

## Pandemic Precarity and Food Insecurity Among Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa

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### Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwean migrants living in South Africa, with a particular focus on food insecurity and economic precarity. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities within the migrant community, many of whom rely on informal, low-wage labour sectors for their livelihoods. The survey conducted in 2021 among Zimbabwean migrants revealed widespread unemployment, drastic income reductions, and severe food insecurity, primarily driven by pandemic-related restrictions and the resultant economic contraction. Zimbabwean migrants, a significant proportion of whom work in South Africa's informal economy, were disproportionately affected by the lockdowns and mobility restrictions. The informal sector, comprising occupations such as domestic work, informal trading, and casual labour, was among the hardest hit by the pandemic. Migrants in these sectors faced mass unemployment, with 72% of the surveyed households reporting job loss. Furthermore, the informal nature of their employment meant that most Zimbabwean migrants were excluded from the South African government's COVID-19 relief measures, leaving them with little to no financial support during the crisis.

One of the most alarming findings from the survey was the significant increase in food insecurity. Over 83% of the surveyed households were classified as moderately or severely food insecure. With reduced incomes and rising food prices, most households found it difficult to meet their basic nutritional needs. The shutdown of informal food markets, a key source of affordable food for migrants, further restricted access to food. Many households resorted to negative coping strategies, such as reducing meal portions, consuming less nutritious foods, and borrowing food from social networks. Remittance-sending behaviour was also negatively affected during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, many Zimbabwean migrants relied on remittances to support their families back home. However, with widespread unemployment and income loss, 77% of the surveyed households reported sending less money to Zimbabwe. The reduction in remittances not only deepened the economic struggles of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa but also exacerbated food insecurity and financial hardship for their families in Zimbabwe.

The pandemic significantly exacerbated the precarity and food insecurity experienced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. The intersection of pandemic-induced economic shocks, existing vulnerabilities, and restricted access to social services created



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a perfect storm that intensified the already precarious living conditions of these migrants. As the pandemic highlighted, the vulnerabilities of migrant populations in the Global South need to be addressed through targeted policy interventions that include better migration governance, improved food security measures, and protections for migrant rights. This policy brief outlines the impact of the pandemic on Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa and provides actionable recommendations for governments and international organizations to mitigate the long-term effects of pandemic precarity.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the profound inequalities faced by migrant communities around the world, with Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa being among the most affected. As South Africa implemented stringent lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, millions of workers in informal and low-wage sectors found themselves unemployed almost overnight. For Zimbabwean migrants, many of whom already lived in precarious conditions, the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, plunging them into deeper economic hardship and food insecurity.

Before the pandemic, Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa were already grappling with numerous challenges, including xenophobic violence, precarious legal status, and limited access to formal employment. Many relied on low-paying jobs in the informal economy, such as domestic work, casual labour, and street vending. These jobs, while essential to their survival, were highly vulnerable to economic shocks and provided little to no social protection. The pandemic brought these vulnerabilities to the forefront, as lockdowns and mobility restrictions shuttered informal businesses and left many migrants without a source of income.

The South African government's response to the pandemic, while robust in many ways, largely excluded migrant populations from critical relief measures. The COVID-19 relief packages, which included unemployment benefits and food assistance, were primarily directed at South African citizens, leaving migrant workers without access to social safety nets. This exclusion was particularly devastating for Zimbabwean migrants, who, due to their legal status and employment in the informal sector, were already marginalised and lacked access to basic services. As a result, many Zimbabwean migrant households experienced a sharp decline in income,

leading to increased economic precarity and heightened food insecurity.

Our survey conducted in 2021 among Zimbabwean migrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg revealed the full extent of the pandemic's impact on this community. The survey also highlighted the significant reduction in remittances during the pandemic. Remittances have long been a lifeline for Zimbabwean families, providing crucial financial support for food, education, and healthcare. However, the pandemic disrupted the flow of remittances, as many migrants were unable to send money back home due to job loss and reduced earnings.

The findings from the survey underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to address the vulnerabilities faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. The pandemic has revealed the fragility of migrant livelihoods and the critical role that remittances play in supporting both migrant households and their families in Zimbabwe.

## Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically worsened the economic precarity and food insecurity experienced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Our 2021 survey of Zimbabwean migrant households conducted in Cape Town and Johannesburg revealed a range of challenges that contributed to the deepening crisis, including widespread unemployment, reduced remittance flows, and severe food insecurity.

### Impact on Employment and Income

The majority of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa relied on informal, low-wage jobs, such as domestic work, informal trading, and casual labour. These sectors were severely disrupted by lockdown measures and restrictions, leading to significant job losses among migrants:

- 72% of respondents reported becoming unemployed during the pandemic, with many unable to find alternative employment due to the contraction of both the formal and informal job markets.
- The informal economy, where most Zimbabwean migrants work, was hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Many informal traders and day labourers, who depend on face-to-face interactions, saw their livelihoods disappear overnight. This sudden loss of income forced many households into deeper precarity.

- 87% of households experienced a loss of income, which directly impacted their ability to meet basic needs, including food and housing. Even after the lockdowns were lifted, many migrants struggled to return to pre-pandemic income levels due to the lingering economic downturn.

### Food Insecurity

Food insecurity emerged as one of the most severe consequences of the pandemic for Zimbabwean migrants. As a result of job losses and reduced income, many households found it increasingly difficult to afford food:

- 83% of migrant households were classified as either moderately or severely food insecure at the time of the survey.
- 90% of households reported that food prices had increased significantly during the pandemic, further straining their already limited budgets. Rising food costs compounded the difficulties migrants faced in accessing adequate nutrition.
- Informal food markets, a crucial source of affordable food for many migrant households, were shut down during the pandemic. 60% of respondents reported that the pandemic disrupted their ability to access food from informal traders, forcing them to turn to more expensive and less accessible sources.

In urban informal settlements in Cape Town and Johannesburg, where many Zimbabwean migrants live, food insecurity was particularly acute. Migrants relied heavily on informal food vendors, but the pandemic-related shutdowns and mobility restrictions made it nearly impossible for them to access affordable food consistently. 48% of respondents reported reducing the number of meals consumed per day, while 59% resorted to eating less desirable and less nutritious foods due to limited resources.

### Reduction in Remittances

Remittances are a vital source of income for migrant families, both in South Africa and in their home countries. However, the pandemic led to a sharp decline in remittance-sending behaviour:

- 77% of migrant households reported sending less money to Zimbabwe during the pandemic, primarily due to job losses and reduced income.
- Many migrants typically rely on informal channels to send remittances, but the closure of borders and mobility restrictions forced them to shift to digital transfers, which

were not always accessible or affordable for all migrants. This disruption in remittance flows had a significant impact on transnational households, which depend on these funds for food, healthcare, and education.

The reduction in remittances further exacerbated food insecurity in Zimbabwe, as families receiving less financial support struggled to afford basic necessities. The loss of income not only affected migrants in South Africa but also reverberated across borders, deepening the economic challenges faced by their families in Zimbabwe.

### Housing and Living Conditions

Zimbabwean migrants faced significant economic pressures related to housing during the pandemic. Many migrants live in informal settlements where housing is precarious and costly:

- 32% of household expenditures were allocated to housing (rent or mortgage payments), while 32% was spent on food and groceries. The combination of high housing costs and rising food prices left little room for other essential expenditures.
- With reduced income and rising costs, many migrants were forced to cut back on other basic needs such as transportation, utilities, and healthcare. This deepened their vulnerability, as many households were unable to afford adequate housing or maintain a stable living environment.

Migrants living in informal settlements were particularly vulnerable to eviction and homelessness, as their inability to pay rent during the pandemic left them at the mercy of landlords. The overcrowded living conditions in these areas also made it difficult for migrants to adhere to public health guidelines, further exposing them to the risks of COVID-19.

### Coping Mechanisms

In response to the economic pressures of the pandemic, many migrant households adopted coping strategies to manage their food insecurity and financial precarity:

- 79% of households relied on less preferred and less expensive foods as a means of stretching their limited budgets. This often meant sacrificing the nutritional quality of their diets to ensure they could feed their families.

- 56% of respondents reported reducing the number of meals consumed per day, and 24% reduced portion sizes to make their food supplies last longer.
- Social networks played a critical role in helping migrant households cope with food insecurity, as 29% of respondents borrowed food or relied on help from friends and relatives to meet their nutritional needs.

Despite these coping mechanisms, many households remained severely food insecure, with 11% of respondents reporting that a household member had gone to sleep hungry due to a lack of food. The pandemic exposed the fragility of migrant livelihoods and highlighted the need for

## Policy Recommendations

### Strengthening Migration Governance

To address the ongoing challenges faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, governments and international organizations must ensure the inclusion of migrants in social protection relief programs and economic recovery plans. Key actions include:

- *Inclusion in Social Protection Programs:* Governments should ensure that migrants, regardless of their legal status, have access to social protection measures, including unemployment benefits, healthcare, and food assistance. This requires revising eligibility criteria and removing barriers that currently exclude migrants from these programs.
- *Bilateral Cooperation:* Strengthening bilateral agreements between South Africa and Zimbabwe can help manage migration flows more effectively and ensure that migrants have access to support services in both countries.
- *Data Collection and Monitoring:* Enhanced data collection on migrant populations and their socio-economic conditions is crucial for informed policymaking. Governments should invest in regular surveys and monitoring systems to track the impact of future crises on migrants.

### Improving Food Security

Given the severe food insecurity experienced by Zimbabwean migrants during the pandemic, targeted interventions are needed to ensure that migrants have reliable access to food in times of crisis. Recommendations include:

- *Food Assistance Programs:* Developing and implementing food assistance programs specifically for migrant

populations is essential. These programs should be designed to provide immediate relief during crises and include provisions for both urban and rural migrant communities.

- *Support for Informal Food Vendors:* Recognizing the role of informal food vendors in providing affordable food to migrants, governments should support these vendors through policy measures that allow them to operate safely during crises. This includes providing financial support, protective equipment, and access to supply chains.
- *Community-Based Food Security Initiatives:* Encouraging and supporting community-based initiatives that promote food security among migrant populations can help build resilience. These initiatives could include community gardens, cooperative food purchasing programs, and food banks specifically for migrants.

### Protecting Migrant Rights

The rights of migrants must be upheld to ensure their well-being and ability to recover from crises. Governments, international organizations and NGOs should focus on:

- *Legal Protection:* Strengthening legal protections for migrants, including the right to work, access to justice, and protection from discrimination, is essential. This may involve revising labor laws to include informal workers and ensuring that migrants have access to legal aid services.
- *Combating Xenophobia:* Public awareness campaigns and anti-xenophobia initiatives are necessary to combat discrimination against migrants, which was exacerbated during the pandemic. Governments should also take a firm stance against hate speech and violence directed at migrant communities.
- *Support for Gendered Precarity:* Recognizing that women migrants often face additional challenges, including gender-based violence and discrimination, governments should implement specific measures to protect and support women in migrant communities.

### Facilitating Safe and Orderly Migration

Ensuring that migration remains safe and orderly, even in times of crisis, is critical for protecting migrant populations. Recommendations include:

- *Safe Migration Corridors:* Establishing and maintaining safe migration corridors between Zimbabwe and South Africa can help ensure that migrants can return home or move safely between countries during crises. This

requires coordination between governments and international organizations.

- *Digital Remittances*: Supporting the use of digital remittance platforms can help migrants send money home safely and efficiently, even when traditional channels are disrupted. Lowering transaction costs and expanding access to digital financial services are key priorities.
- *Emergency Preparedness Plans*: Governments should develop and implement emergency preparedness plans that specifically address the needs of migrant populations. These plans should include provisions for safe repatriation, access to emergency services, and protection of migrant rights during crises.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities within global economies, and Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa were among those hit hardest. As the pandemic unfolded, these migrants – already living in precarious conditions – faced unprecedented challenges. The findings from the 2021 survey make it clear that Zimbabwean migrant households suffered from severe food insecurity, widespread job losses, and decreased remittances during the crisis, with many struggling to meet their basic needs. These challenges were compounded by the fact that migrants were largely excluded from South Africa’s social protection measures, including relief funds and food assistance programs, leaving them with few options to navigate the economic downturn.

A significant reduction in remittance-sending behaviour also emerged as a key issue during the pandemic. Remittances have long played an essential role in supporting families in Zimbabwe, acting as a financial safety net for households in a country that is frequently plagued by economic instability. However, the pandemic severely disrupted this flow of funds, with 77% of migrant households reporting that they sent less money back home. This decline not only affected the livelihoods of migrants in South Africa but also exacerbated the economic struggles of their families in Zimbabwe, where remittances are often used for basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and education.

In conclusion, the pandemic highlighted the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable policies to support Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Addressing the structural issues that make these populations vulnerable – such as exclusion from social protection, high remittance costs, and

lack of access to basic needs – will not only improve the lives of migrants but also contribute to greater social and economic stability in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. Policymakers must act to ensure that the lessons learned during the pandemic lead to meaningful change, helping to safeguard migrant communities from future crises and building a more resilient and inclusive society.

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