

Surviving Capitalism from the Margins: Informal Economic Networks among African Migrants in Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

Capitalist urban economies do not incorporate all residents on equal terms. In cities marked by deep inequality, exclusion from formal labour markets produces forms of work and exchange that operate alongside, and in relation to, the dominant economic system. This article examines how African migrants living in Durban, South Africa, navigate restricted access to formal employment within a highly unequal capitalist environment. Rather than treating informal economic life as existing outside capitalism, the study situates migrant livelihood practices within the broader dynamics of urban inequality, market competition, labour flexibilization, and regulatory exclusion. Drawing on qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews and life-history narratives with 40 African migrants in Durban, South Africa, the article explores migrants' experiences of labour market marginalisation, precarious legal status, language barriers, and limited access to social protection. The findings indicate that many migrants engage in small-scale trading, service provision, and community-based financial arrangements as practical responses to structural constraints. These informal economic networks are embedded in the wider urban economy: They depend on formal supply chains, urban consumer markets, and regulatory frameworks, even as they operate at its margins. While these networks foster cooperation, resource-sharing, and social connection among migrants, they do not represent a romantic alternative to capitalist modernity. Solidarity emerges under conditions of necessity and uncertainty, and participation in the informal economy often entails economic instability, exposure to harassment, and limited legal recourse. Migrants' agency is therefore exercised within tight structural constraints. By analysing informal economic networks as products of, rather than exceptions to, capitalist urban dynamics, the article contributes to debates on migration, informality, and inequality in African cities. It calls for closer scholarly and policy attention to how economic exclusion and migrant entrepreneurship are intertwined in contemporary urban contexts.

Keywords: Capitalism, Informal economy, African migrants, Urban inequality, Durban

1 Background of the study

South Africa has long been a major destination for migrants from across the African continent. Migrants are attracted by the country's relatively advanced economy, employment opportunities, educational institutions, and prospects for improved living conditions (Castles et al., 2014). Among South African cities, Durban occupies an important position as a destination for migrants because of its role as a major port city, commercial centre, and transport hub. Over the years, migrants from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Ethiopia have settled in Durban and become active participants in the city's economic and social life (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023; Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2024). Despite their contributions to local economies, many African migrants continue to face significant barriers to economic inclusion and social integration.

South Africa's urban economy is characterised by persistent unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The country remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with large sections of the population excluded from stable employment opportunities (Sassen, 2014; Turok & Visagie, 2018). In cities such

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as Durban, competition for employment opportunities is intense, making it difficult for both migrants and citizens to secure formal employment. Consequently, many urban residents depend on informal economic activities as a means of survival (Chen, 2012; Meagher, 2015).

For African migrants, access to formal employment is often further constrained by documentation requirements, limited recognition of foreign qualifications, language barriers, and restrictive administrative procedures (Landau, 2011; Neocosmos, 2010). In addition, migrants frequently experience xenophobia, discrimination, and social exclusion that negatively affect their ability to access employment and business opportunities (Charman et al., 2019; Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). Recent studies have shown that anti-migrant sentiments and exclusionary practices continue to shape migrants' experiences in South African cities, including Durban (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023; Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2024). These challenges place many migrants in vulnerable economic positions and increase their dependence on informal livelihood strategies.

Within this context, informal economic activities have become an important source of survival for many African migrants living in Durban. Migrants participate in a wide range of informal activities, including street trading, small-scale retail businesses, food vending, hair salons, transport-related services, and other entrepreneurial ventures (Mhandu, 2020; Skinner, 2019). Access to these activities is often facilitated through social networks based on kinship, friendship, shared nationality, language, and community affiliation. Such networks provide migrants with information, financial assistance, accommodation, business opportunities, and emotional support that help them navigate difficult urban environments (Mhandu, 2025; Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2024).

Previous studies have highlighted the significance of social networks and informal economic activities in sustaining migrant livelihoods in South Africa. For example, Mbatha and Koskimaki (2023) demonstrate how migrant traders in Durban rely on networks of friendship and mutual support to navigate precarious informal markets. Similarly, Umubyeyi and Mtapuri (2024) found that social networks play a critical role in maintaining livelihoods among African migrant refugees in Durban by facilitating access to resources, information, and economic opportunities. Research by Mhandu (2020, 2025) further illustrates how migrant entrepreneurs rely on informal social relations to survive economic uncertainty and regulatory challenges within Durban's informal economy. Collectively, these studies suggest that informal economic networks remain central to migrants' everyday survival strategies.

Despite growing scholarship on migration and informality, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how African migrants mobilise informal economic networks as adaptive livelihood strategies within the context of Durban's unequal urban economy. Existing studies have documented migrant vulnerability, xenophobia, and economic exclusion, yet there remains insufficient empirical understanding of how migrants actively construct and utilise informal networks to sustain livelihoods in conditions characterised by unemployment, legal insecurity, and limited access to formal employment opportunities (Meagher, 2015; Mhandu, 2025). This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of African migrants operating within Durban's informal economy and exploring the role of informal economic networks in facilitating survival and economic participation.

The study is guided by the recognition that migrants are not merely passive victims of exclusion but active economic actors who develop innovative strategies to survive and participate in urban economic life (Bayat, 2013; Simone, 2010). Through informal economic networks, migrants create opportunities for income generation, resource mobilisation, and mutual support despite operating within environments characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability. Examining these networks provides valuable insights into the relationship between migration, informality, urban inequality, and economic survival in contemporary South Africa.

1.1 *Research problem*

Although African migrants contribute significantly to Durban's urban economy, many remain excluded from formal employment opportunities due to documentation barriers, labour market competition, restrictive administrative procedures, xenophobia, and broader processes of economic marginalisation (Crush &

Ramachandran, 2014; Landau, 2011). Consequently, many migrants depend on informal economic networks to secure livelihoods and support their families. However, there remains limited empirical understanding of how these networks function as mechanisms of survival and economic participation within Durban's highly unequal urban environment.

1.2 *Aim of the study*

This study aims to examine how African migrants in Durban utilise informal economic networks to sustain their livelihoods within a context of economic exclusion, unemployment, and urban inequality.

1.3 *Research objectives*

The study seeks to:

- Examine the factors that limit African migrants' access to formal employment opportunities in Durban.
- Explore the informal economic activities undertaken by African migrants.
- Investigate the role of informal social and economic networks in sustaining migrant livelihoods.
- Analyse the challenges experienced by migrants operating within Durban's informal economy.

1.4 *Research question*

How do African migrants in Durban mobilise informal economic networks to sustain their livelihoods within the context of South Africa's unequal urban economy?

1.5 *Significance of the study*

This study contributes to scholarship on migration, informality, and urban livelihoods by providing empirical evidence on the experiences of African migrants in Durban. It extends existing research on migrant survival strategies, social networks, and informal economic participation within South African cities (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023; Mhandu, 2025; Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2024). The findings contribute to broader debates on migration, urban inequality, and economic exclusion while also providing insights that can assist policymakers, municipal authorities, and organisations working with migrant communities to better understand the realities and challenges faced by migrants operating within Durban's informal economy.

2 Literature review

2.1 *African migration and Durban as a migrant destination*

South Africa remains one of the principal destinations for migrants and refugees within Africa due to its relatively diversified economy, established urban infrastructure, and perceived employment opportunities (Castles et al., 2014). Since the end of apartheid, the country has experienced increasing migration from neighbouring countries as well as from other parts of the continent, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. Many migrants settle in major urban centres where economic opportunities are believed to be more accessible than in rural areas.

Durban has emerged as one of the most important destinations for African migrants in South Africa. As a major port city and commercial centre, Durban attracts migrants seeking employment, business opportunities, education, and security. The city hosts a diverse migrant population that participates in various sectors of the urban economy, particularly within informal economic spaces (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023). Unlike Johannesburg, which has received substantial scholarly attention in migration studies, Durban possesses distinct social, economic, and political dynamics that shape migrant experiences in unique ways.

Recent studies highlight the importance of examining migrant livelihoods within the specific context of Durban. Mbatha and Koskimaki (2023) demonstrate how migrant traders rely on networks of friendship and cooperation to navigate informal markets in Durban's inner city. Similarly, Umubyeyi and Mtapuri (2024) show that social networks play a crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of African migrant refugees in Durban by facilitating access to information, accommodation, employment opportunities, and financial support. These studies suggest that understanding migration in Durban requires attention not only to economic factors but also to the social relationships that enable survival in a highly unequal urban environment.

2.2 Urban inequality, unemployment, and exclusion from formal labour markets

South Africa continues to experience some of the highest levels of unemployment and socioeconomic inequality in the world. Despite being one of Africa's largest economies, the benefits of economic growth remain unevenly distributed, with many urban residents excluded from stable employment opportunities (Turok & Visagie, 2018). The legacy of apartheid spatial planning, combined with contemporary economic restructuring, has contributed to persistent patterns of exclusion and marginalisation within urban labour markets.

Within this context, migrants often face additional barriers that further limit access to formal employment. These barriers include documentation requirements, limited recognition of foreign qualifications, language barriers, and restrictive immigration regulations (Landau, 2011). While labour market exclusion affects both migrants and citizens, migrants frequently encounter additional challenges related to their legal status and social position within host communities.

Research suggests that economic exclusion should not be understood solely as an outcome of market competition. Institutional and bureaucratic processes also influence access to employment opportunities. Sassen (2014) argues that contemporary urban economies create differentiated forms of inclusion in which some populations are integrated into formal labour markets while others remain confined to insecure and informal forms of work. For many African migrants in South African cities, exclusion from formal employment often results in dependence on informal economic activities as a primary means of survival.

2.3 Urban marginality and migrant livelihoods

The concept of urban marginality provides an important framework for understanding the experiences of migrants living and working in South African cities. Wacquant (2008) describes urban marginality as a condition in which particular groups experience systematic exclusion from stable employment, social protection, and institutional resources. In highly unequal urban environments, marginalised populations are frequently concentrated within precarious economic sectors characterised by instability and limited legal protection.

African migrants often occupy marginal positions within urban economies because they face both economic and social forms of exclusion. Their participation in urban life is shaped by limited access to employment opportunities, insecure legal status, and restricted access to formal institutions. According to Simone (2010), African cities are characterised by complex forms of economic improvisation in which marginalised populations develop alternative mechanisms for accessing resources and opportunities. Such strategies are particularly important for migrants who are unable to secure stable incorporation into formal economic structures.

Urban marginality does not imply passivity. Rather, migrants actively negotiate economic constraints by developing livelihood strategies that enable survival within challenging urban environments. These strategies frequently involve participation in informal economic activities and reliance on social networks that provide access to resources otherwise unavailable through formal channels.

2.4 Xenophobia, legal insecurity and the policing of migrants

One of the most significant challenges confronting African migrants in South Africa is xenophobia. Research consistently demonstrates that migrants experience discrimination, hostility, and exclusion within both social

and economic spheres (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014; Neocosmos, 2010). Xenophobic attitudes are often linked to perceptions that migrants compete with citizens for jobs, housing, public services, and business opportunities.

In addition to social hostility, migrants frequently encounter legal insecurity arising from documentation challenges and restrictive administrative systems. Difficulties associated with visa renewals, asylum processes, and business registration procedures often place migrants in vulnerable positions, limiting their access to formal employment and entrepreneurship opportunities (Landau, 2011). Bureaucratic uncertainty may therefore become a significant source of economic insecurity for migrant populations.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the role of state power and policing in shaping migrant experiences. Informal traders are frequently subjected to inspections, confiscation of goods, fines, and displacement from trading spaces (Horn, 2019; Skinner, 2019). These enforcement practices disproportionately affect migrants who often lack the documentation and resources necessary to challenge administrative decisions. Consequently, policing and regulation become important mechanisms through which exclusion is reproduced within urban economic spaces.

2.5 *Social networks and migrant solidarity*

Social networks constitute one of the most important resources available to migrants facing economic exclusion. Migration scholars have long argued that social relationships facilitate access to employment opportunities, housing, information, and financial support (Granovetter, 1985). For migrants operating within unfamiliar environments, networks often provide the practical assistance necessary for survival and economic participation.

Studies conducted in Durban demonstrate the central role of social networks in sustaining migrant livelihoods. Umubyeyi and Mtapuri (2024) found that migrant refugees depend heavily on community networks to access employment opportunities, business information, accommodation, and emotional support. Similarly, Mbatha and Koskimaki (2023) illustrate how friendship networks among migrant traders contribute to economic resilience within informal markets.

Mhandu (2020) further shows that undocumented migrant women working in Durban's informal economy rely extensively on social relationships to overcome economic and legal barriers. These networks provide access to customers, business knowledge, credit arrangements, and mutual assistance during periods of crisis. Such findings suggest that migrant livelihoods cannot be understood solely through individual economic behaviour but must also be examined through the collective relationships that facilitate survival and adaptation.

2.6 *Informality as a survival strategy*

Informal economic activity has become an essential livelihood strategy for many migrants living in South African cities. Informality encompasses a wide range of activities, including street trading, home-based enterprises, food vending, transport services, hairdressing, and small-scale retail businesses (Chen, 2012). These activities often emerge where formal employment opportunities are inaccessible or insufficient.

Rather than viewing informality as a temporary deviation from formal economic systems, recent scholarship recognises it as a durable feature of urban economies characterised by high unemployment and inequality (Meagher, 2015). Informal activities enable migrants to generate income, support family members, and establish forms of economic independence despite limited access to formal labour markets.

Research conducted in Durban supports this perspective. Mhandu (2025) argues that migrant entrepreneurs actively negotiate structural constraints by developing adaptive livelihood strategies within informal economic spaces. Similarly, Mbatha and Koskimaki (2023) demonstrate that migrant traders create innovative systems of cooperation and resource sharing that enable survival despite economic precarity and regulatory challenges.

Overall, the literature suggests that informal economic networks represent more than simple survival mechanisms. They constitute important forms of economic organisation through which migrants respond to unemployment, exclusion, xenophobia, and legal insecurity. However, while these networks facilitate

livelihood generation, they do not eliminate vulnerability. Migrants operating within informal economies remain exposed to income instability, regulatory enforcement, and social exclusion. It is within this context that the present study examines how African migrants in Durban mobilise informal economic networks to sustain their livelihoods and navigate the challenges associated with economic marginality and urban inequality.

3 Methods and research design

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how informal economic networks shape the livelihood practices of African migrants in Durban, South Africa. The research is grounded in an interpretive approach that seeks to understand migrants' lived economic experiences, strategies, and constraints within the city's unequal urban economy. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for analysing how individuals navigate exclusion, construct economic networks, and make sense of their participation in informal markets (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The empirical material consists primarily of in-depth semi-structured interviews and life-history narratives with African migrants engaged in informal economic activities in Durban. These methods enable detailed exploration of participants' trajectories into informal work, their economic practices, and their experiences of regulatory and social exclusion. Narrative accounts provide insight into how migrants interpret their own economic positioning and decision-making within constrained urban labour markets.

In addition to qualitative interviews, a structured questionnaire was administered to collect descriptive socio-economic information about participants, including demographic characteristics, migration history, type of economic activity, income patterns, and network participation. These descriptive data do not constitute a quantitative analytical design but serve to contextualise the qualitative findings and illustrate general patterns within the study sample. Summary statistics derived from the questionnaire are presented in tables in section 4 to provide an overview of participant characteristics and economic profiles.

By combining narrative qualitative data with descriptive survey information, the study provides both depth and contextual breadth in analysing migrant informal economic networks. This mixed qualitative–descriptive approach supports a grounded understanding of how migrants sustain livelihoods within conditions of uneven incorporation into Durban's urban economy.

3.1 Study site

The research was conducted in Durban, a major urban and economic hub in South Africa with a diverse migrant population and a well-established informal economy. Durban's urban landscape provides a suitable setting for examining migrant informality due to high levels of unemployment, economic inequality, and regulatory constraints affecting access to formal employment. Urban centres characterised by high levels of informality offer critical insights into how marginalized populations negotiate economic survival (De Soto, 2000). Informal trading areas, transport nodes, residential townships, and central business districts served as key sites for data collection.

3.2 Sampling and participants

The study sample consists of African migrants residing in Durban who are engaged in informal economic activities. A non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and convenience approaches was employed due to the absence of reliable population data on informal migrant workers. Participants were recruited through multiple entry points to reach this hard-to-access population. Initial contacts were established in known sites of informal economic activity, including inner-city trading areas, transport corridors, and market spaces where migrant traders operate. Additional participants were identified through pre-existing community contacts and migrant support networks, and further respondents were accessed through referral (snowball) sampling, whereby participants introduced the researcher to other migrants engaged in similar livelihoods. Such strategies are widely used in research involving undocumented

migrants and informal workers (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were selected based on non-citizen status, engagement in informal economic activity, and residence in Durban at the time of the study.

The final sample included 40 respondents, both males and females aged 18 and above, representing diverse national backgrounds and types of informal economic participation. Although the findings are not statistically generalisable to all migrant populations, the sample provides meaningful insights into patterns of survival and economic adaptation within informal migrant economies.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered in person. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions designed to capture demographic characteristics, types of informal economic activities, income levels, working hours, access to capital, reliance on social and economic networks, and experiences of economic insecurity. Structured questionnaires are well-suited to quantitative studies, aiming to standardise responses and facilitate comparative analysis across respondents (Fowler, 2014).

To address language barriers, the questionnaire was administered in English and, where necessary, translated orally into French, Swahili, or Lingala. This approach has been widely used in migrant research to enhance comprehension and reduce response bias in multilingual contexts (Liamputtong, 2010).

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were used to examine patterns of informal economic participation, income generation, and reliance on economic networks. Cross-tabulations were employed to explore relationships between variables such as legal status, type of informal activity, and levels of economic security. Descriptive analysis is particularly suitable for exploratory quantitative studies that aim to map social and economic trends rather than establish causal inference (Punch, 2014).

The analysis focuses on illustrating how informal economic networks function as survival mechanisms within a capitalist system that limits migrants' access to formal economic opportunities, rather than on producing predictive or causal models.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. To protect participants' confidentiality, no identifying information was recorded, and all data were anonymized. Research involving migrant populations requires heightened ethical sensitivity due to participants' legal and social vulnerability (Block et al., 2013).

4 Findings

4.1 Exclusion from formal employment and economic marginalisation

One of the strongest themes emerging from the interviews was the persistent exclusion of African migrants from formal employment opportunities. Almost all participants reported that securing formal employment in Durban was extremely difficult despite possessing work experience, educational qualifications, and professional skills acquired in their countries of origin. Participants described repeated experiences of rejection, often linked to documentation requirements, lack of local experience, language barriers, and employers' preferences for South African citizens.

Many participants explained that they had arrived in South Africa with expectations of finding stable employment, but soon discovered that access to formal work was highly restricted. As a result, many experienced prolonged periods of unemployment before turning to informal economic activities. A 42-year-old Congolese participant explained:

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of participants and types of informal economic activities

Variable	Category	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	20	50%
	Female	20	50%
Age group	18–29	6	15%
	30–39	9	22.5%
	40–49	15	37.5%
	50+	10	25%
Country of origin	RDC	10	25%
	Rwanda	10	25%
	Zimbabwe	5	12.5%
	Other	15	37.5%
Length of stay in South Africa	0–2	2	5%
	3–5	6	15%
	6–10	10	25%
	>10	22	55%
Education level	Primary	5	12.5%
	Secondary	15	37.5%
	Tertiary	20	50%
Type of activity	Street trading	18	45%
	Small retail shop	6	15%
	Services (hair, repair, etc.)	10	25%
	Other	6	15%
Business location	Street/pavement	34	85%
	Market stall	1	2.5%
	Home-based	4	10%
	Shared shop	1	2.5%
Access to permit	Yes	2	5%
	No	38	95%

“When I left the Democratic Republic of Congo, I believed that South Africa would offer opportunities for people willing to work. Back home, I worked as an electrician and supported my family comfortably. When I arrived in Durban, I spent almost a year searching for work. Every morning, I would leave my room carrying copies of my certificates and CV. I visited factories, construction companies, workshops, and warehouses. Some employers never called me back, while others immediately asked whether I had South African identity documents. Even when I explained that I had refugee documents, they would say they were looking for someone with permanent residency or citizenship. Eventually, I realised that my qualifications and experience meant very little because I was a foreigner. I felt invisible and excluded from the system.” (R. N., 3 September 2025)

A participant from Burundi described a similar experience:

“For nearly eight months, I searched for work. Sometimes I would spend money on transport to attend interviews only to be told that the position was no longer available or that they preferred South African applicants. It became frustrating because every rejection meant another day without income. I had children depending on me, rent to pay, and relatives back home who expected support. There were days when I questioned whether migrating had been the right decision.” (G. F., 22 August 2025)

These experiences demonstrate how exclusion from formal labour markets constitutes an important dimension of migrants' economic vulnerability.

4.2 Entry into informal economic activities as a survival strategy

The interviews revealed that participation in informal economic activities was largely driven by necessity rather than choice. Most participants explained that they entered the informal economy after exhausting efforts to secure formal employment. Informal activities represented one of the few accessible opportunities for generating income and supporting household survival.

Participants reported involvement in a wide range of activities, including street trading, food vending, mobile phone repairs, tailoring, hairdressing, transportation services, and small retail businesses. Entry into these activities often occurred through assistance from friends, relatives, or members of migrant communities already established in Durban. One Congolese participant explained:

"After months of looking for work without success, a friend from church invited me to help him at his small clothing stall. At first, I was only assisting him by arranging stock and speaking to customers. Over time, I learned where to buy goods, how to negotiate prices, and how to identify products that sold quickly. Eventually, I borrowed money from relatives and started selling my own items. It was not the life I had imagined for myself, but it allowed me to survive and provide food for my family." (J. T., 11 August 2025)

A participant from Rwanda stated:

"When I arrived, I knew nobody and had no money. A fellow Rwandan allowed me to stay in his room while I looked for work. Later, he introduced me to people who sold fruit and vegetables at the market. They taught me everything from where to buy stock to how to avoid losing money. Without their help, I would have had no way of surviving." (J. K., 22 August 2025)

These findings indicate that informal economic participation often emerges as an adaptive response to structural barriers within formal labour markets.

4.3 Economic insecurity and everyday risks in the informal economy

Although informal economic activities generated income, participants consistently described conditions of uncertainty and insecurity. Daily earnings fluctuated significantly, and many participants expressed anxiety regarding their ability to meet basic household needs.

Several participants explained that they operated without contracts, legal protections, or stable sources of income. Unexpected events such as poor sales, illness, theft, or confiscation of goods could immediately threaten household survival. One Ethiopian participant stated:

"There are days when I leave home at six o'clock in the morning and return late in the evening with almost nothing. Yet rent, electricity, and food expenses continue regardless of how much I earn. Every day feels uncertain because tomorrow's income depends on factors I cannot control. Sometimes rain keeps customers away. Sometimes, police operations force us to close early. Sometimes there are simply too many traders competing for the same customers." (R. L., 25 August 2025)

A Zimbabwean participant explained:

"I live with constant fear of losing everything. Two years ago, municipal officers confiscated goods worth several thousand rand. That stock represented months of savings. Overnight, I had to start again from nothing. Experiences like that make you realise how fragile your livelihood really is." (H. M., 19 August 2025)

These findings suggest that while the informal economy provides opportunities for survival, it also exposes migrants to significant economic insecurity.

4.4 *Social networks and collective survival*

A dominant theme throughout the interviews was the importance of social networks in facilitating survival and economic participation. Participants repeatedly emphasised that family members, friends, religious communities, and ethnic associations provided critical forms of support that compensated for limited access to formal institutions.

Many participants described social networks as their primary source of information, accommodation, employment opportunities, financial assistance, and emotional support. A female participant from the DRC explained:

“When I arrived in Durban, I did not know where to stay or how to survive. Members of my church collected money to help me pay rent during my first months. Later, they introduced me to women who were running small businesses. They taught me how to manage stock, how to budget, and where to buy products at lower prices. Without that support, I honestly do not know what would have happened to me.” (D. M., 11 August 2025).

Another participant stated:

“Among Congolese migrants, people often help each other because we understand the difficulties we face. When someone’s business is struggling, others contribute money or provide stock on credit. We know that next time it could be us who needs assistance.” (B. M., 18 August 2025).

These narratives demonstrate the central role of collective support systems in sustaining migrant livelihoods.

4.5 *Trust, reciprocity, and community-based economic support*

Participants also highlighted the importance of trust and reciprocity within migrant communities. Many informal economic activities depended on relationships built over time through repeated interaction and mutual assistance.

Several participants described rotating savings groups, informal credit arrangements, and collective purchasing schemes that enabled business development despite limited access to formal financial institutions. One female participant explained:

“A group of ten women contributes money every month. Each month, one member receives the total amount collected. Through this system, I managed to buy equipment for my food business. Banks would never lend money to someone in my situation, but our savings group made it possible.” (E. M., 12 August 2025).

These arrangements illustrate how trust-based relationships create economic opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

4.6 *Gendered experiences of informal economic participation*

Gender emerged as an important factor shaping migrants’ experiences within the informal economy. Female participants often described balancing income-generating activities with childcare responsibilities and domestic obligations.

Many women explained that they selected economic activities that could be conducted from home or close to their residences in order to accommodate family responsibilities. A Congolese mother of four explained:

"I wake up before sunrise to prepare food for my children before they leave for school. During the day, I cook meals that I sell to customers from my room. While serving customers, I am also cleaning, helping children with homework, and managing household responsibilities. Running a business and caring for a family at the same time is exhausting, but I have no alternative because I am responsible for supporting my children." (F. T., 15 August 2025).

These findings suggest that gender influences both opportunities and constraints within informal economic participation, with women often carrying multiple responsibilities simultaneously.

5 Conclusion

This study examined how African migrants in Durban mobilise informal economic networks to sustain their livelihoods within a context characterised by unemployment, economic exclusion, legal insecurity, and limited access to formal employment opportunities. The study sought to answer the research question of how African migrants utilise informal economic networks to survive and participate in Durban's urban economy despite the barriers they encounter in the formal labour market.

The findings demonstrate that exclusion from formal employment remains a significant challenge for many African migrants living in Durban. Participants reported facing multiple barriers, including documentation requirements, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, language difficulties, labour market competition, and xenophobic attitudes. These barriers often prevented migrants from accessing stable employment opportunities, forcing many to seek alternative means of livelihood within the informal economy.

The study further revealed that participation in informal economic activities is primarily a survival strategy rather than a matter of personal preference. Many participants entered informal economic activities after unsuccessful attempts to secure formal employment. Street trading, food vending, hairdressing, transportation services, mobile phone repairs, and other small-scale enterprises emerged as important sources of income that enabled migrants to meet basic household needs and support family members both locally and in their countries of origin.

A key finding of the study is the central role played by informal economic networks in sustaining migrant livelihoods. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of social relationships, including family members, friends, religious organisations, ethnic associations and community groups, in facilitating access to accommodation, employment opportunities, financial support, business information, and emotional assistance. These networks function as critical survival mechanisms that compensate for migrants' limited access to formal institutions and economic resources.

The findings also reveal that while informal economic activities provide opportunities for livelihood generation, they do not eliminate vulnerability. Participants described experiences of income instability, insecurity, police interventions, confiscation of goods, discrimination, and xenophobia. Consequently, migrants often operate under conditions of uncertainty where economic survival depends on their ability to adapt to changing circumstances continually. The study, therefore, highlights the dual nature of informality as both a source of opportunity and a source of ongoing precarity.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on migration, informality, and urban livelihoods by providing empirical evidence from Durban, a city that has received comparatively less scholarly attention than other South African urban centres. By focusing on the lived experiences of African migrants, the study demonstrates that informal economic networks are not merely supplementary support systems but constitute essential mechanisms through which migrants negotiate exclusion and sustain livelihoods in highly unequal urban environments.

The findings have important policy implications. First, there is a need for policies that facilitate greater economic inclusion of migrants through improved access to documentation processes, skills recognition, and employment opportunities. Second, municipal authorities should adopt more supportive approaches towards informal economic activities by recognising their role in livelihood creation and urban economic development. Third, interventions aimed at reducing xenophobia and discrimination remain critical for promoting social cohesion and improving migrants' access to economic opportunities. Finally, organisations

working with migrant communities should strengthen programmes that support entrepreneurship, business development, and community-based support networks.

Future research should expand understanding of migrant livelihoods by examining comparative experiences across different South African cities and exploring how local contexts shape economic opportunities and constraints. Further studies could also investigate the long-term sustainability of informal livelihoods, the experiences of undocumented migrants, and the gendered dimensions of economic survival within migrant communities.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that African migrants in Durban are not passive victims of economic exclusion but active agents who develop innovative strategies to navigate difficult urban environments. Through informal economic networks, migrants create pathways to survival, income generation, and social support despite operating under conditions of uncertainty and marginalisation. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing more inclusive urban and migration policies that recognise the contributions of migrants to the social and economic life of South African cities.

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