Introduction
Cities of Contagion: Pandemic Precarity, Migration, and Food Security in Urban Africa

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The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on the global economy, highlighting deep structural vulnerabilities across regions, countries, and economic sectors (Baber, 2020; Anyanwu and Salami, 2021; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021; Delardas et al., 2022). Among the most profound disruptions were those in food supply chains, which experienced bottlenecks and severe price volatility (Aday and Aday, 2020; Deconinck et al., 2020; Vyas et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Transportation restrictions compounded the challenges, leading to critical food shortages and prompting governments to implement regulatory policies to mitigate supply chain disruption (Walters et al., 2020). Demand-side shocks such as panic buying further strained food systems, exacerbating labor shortages and supply chain fragility (Hobbs, 2020). Labor shortages and movement restrictions limited farming activities and delayed the transportation of goods, depressing agricultural production, increasing food dumping by farmers, and driving up food prices (Ellison and Kalaitzandonakes, 2020; FAO, 2020; Siminiuc and Turcanu, 2020; Chari, 2022). With many countries imposing export restrictions to try and protect domestic consumers, food prices soared, and global food insecurity deteriorated (Crush and Si, 2020; Espitia et al., 2020; Glauber et al., 2020; Béné et al., 2021; Falkendal et al., 2021).

There is now an abundance of evidence that the pandemic affected the livelihoods of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the food system disproportionately, including small-scale farmers, farmworkers, food processing workers, and informal food marketers (Mubangizi, 2021; Kesar et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024; Crush and Tawodzera, 2024). Job loss and unemployment particularly affected groups already vulnerable to economic shocks, exacerbating health crises and psychological distress. Pre-pandemic vulnerability to inequality, poverty, and economic insecurity was exacerbated, weakening resilience and reinforcing disadvantage. Pandemic precarity was characterized by falling incomes,

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multidimensional poverty, and debilitating food insecurity (Sumner et al., 2020; Alkire et al., 2021; Bambra et al., 2021; Onyango et al., 2023).

Urban areas were at the geographical epicenter of pandemic precarity in Africa and elsewhere (Lai et al., 2020; Martínez and Short, 2021). Stringent lockdown measures, supply chain disruption, and restrictions on movement diminished food availability and accessibility in cities. In vulnerable urban communities, food shortages led to reduced consumption, heightened hunger, and growing malnutrition, particularly in cities of the Global South (Moseley and Battersby, 2020; Bukari et al., 2022; Chirisa et al., 2022). The closure of informal markets and restrictions on venues serving food further disrupted food availability, access, and stability (Crush and Si, 2020; Narayanan and Saha, 2020). These food system challenges compounded preexisting inequalities, particularly affecting those reliant on the informal economy (Tawodzera and Crush, 2022).

Despite the wealth of literature addressing the broader socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic precarity, there remains a notable gap in understanding the differential impacts on migrants and refugees in Africa. Most studies to date have focused on consequences for the general population, neglecting the compounded vulnerabilities of these marginalized groups. That said, migrants and refugees were affected disproportionately by pandemic precarity, as they were more likely to be in unstable employment, to live in overcrowded conditions with high rates of transmission, and to be excluded from government relief measures (Dempster et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021; Deshingkar, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Migrants, due to their legal status, lack of access to formal employment, and limited mobility, faced greater exposure to the virus and its economic consequences (Mengesha et al., 2022). Barriers to access to healthcare and discrimination against non-citizens amplified their mental health challenges and further marginalized these populations (Saifee et al., 2021). Furthermore, COVID-19 fueled nationalist sentiments, resulting in xenophobic policies that targeted migrant communities (Hennebry and KC, 2020; Mukumbang, 2021). Many governments excluded migrants from pandemic relief efforts, exacerbating economic hardships (Freier et al., 2020; Mukumbang et al., 2020).

Informal markets, essential for both livelihood and food access, were severely affected by lockdowns and health regulations, leading to a cascade of negative outcomes for both traders and consumers (Crush and Si, 2020). The economic fallout was particularly devastating for low-skilled and informal-sector migrant workers. Losses in employment and income, coupled with the disruption of remittance flows, had severe consequences for migrant families, both in their host cities and home communities. While the pandemic exposed migrant vulnerabilities, it also highlighted the critical, though often invisible, roles that migrants and refugees play in the sustainability of urban food systems. Despite this situation, policy frameworks often overlook the contributions of migrants, leaving them unsupported during times of crisis.

This Special Issue seeks to enhance our understanding of the nexus between migration and food security in urban Africa in at least three ways: first, it examines how COVID-19 impacted migrant populations in African cities by bringing together a selection of the latest research that centers the experiences of migrants before, during, and after the pandemic. Second, given that more and more refugees in Africa are city-based, it looks at how urban refugees pursue a living outside refugee encampments and with what consequences for building food security. And third, it focuses on the links between food security and the participation of migrants in the informal food sector. As a grouping, the papers seek to transcend the simplistic depiction of migrants as passive victims of the pandemic and instead emphasizes their role as active participants in urban food systems, whether as traders, remittance senders, or informal workers. At the same time, the papers draw attention to the structural barriers that continue to limit migrants' agency.

The first group of papers provide a deeper understanding of how COVID-19 has reshaped urban food security in Africa. The first paper by Abel Chikanda, shows the long pre-pandemic history of informal cross-border trading (ICBT) between South Africa and Zimbabwe and its role in stabilizing food security in Zimbabwe. Official hostility toward the informal sector and cross-border trade has an even longer history. The pandemic brought a renewed assault on the livelihoods of informal traders who were seen as a public health danger and had their stalls systematically destroyed across the country. As the author points out, this action eliminated a stable and reliable source of food for the urban population and destabilized the market chains linking cross-border traders and the urban poor in the country.

The second paper by Sean Sithole, Daniel Tevera, and Mulugeta Dinbabo explores how the pandemic transformed the nature of migrant food remitting between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The digitalization of remittances was a pre-pandemic trend that was greatly accelerated by border closures and the resultant shut down of informal cash and food remitting channels. As the authors of this paper show, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these channels and fast-tracked the adoption of advancements in financial technology and migrant use of digital and mobile technologies. In addition to a major shift to digital cash remitting, digital/mobile technology-based channels were increasingly used for food remittances too. Food transfers provided a cushion during the pandemic for households experiencing lowered food access, food shortages, high food prices, and hyper-inflation. The convenience and cost-effectiveness of digital food remitting mean that it is likely here to stay in hybrid form with the reopening of more traditional informal channels.

The next paper by Zack Ahmed, Jonathan Crush, and Samuel Owuor draws on survey research and in-depth interviews with Somali refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, conducted during the latter stages of the pandemic. They point out that most refugees live and work in an area of Nairobi that was designated as a national COVID-19 "hotspot." As well as sealing off the area, most businesses (many of them informal) were closed down, depriving the population of the area of easy access to food.

Additionally, job loss and a fall in income lowered their ability to purchase food, particularly as food prices soared. Over three-quarters of those surveyed said that household economic conditions were worse than before the pandemic and nearly 40% of refugee households were classified as severely food insecure.

The fourth paper by Jonathan Crush, Godfrey Tawodzera, Maria Salamone, and Zack Ahmed turns inward to examine how migrants from the Eastern Cape fared in Cape Town during the pandemic lockdowns. They argue that researchers and policymakers in South Africa reserve the term "migrant" for other countries, which marginalizes the lived experience and struggle for food security of internal migrants. Most migrants remained in Cape Town during the pandemic despite catastrophic levels of job loss and income decline. Their ability to remit funds to family in the Eastern Cape was also badly compromised. Nearly 30% of households were severely food insecure and less than 15% had access to the government COVID-19 social grants. They conclude that migration status needs to be seen as an explanatory variable in assessing pandemic precarity and associated food insecurity.

The second group of papers in this Special Issue are a reminder that even as the worst of the pandemic disappears in the rear-view mirror, precarity and food insecurity have certainly not. The first paper in this grouping by Cherie Enns and colleagues focuses on the precarious lives of young South Sudanese refugees in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. They argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by these urban refugees and that the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations notwithstanding, they still experience food insecurity. Financial support comes from remittances from family members, local communities, and other South Sudanese, as well as from abroad, although COVID-19 suppressed this cash flow. Despite the challenges they face, the paper argues that urban refugee youth are actively involved in positive city-building, and that refugee youth-led organizations need recognition, investment, and support from local government.

The second paper in this group by Andrea Brown examines the food security situation and needs of Kampala's sizable refugee population living in the city's informal settlements. Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and nearly 140,000 refugees reside in Kampala where their access to employment, housing, and social services is a challenge. Brown argues that they also experience very high levels of food insecurity exacerbated by pandemic-related factors. As she points out, Uganda's COVID-19 response was extremely restrictive and the economic and social burden was felt most intensely by the poorest and most vulnerable residents of the city, especially the refugee population. COVID-19 was experienced more as an economic than a health crisis, only partly mitigated by food distribution programs. Like the previous contribution, this paper concludes with a call to local government and other stakeholders to act proactively, in this case to address post-pandemic refugee vulnerability and food insecurity.

The third paper by Bernard Owusu and Jonathan Crush addresses the post-pandemic food security-remittances nexus through an analysis of the interlinked food security status of migrant-sending households in Accra, Ghana, and Ghanaian labor migrants in Doha, Qatar. The paper juxtaposes the findings from a household survey in Accra and in-depth interviews in Qatar and assesses the impact of remittances on the food security of these translocal households. Food purchase is the most ubiquitous use of remittances by recipients that mitigates, but does not altogether eliminate, food insecurity. If migrants are employed and earning sufficient income in Qatar, they can balance the obligation to remit with their own food needs. However, unemployment and income loss have a negative impact on their ability to remit and their food security situation. These migrants sacrifice their own dietary preferences and food needs to ensure that they have sufficient cash to remit as much and as regularly as they can.

The fourth paper in this group by Godfrey Tawodzera examines the diets and food consumption patterns of Zimbabwean migrants living in Windhoek, Namibia. The paper provides a narrative overview of the recent history of migration to Namibia and the self-settlement of migrants in the low-income area of Katutura. The author then paints a picture from the voices of migrants themselves of the traditional rural and modern urban diets consumed in Zimbabwe before migration. After migration, most migrants relied on a westernized and more unhealthy diet of highly processed foods. Some culturally appropriate foods from Zimbabwe are impossible to access while others are imported, but the purchase price is at a premium. During COVID-19 the supply of imported Zimbabwean foodstuffs slowed to a trickle. Food insecurity manifests in the consumption of undesirable foods and poor health outcomes which, as one of his respondents pointed out, rather defeats the purpose of having migrated to Namibia in the first place.

The final paper in this group by Graeme Young revisits the theme of informal food system governance in the City of Cape Town. The paper examines the types of marginalization experienced by migrant and non-migrant workers Cape Town's informal food economy and addresses the question of why the post-apartheid sector is characterized by exclusion rather than inclusion. Inclusive development is obstructed by massive inequality, the nature of local and national party politics, and the dynamics around migration and informality. The paper concludes that the migrant participants in the informal economy face significant operational challenges, which were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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