

The Effects of Capitalism on Migration Dynamics: Perspectives of Congolese Migrants in Durban, South Africa

Yvonne Kabongo*

Abstract

Capitalism remains the prevailing economic system in most contemporary societies. This article examines the effects of capitalism on migration dynamics, focusing on the perspectives of Congolese migrants residing in Durban, South Africa. By analysing the economic factors that drive migration, such as global inequality, the pursuit of better economic opportunities, and labour exploitation, this study illuminates how capitalist systems shape migrants' experiences. Using qualitative methods, including interviews and life histories, the article explores how neoliberal policies, market forces, and competition for resources influence not only the motivations behind migration but also the challenges of integration migrants face in host societies. It further delves into issues related to employment, working conditions, and social exclusion while highlighting the strategies of resilience and survival developed by migrant communities. Based on the results of this study, we argue that capitalism not only drives migration from the Global South but also exacerbates socio-economic marginalization and limits integration for migrants within host societies like South Africa.

Keywords: Capitalism, Migration, Neoliberalism, Labour exploitation, Congolese migrants, Durban.

1 Introduction

Migration patterns have increasingly been shaped by the pressures and structures of global capitalism. While many studies focus on political instability or security concerns as causes of migration, there is a growing recognition that economic systems, particularly capitalism, play a pivotal role in motivating and shaping migration flows. In the context of African migration, individuals often leave their home countries not only due to political unrest but also due to limited access to economic opportunities, social welfare, and sustainable livelihoods. These limitations are, in many cases, exacerbated by the inequalities created by the global capitalist system (Sassen, 2014)

This paper examines how capitalism impacts the migration experiences of Congolese migrants in Durban, South Africa. It does so by exploring both the push factors in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the pull and integration challenges in the host country. Although capitalism is credited with facilitating global economic growth, it also reinforces inequality, labour exploitation, and social exclusion that disproportionately affect migrants from the Global South.

1.1 Central argument

We argue that global capitalism creates conditions that compel Congolese individuals to migrate while simultaneously contributing to their socio-economic marginalization in the host country. This study contends that capitalism, as a structural force, shapes not only the decision to migrate but also the lived experiences of migrants through mechanisms of labour commodification, restricted social access, and systemic inequality.

*School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal; Email: yvonnekabongo2@gmail.com

1.2 *Research question*

How does capitalism influence the migration decisions and socio-economic experiences of Congolese migrants residing in Durban, South Africa?

1.3 *Gap in the literature*

While prior research has explored migration drivers and integration issues, few studies specifically examine capitalism as a central force influencing both the motivation to migrate and post-migration experiences. This study fills that gap by linking neoliberal economic structures to both mobility and marginalization.

1.4 *Structure of the paper*

The article begins by discussing capitalism's influence on global inequality and its role in driving migration. It then addresses how capitalist systems structure migrant experiences in host societies. Subsequent sections explore economic inequalities, the role of state policy, and the challenges of social integration. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of capitalism for migration policy and migrant well-being.

One of the core critiques of capitalism is its tendency to create vast economic inequalities. Rather than legally disenfranchising individuals, capitalism perpetuates inequality by concentrating financial and human capital among those who already possess them. Wealthier individuals and corporations have greater opportunities to invest and accumulate more wealth, while those with fewer resources struggle to save or invest as their income is primarily consumed by basic living expenses. This cycle reinforces economic disparities, making upward mobility challenging for many (Moore, 2015).

Another key factor contributing to inequality under capitalism is the uneven distribution of human capital. This refers to economically valuable knowledge and skills, including entrepreneurial abilities, that allow individuals to improve their financial standing. Those with access to quality education and professional networks are more likely to gain wealth, while those without such advantages remain at a disadvantage. Furthermore, human capital is self-reinforcing: individuals who acquire skills and experience through business or specialized professions continue to build their expertise, whereas those with limited access to such opportunities struggle to break the cycle of poverty. This aspect of capitalism is often framed within discussions of meritocracy, where success is attributed to individual ability and effort, even though systemic barriers can limit opportunities for many.

While capitalism itself does not directly prevent individuals from achieving economic success, systemic inequalities and state policies can create additional barriers for certain groups. Migrants in South Africa, for example, often face systematic restrictions that hinder their economic participation. These barriers arise not from capitalism, but from government policies that deviate from free-market principles by imposing restrictions on employment and business opportunities for foreign nationals. As a result, migrants often experience social and economic exclusion, limiting their ability to accumulate wealth and integrate into the host society.

1.5 *Capitalism and global migration*

At its core, capitalism is a system based on market competition, private ownership, and the pursuit of profit. While capitalism has spurred economic growth globally, it has also exacerbated inequality, particularly in developing regions such as Africa. The economic disparity between wealthy and developing countries creates migration push factors. Individuals from countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who suffer from limited employment opportunities, poor economic infrastructure, and political instability, are drawn to more industrialized countries like South Africa.

Studies indicate that neoliberal economic reforms, such as those supported by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have often deepened socio-economic inequality in African countries. Economic liberalization policies typically prioritize debt repayment, privatization, and market deregulation, leading to reduced government spending on essential public services like education, healthcare, and social welfare (Bond, 2014). As governments cut social programs to comply with structural adjustment policies, vulnerable populations are left without safety nets, exacerbating poverty and economic instability. This misallocation of resources, often channelled toward debt servicing rather than domestic development, further weakens local economies. Under such conditions, people in impoverished countries like the DRC are compelled to migrate in search of better economic opportunities and social stability. Migration, then, becomes not just a personal choice but a survival strategy shaped by global capitalist forces (Adepoju, 2010).

1.6 *Economic inequality and migration*

For Congolese migrants, the journey to South Africa reflects not only a search for better livelihoods but also an escape from systemic inequalities that persist under global capitalism. While capitalism has been credited with generating economic growth and creating job opportunities, its benefits have not been equitably distributed. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country rich in natural resources, global capitalism has facilitated extensive mineral extraction by multinational corporations, leading to immense profits for foreign investors while local populations remain in poverty (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). This contradiction highlights how capitalism can generate wealth while simultaneously deepening economic disparities, particularly in regions where regulatory frameworks are weak and governance structures fail to ensure equitable distribution.

For many Congolese migrants, South Africa appears more integrated into the global capitalist system, offering greater job opportunities and a higher standard of living than the DRC. However, access to these opportunities remains limited due to structural barriers. Capitalist labour markets in South Africa absorb migrant labour but often confine migrants to low-paying, insecure jobs with little protection or labour rights (Peberdy, 2016). While capitalism incentivizes businesses and governments to invest in skills development to enhance productivity, migrants frequently struggle to access formal employment due to factors beyond purely economic forces, such as restrictive immigration policies and bureaucratic hurdles. These constraints, imposed through government intervention rather than capitalism itself, prevent migrants from competing on an equal footing in the labour market.

Additionally, the competition for scarce resources, such as jobs and housing, fuels social tensions between migrants and local populations. In capitalist economies, an oversupply of unskilled labour can drive down wages, particularly for the working poor. However, it is important to differentiate between economic forces inherent to capitalism and exclusionary policies that suppress free-market competition. For instance, if migrants are unable to secure formal employment due to temporary work permits or legal restrictions, the issue stems from state-imposed barriers rather than market-driven competition. Recognizing these distinctions is crucial in analysing how capitalism shapes migration dynamics and the lived experiences of Congolese migrants in Durban.

1.7 *The role of capitalism in shaping migration policies*

The capitalist system not only affects the economic conditions of migrants but also plays a crucial role in shaping the migration policies of host countries. In South Africa, for example, economic considerations significantly influence migration policy. While migrant labour contributes to key industries such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work, there is also resistance to migration due to concerns about unemployment and social cohesion (Crush & Tawodzera, 2014). The country benefits from the immigration of highly skilled entrepreneurs and workers, while the influx of low-skilled labour can contribute to wage competition in lower-income jobs and increase pressure on welfare and healthcare systems. Countries with structured

immigration systems, such as Canada and Australia, design their migration policies to attract skilled labour while regulating lower-skilled migration to balance economic needs with social stability.

This tension between employers' demand for affordable labour and the broader population's desire to protect local jobs is a hallmark of capitalist economies. In response, South African migration policies have become increasingly restrictive, aiming to control the influx of migrants while still ensuring the availability of low-wage labour. However, restrictive immigration policies often have unintended consequences. By limiting legal avenues for migration, they push many migrants into informal employment or undocumented status, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Rather than serving the interests of employers who rely on migrant labour, these restrictive policies are often driven by political pressures, including the need to protect local employment and appease anti-immigrant sentiments. In contrast, a more open migration policy aligned with pure capitalist logic would prioritize market demand, ensuring that employers have access to the labour they need, regardless of skill level.

1.8 The intersection of capitalism and social integration

For Congolese migrants, the capitalist economic system not only shapes their employment prospects but also affects their integration into South African society. Under capitalism, essential services such as housing, healthcare, and education are often commodified, meaning access is determined by financial capacity rather than need. While this system affects both locals and migrants, the latter face additional barriers due to their precarious legal and economic status. Unlike locals, migrants may lack access to government subsidies or social welfare programs, making it even harder to afford these services. Additionally, government policies aimed at protecting local workers and industries can create structural disadvantages for migrants, reinforcing economic inequality rather than alleviating it.

The neoliberal economic model that has influenced South African policies since the end of apartheid has led to the privatization of key services, such as electricity (Eskom's restructuring), water management (municipal outsourcing), and parts of the healthcare system (private hospitals and insurance schemes) (Bond, 2005). This shift has disproportionately impacted economically disadvantaged groups, including migrants, who often struggle to secure stable employment and wages high enough to afford these privatized services. Moreover, capitalism fosters a highly competitive environment that can weaken social cohesion. While economic insecurity affects both locals and migrants, migrants are often scapegoated as economic threats, exacerbating xenophobic tensions. However, it is important to note that the primary division created by capitalist competition is not necessarily between migrants and locals but between those who succeed within the system and those who do not. Capitalism, in its purest form, prioritizes economic productivity over national identity, meaning that both locals and migrants can contribute effectively to the market benefit, while those who struggle are left behind (Crush, 2000). Thus, rather than merely reinforcing divisions between migrants and locals, capitalism intensifies broader economic disparities, fostering resentment toward those perceived as successful, regardless of their origin.

1.9 Aims of the study

This study aims to critically examine the effects of capitalism on migration dynamics, specifically focusing on how capitalist economic systems influence the migration decisions of Congolese migrants residing in Durban, South Africa. It will explore how factors such as economic opportunities, inequality, and precariousness in their country of origin contribute to migration patterns. Additionally, the study will investigate the socio-economic conditions faced by Congolese migrants in Durban, examining their perceptions and lived experiences of capitalism within the host country, particularly concerning employment, housing, and access to social services. The study will also identify and analyse the economic inequalities and forms of exploitation or marginalization that Congolese migrants encounter in a capitalist economy within the host country and assess how these challenges affect their social integration and overall well-being.

2 Method

This research employs qualitative methods to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives and experiences of Congolese migrants regarding capitalism's influence on their migration and resettlement in Durban. Qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring subjective experiences. They allow for a nuanced analysis of how Congolese migrants interpret economic conditions in both their country of origin and their host city. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the study investigates participants' perceptions of economic disparities, challenges in finding work, and their strategies for adapting to the capitalist economic structures in Durban. This approach emphasizes participants' narratives and perceptions of economic challenges, reflecting Liamputtong's (2020) emphasis on capturing the lived experiences that quantitative methods may overlook.

The study's sample includes a cross-section of adult Congolese migrants currently residing in Durban, selected to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. To enhance the study's depth and reliability, the sample was expanded to include 15 individuals aged between 25 and 60, ensuring a broader representation of economic circumstances and lived experiences. The participants include both men and women, with a mix of singles, married, and parents, reflecting the varied household structures within the migrant community.

Given the study's focus on economic impact, participants were purposefully selected based on their occupational backgrounds, ranging from formal employment to informal economic activities, as well as their involvement in community associations that support migrants. The study employed a snowball sampling method to facilitate access to individuals who could provide rich, diverse perspectives on capitalism's effects. Participants were primarily recruited through community organizations and churches that serve the Congolese migrant population in Durban, such as Faith Ministries and Saint Peter Catholic Church. To further strengthen the study's validity, recruitment also extended to migrant business networks and self-help groups, capturing a wider economic spectrum. The voluntary nature of participation ensured that those most willing to share their experiences were included, and the sample was balanced to encompass different economic realities among Congolese migrants in Durban.

3 Results

3.1 *The impacts of capitalism on migrants*

Capitalism, as a socio-economic system, prioritizes profit maximization and market-driven growth, which can exacerbate inequalities by marginalizing individuals who lack the necessary social, financial, and human capital to succeed as entrepreneurs or productive workers. Rather than targeting specific groups, capitalism functions through market mechanisms that assess individuals based on their economic value, independent of their group membership (Harvey, 2005). However, in practice, the interplay of capitalism with politics and societal attitudes can result in indirect forms of discrimination that disproportionately impact certain populations, including migrants.

For migrants, particularly those from low-income backgrounds or countries with limited economic opportunities, capitalist structures can contribute to labour exploitation, marginalization, and social exclusion in both their home and host countries. In home countries, capitalist-driven economic disparities and structural adjustments often contribute to unemployment and economic instability, pushing individuals to seek opportunities abroad (Sassen, 2014). In host countries, capitalist economies frequently rely on migrant labour to fill low-wage, precarious jobs that lack security, benefits and adequate protections, heightening their vulnerability. These dynamics fuel job competition and wage suppression, hurting both migrants and low-income native workers.

Additionally, capitalist policies in host countries often prioritize corporate interests, leading to reduced government investment in welfare programs and public services that are crucial for lower-income populations. While such policies apply to all low-income individuals, migrants are disproportionately affected because

they are overrepresented among the poor and often lack access to alternative support systems (Castles & Miller, 2009). As a result, capitalism, when coupled with political and social factors, can perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion among migrant communities.

3.2 *Economic pressures and employment challenges*

Capitalism's emphasis on profit maximization creates competitive labour markets that often disadvantage migrants, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. In Durban, Congolese migrants frequently face limited employment opportunities due to factors such as language barriers, exploitation, discrimination, and limited access to formal networks. Migrants often find work in low-paying or informal jobs with limited job security, few benefits, and poor working conditions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and economic instability. This precarious employment situation highlights the exploitative nature of capitalism for vulnerable populations who lack the resources to compete in a competitive labour market. One participant shared his experience:

I have a diploma in administration, but I couldn't find a job in my field. Every time I apply, they ask for experience in South Africa or ask if I speak fluent English. I ended up working in a small shop where I clean and pack goods, earning just enough to eat. But I studied for years, what for? (Y.N., 16 August 2024).

This is an example of *deskilling*, a process in which higher-skilled migrants are compelled to take low-skilled jobs in their host country, often due to non-recognition of foreign qualifications, language barriers, and limited professional networks. The phenomenon of deskilling has been widely documented in migration literature (Aigner et al., 2025), with research showing that even highly qualified migrants frequently experience downward occupational mobility upon arrival in their host countries.

3.3 *Language barriers*

Language barriers represent a crucial challenge for Congolese migrants in Durban, shaped by broader economic and structural inequalities between nations. While capitalism facilitates economic mobility and international migration, the immediate drivers of migration are disparities in wealth between countries. The capitalist free-market system tends to amplify these inequalities by directing investments toward already well-developed countries with sufficient human capital and consumer markets, and also to poorer countries, such as India, where human capital and sizable consumer markets exist. Outsourcing of services and relocation of industries often occur from over-regulated high-wage countries in Europe to much poorer countries in Asia. However, this investment trend largely bypasses poor African countries where such conditions are perceived to be absent.

Additionally, capitalism privileges certain languages, most notably English, in globalized economies, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that shape access to economic and social opportunities. For many migrants who have learned English in school, this can be advantageous, enabling them to integrate more easily into host countries where English is dominant. In such cases, English can act as a powerful facilitator of migration and integration. However, this benefit does not extend to Congolese migrants who have not learned English in school. For them, the need to acquire a new language can delay economic participation and hinder integration. The need to learn a foreign language can even contribute to "brain drain" when it encourages migration of more educated people who have learned English in school, leaving their less educated compatriots behind.

In Durban, English dominates commerce, employment, and public services, while many Congolese migrants primarily speak French, Lingala, or Swahili. This language gap limits their ability to secure formal employment, access essential services, and integrate into South African society. Without proficiency in English or Zulu,

many migrants are relegated to low-skilled and informal work, where language skills are less crucial, but job security and wages remain precarious. One Congolese migrant shared his experience:

I am Congolese. I speak French and Lingala, with limited proficiency in English and Zulu, which are widely spoken in Durban. This language gap makes it challenging for me to communicate effectively with potential employers and participate in interviews, pushing me toward low-skilled and informal jobs. That is why I am working as a car guard, where language skills are less essential but pay is low, and job security is minimal. (M.K., 17 August 2024).

Another participant declared:

I've tried to learn English, but it's very hard without money to attend school. Without English, it's like the door is closed everywhere. They just ignore you or shout at you. It's painful because I want to contribute, but the system shuts us out. (M.M., 17 August 2024).

Thus, language barriers serve as both a symptom and a reinforcement of the socioeconomic challenges Congolese migrants face in a capitalist system that privileges particular linguistic and economic structures.

3.4 Exploitation

Capitalism often leads to the exploitation of migrants by using them as cheap labour. This is evident in the case of Congolese migrants living in South Africa. In a capitalist system, where the economy prioritizes maximum profit, many businesses must rely on low-wage labour to reduce production costs. Migrants, due to their precarious legal status, urgent need for income, and sometimes lack of recognized qualifications in the host country, are in a vulnerable position. This often results in them being paid significantly less than local citizens for similar work. The labour market competition between migrants and native low-skilled workers can lead to wage suppression, exacerbating economic hardship for both groups.

For Congolese migrants in South Africa, these challenges are particularly pronounced. Many leave the Democratic Republic of Congo to escape conflict, political instability, and extreme poverty, only to face integration challenges, language barriers, and discrimination upon arrival. These factors frequently confine them to low-skilled, underpaid jobs in sectors such as agriculture, construction, security, and domestic services (Crush & Tawodzera, 2014). Employers often take advantage of their vulnerable status to minimize labour costs, exploiting migrants' desperation to work even under poor conditions. Additionally, fear of deportation or employer reprisals discourages migrants from reporting workplace abuse, further perpetuating their exploitation.

While cost-cutting in labour is an inherent feature of capitalist economies with competitive labour markets, government policies exacerbate the problem for low-skilled migrants. The imposition of temporary legal status and other bureaucratic restrictions limits migrants' ability to access stable employment and fair wages. These legal barriers contradict the core principles of capitalism and the free market, which thrive on unrestricted yet fair competition. Capitalism ideally operates on a meritocratic "level playing field", but restrictive policies distort labour market dynamics, disproportionately disadvantaging migrant workers. The lack of social protections and labour rights further compounds their hardships, exposing them to excessive working hours, unsafe conditions, and sub-minimum wages (Bolt & Hill, 2016).

Thus, in a capitalist framework that prioritizes cost reduction, Congolese migrants in South Africa are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Their status as cheap labour enables employers to maximize profits by bypassing labour protections that apply to local workers, perpetuating systemic inequality.

I work in a call centre as a customer representative alongside South Africans. However, while my South African colleagues earn between R10,000 and R11,000, I only receive R5,500. Our company employs more foreigners than South Africans, particularly from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. If I leave this job, finding another one would be extremely

difficult, and I wouldn't be able to support my family or maintain a steady income. I know that I am being exploited, but I have no other choice. Otherwise, I will starve. (C.M., 17 August 2024)

I work as a domestic worker because my diploma is not recognized in South Africa. I live with my employer in a large house with multiple bedrooms and living spaces. My duties included cleaning, laundry, ironing, and preparing meals for the entire family. I work seven days a week because I have nowhere else to go, and despite my workload, I receive only R1,800 per month. (D.M., 18 August 2024)

They know we are desperate, so they use that. In my first job, they didn't even pay me the full salary, saying I didn't deserve it because I am a foreigner. I couldn't report them because I don't have a permit yet. What could I do? (S.M., 18 August 2024)

3.5 Discrimination and xenophobia

Capitalism, as an economic system driven by profit maximization, can reinforce and accentuate discrimination and xenophobia through both structural and social mechanisms. In competitive labour markets, employers may exploit existing prejudices to justify paying migrants lower wages or assigning them to the most insecure and hazardous jobs. This practice not only maximizes profit by reducing labour costs but also entrenches occupational segregation, where migrants, especially those from African countries, are overrepresented in low-status positions (Crush, 2019). Such structural discrimination can feed into negative stereotypes, portraying migrants as “only suited” for certain types of work.

Furthermore, in times of economic downturn or high unemployment, capitalist economies often foster competition over scarce jobs and resources. Political actors and sections of the media may frame migrants as economic threats, diverting attention from systemic inequalities toward scapegoating foreign nationals. This environment can intensify xenophobic attitudes, as locals come to associate their economic hardship with the presence of migrants rather than with broader structural factors such as wage suppression, casualisation of labour, or inadequate social protections (Landau, 2022).

Capitalist urban economies can also reinforce residential segregation, with housing markets driven by profit, pushing migrants into overcrowded or poorly serviced areas. Such spatial separation limits interaction between locals and migrants, allowing stereotypes and prejudices to persist unchallenged. In Durban, some Congolese migrants report being excluded from certain neighbourhoods due to inflated rental prices or landlords' reluctance to rent to foreign nationals. These patterns mirror wider capitalist dynamics, where economic interests intersect with social prejudices to sustain discrimination and xenophobia. One participant declared:

When I first arrived, I thought finding work would depend on my skills. I worked as a mechanic back home for more than ten years, so I applied at several garages in Durban. Every time, they told me they already had people or they needed someone 'from here' who understands the customers.

3.6 The race to cut costs

In the pursuit of maximizing profits, companies frequently reduce production costs by relying on cheap labour, which is often composed of immigrant workers. As a result, many migrants find themselves in precarious, low-wage jobs with poor working conditions. However, this economic reality can foster tensions, as local populations may perceive immigrants as direct competitors for employment opportunities and public services, thereby reinforcing xenophobic sentiments.

This perception, however, overlooks the broader structural issues within the labour market. In reality, both immigrants and native workers often face similar economic hardships. South Africa's Gini index, one of the highest in the world, reflects extreme levels of inequality, which affect all low-skilled workers regardless

of nationality. The real issue is not the presence of migrants but rather an oversupply of poorly qualified workers competing for a limited number of low-wage jobs in a highly advanced capitalist economy that primarily demands skilled labour. However, instead of addressing systemic inequality and labour market failures, public frustration is frequently misdirected toward migrants.

3.7 *Economic precariousness and competition*

By widening economic inequalities, capitalism increases financial insecurity among the working class. This precariousness fosters a climate of competition for scarce resources, where immigrants are often scapegoated as economic “intruders” despite facing similar struggles as local workers. The fundamental issue is not migration itself but rather the oversupply of low-skilled labour in an unregulated market, which intensifies competition and fuels resentment.

Addressing this challenge requires measures that enhance the skills and employability of both migrants and local workers. Priority should be given to vocational training, skills development programmes, and other initiatives aimed at improving human capital. Such interventions, ideally coordinated through the formal education system and supported by government, employers, and community organisations, can help workers transition into sectors with higher demand and better wages (McGrath & Powell, 2016). By reducing the concentration of workers in low-skilled, low-paid jobs, these measures can ease competition, improve economic stability, and foster better relations between migrants and locals. One Congolese participant explained:

If I could get proper training here, I know I could work in something better. Back home, I learned tailoring from my uncle, but here they want certificates. Without that, I can only work as a cleaner or in the market. I wish there were training programmes for people like me so I could get my papers and use my skills to earn more. (L.N., 20 August 2024)

3.8 *Segmentation of the labour market*

Capitalist economies frequently display labour market segmentation, where certain jobs are disproportionately held by specific groups. In many cases, low-skilled migrants from poorer countries are confined to low-paying and physically demanding jobs, while native workers secure more stable and desirable employment. This contributes to the formation of stereotypes and reinforces racial and ethnic discrimination. However, this outcome is highly dependent on the skill level of migrants. For instance, highly skilled expatriates in the Gulf States fill positions that locals are unable to perform, leading to a different labour dynamic that does not trigger the same level of xenophobic tensions.

3.9 *Consumerism and individualism*

Capitalism promotes values such as consumerism and individualism, which may weaken social cohesion and solidarity both within and between different communities. However, this tendency becomes most pronounced when there is segmentation of the labour market and economic outcomes differ for natives and migrants. In such cases, disparities in income, job security, and access to resources can deepen social divides. Conversely, in contexts where economic opportunities and outcomes are relatively equal, individualism may reduce the significance of ethnic and cultural differences, as the emphasis shifts toward personal aspirations and achievements rather than group identity.

Discriminatory policies, whether in employment, housing, or access to services, create or exacerbate economic disparities between migrants and natives. These disparities, in turn, become sources of friction that can undermine social cohesion. Some scholars argue that the emphasis on material success within capitalist systems can intensify such divisions, indirectly contributing to xenophobic sentiments (Pasqualino, 2021). One Congolese participant shared:

Even when I work hard, I cannot get the same kind of jobs as locals. People say it's because I'm not from here. This makes them think I am taking something from them, but I just want to earn enough for my family. If everyone had the same chance, there would be less hate. (P.B., 21 August 2024)

3.10 The media and stereotypes

The media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of migration. While it may appear that the media actively create negative stereotypes, it is more likely that media outlets respond to and amplify existing public sentiments to maintain their audience. In competitive media environments, an essential feature of both capitalism and democracy, media organisations are driven above all to capture attention through sensationalist reporting, engage audiences by rousing emotions, and reassure them by reinforcing pre-existing beliefs, stereotypes, and biases, rather than fabricating new ones. As a result, xenophobic narratives can gain traction, further entrenching discrimination against migrant communities.

While capitalism is not inherently xenophobic or discriminatory, its prioritization of profit and economic competition can create conditions that indirectly fuel these social divisions. In some cases, it is not the absence of regulation that disadvantages migrants but rather over-regulation, such as limiting the duration of migrant work permits to six months, which restricts their economic stability and opportunities. Under such circumstances, deregulation could improve migrants' prospects by allowing them to participate more fully and securely in the labour market. Conversely, additional regulations often result in more bureaucracy and corruption without effectively addressing the root causes of exclusion. Tackling these challenges requires focusing on structural drivers of economic inequality rather than framing migration itself as the cause of hardship.

I am Congolese, and I am often the subject of discrimination in my environment and also in my workplace environment because there are a lot of foreigners there. After all, the employer pays us a minimal salary, but South Africans think that we are paid like them and we steal their work, at a time when there are many South Africans who are out of luck. This situation makes us feel insecure because it often leads to xenophobia. South Africans are killing us and burning us alive under the pretext that we are taking their jobs. (T.Z., 18 August 2024)

When xenophobia happens, we feel like animals being hunted. But we are here just to survive. People don't see that we are suffering too. They think we are stealing jobs, but we also struggle to get any job. (H.M., 19 August 2024)

3.11 Inequitable access to resources and services

The role of capitalism in resource distribution is driven by market forces rather than deliberate allocation by managers, politicians, or bureaucrats. As a result, marginalized groups, such as Congolese migrants in Durban, often struggle to access housing, healthcare, and education. Many migrants live in overcrowded and substandard housing due to high rental prices in safer areas, which pushes them into informal settlements with limited access to essential services. Similarly, healthcare remains difficult to obtain, often due to prohibitive costs or discriminatory practices. Under a capitalist system that prioritizes profitability, these disparities persist because of the massive inequality in income and wealth in the country. This makes it challenging for migrants, and also for poor natives, to secure basic necessities.

The salary I receive does not allow me to rent a house in a safe neighbourhood. This is why I live in the township together with the Zulu. It's very difficult because they don't like us. Even if you speak Zulu, they hate us because we are foreigners. In these neighbourhoods, we often face difficulties with drinking water and live in unsafe houses that can sometimes be washed away in heavy rain. Faulty power installations often lead to fires. My children rarely go to school

because there are no good schools in the township where I stay, and access to hospitals is also difficult. (G.M., 18 August 2024)

I waited three hours at the clinic with my child, and they kept taking South Africans first. Finally, they said the doctor was gone. My child had a fever, and I had to go to the church for help. That's where we go now, churches, not government. (M.K., 18 August 2024)

3.12 Remittances and capital outflows

Capitalism incentivizes economic mobility and remittances as a means for migrants to support families left behind. For Congolese migrants in Durban, sending money home is a primary motivator; however, the high cost of living in South Africa reduces their ability to save and send remittances. Remittance outflows, while essential for supporting families in the DRC, can strain the finances of migrants, trapping them in a cycle where they must prioritize family obligations over their economic stability. This system often leaves migrants caught between the demands of a capitalist economy in their host country and familial responsibilities back home. Some of the participants declared:

I came here to South Africa in search of a better life because in Congo, the situation is catastrophic with endless wars and an economy that is almost on the ground. However, the South African economic system only exploits foreigners. The job I have, if I only pay the rent and a little food, I have nothing left. But my wife and children remained in my country, counting on me to take care of them. However, the salary I receive does not even allow me to take care of myself. And if I resign, it's not easy to find another job. (R.N., 20 August 2024)

If I don't send money to my mother, she will not eat. But to send just R500 means I have nothing for me. I feel stuck between hunger here and hunger there. It's like drowning on both sides. (E.K., 20 August 2024)

3.13 Adaptation and informal economic networks

In Durban's capitalist economy, Congolese migrants encounter limited opportunities within the formal sector, often due to language barriers, legal employment restrictions, and discrimination against foreigners. However, employment restrictions and discrimination are not inherent features of capitalism but rather regulatory and social barriers imposed by state policies or societal biases. In contrast, language barriers directly affect migrants' ability to integrate into the capitalist free market system, as they limit access to the social and human capital necessary for economic participation.

As a result, many Congolese migrants turn to the informal economy, where they develop adaptive networks to share resources, support one another, and establish small businesses. These informal networks encompassing activities such as street vending, hairdressing, and cooking services serve as essential means of survival. Rather than resisting capitalism, these migrants create their own small-scale free market system, unimpeded by state-imposed regulations such as taxation and work permit requirements, which can function as anti-capitalist constraints on fair competition.

Through these networks, Congolese migrants demonstrate resilience and adaptability, developing alternative economic structures to sustain their livelihoods. However, the absence of regulation and social protection in the informal sector exposes them to economic vulnerability. This highlights the tension between the advantages of a free-market system and the need for regulatory measures that could provide stability and security for marginalized economic participants.

Beyond economic activities, Congolese migrants form solidarity networks anchored in religious associations, support groups, and cultural organizations. These networks provide not only financial assistance but also social and psychological support, fostering a sense of belonging and security. For instance, they may organize small, interest-free loans or help members find informal economic opportunities. By promoting mutual aid, these networks enhance economic autonomy while also helping migrants navigate the pressures of a

capitalist system that often prioritizes individual success over collective well-being (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). One participant declared:

I started selling fried fish near the taxi rank with my cousin. We make a little money each day. It's not legal, but how else can we survive? We help each other with small loans when someone is sick or needs to send money home. (Y.M., 18 August 2024)

3.14 Mental health and well-being

Capitalism's focus on productivity, individual success, and financial achievement places unique psychological pressures on migrants, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds like many Congolese migrants in Durban. These individuals often face immense pressure to secure stable income, support families back home, and integrate economically into the host society. This relentless pursuit of financial stability frequently leads to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. The expectation to "succeed" within a highly competitive capitalist framework can result in burnout and a deep sense of inadequacy when these goals are not met, further exacerbating mental health struggles. However, this drive for success is also the engine of economic growth, a fundamental aspect of capitalism that fuels national prosperity. At the same time, for those who struggle to succeed, non-capitalist forces such as government intervention or philanthropy are necessary to mitigate economic disparities and provide support.

Moreover, migrants face significant barriers to accessing mental health services due to both economic and institutional constraints. In capitalist societies, healthcare, including mental health support, is often costly and not easily accessible to low-income populations, including both migrants and native-born individuals. This financial burden exacerbates the psychological strain on migrants as they lack adequate resources to address emotional challenges. The difficulty in accessing mental health care highlights how capitalist systems prioritize economic productivity over essential psychological and community support, leaving vulnerable populations without sufficient assistance.

Additionally, migrants from Africa often encounter xenophobia and discrimination, further intensifying their marginalization and contributing to feelings of alienation and exclusion. While these issues are not inherently caused by capitalism, since xenophobia and discrimination contradict the principles of a free labour market, they can be exacerbated by cutthroat competition among economically disadvantaged groups. In societies where job opportunities are scarce, particularly in low-skilled labour sectors, resentment toward migrants can manifest as anti-immigrant attitudes and calls for discriminatory policies. One potential solution could involve large-scale public works projects to create employment opportunities and balance labour supply and demand. However, the key question remains: Who will fund such initiatives? In a capitalist economy, government intervention of this scale often requires careful consideration of taxation, public spending, and economic sustainability.

Sometimes I cry without reason. I think I am failing my children. I can't talk to anyone because we are all struggling. Depression is real here, but who cares about our feelings when we are just foreigners? (R.S., 19 August 2024)

4 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the complex and often contradictory ways in which capitalism shapes the lived experiences of Congolese migrants in Durban. The results largely align with the literature reviewed earlier, but they also offer localized insights that underscore the specific vulnerabilities experienced by this group.

For instance, as Sassen (2014) argues, global capitalism promotes labour mobility while simultaneously creating structural conditions of inequality in both sending and receiving countries. This was evident in the participants' accounts of limited employment opportunities, even for those with qualifications. Similar to

Castles and Miller (2009), this study confirms that capitalist economies often rely on migrant labour while denying them the social protections available to citizens.

The theme of exploitation aligns with Harvey's (2005) critique of neoliberal capitalism, which commodifies labour and prioritizes profit over worker welfare. Participants' testimonies of wage gaps, poor working conditions, and fear of deportation mirror Harvey's argument that capitalism fosters inequality not just by design but through policy inaction or complicity.

Language barriers, a recurring issue in the results, were highlighted by Crush and Tawodzera (2014) as both a cause and a consequence of social exclusion. This paper deepens that analysis by showing how language intersects with economic marginalization under capitalism. Language not only mediates access to work but also marks migrants as outsiders in the economic order.

The findings on xenophobia and discrimination reinforce Pasqualino's (2021) claim that capitalist values such as individualism and competition can erode social cohesion. Participants' fear and experiences of violence reflect a broader climate of resentment fuelled by labour market saturation and economic desperation, as also emphasized by Bolt and Hill (2016).

Interestingly, the evidence from informal economic networks expands the conversation beyond dependency and victimhood. The ability of Congolese migrants to adapt through mutual aid and small business activities suggests a form of grassroots capitalism, challenging the notion that migrants are merely passive victims of the system. This partially supports the arguments of Crush and Tawodzera (2017) on migrant resilience and economic agency in the informal sector.

However, mental health struggles remain underexplored in the literature on capitalism and migration. This study adds to the discourse by connecting psychological hardship to capitalist metrics of success and productivity, which leave little space for vulnerability or failure.

In sum, while the literature has established the structural impacts of capitalism on migration, this study contributes to the field by foregrounding personal narratives that make visible the daily struggles, adaptive strategies, and contradictions within a capitalist migration system. The voices of Congolese migrants in Durban illustrate the need to rethink economic systems that are profit-driven but socially exclusionary.

5 Conclusion

This article has argued that capitalism significantly influences migration dynamics by shaping both the motivations for migration and the socio-economic realities migrants face in host countries. Drawing on the lived experiences of Congolese migrants in Durban, South Africa, the study demonstrates that while capitalism can generate economic opportunities, it also reinforces systemic inequalities, particularly in the labour market, through exploitative practices and limited social protections. This central argument contributes to migration studies by offering a nuanced analysis that distinguishes capitalism from associated regulatory and ideological frameworks, such as neoliberalism, which often mediate migrants' experiences. Theoretically, this research adds to the existing scholarship by moving beyond binary critiques of capitalism and instead presenting a layered understanding of how capitalist systems, when unevenly structured, both attract and marginalize migrant populations. It highlights the need to consider capitalist heterogeneity across national contexts, such as the differences between South Africa's diversified economy and the DRC's resource-dependent structure. This underscores that migrants are not rejecting capitalism as an economic system but are seeking inclusion in more developed and stable versions of it.

In terms of knowledge contribution, the article advances a critical yet balanced view of capitalism's dual role as both an enabler of mobility and a generator of precarity. This perspective is valuable for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working on migration, development, and labour rights, as it encourages context-specific policy responses that recognize structural economic limitations without reducing all migrant challenges to capitalist dynamics. Future research could explore three key themes:

1. Comparative studies of how different capitalist models (e.g., social-democratic vs. neoliberal) affect migrant integration and labour market access.

2. The role of informal economies and survival strategies among African migrants in urban centres.
3. The intersection of capitalism, gender, and migration, especially how capitalist labour structures uniquely affect migrant women.

By identifying these areas, this study opens space for interdisciplinary inquiry into the evolving relationship between global capitalism and human mobility.

References

- Adepoju, A. (2010). *International Migration within, to and from Africa in a Globalized World*. Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Aigner, P., Bešić, A., Kubiciel-Lodzińska, S., Bacher, J., Maj, J., & Prischl, C. (2025). The drivers of deskilling: Comparing highly skilled Ukrainian refugee women in Austria and Poland. *International Migration*, 63(3), e13363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13363>
- Bolt, M., & Hill, K. (2016). Labor, migration, and precarity: Congolese migrants in South African agriculture and construction. *African Affairs*, 115(460), 259-279.
- Bond, P. (2014). *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*. Pluto Press.
- Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crush, J. (2000). The dark side of democracy: Migration, xenophobia and human rights in South Africa. *International Migration*, 38(6), 103-133.
- Crush, J., & Tawodzera, G. (2014). *Exclusion and Inclusion: Migration and Job Security in South Africa*. Southern African Migration Programme.
- Crush, J., & Tawodzera, G. (2017). Refugee entrepreneurial economies in urban South Africa: The role of social capital and the transnational connection. *African Human Mobility Review*, 3(2), 629-658.
- Crush, J. (2019). South-South migration and xenophobia in Southern Africa. *International Migration*, 57(4), 256-273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12543>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Landau, L. B. (2022). Xenophobia, mobility and development in Africa. *African Affairs*, 121(484), 595-617. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adac017>
- Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods* (5th ed.). Docklands VIC: Oxford Univ. Press Australia
- McGrath, S., & Powell, L. (2016). Skills for sustainable development: Transforming vocational education and training beyond 2015. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 50, 12-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.05.006>
- Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso.
- Nzongola-Ntalaja, G. (2002). *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*. Zed Books.
- Pasqualino, R. (2021). *The challenges and experiences of Congolese refugees living in Durban, South Africa*. Organization for World Peace. Available at: <https://theowp.org> (Accessed 3 November 2024).
- Peberdy, S. (2016). Selecting Immigrants: National Identity and South Africa's Immigration Policies, 1910-2008. Wits Univ. Press.
- Sassen, S. (2014). *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Harvard Univ. Press.