When the cross-border remittance system fails: The impact of Covid-19 regulations on the food provision and access for cross-border migrant households in north-western Zimbabwe

VUSILIZWE THEBE

Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Pretoria, P. Bag X 20, Hatfield, 0028, Pretoria

E.mail: vusi.thebe@up.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Cross-border remittances from South Africa have played a central role in the food availability and wellbeing of migrant labour households in semi-arid Zimbabwe. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and containment measures introduced by both the South African and Zimbabwean governments hampered the cross-border remittance system and the movement of goods. This paper explores the food provisioning and availability impacts of the changes brought by the cocktail of policy measures on migrant sending households, and whether these households were able to find alternatives food sources locally. The study highlights a precarious situation for affected households, which saw their main source of food provisioning curtailed. It argues that the situation was further aggravated by the risk associated with alternative remittance channels, and the non-availability of local alternatives for these households, which were excluded from accessing food parcels/aid by the criteria used to determine beneficiaries. The paper demonstrates the vulnerability of migrant labour households to economic and labour market changes.

Key Words: Food, cross-border migrants, remittances, South Africa, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

The Mahlobo household has been receiving remittances from South Africa for several years. Since the death of Mr Mahlobo in 1993, the household has increasingly leaned towards cross-border support for sustenance and food provisioning and access. The household has 10 members working in South Africa, who provide financial and material support to the widowed elderly woman, who heads the household. Until March 2020, the household was receiving remittances directly from Johannesburg, where the majority of members are based, mostly through self-delivery by visiting members, rather than through the popular *malayisha* system.[1] Over time, then, the household managed food self-sufficiency, even in situations of national food shortages. There was also an emphasis on consumption of imported rather than local manufactured goods.[2]

Over the past several years, the country has experienced food availability challenges at both the national and household levels (Jayne *et al*. 2006). Literature also notes that food self-sufficiency at the national level was often not replicated at the local level, and in

semi-arid regions (where this household is located), food shortages were reported even in years when nationally there was a bumper harvest (ibid).

However, after March 2020, there were major policy shifts that disrupted the cross-border remittance system that impacted food availability and access for many households. The South African and Zimbabwean governments implemented Covid-19 containment regulations that restricted economic activities and mobility. In particular, the restrictions on cross-border movements (introduced as a *combo* of containment measures against the spread of the novel coronavirus), made it impossible for non-essential cargo to move freely across borders (Moyo 2022). This certainly impacted many households with cross-border migrants and compounded earlier vulnerabilities caused by harvest failures due to perennial droughts and poor soils (Thebe 2017).

This paper, therefore, has two broad aims. First, it examines the broad implications for food provisioning and access of Covid-19 associated regulations, mostly related to cross-border movements, on migrant labour households that mostly depended on cross-border

remittances for sustenance. Second, it explores the alternatives available to these households to achieve their food requirements in the context of disruptions in the cross-border remittance system, and the challenges associated with these alternatives.

The paper, thus, presents cross-border remittances as central to these households' food provision and access. The broad argument put forward in this paper is that cross-border restrictions on the movement of cargo meant that *omalayisha* – the main agents in the informal movement of remittances – could no longer generate a 'constant supply of ….goods to beneficiary households' (Thebe 2011: 666), while bans on international travels created a blockade of alternative pathways. These, accordingly created a rural food availability crisis, as households that were previously food secure plunged into a state of food crisis.

The government not only exacerbated the situation by failing to control prices of basic goods, but also, the available food

assistance programmes could not reach all those who needed food, due to the selective criteria employed by officials.

Although *omalayisha* have for long been the main agents in the movement of cross-border remittances, and have ‘provided an apparently sustainable and seamless exchange between labour and its earning’ (Thebe 2011: 648), they operated informally, and fell outside the freight category permitted under the regulations, and were for a period of time prevented from operating.[3] Although new alternatives (to move food remittances) became available, mainly through haulage trucks, these were unreliable and risky.[4]

Goods remitted through these alternatives often took too long to reach their destination, due mainly to delays at the border posts, and in some cases, they were never delivered after being lost or confiscated by customs officials or by police following failed smuggling operations.[5]

Moreover, the alternative in the form of cash remittances (sent through semi-formal channels such as *Mukuru* and other similar channels), could not provide a solution since the country was experiencing acute cash flow challenges.[6] To understand the implications of Covid-19 related regulations, which impacted on the cross-border remittance system, on the food availability situation for rural households of South African-based migrants, it became necessary to engage with these households on their food situation and provision dynamics.

I have structured this paper as follows: Following this introduction, I contextualise remittances and their significance in migrant labour societies in Zimbabwe, including the context of the Covid-19 containment regulations in the two countries. In the next section, I provide a background and context, before analysing the implications of the failure of the cross-border remittance system (due to the restrictions) on the households' food availability and access, by focusing on the situation of different households. I then discuss the alternatives that became available, together with their

associated challenges. Lastly, I engage with specific household cases and discuss the broader implications.

UNDERSTANDING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND RURAL HOUSEHOLDS' FOOD ACCESS IN ZIMBABWE

In an attempt to understand the food access impacts of the Covid-19 regulations on the worker-peasantry of rural Zimbabwe, the essential starting point was an appreciation of labour migrant economies and the significance of remittances, together with the Covid-19 containment regulations in both South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Labour migration and remittances in Zimbabwe

Labour migration and remittances have a long pedigree in rural Zimbabwe (see Bracking & Sachikonye 2006; Maphosa 2007, 2010; Mazwi 2022; Thebe 2011), and are closely linked to colonial conquest, the creation of native reserves and subsequent land policies (Arrighi 1970; Scoones & Murimbarimba 2021; Thebe 2018). The creation of Native Reserves proceeded together with the racialisation of territory (Ndlovu-Gatheni 2009) and the coercive

incorporation of the African population into the emerging capitalist system (Arrighi 1970; Phimister & Pilossof 2017; Scoones & Murimbarimba 2020). While Natives Reserves were identified and created for settlement by indigenous Africans, they were, in all purposes, created as labour reservoirs for agricultural, industrial and mining capital.

Much of the early literature on Native Reserves has highlighted the 'reserve labour' aspect and its significance to emerging capitalism. Bush & Cliffe (1984: 77) highlighted how the native reserves provided for the 'reproduction of labour power, used elsewhere in the economy in capitalist production, on terms that make it available cheaply as form of some migrant labour'. Potts (2000) drew our attention to the development of a worker-peasantry, mainly migrant men who worked in urban areas, but also maintaining close links with the rural home, and 'farmer housewives' (mostly the women left behind to secure rural land rights). She was also unambiguous about the significance of remittances, pointing out that 'the dependence of many, if not most,

rural households on such remittances is fundamental to their survival' (Potts 2000: 808).

Along similar lines, Nyambara (2001: 776) found that when the Gokwe frontier opened for settlement in the 1950s, labour migrants would 'book land' by 'leaving their wives [in the rural area], and then return[ing] to work'. He also noted that the practice was a common strategy of securing land access, and was a 'well-established method of exploiting the flexibility of 'communal' tenure, which allowed rural households to combine rural and urban incomes' (ibid).

In rural areas of Zimbabwe, labour migration was also an outcome of agricultural marginality (see Andersson 2007). If initially, labour migration was coerced (Arrighi 1970; Johnson 1992), we cannot rule out the possibility of male labour migration as a livelihood choice as agriculture could not generate income for commitments such as taxes (Thebe 2021; see also Boehm 2003 in Lesotho). Scholars have documented how Native Reserves were

designated in regions of marginal agricultural potential (Andersson 2007; Gwekwerere *et al*. 2018; Phimister 1988).

Others showed how African agriculture was systematically eroded through discriminatory policies (like the Maize Control Act of 1931) (Baudron *et al*. 2012) and deliberate neglect (Bush & Cliffe 1984). Some scholars have also drawn a relationship between labour migration and the demise of African agriculture, arguing that the neglect and failure of African agriculture worked to the advantage of the settler economy. The colonial state, by neglecting African agriculture, forced Africans into wage labour (see Potts 2010). Africans too, needed money to finance marginal agricultural activities, following the adoption of the plough (see Wolmer & Scoones 2000).

Alexander *et al*. (2000) too, in the context of the former Shangani Reserves, brought the relationship between labour migrants and ploughs, by describing new immigrants as 'plough using people'. Along similar lines, literature on Zimbabwean

agriculture in general has shown how agriculture is input intensive, requiring extensive financial investments (Jayne *et al*. 2006). From this perspective, Cousins *et al*. (1992) highlighted how successful agriculture was linked to labour migration and investment of wage income into agriculture.

While this pattern has persisted, we need to recognise the changes brought by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and retrenchments in the 1990s (Carmody & Taylor 2003; Potts & Mutambirwa 2019; Sachikonye 2016), and the 1991/1992 and subsequent droughts (Andersson 2007; Bird & Shepherd 2003). These led to a shift in this relationship. Today, labour migration patterns have changed, with increased cross-border migration since the 2000s (Crush & Tevera 2010; Crush *et al*. 2015; Maphosa 2007; Thebe 2011).

Out migration to South Africa, as a result of job losses, is reflected in the rapid rise in national migration figures to about 700 000 between 1991 and 1995, and the growing popularity of the

malayisha system (*omalayisha*), which transported both goods and cash remittances (Thebe 2011). *Omalayisha* further provided a perfect opportunity for cross-border migrants to change the rural landscape through investment – build modern homes powered with solar power – which has become a source of rural social stratification (Maphosa 2010; Thebe 2014).[7]

Covid-19 regulations in South Africa and Zimbabwe

It is undeniable that the Covid-19 pandemic provided the greatest disruption to social life and human nature. After March 2020, when cases of the pandemic increased, countries in the SADC region implemented a cocktail of containment regulations, which completely changed social and economic dynamics, with both short- and long-term impacts on households, families and individuals (Adebiyi *et al*. 2022).

Studies have shown that many countries implemented lockdown regulations including imposing international and internal travel bans, as well as national border closures – decisions that

disrupted movement and transportation linkages (Moyo 2022; Mushomi *et al.* 2022; Rutayisire *et al.* 2020). Others have argued that these restrictions, while effective and necessary in containing the pandemics, severe impacts on migrant communities and migrant sending communities or countries (Rogan & Skinner 2020; Zanker & Moyo 2020).

In South Africa, the government adopted a strategic response, with a five-tier-risk adjusted strategy, with a hard lockdown implemented from March 2020. While there were adjustments to the levels when and where the cases declined and the delivery of health care services and systems were deemed adequate, other services and activities remained restricted. As in other countries impacted by the pandemic, most economic activities were suspended during Level 5, but essential and freight services including cross-border freight were exempted (Crush & Sithole 2024; Moyo 2022).

Although Level 5 restrictions were later relaxed to Level 4 on May 1, 2020, travel restrictions remained – restrictions on cross-

border and provincial travel, restrictions on personal interaction, prohibitions on any forms of recreation, and although public transport was allowed to operate, there were restrictions on carrying capacity (Crush & Sithole 2024). While the government allowed most of the workers to return to work with the implementation of Level 3 on June 1, employers and employees had to comply with strict health protocols (ibid). During lockdown, unemployment increased, resulting in livelihood and income losses, particularly by international migrants and informal sector workers, as the informal sector was severely affected (Crush & Sithole 2024; Rogan & Skinner 2020; Sithole *et al*. 2025).

In Zimbabwe, similarly, Covid-19 restrictions became a source of livelihood deprivation, and rural families that depended on remittances bore the blunt. As others have shown, in Zimbabwe remittances (both national and international) are key to the survival of rural households (Bracking & Sachikonye 2008; Maphosa 2007; Thebe 2011). As in South Africa, lockdown measures in Zimbabwe 'disrupted work, economic life, income sources and livelihoods of

most families', as both sectors of the economy operated below capacity and some organisations and markets closed shop (Tom & Chipenda 2020). Furthermore, lockdown regulations applied to urban areas more than rural areas, while travel bans were enforced through patrols and roadblocks on major highways (ibid).[8]

Besides, when the South African government reopened its borders, the Zimbabwean government maintained its closure of the Beitbridge border post, which opened opportunities for illegal movements including smuggling of both humans and goods, and any 'other quasi-legal activities across the formal [border]' (Moyo 2022: 783).[9]

METHODOLOGY

I conducted an extended study of worker-peasant households on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves in Lupane District, south-western Zimbabwe between 2021 and 2023.[10] These households were spread over 5 traditional villages in the Menyezwa Ward 14.[11]

Qualitative data was collected using interviews and observation techniques. Interviews were conducted, first with key individuals in the community who included headmen, the elderly, people involved in cross-border transportation (who were at home) and local leaders of political parties and officials working for humanitarian NGOs. These were purposely selected for their knowledge of the community and households, and the role they played in cross-border transportation and the humanitarian aid process.

A total of 15 key community individuals were identified, selected and visited for interviews during the course of the study. At the household level, I selected 50 households with cross-border migrants working in South Africa. From this list, I selected four households, representing different categories of remittance receiving households for detailed studies. From these households, I also followed-up on members who were cross-border migrants, and conducted telephone interviews. In total, I conducted over 110

interviews, including with heads of households, key community individuals and South African-based cross-border migrants.[12]

The interviews sought to understand the households' food provisioning and access history, the impacts on food availability and access of the containment regulations introduced by the South African government, together with the alternatives that became available, both to move remittances and for food access locally, as well as the challenges associated with these alternatives. The observations on the other hand sought insight into the current state of the households with food access and arrangements regarding alternatives.

CONTEXT

Located in the former Shangani Native Reserves, the largely Ndebele-speaking households are typically semi-proletarian and popular for male labour migration and female headed households - what Deborah Potts (2000) termed 'worker-peasants and farmer housewives.' Because men are only temporary residents of the rural

community, they have been aptly described as being on transit (Thebe 2018).

Most households occupying these parts of the *gusu* forest frontier are either remnants of or descendants of waves of immigrants evicted from land around Bulawayo that was expropriated for settler whites, and were forcibly relocated to the *gusu* region, an aspect which shaped livelihoods pathways. Besides, these households were already fully proletarianised and incorporated into the capitalist system before relocating to the Shangani Native Reserves (Alexander *et al*. 2000; Thebe 2017). As a consequence of their proximity to the City of Bulawayo and its emerging industry, men were in formal employment, and the households had undergone successful transition to modernity. These were, in Alexander *et al*. (2000: 50)'s words 'people of the school and of the store and the market…..and dressed people'.

At the new place, they also engaged in marginal agriculture, producing cereal and a variety of vegetable and tuber crops. Some

of these households had relocated from areas in Bubi District such as Insuza and Inyathi, where sorghum was the main cereal crop produced (Thebe 2009). Others had adopted the plough in their farming (Alexander *et al*. 2000). Taking advantage of what Chimhowu and Hulme (2006) refer to as *makombo* (abundant land), they had cleared large areas of land for their households.

This is revealed at present by vast sizes of abandoned fields (*amafusi*) that are identified with certain pioneering households. For these households, labour migration was and is still the basis for income and accumulation, while agriculture (for many) is and has always been a marginal activity (Thebe 2017). To this day, this has been a major cause for concern for the government and policy makers, who have source to end the worker-peasantry (Bush & Cliffee 1984; Chimhowu & Hulme 2006). In order to secure and retain rural land rights, migrant labour was mostly confined to men (with women remaining behind as *de facto* heads of households), and essentially was or had been a migrant worker (see also Boehm 2003).

In the majority of households, agriculture tasks were often left to the women and children. Group ploughing was popular in big households that shared resources and nuclear households that pooled resources together. Group ploughing, nonetheless, reduced productivity since farming days had to be spread across participating households. This has implications for land cultivated in a system where extensification was the main agricultural system.

Thus, male labour migration and wage employment assumed greater significance because of agricultural marginality. Households could not live on their own farming. More importantly, like in other migrant labour systems in the region, men were expected to make money (see Boehm 2003).[13] At any one-time, men (including boys) would be out of the rural space, and before the 1990s, the bulk of men were absent, either working or seeking work in the cities. As education was highly valued among these late immigrants, children were sent to school, but in most cases, they attended better schools

in the cities. Most households had a second home in the city, which gave children opportunities that were not available in rural areas.

Besides working and having a second home in the city gave some men opportunities for contract mining jobs in South Africa, and some men had actually migrated to South Africa. Although both men and women could easily gain employment before the 1990s, the situation changed following the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991 with both the private and public sectors shedding jobs. As a copying mechanism, men began crossing the border for opportunities in Botswana and South Africa, while others engaged in oscillatory migration (see Zinyama 2002).

Furthermore, out-migration peaked in the early 2000s, and individuals living and working in South Africa in the community increased, with four in every ten households having at least someone working in South Africa (Thebe 2017). With their incomes, migrants provided remittances (material goods for accumulation, money for expenses, and consumption goods).

DISRUPTION OF THE CROSS-BORDER REMITTANCE SYSTEM AND HOUSEHOLDS' FOOD ACCESS

I first conducted this study in the winter of 2021, about a year after both the South African and Zimbabwean governments had locked-down their respective countries, which consequently placed restrictions on cross-border movements. However, in the study region and Zimbabwe as a whole, these measures had coincided with a period of drought, where all crops had completely failed. Also, nationally, some goods were in short supply, which had bred a thriving black market.

For many households, food access had long been predicated on the availability of remittances from either Botswana or South Africa. In the process of achieving food access, these households relied on effective and efficient cross-border remittance channels. However, with the implementation of containment regulations, the movement of remittances to this rural hinterland, as was the case in the whole of Zimbabwe, was severely constrained. The disruption of

remittance channels, which supplied households with the much-needed consumption food and other supplies, led to food availability challenges, not only because food items were not received from South Africa, but also because of lack of alternatives locally, even for those with access to money.

Households, remittances and food security

Throughout much of the early lockdown period, two different types of households could be identified, in terms of the impact of the freeze on remittance movements and food availability. In some households, the situation could be described as critical, and bordering on a crisis. In others, the situation remained stable, but difficult since the experience was entirely new and different from the past.

Of the 50 households studied, 37 indicated that they used to receive regular monthly remittances, 5 were receiving bulky remittances, while for the remainder the remittances were irregular and not always guaranteed, before the policy changes. For some, particularly those who depended on monthly supplies, the situation

became more pronounced as they reported experiencing food scarcity. These households, which were by far in the majority, mostly received smaller consignments for a month's consumption.

As would be expected, they had last received supplies in February, just before the lockdown. The majority were supported by migrants who were working menial jobs, and despite remittances being a major source of support, the wages were very low. A significant number of households were not receiving monthly remittances, and among these were households that were receiving bulky supplies, mostly three times during the year. By her admission, MaNgwabi only receives supplies only three times in a year: 'my sons only send or bring goods mostly during major public holidays (Christmas, Easter and Heroes in August), and these would last us for months' (MaNgwabi int). She went on to explain: 'When the lockdown happened, we had received our last delivery in December 2019, and were expecting the next delivery in March or April, which unfortunately never arrived'.

Nevertheless, the system of remitting adopted by these households meant that their situation was significantly different from the others. The bulk remittance strategy meant that these households were not immediately affected by the lockdown, but the effects became evident later as the freeze in cross-border movements continued. A small number of migrants were expecting to visit the rural homes and take remittances with them during the Easter holidays. They had not visited during Christmas because of work commitments. It is quite common for migrants to only take remittances with them when they visit home, and these visits mostly happen during public holidays or on their annual vacation leave days.

The freeze on the movement of cross-border remittances, however, were not the only contributor to a lack of remittances. Some migrants in South Africa had also lost income due to lockdown regulations. The majority of migrants from the area were employed in sectors such as hospitality, with no stable income, and these sectors were affected most.

One migrant, and a head of household, who had a wife and five children in one of the villages, indicated that he lost his job as a waiter. Some of the migrants, who were infected by the virus, got incapacitated. Notwithstanding the situation, income was lost and remittances could not reach the rural households. When asked about their food situation, the common responses were: 'goods were stuck on the other side of the border'; 'no one could bring them across'; 'my children lost their jobs and struggled to survive in South Africa'; and 'goods were sent and they never arrived…were confiscated by police'.

Several authors have also identified similar challenges, which became common among migrants in South Africa, thus affecting households in the receiving country (e.g. Sithole *et al.* 2025). Although this literature is not specific to rural households, we should not deny that the impact of the regulations was felt beyond the national borders where the migrants lived.

Alternatives and associated challenges

To understand better the food availability situation of cross-border migrant households in this former labour reserve, it is necessary to explore the alternatives that became available and the challenges associated with such alternatives. At first sight, there appears to be available alternatives, both for migrants to send remittances home and for their households to access food. But the issue was not that simple.

The movement of goods from South Africa involved new methods, which were new and risky (see Moyo 2022). *Omalayisha* had found new ways of moving goods across, either through smuggling, or by operating haulage trucks. Either way, these methods were unreliable. The cross-border migrants I interviewed indicated that they were under pressure to send food items home, and *omalayisha* were actively canvassing for clients. However, the whole process was risky. Of the migrants who took this route, not all were successful, as goods were either not received at all, or they were delivered with some missing items.

Goods that were delivered were often delayed, and as one of the recipients remembered, 'some goods were delivered damaged, or spoilt' (MaNcube int). And furthermore, the migrants told of goods being confiscated by customs officials or police. More commonly, during the lockdown period, were smuggling activities as people and goods continued to move between Zimbabwe and South Africa (Moyo 2022; Mutendi & Chekero 2023). Despite restrictions on cross-border movements, the South African-Zimbabwean border remained permeable, and transporters continued to exploit the situation to develop smuggling routes (Moyo 2022).

Remitting cash through semi-formal channels also occurred from South Africa. Cash remittances had probably, on the whole, became the most feasible way. Access to these channels by migrants was not difficult: first, the requirements were easy to satisfy (see Chauke & Thebe forthcoming); second, migrants were already patronising these channels even before the lockdown, and some had accounts with institutions such as *Mukuru*; and third, agents

representing these institutions were acting among the migrant community recruiting clients.

Some study households had received cash remittances, as an alternative to goods during the same period. However, the money was of no value since goods were not easily available in local shops, and when they were available, 'the pricing was often exorbitant' (MaGumede int). Although recipients could easily receive the money in United States Dollars, which was the preferred currency, they still could not travel to cities where goods were available and affordable because of restrictions in inter-provincial travels. In the rural area, however, even the black market that dominates the Zimbabwean food market, is not available, which ultimately rendered the cash remittances worthless. In fact, according to one individual, 'there was no difference between one with money and the one without, as both faced starvation' (MaZondo int).

In addition, government food relief programmes were inaccessible to some households. I was informed that humanitarian

food aid has always been politicised, and only awarded through selective criteria, which singled out households with cross-border migrants for exclusion. The background to the exclusion could be inferred from the following excerpts:

> During the lockdown period in 2020, the government launched a food assistance programme that provided households with grain (the staple product in short supply). ….However, there already existed at the time, other food aid programmes, which were targeted at the most vulnerable in society.
>
> (MaDlomo int.)

> The government grain programme was run separate from all existing programmes and was a response to Covid 19-related disruptions….., those in charge of the programme simply cloned the criteria used in the other programmes.
>
> (Nkomo int.)

> Most households headed by the elderly and those with vulnerable individuals were beneficiaries of food aid. Those households with some

stable form of support and those headed by able-bodies men were, however, excluded from the programme.

(Ncube int.)

The focus was on the elderly without support, women headed households (also without support), orphans, and as an added criterion, households where the men were unemployed….

(Moyo int.)

Such criteria ultimately closed the door for households that were receiving cross-border remittances. Only a few households, mostly those headed by the elderly and those known for lack of cross-border support benefited from the programmes. The community actually prevented these households from accessing any food assistance programmes.

These households also faced a strong disincentive to enlist for food relief, knowing that they fell outside the qualification criteria. However, some people blamed these households: ‘Some households that received remittances never availed themselves for

consideration, preferring instead to purchase their grain requirements' (MaNdlovu int.).[14]

As a way of accommodation, a parallel government food programme was introduced, where grain was made available for people to purchase at subsidised prices. However, people said the programme was chaotic, characterised by erratic supply of grain, capture of the programme by those with connections, favouritism and plunder. Consequently, it became difficult to access this assistance for many people as shown below:

> The delivery of the grain was made a secret, and communication was poor….., with only a select few knowing.
>
> (MaNdlovu int.).

> Everyone was waiting for the grain,….people pushed and shoved…., this required people with strength. I live with my grandchildren. Who was going to push and shove for a bag of maize that had fermented because of exposure to moisture during transportation?
>
> (MaNgwabi int.).

Corruption was rife in the programme. They only availed a few bags and then hid the rest for sale at high prices,…some of the grain was sold here in the community at thrice the subsidised price.

(MaDube int.).[15]

I was informed by some people…., I was never going to get government issued grain since I have often received goods from South Africa, which I have never shared with anyone. I sent children on two occasions to buy grain, but every time it ran out before their turn.

(Judith int.)[16]

In other words, households that required food remained outside the programmes. This, of course, had a negative spin-off on households, with cross-border migrants, which had lost goods. The government too failed to provide enough quantities of grain. As a result, some households were left without food, while the cost of feeding oneself increased dramatically as food prices sky-rocketed. There were also complaints that the maize that was provided had gone bad and was fermenting.

SPECIFIC HOUSEHOLD CASE STUDIES

The cases discussed below focus on selected cross-border remittance receiving households in the ward. In order to understand the level of deprivation caused by the disruption in the cross-border remittance system on these households, it is important to understand their history and specific situations. The case study households were carefully selected to capture the different circumstances of affected households.

Case Study 1: Enough food reserves (MaNgwabi)

Gogo MaNgwabi's household was an ideal modern home, with a female head. People in the village described her as humble and generous. Others recognised her household for its material wealth and social standing in the community. Her family owned a second home in the City of Bulawayo, had a modern brick-built house in the rural area, and had managed to educate children (2 with higher degree qualifications) and occupying high paying jobs in South Africa, while one of the two remaining daughters held a number of

mining claims in Zimbabwe. The children owned a fleet of expensive vehicles. The grandchildren, which she had brought up, also lived in South Africa, and two of them were in professional occupations.

Since the death of Mr Mahlobo, who worked for the City Council in Bulawayo in 1993, the household had been supported by children and other members working in South Africa. They provided financial and material support needed by the household, making sure that the elderly woman was comfortably catered for. Thus, access to cross-border remittances allowed her household to achieve food self-sufficiency even when crops had failed.

The household mostly received bulky supplies, which migrant members brought during public holidays, while those remaining in Zimbabwe provided supplementary goods, ensuring that the household did not runout of food. In the six months following the lockdown, the household never received cross-border remittances, although the old lady indicated that she had enough food stock from

previous deliveries. The supplementary supplies from the city were only received in February, just before the lockdown.

This contrasts with the common situation at the time as found, for example, in other households in the community, where food supplies dried out, creating a crisis situation. However, the situation with the containment regulations was new, and the old lady feared that if it continued for a long time, the situation could change. She explained:

> …..my children were concerned. They knew that the food stock would soon run-out, and we would starve. They talked of options available, but they had never used them before. They had never used cross-border transporters because of the bulky nature of the goods, preferring instead to bring goods themselves. They tried the Malaicha.com facility, but the goods could not be transported from Bulawayo. At the end, they sent money through *Mukuru*, but the money was useless because we could not buy anything.
>
> (Gogo MaNgwabi int.).

She also indicated that she stressed a lot during the period about her two sons who had contracted the virus, but had survived. A loss of any of her sons would have killed her, and probably brought changes to her household. She explained: ‘I did not know how I would handle it; they are my everything……, they filled their father’s gap, and no one can tell that I am a widow’.

As restrictions on cross-border movements and internal mobility continued, it was to be expected that the household’ food situation would change, and with changes in remittances from goods to money, consumption habits would change. The issue that the household had to address then was how and where to source food, given that it was also excluded from the humanitarian aid list, and in the words of the old lady, ‘the maize supplied by the government was bad for consumption due to fermentation’.

Case study 2. Food crisis (Judith Madlala)

A typical cross-border migrant household in the study was that of Ms Judith Madlala. It was an ordinary home of three traditional mud and thatch huts, headed by a single woman (Judith) in her early 50s, who lived with her late sister's two children (a son and a daughter) and five grandchildren from her sister's two daughters. She had assumed headship of the households after her sister (Lilian), who had returned home after a failed marriage, died. Judith had never married, had no children of her own and had never lived anywhere except in the village.

Her household, just like her family of origin, was considered poor by community members due to lack of assets such as cattle, which are the main source of draft power. Her father worked in Bulawayo until the 1970s, but returned home to begin a new life after losing his job. Together with her siblings, six brothers and two sisters (some with own homes in the community), never managed to complete primary school.

Her late sister's elder daughter (Ntombana) was married in South Africa, but had left two children (both from different men) behind. She occasionally visited her children and brought food, but in most cases, she sent money and groceries through a cross-border transporter (*umalayisha*), who had a home in the community.

Judith, herself, was a vegetable vendor, mostly selling wild fruits and berries to passing motorists. Judith still ploughed the family fields with the assistance of her two brothers, who owned a herd of cattle, but the land was poor and Judith remarked that they never really derived any benefits from the fields. In a way, the household was supported by a combination of remittances from South Africa and proceeds from her vending activities. However, remittances sent by her sister's daughter were the only sustainable means of support.

For three months before the lockdown, she had not sent anything, and Judith had been expecting groceries for the Easter holidays. Unfortunately, the borders closed, *omalayisha* stopped

operating, and nothing was delivered. In the meantime, the family ran out of food: the harvest was poor, she could not sell fruits and vegetables, and remittances had ceased. Judith remembers how she moved around seeking for grain or maize meal loans from neighbours; these grain loans had to be repaid once she had received her own grain. Her sister's daughter had promised to find alternative ways to send goods. In July 2020, she had sent goods through *omalayisha*, who were smuggling goods through undesignated exit points along the Limpopo River. However, the goods never arrived. She said she was informed that the good were lost on transit.

She enlisted in the government food aid programme, which was implemented to provide temporary relief during the lockdown period. The programme, however, did not cater for households with cross-border migrants. With some assistant from community members, who understood and sympathised with her situation, she had received a bag of maize, but this only lasted only a month as she had to repay the grain loans. She was able to find work at

MaNgwabi's homestead and managed to get maize meal as payment, but this also did not last long.

The Judith Madlala case is clearly unique and departs from the model migrant labour household where a man, who is often the head of household, provided the necessary support. Certainly, her sister's daughter had no obligation towards the household, and only provided support because of her two children. As such, remittances were not regular as evidenced by the three-month lag before the lockdown period. In typical migrant labour systems, remittances sustain households, in combination with agricultural production, but in the context of agricultural marginality, remittances assume a more significant role. While it is easy to blame the household' situation on changing regulations, it is also important to ask whether the situation would have been different, had the remittances been more regular?

Case study 3: Alternative channels, but no food access (MaNkala)

Like most labour migrant households in the community, this was well-supported through remittances from South Africa. It was one of

the few with male heads providing remittances. The man worked in South Africa and only came home for short periods, which left his wife (MaNkala) as the as the *de facto* head.

By local standards, the household could be considered rich, with a herd of cattle, a modern cement bricks house, scotch cart, helpers and a second home in the City of Bulawayo. Taking advantage of the availability of relatively cheaper products and diverse channels of remittances, the man was able to maintain a steady flow of both in goods and cash.

For a household that had small fields, the man sent goods every month. In a migrant labour economy, remittances and access to income from the wage often compensates for lack of land and production from the fields. As others have shown, land in these communities has no agricultural value and does not define household status, since wealth accumulation is premised on men making money from migrant labour (Boehm 2003; Thebe 2017).

When the men visited during major public holidays, he would bring larger quantities of goods because he had a van. He had last visited in December 2019 and was expected again in April 2020, but the visit never materialised. He also had not sent any substantial amount of goods in the months preceding April, hoping to bring the goods himself. This means that the household's food supplies were already low, and in July 2020, the situation reached crisis levels.

The husband used *Mukuru* to send money, providing the household with the opportunity to purchase food. However, local shops had limited stock, and with a hard lockdown in place she could not access the urban food market. In August, the man sent goods through *umalayisha*, but the consignment was confiscated *en-route*. This placed the household in a precarious situation, without any food supplies.

At face value, the case of this household seems to replicate the argument by scholars for food sovereignty. Afterall, if the household had fields and had produced its own food, the impacts of the changes

in regulations would have been minimal. However, the situation is more complex. For instance, the household had cattle, small fields and had access to labour in the form of employees, and it could easily have produced its own food, if the natural conditions permitted. Its dependence on the market for food access was not a question of choice, but that of necessity.

Case study 4: Jobs lost in South Africa (MaDube)

MaDube was widowed and middle-aged. Originally from the southern region of Zimbabwe, she had married into one of the pioneer families in the community. She had been a *de facto* household head since the early 1980s when she got married because her husband worked in Bulawayo, only coming home for brief periods. He had died in early 2000, leaving her with six children who were still at school. After completing secondary school, four of her children (3 sons and a daughter) migrated to South Africa, leaving children in her care. This necessitated regular support.

After their migration, the household had reduced its farming activities due to labour constraints and persistent rain failure. It was only engaging in marginal farming activities, producing maize and other vegetable crops for immediate consumption. Thus, it became overly dependent on support from the children, who provided regular cross-border support.

When her household ran out of food items, she would get food loans from a network of households that loaned each other food, while waiting for their next delivery. She would repay the same amount she had borrowed once she gets her delivery. These food loans were an important short-term food access facility. As such, in February 2020 she had loaned 2kg of sugar from MaNgwabi, after her stock ran out, which she intended to repay in March once her children send goods from South Africa.[17] However, there was no consignment in March. The South African government had locked down the country before the month ended, and her children had not received their salaries to send the much-needed remittances.

This was the first time she had missed a delivery and failed to repay MaNgwabi's food loan. Furthermore, her children were employed in industries that were most affected by the lockdown, and the two sons had lost their jobs after their employers closed shop. This left the household without any form of material and financial support, in debt and without any food. In July, two of the children were still without jobs, but her daughter had managed to send money for her to buy food. However, there was no food to buy.

This household's case proves that although migration can be seen as significant to poverty reduction, the reality is rather complex. Poverty reduction – which is achieved through migration – is highly dependent on migrants being successful in getting jobs. In this case, the pandemic led to loss of jobs, and therefore loss of income. This means, even without the closure of the border, the sons had lost the capability to send remittances.

Interpreting the case studies

The cases discussed above are important for any understanding of the significance of remittances for the food status and survival of cross-border migrant households. These households clearly represent a new generation of households described elsewhere by Thebe (2013) as having disengaged from the Zimbabwean economy,[18] whose livelihoods heavily depended on migrant labour to either Botswana or South Africa (see also Maphosa 2007). These households depend on an uninterrupted flow of remittances from across the border. As the study has shown, any disruption of the cross-border remittance system impacts on their food provision and status, and threatens their existence.

As much as farm households in low rainfall regions are vulnerable to natural shocks, the study shows that households that rely on remittances are equally vulnerable to economic shocks, and for cross-border migrants, their vulnerability extend to immigration laws and regulations. The cases further illustrate the vulnerability of cross-border migrant labour households to the volatility of foreign

labour markets. Such households often have no fall-back options locally, since their livelihoods are based abroad.

Without access to this key aspect of their survival, the households have relatively little chance of accessing food. As we have seen, with the blockage of this avenue, such households tend to sink into poverty, unless if enough investment was made locally from cross-border receipts. Judith Madlala and MaDube's households, for example, had made no investments and neither had they maintained sufficient stores of food, and the fall from grace was more pronounced as they found themselves facing food crisis.

The households had to find alternative sources of food in a very hostile environment, where even other households selfishly blocked their food access locally. In their quest for survival and to navigate the tough regulations, which blocked the usual channels of food access, some of these households were forced into illegal, and often risky methods, mainly through smuggling, to achieve food access.

CONCLUSION

Following Boehm (2003:5), this article notes that, 'with their ambitions…clearly outside the agriculture sector', households with cross-border migrants and surviving on cross-border remittances from South Africa, are always vulnerable to changes in labour market and policy shifts in the receiving country. Because of the significance of cross-border remittances, any disruption in the remittance delivery system can change the way of life for households.

For these households, remittances are closely linked to food provisioning and access, and anything that disrupts the flow of cross-border remittances potentially impacts on their food availability. Unlike other households in Zimbabwe whose food access was mediated by weather patterns and food self-sufficiency at the national level, households with migrants in South Africa this could only achieved food self-sufficiency through availability of jobs and

an efficiency cross-border remittance system (see Maphosa 2007; Thebe 2011).

This article has shown that the case study households had, until March 2020, had easy access to food remittances through members working in South Africa. With the food remittances they received through a number of channels, they were able navigate food self-provisioning failure through their own agriculture. However, changes to cross-border movements, driven by governments' responses to the spread of the coronavirus, completely blocked their main channel for food access, creating major food availability challenges for many rural households.

The ban on cross-border activities – except only for essential cargo – introduced by the South African government (which also acted as containment of the spread of the coronavirus), prevented *omalayisha* from providing a normal service. While alternative methods of moving goods across (that circumvented the ban) were found, and migrants desperate to feed kin at home placed their hopes

on them, they proved to be unreliable and risky, and goods sent through these channels were either delayed, or never reached their destination.

Households with cross-border migrants could still receive financial remittances, mainly through semi-formal channels. However, the money was rendered useless because of non-availability of food products and constraints on mobility. Households could also satisfy food security through humanitarian assistance programmes, but they were excluded through the criteria adopted, while the subsidised food scheme also fell short. Consequently, households were stranded: their major channels for food supply were blocked; their fields failed to yield; and their money could not guarantee food access.

While the food crisis that developed, might seem paradoxical at first glance, it should not surprise us, if we consider that labour migrant livelihoods have always been vulnerable to policy shifts and labour market changes as demonstrated by the impacts of the

Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). In this case, government regulations on containing the coronavirus, meant that the provision of ‘an apparently sustainable and seamless exchange between labour and its earning’ was compromised (Thebe 2011: 648).

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INTERVIEWS

Dlomo Nothando, Community member, Gumede, 10.06.2022

MaGumede Busi, Wife of a cross-border migrant, Gumede, 17.06.2022

MaNgwabi Gogo, Remittances recipient, Gumede, 18.06.2022

MaZondo Mirriam, Community leader, 16.06.2022.

Moyo Alton, Headman, Menyezwa, 10.11.2023

Ncube Marvis, Remittance recipient, Menyezwa, 06.11.2023

Ncube Tholokwakhe, Opposition political party committee member, Masenyane, 24.06.2021.

Nkomo Abel, Community leader, Makhuyana, 16.07.2021

Ndlovu Doreen, Community member, Gumede, 26.06.2022

NOTES

[1]. For an understanding of the *malayisha* cross-roader remittance system, see Thebe, V. 2011. From South Africa with love: the *malayisha* system and Ndebele households' quest for livelihood reconstruction in south-western Zimbabwe. *The Journal of Modern African Studies 49*, 4: 647-670.

[2]. There is a perception among these households that anything imported from South Africa is of superior quality.

[3]. The Covid-19 regulations exempted freight cargo to move through the border, and *omalayisha* fell outside this category, which mostly included haulage trucks.

[4]. *Omalayisha* pooled resources together and hired haulage trucks to conform with regulations.

[5]. Smuggling, mostly by *omalayisha*, became rampant during this period as they sought ways to remain in business.

[6]. The cash flow problems in Zimbabwe had forced migrants to send the South African Rand through *omalayisha*. Unfortunately, this path was closed.

[7]. On the relationship between labour migration, rural investment and rural differentiation, see Cousins, B., D. Weiner & N. Amin 1992. Social differentiation in the communal lands of Zimbabwe', *Review of African Political Economy* 53: 5-24

[8]. Urban areas are places of commerce and livelihoods for many households, and

anything that affects the urban sector has a spillover effect on the rural.

[9]. Beitbridge is the point of entry for traffic to and from South Africa, and remittances from South Africa mainly move through this corridor.

[10]. In this community, cross-border migrant households are well represented, with 4 in every 10 households having a cross-border migrant.

[11]. Household visits were conducted on five separate occasions: June – July 2021; June – July 2022; September – October 2022; June – August 2023 & November 2023. Telephone interviews with migrants in South Africa were conduct in between.

[12]. To obtain consent, participating individuals were asked to sign a consent form, while those who were interviewed telephonically had the consent form read to them over the phone.

[13]. Christian Boehm interrogated the concept of '*realema*' (we are farmers in Lesotho, and argued that migrant labour was an aspiration of every men, and Basotho households were dependent on migrant labour than their own farming.

[14]. Mrs Doreen Ndlovu, Community member, Gumede Village, 26.06.2022

[15]. Mrs Thalitha Dube, Household head, Menyezwa, 13.07.2023.

[16]. Judith Mlotshwa, Aunt to a female migrant, Gumede Village, 23.06.2022.

[17] . Among a circle of households, there exists an informal food loan system that serve to fill the food requirement gap before remittances are received.

[18]. Thebe has argued that the community of Matabeleland engaged in reciprocal disengagement from the Zimbabwean state following neglect and disenfranchisement. Such disengagement was not only characterised by mass

migration to South Africa, but also reliance on South African products and the use of the South African Rand even before the country adopted the multi-currency system.