



# From Banned Bonds to Hungry Homes: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life on food security among migrants on the margins

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## Abstract

This paper examines the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic and related bans on associational life had on the food security of migrants residing in informal settlements. Through ethnographic fieldwork at Lydiate informal settlement in the Norton peri-urban area, Zimbabwe – where Malawian migrants have established a unique home – the study reveals the transformative impacts of the pandemic on the livelihoods, food security, and everyday life of migrants. Lockdown measures disrupted crucial social support networks, including community organisations and informal associations that are essential to migrants' and diasporas' sense of belonging. The findings reveal a dramatic alteration in the lives of migrants at Lydiate, emphasising how limited access to these networks exacerbated food insecurity among a population already facing discrimination and exclusion from formal support systems. Beyond the immediate impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on food security, pre-existing vulnerabilities (questionable legal status, lack of social safety nets, and resource constraints) also demonstrated the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of migrants in informal settlements. This complex array of challenges significantly influences food security outcomes among migrants on the margins during times of crisis. Understanding the impacts of bans on associational life and belonging among migrants necessitates a thoughtful approach to policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners must consider the interconnectedness of social, economic, and psychological dimensions in the lives of migrants. Future research might usefully focus on how migrants find 'informal or nimble ways of belonging' to continue their lives even after bans on associational life in the community and beyond.

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## Disclosure statement

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reverberated across multiple dimensions of human life, with significant implications for food security (Niles et al., 2020; Smith and Wesselbaum, 2020). Vulnerable populations, particularly migrants residing in informal settlements, bore unintended consequences due to measures implemented to contain the virus, such as mandatory lockdowns (Bhanye, 2023a; Matamanda et al., 2022). The bans on associational life, including market closures and restrictions on communal gatherings, disrupted established food supply chains and livelihoods, resulting in heightened food insecurity among these marginalised communities (Bhanye, 2023b; Chirisa et al., 2020; Matamanda et al., 2022).

This paper extends our understanding of the impacts that COVID-19 and bans on associational life had on food security among foreign migrants in informal settlements. It builds on existing literature on food insecurity in migrant communities, drawing insights from other preliminary works such as Arndt et al. (2020), Amare et al. (2021) and Shupler et al. (2020). These studies illuminate the complex and diverse challenges faced by marginalised groups, including disruptions to economic activities, limitations in accessing healthcare, and heightened social vulnerabilities. Extending beyond the general effects, a notable consequence of the pandemic has been its impact on food security, especially among urban poor communities (Inegbedion, 2021; Manduna, 2023;). The lockdown measures, implemented with the intention of curbing the spread of the virus, inadvertently intensified existing inequalities (Bhanye and Bhanye, 2023). Vulnerable populations, often concentrated in urban informal settlements, faced heightened economic insecurities as jobs evaporated and livelihoods were disrupted (Chirisa et al., 2020; Shupler et al., 2020). The closures of informal markets and restrictions on communal gatherings further compounded these challenges, leading to a domino effect on food supply chains and access (Matamanda et al., 2022). As a result, urban poor communities found themselves grappling with exacerbated food insecurity, a crisis that required immediate attention and tailored interventions.

This study is situated within the broader discourse on the impacts of pandemics on migrants, emphasising the need to address their unique vulnerabilities. Central to this study is the framing of associational life and belonging, a lens that proves particularly relevant in understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations, specifically foreign migrants in informal settlements (Bhanye, 2023a). The disruptions caused by lockdown measures extend beyond the immediate economic and health domains; they profoundly affect the social fabric that sustains these communities (Bhanye, 2023c). Associations and communal ties form the bedrock of support for migrants, providing not only economic assistance but also a sense of identity and belonging (Bhanye, 2023b; Laurence and Kim, 2021). The closure of markets and restrictions on communal gatherings eroded these social support networks, profoundly altering the lived experiences of migrants.

This paper explores the impacts that bans on associational life had on the food security of foreign migrants in informal settlements during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the various factors that contribute to the vulnerability of these populations, including their legal status, lack of access to social safety nets, and limited resources. The study draws on qualitative data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork among Malawian migrants (herein referred to as Lydiatians) living in an informal settlement in Zimbabwe's Norton peri-urban area. In this context, the ethnographic study conducted at Lydiate informal settlement among Malawian migrants serves as a unique contribution to the existing literature. Ethnography, with its focus on immersive and context-specific understanding, allowed the researcher to get closer and gather information on the daily life, social interactions, and coping mechanisms of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative ethnographic approach offered a more detailed understanding than quantitative data alone, shedding light on the subtle ways in which migrants navigate challenges, find resilience, and forge 'informal ways of belonging' even in the face of bans on associational life. Therefore, this ethnographic study enriches the existing literature by offering a micro-level perspective that contributes to the broader understanding of how social connections shape the vulnerabilities and resilience of migrant populations during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.



The paper is structured as follows: first, it provides a literature review on food security in the context of migrant communities, and on the significance of associational life and belonging among migrants in informal settlements. The section that follows describes the methodology used to collect data for this study – ethnography – and presents the background and context of migrants at Lydiate. The study then presents a section on associational life and its significance among Lydiatians. This is followed by a presentation of the study findings, highlighting the impacts that bans on associational life have had on the food security of migrants at Lydiate informal settlement. The final section concludes the study, providing policy recommendations for addressing food security challenges faced by foreign migrants in informal settlements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Food security in the context of migrant communities**

Food security refers to the ability of individuals, households, and communities to access sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life (Alonso et al., 2018; Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). The term food security encompasses several dimensions, including availability, access, utilisation, and stability (Gibson, 2012). Availability refers to the physical availability of food, which depends on the production, distribution, and storage of food at the local, national, and global levels (Gibson, 2012). Availability is influenced by factors like climate, natural disasters, conflicts, agricultural policies, food trade, and transportation systems. Access refers to the ability of individuals and households to obtain food through purchase, production, or other means (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). Income, prices, market availability, and physical access to food sources influence food access. In addition, social and cultural factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and social status, can affect access to food. Utilisation refers to the ability of individuals to use food effectively for their nutritional needs, and is influenced by factors such as food safety, hygiene, and nutrition education, as well as access to healthcare and sanitation facilities (Alonso et al., 2018). Stability refers to the ability of individuals and households to maintain food security over time, even in the face of shocks such as economic crises, natural disasters, or political instability. It is affected by factors such as social protection policies, savings, and coping mechanisms.

The UN Migration Agency (IOM) defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of: (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is (IOM, 2022). The reasons for migration vary widely and may include economic, social, political, or environmental factors. There are several types of migrants, including economic migrants, who move to seek employment opportunities or to improve their economic status, and refugees, who are forced to flee their home country due to persecution, conflict, or other forms of violence or instability (IOM, 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant populations have faced particular challenges, including restrictions on travel and movement, difficulties in accessing healthcare and social services, and economic hardships due to job loss or reduced income (Che et al., 2020). Migrants living in informal settlements or slums may face additional challenges in accessing basic services such as water and sanitation, which can significantly impact their health and well-being (Chirisa et al., 2020; Matamanda et al., 2022).

Studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of foreign migrant populations in informal settlements, particularly with respect to accessing sufficient and nutritious food (Niles et al., 2020; Smith and Wesselbaum, 2020). For example, a study by Suhardiman et al. (2021) found that foreign migrant workers in Asia faced significant challenges in accessing food during the pandemic, due to job loss and restrictions on movement. Similarly, a study by Chauhan and Singh (2020) found that foreign migrants in India faced food insecurity due to a lack of access to social protection programmes and basic services such as water and sanitation. In addition to these challenges, foreign migrants in informal settlements also faced discrimination and exclusion from local food systems, exacerbating food insecurity. For example, a study by Chakraborty and Bhabha (2021) found that foreign migrants in South Asia faced exclusion from local food

markets due to language barriers and cultural differences. However, some studies have also highlighted the resilience and adaptive strategies of foreign migrants in the face of food insecurity. For example, a study by Payán et al. (2022) found that Latino immigrants in California, USA, relied on informal food networks and social support systems to cope with food insecurity during the pandemic. In addition to the challenges and adaptive strategies identified in the existing research, several factors can influence food security among foreign migrants in informal settlements. These include factors related to the migrants themselves, such as their socioeconomic status, education level, and cultural background, as well as external factors, such as government policies, the availability of social protection programmes, and the functioning of local food systems. For example, a study by Ogundari et al. (2021) found that the food security of foreign migrants in the United States was strongly influenced by their access to social protection programmes such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), as well as their level of education and English proficiency.

The above preliminary research on food security in the context of foreign migrants in informal settlements during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the complex and diverse nature of the issue of migrants and food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is a growing awareness of the challenges faced by this population, there is a need for more comprehensive research to: (1) determine the impacts that bans on associational life during the COVID-19 pandemic have had on the food security of foreign migrants; and (2) identify effective interventions and strategies to address food insecurity and promote the well-being of foreign migrants in informal settlements.

### **Significance of associational life and belonging among migrants in informal settlements**

Associational life refers to forming and participating in social groups and organisations based on shared interests or identities (Bhanye 2023a; Giurca and Metz, 2018). For migrants in informal settlements, associational life can provide a sense of community and belonging, and opportunities for social interaction and networking. These groups can be based on a wide range of factors, including cultural, linguistic, religious, or political affiliations and shared experiences of migration and settlement (Sparrowe et al., 2021). Participation in associational life can have numerous positive impacts on the well-being of migrants in informal settlements. Research has shown that involvement in community groups and organisations can reduce social isolation and loneliness, improve mental health, and increase social support networks (Bhanye, 2023a; Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019). Participating in these groups can also help migrants develop skills and knowledge relevant to their settlement and integration, such as language learning, job skills, and civic engagement (Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019). Associational life is often seen as an important aspect of civil society, providing individuals with opportunities for social engagement, personal growth, and political participation. By organising themselves into associations, migrants can amplify their voices and influence decision-making processes that affect their lives (Kindler et al., 2015). This can include advocating for improved housing, sanitation, healthcare, and education, and addressing issues such as discrimination, violence, and exploitation. Through collective action, migrants can challenge the structural inequalities and power imbalances that underlie the informal settlement system (Kindler et al., 2015).

Belonging in the context of migrants' experience refers to the sense of social, cultural, and psychological attachment that individuals feel toward the new community they have migrated to (Bhanye, 2022; Gilmartin, 2008). It involves feeling accepted, valued, and included in the new society, despite differences in language, culture, and background. Belonging can significantly impact the well-being and social integration of migrants, as it provides a sense of security, identity, and connection to the wider community (Anthias, 2009; Bhanye, 2022). It can be fostered through various social and cultural activities, such as language classes, cultural events, and community service, promoting interaction and social cohesion among migrants and the wider community (Bhanye, 2023c). Migrants in informal settlements often experience a sense of isolation and disconnection from the wider society. One way to address this issue is by promoting associational life and a sense of belonging



among themselves (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021). This paper explores the significance of associational life and belonging among migrants in informal settlements, examining the ways in which bans of such associations during the COVID-19 pandemic affected migrants' food security.

### **Ethnographic fieldwork among Lydiatians**

To comprehensively explore the impacts of mandatory lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic on food security among foreign migrants in informal settlements, this study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach. The qualitative research consisted of 50 in-depth interviews with migrants and an additional 7 key informant interviews. The study participants were selected purposively, encompassing migrants aged 18 and above, both men and women, and individuals from various migrant generations (first, second, third, and fourth). To enrich the understanding of the associational life and its disruptions, key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders, the local Councillor, and civic activists.

The fieldwork was conducted at Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe's Norton peri-urban area, recognised for its substantial population of foreign migrants of Malawian origin. This location was chosen through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling considered the characteristics of the settlement, such as its high proportion of foreign migrants and accessibility. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants through referrals from the initial study subjects.

The research was carried out between January 2020 and November 2021 as part of a broader Doctoral research project examining mobility and sociality among migrants. Leveraging the researcher's privileged position as an insider facilitated a deeper understanding of the associational dynamics of migrants in Lydiate during the pandemic. In-depth interviews were conducted based on participants' willingness and ability to contribute insights into the impacts of COVID-19 on their food security. In addition to interviews, participant observations played a crucial role in gathering data on the effects of bans on associational life. The researcher immersed himself in the settlement, observing daily interactions, social dynamics, and food-related practices. The impact of the pandemic on informal food markets and related activities was also documented through participant observation.

In the course of this research, several COVID-19 measures presented noteworthy challenges that influenced the full-immersion ethnographic approach of the study. Social distancing mandates, restrictions on movement, and health safety concerns posed logistic hurdles to traditional fieldwork methodologies. Consequently, a pivotal decision was made to transition to digital and remote ethnography, leveraging technology to maintain research momentum during a period of stringent lockdowns. The researcher transitioned to remote ethnography at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and strict mandatory lockdowns, starting June 2020. Digital ethnography (also known as "virtual ethnography," "cyber ethnography," "netnography," or "mobile ethnography") is a digital transformation of in-person ethnography and a form of online or remote ethnographic research that leverages the power of technology – gadgets and internet – to help researchers to remotely generate rich, contextual insights into the lived experiences of social groups under study (See Hjorth et al., 2017; Varis 2016). Digital/remote ethnography involved becoming part of the community's WhatsApp group, facilitated by Dhabuka, an active group administrator known to the researcher before the pandemic. The WhatsApp group emerged as a vital coping mechanism during the bans on associational life. In-depth interviews continued through phone calls, supplemented by conversations on the WhatsApp platform.

The switch to digital ethnography presented both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities included broader access to participants through online platforms, increased flexibility in scheduling virtual interviews, and the potential for real-time observations of digital interactions within the community (Bhanye, 2023a). However, challenges were also apparent, encompassing issues of digital literacy, potential biases introduced

by online communication, and the inability to fully replicate the immersive nature of in-person ethnography. Moreover, disparities in internet access among participants introduced concerns about inclusivity (Hjorth et al., 2017; Varis, 2016).

To address these challenges, the researcher established clear communication channels, fostering a sense of trust and openness in virtual interactions. Importantly, recognising the limitations of virtual ethnography, he paid particular attention to acknowledging and managing potential biases introduced by the digital medium. Additionally, regular check-ins and follow-ups were conducted through phone calls and alternative communication channels to ensure that the challenges of the digital format did not compromise the depth of understanding gained through in-person ethnography. The iterative nature of the research process allowed for continuous refinement of remote methodologies to navigate evolving challenges.

To address ethical issues during the study, informed consent was obtained from all study participants, who were also briefed about the research goals, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained throughout the study. The data analysis followed a thematic approach. Interview transcripts and field notes were meticulously reviewed, and themes relevant to the research questions were identified. Through an iterative process of coding and analysis, these themes were refined, resulting in a final set that encapsulates the key findings of the study.

### **Background and context of migrants at Lydiate**

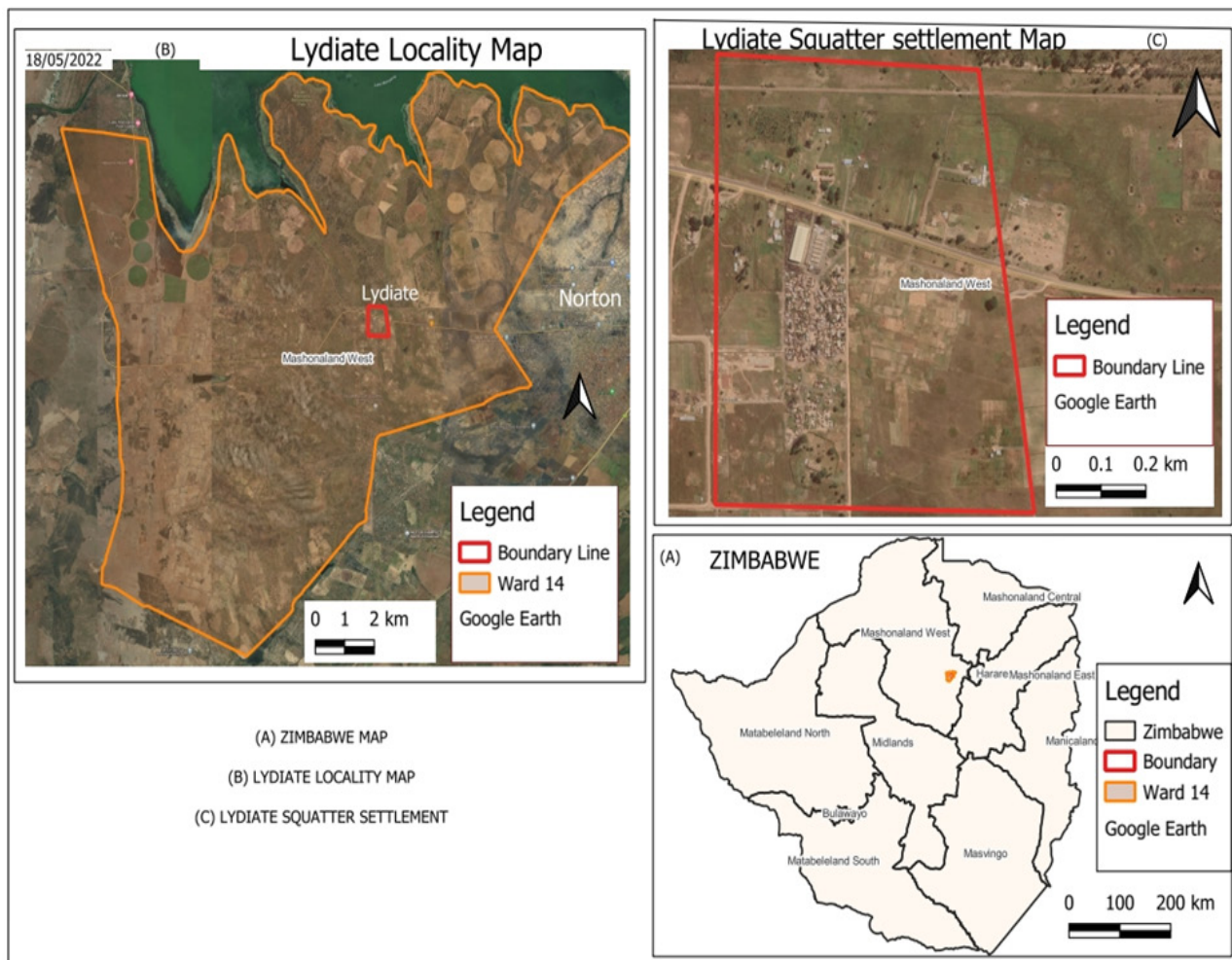
Malawian migrants at Lydiate informal settlement (Lydiatians) have a long migration history linked to colonial policies and practices (Bhanye, 2023c). Beginning in 1895 and up until the 1970s, Malawians migrated to Southern Rhodesia as part of migrant labour pools under the infamous colonial labour migration (Chibaro/Mthandizi) system (Bhanye, 2023c). It was during this period that Nyasaland (now Malawi) acted as a labour reservoir for Zimbabwe and South Africa's colonial capitalist economies, and Malawian migrants were engaged as labourers on colonial white-owned farms and mines (Daimon, 2015). Some of these migrants were settled on Lydiate, a former farm compound. Lydiate squatter settlement is now home to first, second, third and fourth-generation Malawians, who together have become an ethnic enclave and diaspora community in Zimbabwe (Bhanye, 2022). Lydiatians now have internal differences based on the history of settlement. To begin with, there are *vauyi vakare*, long-term migrants who live in the core of the settlement. Then there are *vauyi vazvino*, or recent migrants (Bhanye, 2022), who live on the periphery of the settlement in areas known as *kuma nyusitendi* (now stands). Figure 1 shows the location of the study area, Lydiate.

Lydiate informal settlement falls under Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe, in Ward 14 of Chegutu Rural District Council. The community relies on services from shopping areas like Lucky Store owned by the former Councillor Mr. Musevenzi, Lydiate Store, and Mboma shopping and beer drinking area, as well as Mutipitipi Primary School. The area also lies close to other popular areas like Murombedzi, Darwendale, Mapinga, and Trelawney, among others, where some Lydiatians travel for various livelihood activities.

Life in Lydiate informal settlement is generally difficult. Like other informal settlements in Southern Africa, Lydiate is what Nyamwanza and Dzingirai (2020) term a 'rough neighbourhood'. To begin with, there is an acute scarcity of land for settlement, and this is against a backdrop of the population in the informal settlement having grown to about 1200, with more than 60% of the migrants being youths between the ages of 18 and 35 who now require their own individual pieces of land for settlement. The livelihoods in Lydiate are diverse, with peri-urban petty farming, trading, and casual labour being key. However, as in several other African informal settlements, the general livelihood situation in Lydiate is poor. Most people in Lydiate are also illiterate, making it difficult for them to look for better opportunities, including formal employment elsewhere that pays better wages. Peri-urban petty farming barely provides any resources since Lydiatians were denied land during Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). There is also a tobacco grading plant in the settlement that relies on Lydiatians for labour but generates a trail of sicknesses like Tuberculosis (TB). The plant operates from May to September and, at the height of activity, employs close to 500 migrants.



Figure 1: Location of the study area (Lydiate)



Source: Author

Foreign lands are often rough and uncomfortable for migrants due to the othering between the so-called autochthons (sons of the soil) versus the allogenes or allochthons; and /or the indigenous versus the aliens or strangers (Daimon, 2015). This is the case of Lydiatians, who have often been labelled as aliens, foreigners, and lost ones, along with several other derogatory titles. The migrants are also under constant threats of eviction by local authorities and locals who consider them criminals, outcasts and bandits who flout the law of the land. Most Lydiatians live in inter-generational households crammed into small spaces and buildings, making social distancing and self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic largely impossible because of the overcrowding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, regular handwashing was problematic due to a lack of water or adequate sanitation access. Testing for COVID-19 at the small local clinic was challenging due to a lack of resources and capacity. In short, virus containment measures such as hand washing and self-isolation were less effective and often impossible to practice at Lydiate. Another sad reality is that the number of COVID-19 cases in informal settlements like Lydiate were inevitably underestimated. There are also elderly first-generation Malawians who mostly live in poverty and have high rates of chronic medical conditions, like non-communicable respiratory diseases (asthma, tuberculosis etc.), which placed them at risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.

## Associational life and its significance among Lydiatians

Life among Lydiatians is highly dependent on associations with kin, fictive kin, friends, and neighbours. Beginning with the organisation of the community, Lydiatians belong to kin groups. These kin groups are not locked to specific spaces; it is common for members to be spread across the settlement, depending on land availability. Elders in kinship groups remain important and occasionally meet to deliberate over community matters affecting their members. There is a culture of reciprocity between members; people assist one another with basic needs and will attend one another's funerals and celebrations alike. As a community leader said: 'We are like a big family in this community. We support each other, both in times of need and in times of celebration.'<sup>1</sup> In the literature, kinship has widely been identified as a critical factor in facilitating the integration of migrants and their access to scarce resources (see, for example, Kazlou and Wennberg, 2021). The decades of coexistence among Lydiatians have also strengthened their social ties, which are so important in times of need. This came out clearly in an interview with 67-year-old Dorothy Ngadza, who explained:

*People in this community are now more comfortable with this place than anywhere else because of the strong connection with friends and relatives here. Yes, life can be difficult here and there, but there is no other place where you are better welcome than here. Some of us now have decades staying here, and we have built strong friendships with others here. Some of my friends here have even become like blood relatives. I am also privileged to have four families that I am closely related to here. I have three brothers and a sister who both stay here. We understand each other better and support each other in difficult times.<sup>2</sup>*

I observed that associational life at Lydiate is mediated by the various institutions and networks that have emerged over time in the community. The community, for example, has an established hierarchy of leadership that govern the affairs of the community. There are selected leaders, 'maSabhuku' (village heads), who maintain a register (bhuku) of the settlement. At the micro level, the compound is divided into five units, each represented by a 'Sabhuku', chosen by the community and officially appointed by the powerful chief Chivero. The maSabhuku command respect from the migrants, who regard them as instrumental in facilitating land access. Also active in the compound are Vakuru-vakuru (big men). These include vakuru venzvimbo (the Councillor) representing the state; vakuru vemusangano (the local ZANU PF political party chairperson), and finally, mukuru wevechidiki (the local ZANU PF political party youth chairman). It is common for these leaders to oscillate between Lydiate and the towns of Harare and Norton. These 'big men' have the power to change the politics on the ground, including facilitating access to resources.

Associational life in Lydiate is also strengthened as Lydiatians drink beer together at the nearby beer halls and some sell illicit brews, 'chikokiyana', in the compound. Well-known homes in the community have now become like small beerhalls, which the locals refer to as 'mashabeen'. Lydiatians buy the illicit brews and sit down to drink and chat about various matters in the community.<sup>3</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, these shebeens became centres of activity as people could not visit proper bars which were closed. During funerals, Lydiatians also strongly support one another; they bury their lost ones in song, dance and Nyau cult rituals. It is a norm for every household to give support, materially or in kind, to the deceased's family. This is also the case during celebrations, where community members pool resources and have music and meat as they celebrate.<sup>4</sup> Associational life is also meaningful among the youth who occasionally gather, especially during weekends, to play soccer on the Mutipitipi primary school ground adjacent to the community. During other times, the youths gather to play cards, commonly referred to as 'makasi'. During these times, they bond more and tip one another on potential opportunities for making money in the community and building syndicates for exploring opportunities such as menial jobs, fish mongering, and gold panning outside the community. Thus, Lydiate community is punctuated by a frenzy of mobility and transition characterised by migrants, often young, continually moving in and out of the settlement in response to better opportunities elsewhere (Bhanye et al., 2021).

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Community Leader Matambo at Lydiate Farm, 20 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Dorothy Ngadza at Lydiate Farm, 11 May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mr. Tembo at Lydiate Farm, 26 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mr. Tembo at Lydiate Farm, 23 June 2020.





Several established religions bind the people of Lydiate together, from Christianity to Islam and the enchanting Nyau cult. The Islamic Mosque is located by the roadside, and there are multiple churches of various denominations scattered in and outside the compound. Among the churches that I observed and interacted with in Lydiate were the Gospel Power Ministries, the Marange church in Mutufa and Norton, the Zvakazarurwa, the Apostolic church led by Rairo Tembo (who lives in the compound), the AFM at Mutipitipi Primary school, the Calvary Fellowship Ministries, the Pentecostal Holiness church in Norton, the Ever Journey Apostolic church, the Calvary ministries, the Roman Catholic church, the Mwazha, the Anglican church, the Zvakazarurwa Zvavapostori, and the Seventh Day Adventist church. Religious associations in Lydiate have brought the community together through shared rituals and beliefs. Beyond faith and spiritual guidance, members also give one another moral and tangible support like food and clothing handouts.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is common for members to belong to multiple faiths to maximise the benefits offered by the various religions.

Among the various religions in Lydiate, the Nyau cult seems more outstanding and mysterious. It is customary in Lydiate for the Nyau cult to organise initiation rites for the youth. The enchanting and dramatic Nyau cult has a voice and influence on sociality and associational affairs in the community. Like all other religious leaders, Nyau leadership is respected among Lydiatians; It is presumed to have ritual powers capable of inflicting harm or bringing illness upon insubordinate people who go against its decisions. The popular Nyau ceremonies and dances occur on weekends, usually after church services and funerals.

### Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life, on food security among migrants at Lydiate informal settlement

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the food security of migrants living at Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe. These impacts on food security manifested through loss of income due to job losses, disruptions in food supply chains, limited access to social support networks, limited access to essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes, closure of schools and community centres, increased mental stress and anxiety, exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, limited access to clean water and sanitation, lack of access to healthcare and medication, and poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate ventilation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life, on food security among migrants at Lydiate informal settlement



#### Loss of income due to job losses

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns resulted in job losses and reduced working hours, impacting the income of migrants at Lydiate informal settlement. Lydiatians are often employed in the informal sector, already characterised by low pay, limited job security, and lack of benefits. The pandemic hit the informal sector hard, with many businesses in nearby towns like Norton shutting down and drastically reducing their operations, leading to job losses and reduced working hours. This loss of income severely impacted the food security of Lydiatians, affecting their ability to provide food for their families and generating food insecurity.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs. Zvinyenye at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 27 June 2020

A Lydiatian, whose already low and precarious income was significantly disrupted after losing several jobs on nearby farms, commented:

*I lost my job three months ago at Mboma farm. The operations were affected by Covid-19, and the farm owner decided to stop the chicken project. Now I'm stuck and don't know how to feed my family.<sup>6</sup>*

Figure 3 shows farming activities (livestock and crop production) at nearby farms where Lydiatians used to find employment before the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life.

**Figure 3: Farming activities (livestock and crop production) at nearby farms where Lydiatians often find employment**



Source: Author's fieldwork

In a similar case, another Lydiatian said:

*Our lives have been completely shattered. The lockdowns have halted all the economic activities in this community and the nearby areas where we used to get employment. This has resulted in substantial employment loss among young people like me.<sup>7</sup>*

Figure 4 shows the researcher working on a building project with some migrants from Lydiate informal settlement before the COVID-19 pandemic halted their employment. The building project was for a poultry farmer who owned an agro-residential plot adjacent to Lydiate informal settlement.

**Figure 4: The researcher working on a building project with some migrants from Lydiate informal settlement before the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source: Author's fieldwork

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mr Gabarinocheka at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 27 June 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr Kainos at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 22 June 2021.



nother migrant at Lydiate informal settlement – who like many other Lydiatians survived owing to the informal sector, which was banned during mandatory lockdowns – explained:

*They have banned our livelihoods, and we no longer earn an income. They forget that we have recurrent expenses for food every day; how do they expect us to survive during the pandemic?*<sup>8</sup>

Figure 5 shows Mr Jacob's bunches of bananas which he used to sell as his main livelihood before the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 5: Mr Jacob's bunches of bananas which he used to sell as his main livelihood before the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source: Author's fieldwork

In the final case, a migrant who was forced to skip meals together with his family after he lost his job in the nearby town during the COVID-19 pandemic explained:

*Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I used to work in the nearby Norton town. The loss of income because of job losses directly affected my ability to purchase enough food for my family. This led to severe food insecurity throughout the pandemic. We were forced to skip meals, eat less nutritious food, and rely on cheap food with little nutritional value.*<sup>9</sup>

Food insecurity arises when people do not have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life (Hines et al., 2021). Food insecurity can result in undernutrition or malnutrition, leading to poor health outcomes, including stunted growth, micronutrient deficiencies, and impaired cognitive development (Hines et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively affected tobacco grading work at Lydiate. For several decades, Lydiatians have been bound by this common practice of providing labour in the local tobacco grading shade that belongs to a white man, who generously allocated some of the Lydiatians' spaces for settlement. The tobacco grading shade (Figure 6) normally has more than 500 people working simultaneously; however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shade could only accommodate a small group at a time, working on a shift basis. While the white owner allocated COVID-19 PEP (face masks, sanitisers) to the workers, tobacco grading exposed them to diseases like tuberculosis, which made them more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. However, Lydiatians who relied on the daily earnings from labour in the tobacco grading plant had no option but to take risks to feed their families during the pandemic.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr Jacob at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 20 June 2021

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr Perer at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 14 June 2021

Figure 6: Empty Tobacco grading shade at Lydiate during the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Author's fieldwork

## Disruptions in food supply chains

Lockdowns and restrictions on movement to curb the spread of the virus led to disruptions in the production, processing, and distribution of food items, resulting in shortages and price hikes. This negatively affected migrants at Lydiate informal settlement. The disruptions in food supplies were caused by a combination of factors, including the closure of borders, reduced workforce due to illness and restrictions on movement, and disruptions in transportation and logistics. The shortages and price hikes made it difficult for migrants at Lydiate informal settlement to access nutritious food, thus increasing the prevalence of malnutrition and other health problems. The disruptions in food supply chains also impacted the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables, which are essential for a healthy diet. One of the community leaders at Lydiate informal settlement commented:

*When the government imposed the first lockdown, panic buying and hoarding made it difficult for vulnerable communities like Lydiate to access food. The increased food prices during the pandemic also made it difficult for us to afford nutritious food. People here work in low-paying jobs and do not have access to social protection programmes, making it difficult for them to cope with price hikes. As a result, they are forced to reduce the quantity and quality of food they consume, leading to malnutrition and other health problems.<sup>10</sup>*

The pandemic and associated lockdowns also resulted in limited access to transportation to move from Lydiate informal settlement to other places, making it difficult for Lydiate residents to access food markets, grocery stores, and other food sources. This was particularly challenging for the elderly, often first-generation migrants, the disabled, and the infirm and invalids.

## Limited access to social support networks

Limited access to social support networks significantly compounded the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on food security among Lydiate residents. These support networks, which often include friends, family, and community organisations, provide critical support and resources during times of food insecurity. However, lockdown restrictions on gatherings and mobility disrupted these networks, making it harder for migrants at Lydiate to obtain the support and resources they needed to access adequate and nutritious food. Social support networks can be particularly crucial for foreign migrants living in informal settlements, as they may face discrimination and exclusion from formal support systems (Bhanye, 2023d). These networks can provide essential assistance in navigating bureaucratic processes, accessing health care and social services, and finding work and food sources. They can also provide emotional support, which is critical for maintaining

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mr Mrs Zvinenyene at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 20 June 2021



mental health and well-being during times of crisis. At Lydiate informal settlement, the pandemic drastically reduced access to social and cultural practices like religious gatherings and the Nyau cult practices that are very important for maintaining a sense of community and identity among Lydiatians. Figure 7 shows Nyau Cult gatherings in Lydiate before the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 7: Nyau Cult gatherings in Lydiate before the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source: Author's fieldwork

Meetings among members of other religious groups (Muslims and Christians) were also affected in Lydiate (Bhanye, 2023c). Because of the restrictions on gatherings, there were no longer 'big Sundays'. In one instance, and at the height of COVID-19 strict lockdowns, members of the Apostolic church were beaten up by the police and soldiers. They had defied COVID-19 lockdown regulations banning church gatherings and had engaged in a public church programme close to the railway adjacent to Lydiate community. Besides the beatings, the soldiers and police forced the church members to drink beer, which is against their religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup> This incident was reported on all social media platforms in Zimbabwe, thus reinforcing migrants' bad reputation as 'deviants', 'law breakers', and 'perpetual outcasts'.

In the face of these punishments, many churches were closed, greatly affecting numerous people who depended on these gatherings for emotional, spiritual, and social support. The modern Pentecostal churchgoers, for example, believe in a spirit-filled and empowered life through prosperity gospel and demonstrations of power through divine healing and prophecy. For the Pentecostal churchgoers in Lydiate, the ban on associational life meant the loss of hope for tomorrow and exposure to demons and diseases. During the study, I encountered some Christians who had become sickly and despondent because they could not physically attend church on Sundays after the pandemic hit. One female migrant commented:

*We depend on the church for our emotional and social life. The pandemic did not only disrupt our livelihoods; it also cost our spiritual life. When we meet at church gatherings physically, we are given hope with the word of God; some are healed, while others are protected from potential future calamities by the word of prophecy.<sup>12</sup>*

Because of the pandemic, stigma and discrimination against households affected by COVID-19 increased in the community. Traditional support networks were disrupted as some community members were no longer entertaining visitors. As a respondent in Lydiate said:

*People here are no longer allowing visitors; this is a massive blow because, as a community, we are used to supporting each other. Some people do not have food to sustain themselves throughout the lockdown but cannot approach other households because they fear the virus.<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mr. Kambeva at Lydiate Informal Settlement, 20 June 2020

<sup>12</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Mrs Gidhiza, 10 October 2021

<sup>13</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Mrs Mzauzi, 13 October 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns made it challenging for migrants to access these support networks. They could not physically meet with their support system due to restrictions on gatherings and mobility. Additionally, the economic impact of the pandemic made it difficult for many individuals in Lydiate community to provide financial support to their friends and family members in need, which further strained social support networks. To address this issue, governments, community organisations, and individuals must work together to find innovative ways to maintain social support networks during times of crisis. This could include promoting online communication platforms or providing financial assistance to individuals unable to support their family or friends in person. Additionally, community organisations and local governments can work to provide additional support to foreign migrants who may be more isolated or excluded from formal support systems.

### **Limited access to essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes**

Another significant impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on the food security of migrants in informal settlements was the limited access to essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes. Migrants living in informal settlements often face multiple barriers that limit their access to essential services, including discrimination, exclusion, and lack of documentation (X). At Lydiate informal settlement, these barriers were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it even more challenging for migrants to access these services. Explaining the increased discrimination and exclusion triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, a migrant explained:

*Discrimination and exclusion have become widespread issues ever since the pandemic started. We are perceived as carriers of the virus and are stigmatised and discriminated against by the wider society. This discrimination and exclusion make accessing essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes, difficult.<sup>14</sup>*

### **Closure of schools and community centres**

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns also led to the closure of schools and community centres, disrupting feeding programmes and other nutrition interventions. Schools and community centres often provide essential nutrition interventions, such as school feeding programmes, food distribution, and nutrition education, to vulnerable populations, including migrants living in informal settlements like Lydiate. At Lydiate, the closure of schools and community centres due to the pandemic disrupted these critical nutrition interventions, leaving many migrants, especially school-going children, without access to nutritious food. School feeding programmes at nearby schools like Mtipitipi primary school, which provide free or subsidised meals to students, were disrupted, depriving many children of their only daily meal. This severely impacted the food security and nutritional status of migrant children at Lydiate informal settlement. There was also reduced access to food aid and other forms of assistance typically distributed by community organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), which were forced to suspend operations due to lockdown restrictions. Community centres also play an essential role in providing migrants at Lydiate with nutrition interventions such as food distribution, nutrition education, and cooking classes. The closure of these centres due to the pandemic disrupted these essential interventions, leaving many migrants without access to nutritious food and information about healthy eating habits. The closure of schools and community centres severely impacted migrant women in particular, as they often rely on these institutions for their children's nutrition and education. This severely impacted the food security and nutritional status of migrant families at Lydiate.

### **Increased mental stress and anxiety**

The study also revealed increased mental stress and anxiety among migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. The pandemic disrupted daily life, leading to job losses, financial insecurity, and

<sup>14</sup>WhatsApp Interview with Dorothy, 18 October 2021



social isolation, which all contributed to increased levels of stress and anxiety among Lydiatians. Furthermore, Lydiatians faced additional stressors and challenges due to their living conditions, including inadequate housing, lack of access to basic services, and social exclusion, which exacerbated mental stress and anxiety levels. This, in turn, severely impacted food security and nutritional status because of a range of unhealthy eating habits, including overeating or under-eating. Overeating often occurs as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety, leading to weight gain and obesity. On the other hand, under-eating can occur due to a lack of appetite or financial constraints, leading to malnutrition and other health problems. Moreover, the impact of mental stress and anxiety on the body's ability to absorb nutrients is well documented. Stress and anxiety can lead to decreased production of digestive enzymes, resulting in poor digestion and nutrient absorption (Da Silva et al., 2020). Additionally, stress and anxiety can lead to changes in the gut microbiome, which can further impact the body's ability to absorb nutrients (Da Silva et al., 2020).

### **Exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities**

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, particularly for marginalised communities, including migrants living in informal settlements. These communities, like Lydiate, were already vulnerable due to poverty, lack of access to basic services, discrimination, and exclusion from social protection. The pandemic worsened their situation, particularly in terms of food security. Many Lydiatians worked in the informal sector, such as domestic work, street vending, or casual labour, which lacked job security, social protections, and benefits. With the onset of the pandemic, many of these workers lost their jobs or had their working hours reduced, leading to loss of income and increased financial insecurity. This, in turn, impacted their ability to access nutritious food, further exacerbating food insecurity and malnutrition. Amongst Lydiatians, the impacts were disproportionate on women and children, who bear the brunt of food insecurity and other adverse impacts associated with lockdowns and associated restrictions on associational life.

### **Limited access to clean water and sanitation**

Migrants living in informal settlements often lack access to basic services, including clean water and sanitation facilities (Bhanye, 2023c; Matamanda, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem, making it even more challenging for vulnerable communities like Lydiate to maintain their health and well-being. During the study, respondents revealed that limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities increased the risk of infections, including diarrheal diseases, leading to malnutrition, particularly in children. Figure 8 shows two small Blair toilets servicing the entire Lydiate community.

**Figure 8: Small Blair toilets servicing the entire Lydiate community**



Source: Author's fieldwork

Poor hygiene practices and inadequate sanitation facilities in the community also increased the risk of infectious

diseases, including COVID-19, which could further exacerbate food insecurity. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns increased the demand for water and sanitation facilities, which were already scarce in the community. This resulted in overcrowding and longer waiting times for access to these essential services, further exacerbating the risks of infections and malnutrition. The lack of clean water and sanitation facilities also impacted food security by limiting the ability of households to prepare and store nutritious food. The lack of clean water can for example make it difficult to wash vegetables and fruits, leading to the risk of contamination and illness. Inadequate sanitation facilities also made it challenging to store food safely, leading to food waste and reduced access to nutritious food.

### **Lack of access to healthcare and medication**

Migrants living in informal settlements often lack access to basic healthcare services and medication, which can significantly impact their health and nutritional status (Corburn et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue at Lydiate informal settlement, making it even more challenging for migrants to access essential healthcare services. A community leader at Lydiate informal settlement explained:

*The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the lack of access to healthcare services and medication for our people here. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement have also made it difficult for our people to access healthcare services in nearby towns. Further, the fear of infection has led many to avoid seeking care.<sup>15</sup>*

The lack of access to healthcare services and medication can result in untreated health issues, including chronic illnesses, infectious diseases, and mental health conditions. These health issues can impact the nutritional status of individuals, leading to malnutrition and other related health problems. For example, untreated chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease common among Lydiate residents affect the body's ability to absorb nutrients, leading to malnutrition. Similarly, infectious diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV, common in informal settlements like Lydiate, can impact the body's immune system and nutritional status. Moreover, mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression can also impact nutritional status. Individuals experiencing mental health issues may lose their appetite or engage in unhealthy eating habits, leading to malnutrition or overnutrition.

### **Poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate ventilation**

Poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate ventilation, are significant challenges faced by migrants living in informal settlements, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcrowding and inadequate ventilation at Lydiate informal settlement increased the risk of infections and impacted the health and well-being of migrants, including their food security. Overcrowding is a significant problem at Lydiate informal settlement, where multiple households often share a single room or living space. This increased the risk of infectious diseases such as COVID-19, as the virus could easily spread in crowded living conditions. Figure 9 shows shacks and cramped living conditions at Lydiate informal settlement

**Figure 9: Shacks and cramped living conditions at Lydiate informal settlement**



Source: Author's fieldwork

<sup>15</sup>WhatsApp Interview with Mr Bhinya, 06 October 2021





Additionally, the lack of privacy and personal space in overcrowded living conditions among Lydiatians lead to stress, anxiety, and mental health issues, which impact appetite and nutritional status. Inadequate ventilation is also a common problem in informal settlements like Lydiate, where many houses lack windows or proper ventilation systems. Poor ventilation increases the risk of respiratory infections, including COVID-19, as it can cause the build-up of airborne pollutants and pathogens. Moreover, inadequate ventilation can impact individuals' overall health and well-being, leading to headaches, fatigue, and other health problems that can impact their ability to access and consume nutritious food. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of adequate housing conditions for promoting public health and food security. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement made it difficult for individuals living in overcrowded or poorly ventilated housing conditions to maintain social distancing and to take other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, the economic impact of the pandemic made it challenging for migrants to improve their housing conditions or relocate to safer environments.

Overall, the presented impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life had on food security among migrants at Lydiate informal settlement are not isolated challenges; rather, they form an interconnected web, where the consequences of one aspect reverberate through various dimensions of individuals' lives. Understanding these interrelationships is crucial for developing effective interventions that address complex challenges faced by migrant communities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated disruptions.

## **Conclusion and way forward**

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the food security of vulnerable populations, including foreign migrants living in informal settlements. Bans on associational life due to mandatory lockdowns disrupted food supply chains and livelihoods, leading to food insecurity among these populations. This paper explored the impacts of such bans on associational life on the food security among Malawian migrants at Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts on food security manifested through loss of income due to job losses, disruptions in food supply chains, limited access to social support networks, limited access to essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes, closure of schools and community centres, increased mental stress and anxiety, exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, limited access to clean water and sanitation, lack of access to healthcare and medication, and poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate ventilation.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and of associated bans on associational life were intricately interconnected, creating a complex web of challenges and profoundly affecting the food security of migrants at Lydiate informal settlement. The loss of income, primarily stemming from job losses triggered by the pandemic, acted as a linchpin in this interlinked scenario. As financial resources dwindled, households found themselves grappling with several challenges, including disruptions in food supply chains and limited access to social support networks which were vital for economic sustenance and mutual aid. Compounding the issue, the closure of schools and community centres disrupted not only education but also communal spaces that often served as hubs for resource-sharing and support. The consequences of this disruption were far-reaching, limiting access to essential services, including food aid and social protection programmes that were crucial lifelines for vulnerable populations. As these critical support mechanisms faltered, the vulnerability of households increased, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities within the settlement.

The impacts also extended beyond economic and social spheres to impact mental health, as the pandemic-induced stress and anxiety took a toll on migrants' well-being. This psychological strain further intensified the challenges of maintaining adequate food security, creating a cyclical relationship between mental health and food access. Moreover, the interconnected nature of these impacts extended to basic living conditions. Limited access to clean water and sanitation compounded health risks, especially considering the importance of hygiene in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Simultaneously, the lack of access to healthcare and

medication heightened health vulnerabilities, creating a reinforcing loop wherein compromised health further undermined the ability to maintain food security. Housing conditions played a pivotal role in this interlinked narrative as well. Overcrowded and inadequately ventilated living spaces became breeding grounds for health concerns, including the potential for increased transmission of infectious diseases. Poor housing conditions not only directly impacted the health of migrants but also indirectly influenced their ability to secure and store food adequately.

The findings of the study reveal not only the direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated bans on associational life, but also the compounding effect of pre-existing vulnerabilities and marginalisation, significantly exacerbating food insecurity among foreign migrants in informal settlements. Legal or citizenship status of migrants emerged as a critical factor, shaping the extent to which migrants could access essential services and support during the pandemic. Those with precarious legal standing faced higher barriers, limiting their eligibility for social safety nets and exacerbating their susceptibility to food insecurity. Furthermore, the lack of access to robust social safety nets became glaringly apparent, particularly for migrants already on the fringes of formal support systems. The study identified a stark disconnect between the needs of migrants and the available social protection mechanisms, leaving many without adequate assistance during the challenging times brought about by the pandemic. Limited resources further compounded these challenges, with financial constraints restricting migrants' ability to withstand the economic shocks induced by the pandemic and bans on associational life.

Beyond the immediate impacts of COVID-19, these pre-existing vulnerabilities demonstrate the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of migrants in informal settlements. The intersection of legal status, social safety nets, and resource constraints forms a complex array of challenges, significantly influencing food security outcomes during times of crisis. Recognising and addressing these foundational vulnerabilities is imperative for the development of targeted and effective interventions aimed at mitigating food insecurity among foreign migrants in informal settlements, not only during the pandemic but also in the broader context of their lived experiences.

The study's findings also highlight various factors contributing to the vulnerability of foreign migrants in informal settlements, including their legal status, lack of access to social safety nets, and limited resources. The study demonstrates the crucial role of social networks and informal associations in supporting food security among these populations. Bans on associational life disrupted these networks, exacerbating the challenges faced by foreign migrants in informal settlements during the pandemic. Overall, the paper highlights the importance of considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations such as foreign migrants in informal settlements, in efforts to address food insecurity. It also highlights the need for more research and policy attention to the unique challenges these populations face during the pandemic and beyond. Ultimately, the findings of this study can inform policies aimed at improving the food security and well-being of foreign migrants in informal settlements and contribute to broader discussions on the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic, food security, and migration.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the broader conversation on the consequences of bans on associational life and belonging among migrants in informal settlements. The restriction of these vital community-building activities amplifies the vulnerabilities faced by migrants, leading to a cascade of challenges that extend beyond immediate concerns to impact food security, mental health, and overall well-being. The paper emphasises the pivotal role that associational life plays in the lives of migrants, providing a sense of community, shared identity, and mutual support.

Crucially, this paper reveals the need for context-specific policies that recognise the importance of communal ties and shared experiences among migrants. Banning associational life inadvertently disrupts not only the social fabric of these communities but also their ability to access crucial resources and support networks, thus exacerbating existing inequalities.



Understanding the impacts of bans on associational life and belonging among migrants necessitates a thoughtful approach to policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners must consider the interconnectedness of social, economic, and psychological dimensions in the lives of migrants. Investments in programmes that facilitate cultural events and community engagement become not only avenues for integration but also essential components in mitigating the negative consequences of imposed restrictions. Thus, the study calls for a re-evaluation of policies that may unintentionally hinder the resilience of migrant communities. Fostering an inclusive environment that encourages associational life and a sense of belonging is crucial for the well-being and food security of migrants. By recognising the impacts of bans on these fundamental aspects of community life, policymakers can work towards creating environments that empower migrants in informal settlements, promoting not only their survival during crises but also their long-term integration and thriving.

The paper suggests that future research should examine how migrants restructure their associational life or negotiate the bans on it that undermine their livelihoods and usual ways of belonging. Preliminary findings from Lydiate, presented for example in Bhanye (2023a), “Nimble Sociality and Belonging”: an Ethnography of Migrants’ Responses to Bans on Associational Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic, revealed that WhatsApp groups became significant, eventually serving as a new form of associational life among the migrants. Lydiatians created a vibrant virtual WhatsApp group, ‘Lydiate Community Updates’ for easier communication, job updates and support for each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lydiatians also relocated their religious places of worship from public or open spaces to more secretive places after bans on associational life, while others turned to drinking their illicit brew within the perimeters of their community, out of sight of monitoring authorities. Lydiatians also made use of the ‘architecture of invisibility’, a community barricade, to hide group activities in the community from the public and continue their everyday associational lives even during Covid-19. In short, it seems that migrants find ‘informal or nimble ways of belonging’ to continue with their lives even after bans on associational life in the community and beyond.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations (Table 1) can address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life on the food security of migrants living in informal settlements.

**Table 1: Recommendations to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and bans on associational life on the food security of migrants living in informal settlements**

Recommendation	Explanation
Provide targeted financial support	Governments and aid agencies should provide targeted financial support to vulnerable populations, including foreign migrants living in informal settlements, to help them cope with the economic impacts of the pandemic. This support could include cash transfers, food vouchers, or other forms of social protection.
Improve access to basic services	Efforts should be made to improve access to basic services such as healthcare and sanitation, which are critical to promoting food security and reducing the vulnerability of these populations. This could include providing free or subsidised healthcare services to vulnerable populations, improving access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and promoting hygiene practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
Support informal food markets and networks	Informal food markets and networks play a crucial role in supporting the food security of foreign migrants living in informal settlements. Governments and aid agencies should support these networks by providing infrastructure, training, and technical assistance to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness. This could include providing support for cold storage facilities, transport infrastructure, and training on food safety and hygiene.
Develop community-based initiatives	Community-based initiatives can play a critical role in promoting food security and resilience among foreign migrants living in informal settlements. Governments and aid agencies should support the development of community-based initiatives, such as community gardens and urban agriculture, to promote food production and distribution. This could involve providing training, technical assistance, and other forms of support to community-based organisations and groups.

Strengthen social protection systems	Governments and aid agencies should strengthen social protection systems to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, including foreign migrants living in informal settlements. This could involve expanding social protection programmes such as cash transfers, food assistance, and other forms of support to reach more vulnerable populations.
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