrepreneurs who want to accumulate capital for investment in their dream projects but also for the entrepreneurs who could not get the expected return from their existing businesses. The latter group also expected to collect more capital for making investments upon their return.

Irregular Migration Routes

Mzuzu, the fastest growing city in Malawi, has a unique feature in that international labour migration is important in the livelihoods of many urban dwellers. However, the intensity of labour migration from Mzuzu is overshadowed by the rural areas of the Mzimba district, historically the out-migration district of Northern Malawi. Before entering the field, I was worried about the potential difficulty of finding migrant households because of the pre-existing perception that all migrants to South Africa are rural in origin and that the informal settlements of the cities are mostly flooded by internal migrants. The reality is that people who migrated to Mzuzu from different rural villages are now sending their family members abroad to places like South Africa.

To travel legally to South Africa, Malawians need a valid passport, transportation costs, and cash to the value of ZAR 3,000 which is required by the Malawian government to help migrants return home in case they get stranded in South Africa (Banda 2019). At the land or air border of entry to South Africa, they are granted an on-arrival visitor visa for 30 days. Those who do not have a passport and/or cannot afford one choose uncharted routes. Migrant networks of family and friends play a crucial role in facilitating irregular migration. Almost all migrants have a connection in their country of destination – usually a relative or a friend to rely on when they arrive and who can help them finding a job in the host country. For example, the family network played an influential role in the migration decision of one migrant in his early thirties:

It was not my intention, but by then I was living with my uncle who was supposed to support my school and my well-being. So, after completing my Form 4, they discussed with my uncle [in South Africa] and said I had to go there. So, I had to go (RM07).

One key informant, a journalist, said, “if I want to go out there, let’s say I have friends there or relatives there, then they link me up and say let’s process the travel documents when you come, we can help you find jobs” (KI02). Family members already in South Africa also provide funds for passports and transportation for those coming to join them. One respondent in her early fifties noted that she did not have to take a loan to bankroll her third son’s journey: “Both the brothers sent the money. I didn’t have to get loans from anyone” (MHH23).

Travelling with risks has been a new normal for Malawians since the late 1980s (Andersson 2006, Banda 2019, Chirwa 1997). Even though migration to South Africa is discouraged by both governments, migration has not stopped but rather increased. Once the migration decision is made, the next steps include finding sufficient funds, contacting families and friends in in South Africa, and finding a transporter. Raising the funds is a challenge for many poor Malawian households. However, people living in Mzuzu have the advantage of earning income in both formal and informal sectors. The majority of people in Mzuzu depend on the informal economy for their livelihood (Riley et al 2018). Most of the respondents in this study were engaged in food vending, piece work, or employment in the informal sector. Families therefore draw on various income sources to cover the cost of migration including savings, loans from village banks (informal group-based savings institutions), friends and relatives, and high-interest loans from traditional money lenders (locally known as *katapira*).

When family members start to save money, it can take months or even years until they have enough savings to fund the journey. As such, collecting enough money for a passport and transportation can become a multi-year project even after a migration decision is made. The father of one male respondent in his mid-thirties (who was working as a builder in South Africa) covered the cost of a passport money, but he had to find transport money by himself:

It was very hard for me to find the transport money as the passport expenses were covered by my father. I did some piece works to raise transportation costs. ... I was working on some people's farm so that I could get some money. From there, I used to order fresh fish at the lake, bring them to the town and sell them (MHH06).

Some families obtained loans from FINCA for small business activities and saved money little by little until they had sufficient funds to cover the costs of migration cost. One respondent in her late sixties sent her first-born son to South Africa in 2008 with funds she had raised:

The amount we could get as a loan at FINCA was not going beyond 30,000 MWK. That money I invested into vegetables. I was keeping the benefits of vegetables until it reached the amount required to process the passport and transport money (MHH08).

The next step is to find transportation to South Africa. Describing the risks faced by migrants while travelling, one key informant observed:

Those who want to go to South Africa, because there are many of them, they want to go there but they do not have a passport. So, they just want to go. So, someone organizes them, and they pay him. So, he takes them, sometimes they are caught. Some of them are not caught but generally they do not get caught. So, if Malawians are going to South Africa, for example, they bypass the formal border, they cross the rivers, but this river they're crossing has a lot of crocodiles. So, some people are eaten by crocodiles. And that's the end (KI10).

Many transport companies operate between Mzuzu to South Africa, including big bus companies and small transporters. The latter include truck operators (widely known as transporters) who bring goods sent by migrant workers from South Africa to Malawi and return with migrants on board. Big bus companies like Inter Cape and Munorurama charge more than small transporters and officially require a passport and ZAR 3,000 before allowing anyone onto their buses. However, those without a passport depend on these transporters since they deal with immigration officers and bribe them to allow passage of migrants into South Africa. Those who do not have the documentation and means to travel legally generally pay ZAR 50 at each police checkpoint en route (Nyirongo 2019):

Migrants need to pay 50 Rands at each and every border post. We always encourage people to have enough money. So, when the passengers get on the bus, they have to show enough money to deal at border checkpoints (KI25).

We have these transporters.... they take people from here to there. These transporters are very clever. They collide with the immigration officers; they know one another very well. So even if you come from this end without a passport, you will reach South Africa (KI15).

Migrants have to avoid numerous obstacles while crossing the Limpopo River into South Africa: crocodiles, police, helicopters, and armed thieves (Elford 2009). Getting attacked by crocodiles and hippos while crossing the river is a great challenge for those who avoid the formal route. But being able to cross the river does not mean that the threats to their lives are over. Sometimes migrants are kidnapped for ransom (Frouws and Horwood 2017).

The migration process can be even more challenging for women migrants. One key informant, KI24, a woman in her late thirties, had been in South Africa for 10 years, and observed the challenges faced by many women migrants travelling through irregular routes:

The moment they just entered the Bridge, that's where they get abducted. Then they ask for 3,000 Rand. They are getting brutalized there. But the

problem is to travel safely, people do not have enough money. That's why they don't want to travel through a proper channel like taking a bus there. There is also another bus by which you can travel if you have got all the money, passport, and documentation. But because people don't have money, they meet these fraud people who say, "You know what, even if you have got 150,000 MWK, I'm going to be able to help you transport to South Africa", which is just a lie. They help you pass the border and the moment they are in South Africa, they sell them to those guys saying "Guys, I have brought you this business." Then, they just receive all of them, put them in a big warehouse where there's a big hall then they say, "Give us the name of your relatives here in South Africa. If you don't have any, we're going to kill you," threatening like that. They call the relatives so, in fear, you just have to send that money then they release her. All those who don't pay, they get raped, they get killed, brutalized, they get infected with all sorts of things (KI24).

Though all migrants face challenges, women migrants travelling without documents are far more vulnerable to physical abuse, kidnapping for ransom, and exploitation on their way to South Africa.

On the journey southwards, migrants are susceptible to food insecurity throughout. Sometimes, they are compelled to empty their pockets for bribes to officials at border posts. This leaves them without any funds to purchase food until they reach their destination in South Africa and meet their contact person. As one returnee migrant, recalled, "You have to pay 50 Rands at each border. Maybe it goes over 600 Rands until you reach South Africa. So, it was difficult. Even the food. I ate here and then I didn't manage to eat again until I reached South Africa, for almost 3 days" (RM09).

During the transition period – from the day migrants leave home until they receive remittances – access to food for the families left behind becomes very critical. As the same migrant commented, he had left his wife and children behind in Mzuzu, which meant that "the challenges were when I left her [wife] here... She didn't get money for food." This narrative emphasizes the difficult situation migrant families in Malawi have to endure until they receive remittances.

Surviving in the Destination

Malawian migrants' food security struggles continue even after they reach their destination. Finding a job is always challenging and so is being vigilant to avoid any encounter with the police or home affairs authorities. Competition for jobs is intense and finding a full-time job takes time. Many have to depend on piece work until then:

It is very hard to find a better job compared to maybe six or seven years ago. Those days jobs were a little bit better. But now, there are so many Malawians,

not only Malawians even people from Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are there. So, it's hard to get a job. Even the paying rate has actually lowered because there are so many cheap labourers available there (KI24).

The moment I got there, there was no job. Then I had to struggle. I had to go to the robots (traffic lights) and sit there for the whole day. For you to get a job, you have to go somewhere there and sit there. And someone who comes and says, "I need two guys," then they pick you, that's how you are going to get a job (RM04).

Many family respondents reported that their migrant family members waited for months and sometimes even years to find a full-time job. The longer it takes to find a job, the greater the suffering for migrants and their families at home. Temporary help is available from the social network of friends and relatives in South Africa, but it comes at a cost:

So even the relatives and friends there, they will keep you only for a few days and if you cannot find a job within that time, they will chase you from their house. And, also, if they find a job for you, they will tell you that it won't be free. They will sell that job to you. They will take 50% of the salary, generally for the first month only, but it depends (MHH33).

In some cases, migrants end up spending all the money they brought from home just to survive. Migrants stranded in South Africa without a means of livelihood have to rely on their families in Malawi to bring them back home:

It is very difficult for Malawians to find a job because many people are there in South Africa. When they couldn't find money to come back, their parents come to the Mzuzu office and buy tickets for their children. We get at least one such request every day (KI25).

Irregular migrants in South Africa live in fear of being caught by the police and deported. One returnee migrant in his early forties and now the owner of a couple of businesses at the Mtaifa market in Mzuzu went to South Africa in 2007. However, after some time, he was caught by the police while returning from work and eventually deported:

When things were not okay, then they caught me when I was coming from work. I tried to talk to them, but nothing worked. So, they deported me. When they take you to the police, you stay there maybe a week, and they take you to the deportation centre. There, it sometimes takes one month but people stay up to six months. For me, it was the holiday time, December time so didn't take long. I just stayed a week. But those people I found there, some of them were there for two months (RM09).

He went back to South Africa and worked for another three years until he returned and started his own business in Mzuzu. Asked why he did not establish his own business after being deported, he said, "I didn't have capital, and my wife was there. So, I had to go again and work for three more years" (RM09). To get back to South Africa he had to acquire different documentation:

I did make another passport. I needed to change my name because at that time they didn't have this system of the fingerprint. It's just information, maybe a letter from a chief or someone. So, I just changed my name, and I changed my watch and even my village. I was no longer from Mangochi, I was now coming from another place (RM09).

Most migrants accept deportation as a necessary risk. Once deported, the migrant is banned from entering South Africa for a period of between 12 months and five years. Those who enter through formal channels often overstay and become irregular. Returning home becomes another challenge for overstayers as South Africa has a policy that restricts foreign nationals who are caught overstaying from re-entering for up to 5 years (Department of Home Affairs 2014). Deportees and returnee overstayers accept detection as a misfortune and try to re-enter by any means possible, often by obtaining another passport or by following irregular channels:

Deportation from South Africa is a challenge. First, they take you to a prison in South Africa. Then when the numbers are good, they send them to Malawi. Now many people are deported. When they got here, they assume that you have reached home, you are okay. But what they do is these people go to get a new passport in a different name (KI13).

Another pressing issue that has received inadequate attention is the food security challenges that migrants face at their destination. Crush and Tawodzera (2017) recently documented a high level of food insecurity among Zimbabwean migrant households in South Africa as they are obliged to support their families in Zimbabwe. The following narratives from returnees indicate that a similar situation faces Malawian migrants:

It differs when you are just alone, but when you got a family, you got a wife, and now you got kids, some of the challenges I was facing was the money I was getting was not meeting my needs, for school fees, transport, food etc. And when you are there [in South Africa], you are looking after a big family here as well. I was really struggling. I had more things to do than I was earning. So, it was like I was working hand to mouth and that was really painful. I was supporting here and again supporting myself and even supporting my brothers who were there because they were not working there. So I had to pay rent for them, I had to buy food for them, buy food for myself (RM07).

It took long [to send support]. It was hard for me to make money that side. Even for myself, that side was difficult. I had to pay rent, buy food, the job I got was just piece jobs, twice a week, just imagine. I got like 100 Rand a day, and a week may be 200 Rand, and that money I must buy food and the rent just share with friend. That's how life was there (RM04).

When migrants struggle to meet their own costs such as food, transport, and rental expenses at their destination, as well as send support to mitigate the food insecurity of the family members left behind, their own food security situation becomes critical. These responsibilities put a strain on the quality and quantity of food intake, as food is the first thing to be compromised (Crush and Tawodzera 2017).

Even after deportation, migrants from Malawi often re-enter South Africa with fabricated passports and by paying off corrupt immigration officers (Torkelson 2011). One key informant explained the costs involved in circumventing this policy:

When coming back, they pay a lot of money at the border point, South Africa. They charge almost 900 Rand just to protect their passport. Going the second time you have to pay back a lot, almost 3,000 Rand or 2,500 Rand (KI 25).

If they are unable to 'protect their passport' through avoiding a stamp prohibiting re-entry, going back to South Africa becomes very difficult. They must pay a considerable sum at every check point before re-entering South Africa:

I could see people parting with funds. Either they have overstayed, and if they had overstayed, it means that they can't be accepted for another entry. So, they do face problems as they go. And, when they are coming back, they lose a lot, at the time they reach this place, almost with nothing. That's the real challenge (KI06).

Migrant families who received remittances in cash or kind from family members working in South Africa experience better access to food and food security outcomes than those who do not. This is because they use cash remittances directly to buy food from the market and indirectly to buy fertilizer that they applied on their farms for better output. The majority of migrant-sending households interviewed in Mzuzu were involved in some sort of farming and almost half reported using remittances for buying fertilizer and even hiring farm labourers. Further, households were not only practising urban agriculture but also cultivating on rural farmlands. Another study of Mzimba district in the north and Dedza district in central Malawi also found that rural households receiving remittances were more likely to be food secure than non-receiving households (Kangmenang, Kerr, and Luginaah 2017).

A man in his late forties received support from his son in South Africa every two to three months. The cash remitted had a positive impact on the family's food security:

There is a great change right now. Earlier, I was using the money I received as a pension but at present, as he went there and sending something, that something is helping us. We are buying extra food and the other things which were lacking before. First, we didn't have breakfast and rice. But now we do breakfast and also eat rice for breakfast. Now, we use rice for breakfast every day. In most cases, we use rice with tea instead of buying bread. Before we just possibly ate porridge using common flour and sometimes without sugar. Now we don't have that problem (MHH10).

A similar improvement was experienced by another household that decided to send a second member to South Africa as they were not receiving the expected support from the first migrant. She went to South Africa in 2017, and since then the family had bought a plot of land at MWK 400,000 and paid off almost 50% using the money she sent. However, the family still faced food shortages because remittances were being used to pay off the remaining MWK 200,000 for the plot:

At least now we are better off because if we talk about the most difficult times, we used to stay a whole week without a breakfast, even a month, but now we can only stay without it maybe for two days only.

In-kind remittances sent in the form of food packages are also an important aspect of Mzuzu's migration system. Some migrant households receive food packages that last many months. Many migrants send cooking oil, sugar, and milk powder from South Africa in December for the year-end festive season. A woman in her mid-sixties who had two family members working in South Africa noted:

Milk, sugar, soap, body oil, cooking oil, like those things I received in December, and they ended last month. He sends those once a year. We can say it is more than MWK 50,000. Because these things are cheap in South Africa but if you buy them here, they cost more. He tells me that "If I send you money to buy groceries there means it's a lot of money. So, it's better I should just send them from here" (MHH17).

Migrant households with no, or very little, remittance support experienced reduced ability to buy food. For instance, a female respondent in her mid-fifties took a loan of MWK 60,000 to secure her son's passport and cover his travel expenses. He went to South Africa in 2014 but she did not receive any support from him while she still had the burden of the loan. As she said:

There is a change, because, at first, the food at the house was just ok, but because I borrowed some money to send this boy for transport, and now I am still paying back the money. The way I am buying food now and the way I was buying at first are different. Now, I am struggling to buy food because the other money is being used to pay back the loans (MHH03).

Conclusion

Informal or irregular migration of men and women from Northern Malawi has become the dominant form of labour migration from the country since the end of contract migration to the South African gold mines in the 1990s (Andersson 2006, Banda 2019, Chirwa 1997). The decision to migrate is usually a family affair and the migrant travels with the expectation that they will fulfil their obligation to the family once settled and working in South Africa. The decision to migrate is fundamentally driven by the need to alleviate food insecurity and generate investments in human and physical capital. Migration is costly and the family has to raise the funds through various means. By taking advantage of social networks of friends and relatives already in South Africa, migrants increase their chances of fulfilling family expectations on arrival. Migrants face many challenges before leaving home, in transit, and at their destination. They leave home for South Africa, face obstacles while travelling along irregular pathways, struggle to find jobs, are sometimes caught up in xenophobic violence, and run the risk of arrest and deportation. Deportation and overstaying come with the risk of being barred entry by South African law for up to five years. This is no deterrent as many return anyway. The ultimate aim of migrants is not to stay in South Africa permanently but to return to Malawi once the reasons for migrating have been achieved.

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