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How did refugees and migrants' solidarity initiatives become an intervention for disaster and humanitarian response during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town, South Africa?

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The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in South Africa has been profound and multifaceted. Refugees, that is, people who are vulnerable due to displacement, have faced a series of challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. These challenges include health risks, limited healthcare access, economic hardships, food insecurity, disruptions in education, mental health concerns, stigmatization, and xenophobia. The pandemic disrupted asylum procedures and hindered the delivery of humanitarian assistance. While there were efforts to address these issues, the highlighting the need for targeted support and policies to protect and assist this vulnerable population during and after the pandemic. Refugees and migrant communities are among the most vulnerable groups during disasters and humanitarian responses. This vulnerability could be exacerbated by their presence in foreign lands, where they are legitimately discriminated against due to illegality, unrecognized documents/permits, or simply being foreign. Additionally, when new arrivals or immigrant groups are perceived as poorly integrated or as rivaling locals for limited resources, declining public support might occasionally limit the scope for robust humanitarian protection measures. To minimize the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African government implemented a financial stimulus package that supported complimentary monitoring measures for the citizens. However, the government's response to refugees and migrants focused mainly on closing the land border, with limited social protection for refugees and asylum seekers. Perhaps the most significant benefit of COVID-19 was global solidarity to curb its spread and humanitarian assistance in the areas of health, finance, and other relief items such as food. One can assume that the collective self of the global community exhibited high levels of solidarity despite some discrimination being observed in the areas of vaccines. Indeed, disaster-stricken communities need solidarity, not charity, as observed during the pandemic. This article theorizes how the existing structure of solidarity scholarship purposefully incorporates both the necessity of tangible responses to people's needs and the alternative conceptions of participation and self-organization. This study utilized a qualitative approach, collecting data from selected migrant and refugee communities in urban centers of Cape Town, including participants from Bellville central business district (CBD), Parow Centre, Goodwood Centre, and Cape Town CBD, who provided humanitarian support during the pandemic. In total, seven interviews were carried out, and participants were selected depending on their availability using a combination of

purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were analyzed thematically based on the research question. The study drew on the pragmatic realities of refugees and migrants' solidarity initiatives and explored how they contributed to the COVID-19 humanitarian response in Cape Town, South Africa. This research aimed to investigate how solidarity initiatives led by refugees and migrants have functioned as interventions for disaster and humanitarian response in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town, South Africa. The study findings from participants revealed that members of refugee and migrant communities relied on a vital solidarity initiative as coping strategy in order to deal with the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine restrictions.

KEYWORDS

refugees, migrants, solidarity, humanitarian response, COVID-19 pandemic, Cape Town, South Africa

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the global economy and has posed a threat to people's lives and livelihoods. What started as a health crisis quickly escalated into a global economic crisis. Due to the interconnectedness of our world, many countries continue to experience an economic recession (Rasul et al., 2021). Recent studies have shown that pandemics are a global risk that can quickly spread around the world, regardless of their origin (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020; Rasul et al., 2021). In response, solidarity initiatives were undertaken by civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and United Nations member states to provide necessary support to vulnerable families and individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread suffering, especially with the implementation of lockdowns affecting mobility, commercial activities, and social interactions (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020).

This study discusses the concepts of solidarity initiatives and humanitarian practices in relation to refugees and migrants as coping strategies during shocks and stresses (Niemi et al., 2019). The conceptual framework further elaborates on these concepts and serves as the theoretical basis for the study. The research uses various concepts, including refugee, asylum seeker, community-based organization, solidarity initiative, social intervention, humanitarian response, and social capital, to describe the process and outcomes of solidarity among refugee and migrant communities, as well as the impact of humanitarian interventions on community members.

The pandemic had a significant impact on mobility in South Africa due to strict regulations that allowed people to leave their homes only for essential services such as food, medicine, and social grants (Parsanoglou, 2020; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020; Crawley, 2021). However, it is uncertain how many refugees and migrants benefited from government interventions because the online registration system did not accept asylum seeker documentation, except for those with refugee status, referred to as in Section 24. During the lockdown, NGOs that provide essential services to refugees and migrants faced challenges as movement restrictions made it difficult for refugees and migrants to access these services. Both government and NGO support were limited and not enough to meet their basic needs.

According to Rogge's (1994) refugee theory, migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, face numerous difficulties upon arrival and during their stay in the host country, such as barriers to housing,

work, education, marginalization, and exclusion. Nevertheless, South Africa is one of the several countries that have legally committed to protecting asylum seekers and refugees (Sebakwiye, 2020). The terms "refugee" and "asylum seeker" are frequently used interchangeably, although they have different meanings (Bidandi, 2018; Sebakwiye, 2020). According to Chapter 3 of the South African Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998, a person is legally recognized as a refugee if they are forced to leave their country of origin or nationality due to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events that seriously disrupt public order (Government Gazette, 1998). The South African Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998 defines the terms "asylum seeker temporary visa" and "refugee status" in sections 22 and 24, respectively (Government Gazette, 1998, p. 16–18). An asylum seeker temporary visa is a temporary document that allows a person to stay in South Africa while they apply for refugee recognition. The temporary document is valid for up to 6 months and can be extended while the process of determining their refugee status is in progress. Refugee status is a document given to a person who has been declared and recognized as a refugee (Sebakwiye, 2020). However, in the previously mentioned study, the terms migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were used interchangeably. The study referred to the mobility of people who moved from their home countries and crossed borders to South Africa.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants lacked government support in South Africa. Despite the lack of support from the government, many refugees and asylum seekers had existing solidarity initiatives in place, which enabled them to intervene and provide humanitarian assistance during the pandemic. Additionally, when migrants arrive in South Africa, they often register with associations from their countries of origin or tribal formations to maintain their culture and sense of belonging. Fundamental components of solidarity among migrants include mutual support, a common purpose, and recognition of interconnectedness, where the success of one's initiative contributes to the overall advancement of shared goals (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021). In Cape Town, South Africa, migrant-based associations, which are non-profit and non-governmental, work to improve the well-being of their members through shared responsibilities. Members pay an annual membership fee that acts as insurance to assist them in times of need. Solidarity initiatives create obligations and responsibilities to care for community members, taking into account shared vulnerabilities (Cantat, 2018). Members of migrant and refugee

communities have undertaken various activities to help those affected by the pandemic, preserving lives, minimizing suffering, and protecting human dignity. The concept of intervention, referring to initiatives aimed at improving the livelihoods of specific target groups and providing them with social benefits, is used in this study. These initiatives include humanitarian interventions benefiting vulnerable groups of refugees and migrants during the pandemic, among other forms of social intervention.

However, refugees and migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, encounter numerous obstacles, but they have bonded together to create support networks for each other, providing assistance with necessities such as food, housing, and even funeral arrangements. Research indicates that, in the face of adversity, refugees and migrants tend to form strong connections with others from their home country based on factors such as tribe, food, cultural traditions, and financial support (Bauder and Juffs, 2020). This solidarity among migrants is considered a compassionate practice rooted in hospitality and community spirit (Millner, 2011).

Building migrant solidarity involves a range of activities such as regular community meetings, social gatherings, financial lending schemes, traditional food, and language. These activities contribute to the creation of social capital, which is the accumulation of potential and actual resources connected to strong interpersonal connections and social networks within a community (Bourdieu, 1983). Cultivating these vital relationships is crucial for refugees and migrants because it enables them to effectively navigate challenges and difficulties. It also promotes social integration and humanitarian support, fosters community-building initiatives, facilitates advice and information exchange, and mobilizes savings.

Recent studies on migrant solidarity and humanitarian practices in countries such as Germany and the United States have shown that local residents often provide assistance to refugees (Koos and Seibel, 2019). Della-Porta (2018) suggests that humanitarianism in these countries can also be seen as a form of political activism. In Cape Town, however, refugees are marginalized and rely primarily on their formal associations for support. Despite the significant challenges brought on by COVID-19, refugees and migrants were able to offer support to each other through their tribal associations or collective national umbrella associations. Despite facing health risks, limited access to healthcare, economic struggles, and food insecurity, disruptions in education, mental health concerns, stigmatization, and xenophobia - all of which were exacerbated by the pandemic - they were able to navigate this complex situation and assist the vulnerable population within their respective communities during and after the pandemic. Solidarity, in the context of this, is defined as a mutual bond between multiple entities, in which each one depends on the others, as well as a commitment in which individuals or associations pledge to assist the less fortunate in their community.

Moreover, recent research has shown that local individuals and community initiatives are stepping in to provide humanitarian aid to those in need, replacing the traditional large aid organizations (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019). However, these community efforts are not as prevalent in the context of refugee and migrant communities in South Africa compared to Europe and other regions (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019). In their study "Beyond Crisis Management," Haaland and Wallevik (2019) offer a practical perspective on how people can come together to help others during times of crisis. While their research does not directly relate to COVID-19, it does provide

valuable insights for this study, particularly in the context of individuals voluntarily coming together to support those in need. This is evident in Cape Town, where refugee and migrant associations have organized themselves to assist one another before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of solidarity, therefore, unites people in aiding those in need. It is important to note that migrant associations and their leaders played a significant role in providing essential services to the majority of refugees and migrants during the pandemic in Cape Town (Stewart et al., 2008; Posel and Casale, 2021). While the study conducted in Greece by Kalogeraki (2020) does not directly relate to COVID-19, its findings demonstrate the various roles that formal and informal migrant organizations or associations play in meeting migrant needs during times of crisis. Fechter and Schwittay (2019) argue that community aid practices in the refugee context have specific characteristics and raise different but overlapping theoretical issues, particularly in the context of humanitarian intervention during disasters.

Nonetheless, this empirical research reviewed a relatively large number of theoretical constructs that provide insights into social participation among migrants and narratives about solidarity among refugee communities and their humanitarian responses during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Niemi et al., 2019; Banulescu-Bogdan, 2022). In doing so, the study included a varying degree of understanding of the main concepts of solidarity initiative and humanitarian actions.

The concept of solidarity initiatives involves bringing people together through shared activities to raise awareness about important societal issues such as the environment, equal rights, and social exclusion. Both members and the group are grateful for these initiatives (Vine and Greenwood, 2021). On the other hand, a humanitarian intervention refers to the activities of people or organizations that support those affected by natural disasters and social and political conflicts to save lives, reduce suffering, and uphold the human dignity and rights of individuals (Pantuliano, 2014). In the context of this research, the commonly used phrase "we live together, we fight together" serves as an example of how solidarity activities are seen as paradigms of creative and alternative ways of fighting together among refugee and migrant communities. These efforts have arisen to address the tangible and urgent needs of community members, and they can go beyond their specific locations and circumstances. Sometimes locals can benefit from the solidarity activities of refugees and migrants. While searching for and creating new ideas of participation and self-organization, spaces of common life and struggle also strive to solve pressing matters. Members of these communities foster solidarity among themselves through social capital characterized by cooperative intergroup interaction. This study showed tremendous solidarity with members of refugee and migrant communities, which has been echoed in certain intervention responses to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely recognized that members of marginalized groups such as refugees and migrant communities can fight against harmful societal stereotypes by working together and in environments where people construct social capital and perform positive self-representations.

This research aimed to investigate how solidarity initiatives led by refugees and migrants have functioned as interventions for disaster and humanitarian response in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town, South Africa. This research is focused on communities of refugees and migrants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

(DRC), Uganda, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda, and Somalia residing in urban centers of Cape Town, South Africa, including Parow Centre, Bellville central business district (CBD), Goodwood Centre, and Cape Town CBD. These communities are organized by national-level associations such as the Cameroonian Refugee Association of South Africa, the Somali Association of South Africa, and the Rwandan Refugee Association of South Africa. The research aimed to analyze research gaps and gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of migrant solidarity initiatives. The specific problem that the research intends to address is explained, and the methodology of the study is outlined before embarking upon the empirical analysis.

2 The problem

The South African government implemented a financial stimulus package to support vulnerable citizens during the pandemic. However, they quickly closed the land border to prevent new arrivals, leaving refugees and asylum seekers with limited social protection. Since they do not fall under government protection as provided in the 1951 United Nations Convention for refugees, new arrivals and migrant categories were mostly ignored during the pandemic. This issue was exacerbated by the urban refugee policy adopted by the South African government, which made it difficult for many refugees and asylum seekers to receive assistance due to issues of legality and documentation. As a result, asylum seekers and undocumented individuals had to rely on support initiatives and humanitarian aid from their respective communities. In addition to the challenges of health risks, limited healthcare access, economic hardships, food insecurity, disruptions in education, mental health concerns, stigmatization, and xenophobia, refugees and asylum seekers also faced deep unequal treatment during the pandemic. For example, a study by Mukumbang et al. (2020) highlights this issue. Another study by Mushomi et al. (2022) confirms that the humanitarian response ignored the migrant category. However, it is important to note that the authors above did not address the significant role played by refugee and migrant solidarity initiatives in relation to the humanitarian response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design to facilitate the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Data were collected using a questionnaire guide from key refugee and migrant leaders from various communities in South Africa, including Cape Town. The selection of the sample was based on the availability and easy access of refugee and migrant communities, as well as the resources of the researchers. The study included communities of refugees and migrants from the DRC, Uganda, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda, and Somalia residing in South Africa, specifically in Cape Town. The exclusion criteria were set based on (1) the lack of information on communities, (2) limited access to communities, and (3) limited resources of researchers. Although the study aimed to reach more refugee and migrant communities, specifically from Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Angola, and Mozambique, it was limited by a lack of information and

resources. Therefore, communities from these countries were excluded from the sample population.

As we stated previously, during the inclusion criteria, a total of seven community leaders from seven nationalities were selected based on their availability. Consent was obtained from the participants prior to scheduling the interview date and time. Initially, purposive sampling was used to select some refugees and migrant communities residing in Cape Town that were known to the researchers. Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to extend the sample and reach more refugee and migrant communities. This extension has been achieved by asking the first wave of participant referrals from the refugee and migrant communities and our personal relationships with some of the leaders to refer to other respondents known to them to be interviewed. For this study, the sample size selected is seven participants. The researchers interviewed each respondent, and the length of each interview was expected to take between 45 and 60 min. We conducted face-to-face conversations with four of the participants, while the rest were reached via telephone. The study themes were developed and analyzed according to the study title and research question. The researchers constructed their own conceptual framework to evaluate subjective solidarity initiatives among refugee and migrant communities and humanitarian responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using research findings from fieldwork, researchers attempted to provide conceptual insights from an embodied and contextual perspective. Before data collection, participants were provided with an informed consent form for the purpose of the study. They were reassured of anonymity, knowing that the collected data would be treated with confidentiality and would only be used for the study being carried out. Pseudonym names, such as Interview No 1, were used. Researchers investigate the pathway in which various aspects of solidarity initiative within communities are linked to outcomes related to social capital and internal humanitarian interventions in the pandemic. This construct was classified under the umbrella concept of solidarity initiative within refugee and migrant communities.

4 Data analysis and findings

4.1 Introduction

The primary objective of the study was to comprehend and evaluate the dynamics of the South African communities of refugees and migrants with regard to solidarity initiatives as an intervention for disaster and humanitarian response during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cape Town, South Africa. The task assigned in this particular scenario was to conduct open-ended questioning using a questionnaire guide with key refugee and migrant leaders. Data were collected from qualitative semi-structured interviews with face-to-face and remote phone interviews and will be analyzed using thematic content analysis. These interviews enabled participants to reflect on solidarity initiatives within their respective communities, specifically during the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This study also aimed to evaluate the extent of the impact of social support provided by community-based organizations that assist refugees and migrants, as well as the nature of social support provided by South Africans for their respective communities. Data were collected from refugees and migrants from the DRC, Uganda, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda, and Somalia residing

in Cape Town, South Africa. We observed that the refugee and migrant communities in question appear to be well-organized, with a leadership structure that includes a president, a vice president, a secretary, a vice secretary, a treasurer, and an advisory committee. These communities are made up of African immigrants who came from various African countries and settled in the urban and peri-urban areas of Cape Town, South Africa. The members of these communities include legal and undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who work in both formal and informal jobs such as transportation, cashiering, hairdressing, tailoring, street vending, restaurant services, and domestic work across Cape Town. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the daily livelihoods of these refugees and migrants as their survival depends on daily incomes from their various activities. Despite national COVID-19 lockdown measures, urban refugees and migrants were able to navigate through and beyond state and local barriers, relying on their social networks, interdependent relationships, and innovative interdependencies to survive. This study portrays members of the refugee and migrant communities as resourceful individuals who rely on multiple connections and innovative solutions to overcome their challenges.

4.2 The global COVID-19 pandemic and challenges to socioeconomic well-being: key factors in refugees and migrants' stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global crisis, impacting every aspect of our lives. It has disrupted economies and changed the way we interact with each other. Among the most vulnerable groups affected by this pandemic are refugees and migrants (Rodríguez et al., 2021). These marginalized communities face unique challenges that have worsened their stress levels and made it difficult for them to maintain their socioeconomic well-being. When asked to reflect on the key factors contributing to their stress, the majority of participants cited the economic impact as a significant factor. One participant mentioned the issue of job insecurity and the low quality of life for refugees and migrants. Since many of them work in low-paying jobs without job security, it makes them more vulnerable to job losses:

“Many of us rely on daily wages or informal jobs, which have been drastically reduced or completely wiped out due to lockdowns and economic slowdowns. As result, we are unable to meet our basic needs and provide for the families, leading to financial stress, anxiety and uncertainty about our tomorrow, I mean our future” (Interview No. 7, Cape Town, 10 November 2023).

In addition, not only are these individuals struggling to make ends meet, but some of them also face discrimination, exclusion, and xenophobia, especially undocumented migrants, which makes it difficult for them to access healthcare services. One had the following comment:

“Migrants are being blamed to deteriorate the economy of the country in terms of increase of unemployment crisis as well as the spread of the pandemics especially for those newcomers who kept coming during the lockdown. [...] Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there has been a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and

hate crimes. For instance, I have a testimony of undocumented migrants who came two months ago before the lockdown and were denied the access to healthcare services and this adds to our already existing trauma and feelings of isolation, fear of being killed and making it even harder for us to cope with the challenges brought by this pandemic” (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Furthermore, one of the other key factors contributing to the stress experienced by refugees and migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic is their displacement status. Being uprooted from their homes and forced to flee their home countries due to conflicts, persecution, or seeking economic opportunities, these individuals are already in a state of vulnerability. The very nature of their displacements makes it difficult for refugees and migrants to access healthcare and other necessities, making them a breeding ground for the pandemic. One of the participants provided the following points:

“The strict lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed by the government have generated the mental health implications of multiple challenges for refugees and migrants in Cape Town. The uncertainty and fear of contracting the virus, coupled with the loss of livelihoods resulted a toll on the mental health of refugees and migrants. [...] In our community, we experienced a few cases where some members developed mental health disorders including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder” (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

The evidence extracted from the above information clearly shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a multitude of challenges to the socioeconomic well-being of refugees and migrants. From limited access to healthcare to economic and social instability, this vulnerable group has been greatly affected. These factors contribute to the already heightened stress levels in their host refugee and migrant communities, which in essence explains the reason for their solidarity.

Moreover, according to most participants, the solidarity initiatives were largely founded before 1994 and early 2000, when migration policies in South Africa were conservative and rigid and did not allow refugees and migrants to study or work, for example. Therefore, it was on this basis that people from different nationalities had to come together to form solidarity initiatives in support of one another. In terms of membership, participants indicated that one has to be a citizen of a particular country and has to pay an annual membership fee. For example, Cameroonians pay R 700 membership fee *per annum*, and Ugandans pay R 400 *per annum*, which is payable into the bank account of the association. This initiative cuts across migrant communities in Cape Town. However, the difference between these groups is that, when a member dies, the president or chairperson mobilizes the members to contribute toward the burial or repatriation of the body. The same can be said for marriage and so on. However, apart from Rwandese, Congolese, and Somalis, the rest contribute money from members and repatriate the bodies of their members for burial. Participants indicated having a functional executive committee elected by members of a particular nationality for a 2-year term or a 4-year one, depending on the constitution. The chairperson or president becomes head of the community and is answerable to the needs that might arise. When asked about the numbers, one participant from Uganda indicated that there were more than 8,000 registered members. To be precise, the figures vary among countries.

4.3 Solidarity initiative as the main social intervention and humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic from the refugee and migrant communities' perspective

In a study examining refugee and migrant solidarities during the global COVID-19 pandemic, participants were asked to reflect on how their communities initiated and utilized social interventions and humanitarian responses to the pandemic. All participants indicated different strategies used within their communities to overcome challenges resulting from the pandemic. The main strategy was solidarity among community members, providing social assistance and intervention to respond to various struggles raised by the pandemic. The majority of the participants witnessed community members contributing money and supporting each other, especially those who were vulnerable. One participant explained the framework of collective support within their community used during the pandemic:

“As a community we met and collected money from our members, then assisted those in need. Since there was no work, we depended on each other, bought food and shared with the vulnerable people in our group” (Interview No. 4, Cape Town, 08 November 2023).

The majority of the participants highlighted the role of social capital in solidarity, including social savings such as money lending schemes, and social networks, such as contributions for social assistance and sharing information through social media platforms. It has been suggested that the development of social capital is closely related to social participation, which refers to involvement in social activities, structures, and organizations. As a result, the production of social capital may have positive effects on health (Niemi et al., 2019). One of the respondents mentioned an example where the community pooled money from its savings to buy and share food among its members. The community also provided air tickets to those members who wished to return home (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023). He further commented on the nature of social capital from their solidarity initiative within the organization:

“Our savings come from membership fees and interest made from our money lending scheme called ‘Njanji’. Besides [our main association], some of our people got various types of aid or assistance from their tribal associations and saving schemes. To be precise, the tribal associations are independent entities who are also subscribed to our national association [...]. Perhaps what to add is that our solidarity has been shaped based on our identity and social networking” (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Some participants have mentioned the use of social media platforms as a key strategic tool for calling for assistance for vulnerable members during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant provided the following comments and feedback:

“We had a WhatsApp platform to reach out for support [...]. As our association ‘Agaliwamu’ meaning solidarity, we have been collectively providing humanitarian assistance for years in different disasters such as death. Covid-19 simply taught us to be more

prepared so that we can support our people like the new comers with start-up capital, finding work, assisting those who wish to continue with studies and so on. [...] During the pandemic, we assisted children who lost their parents and we have since opened up a fund to educate them, including uniforms and other materials” we do this because we are far away from home and no one can help us other ourselves. Being in exile has helped us to stay united, something we do have while at home in Uganda (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

He further noted that the social capital from their community also includes donations, which are sometimes used to assist homeless people (locals) in Cape Town.

“...We largely relied on tribal associations to provide for the assistance (food, rentals, drinks, sugar, money and other essentials) needed. The money we provided came from community donations and savings as well. [...] We occasionally assist the homeless locals as a gesture of being hosted by their government” (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

The research shows that refugees and migrants use social media to share information about potential issues within their communities and to seek help from NGOs and churches. One participant argued that social media platforms were used to seek food and non-food assistance from different NGOs and churches:

“People in the community helped each other by using WhatsApp platform and telephone calls to ask assistance to different Non-Government Organisation to be assisted such as Adonis Musati, Scalabrini, UCT Refugee Law Clinic and different Congolese Churches” (Interview No. 7, Cape Town, 10 November 2023).

The comments above show that friendship and relationship resources are crucial for the solidarity of members of refugee and migrant communities. These resources helped them survive during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing support and coping strategies. The participants' feedback indicates that refugees and migrants relied on social capital, such as saving schemes and social networks, to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. This study aimed to explore how the solidarity initiatives of refugee and migrant communities served as intervention tools and humanitarian responses to the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4 Practices of solidarity: refugees and migrants' resilience, social interventions, and practical responses in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

Apart from voluntary contributions from community members, refugee and migrant communities, particularly in the city of Cape Town, receive limited external support and donations from the government and NGOs, which are not enough to cover all the basic needs of community members. The participants in this study viewed solidarity initiatives as the only tool that would have been enhanced among communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of self-resilience, interventions, and practical responses to tackle the

challenges and effects of the pandemic. Additionally, participants were asked to extensively reflect on the form of humanitarian intervention and practical responses that marked their solidarity initiative during the pandemic. Humanitarian interventions and practical responses span a wide range of social activities among community members beyond including food assistance, protection, education, healthcare, and shelter. The findings revealed that the majority of humanitarian intervention assistance described by participants in this study was provided in the form of in-kind goods, support, and services. The goods or support include food parcels, free lunch distribution, healthcare emergency equipment (such as home hygienic and sanitary supplies), cash, and vouchers, while services include counseling and sharing information about the pandemic and advice. These were part of collective and practical responses to prevent or alleviate suffering among the community members against the impact of the pandemic. One of the participants could quite recollect how they provided shelter to members of the communities and locals, food parcels, and money for rent for those who lost their job income due to the effect of the national COVID-19 lockdown (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the majority of the participants witnessed that the major concern of refugee and migrant communities was to provide emergency services for the members. However, most importantly, their concern was to care about their basic needs and services and to comfort those who lost their loved ones due to the pandemic. One of the stakeholders witnessed various activities delivering food assistance door-to-door for their community members:

“We provided food items like rice, beans, sugar, tea, and vegetables etc. We also buried those who sadly passed on due to the pandemic” (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Information provided by the respondents indicates an aspiration for a more united community among people of low status who share the same struggle and interests in the host country. In addition, this aspiration shows a united community that organizes itself (stronger together) to help its members survive the shocks and stresses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the findings of the study identify the main purpose of solidarity initiatives as humanitarian interventions and practical responses provided by refugee and migrant communities during the pandemic. These organizations share a common goal and interests, which are to serve the community members by offering them emergency services in the form of goods and services, including social assistance for basic needs and services, access to primary healthcare, housing, and funeral arrangements.

4.5 Reviewing social impact on refugees and migrants through a lens of solidarity initiative among their communities as the COVID-19 response

In this study, participants were asked to reflect on their desired impact on their community brought by the solidarity initiatives during the pandemic. Participants argued that refugee and migrant communities stand for legitimate umbrellas that assist and protect community members. Information gleaned from the interview discussions revealed that the solidarity initiated by refugees and

migrants within their communities has been very useful and has positively impacted their lives during COVID-19 and beyond. To date, it is still evident that refugees and migrants, as members of their communities, have deeply realized the importance of working together in partnership. This realization has had an impact on the interaction between community members as well as the degree to which power and trust dynamics play a role in such a partnership. More explicitly, the findings indicate that solidarity initiatives resulting from the efforts of the respective communities have impacted the lives of members of the community and beyond in different ways. For instance, food assistance, which was common for all respective communities, made a huge impact on saving the lives of children and those who lost job income during the pandemic lockdown, as well as some homeless locals. One participant mentioned the success of the food parcel distribution as such assistance made a positive impact on the lives of international migrant students who could no longer receive assistance from home due to the travel restrictions of the lockdown:

“We provided social support and food to the needy especially international students since they could no longer receive money from home” (Interview No. 4, Cape Town, 08 November 2023).

Additionally, the findings also revealed that the majority of participants witnessed the humanitarian intervention assistance from the refugee and migrant communities having significant impacts on the lives of their members who were not eligible for the South African government’s COVID-19 relief mechanisms. In this stance, one of the participants noted:

“We made a very huge impact since many of our people did not qualify for state Covid-19 relief distress fund. As indicated earlier, we provided food since it was part of the essential services” (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Furthermore, another participant commented that the humanitarian intervention assistance from their community had a greater impact on the undocumented migrants as they would not have survived the pandemic due to the lack of legal documents (Interview No. 2, Cape Town, 06 November 2023). He further noted that the COVID-19 pandemic came when their solidarity initiative was already positively impacting the lives of members within their community:

“[...] many of our people have document issues especially newcomers. During the pandemic, we had no choice but to use our own efforts in order to help them. By the way, we have always had the impact even before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, assist newcomers settle, find them some jobs to do and shelter. So, the pandemic came when we were already experiencing the significant impact of solidarity initiative within our migrant communities” (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

Clearly, from the results of this study, the solidarity initiative of refugee and migrant communities had a significant impact on needy community members and some locals. The findings indicated that the lives of undocumented migrants, international migrant students, and other disadvantaged members of the respective communities, as well as some of the homeless locals,

have been sustained by the solidarity initiatives of these respective refugee and migrant communities.

4.6 Potential responses of the south African government in support of refugees and migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic

Finally, participants in this study were asked to reflect on social support benefits from the South African government during the pandemic. In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted a variety of families and individuals, including migrants and refugees. In addition, their fundamental framework for a structured life or mode of living was hit by the pandemic. This situation is explained by the significant disruption of daily routines such as going to work during the working days, going to school, using public transportation, going out shopping, engaging in different recreational activities such as sports and community events, interacting with families in public, and attending religious events. However, South Africa's COVID-19 relief measures in response to the effects of the pandemic mostly excluded refugees and migrants in South Africa. As documented by the [South African Institute of Race Relations \(IRR\) \(2020\)](#), the South African government's responses to the pandemic include social order and social protection such as police security protection, insurance-based income relief, Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF)-based income relief, government relief packages of food distribution, and South Africa Social Security Agency (SASSA) grants, but these were only available to refugees and migrants with a legal immigration status. As documented by the [South African Institute of Race Relations \(IRR, 2020\)](#), the South African government's responses to the pandemic include social order and social protection such as police security protection, insurance-based income relief, Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF)-based income relief, government relief package of food distribution and SASSA grants (South Africa Social Security Agency) but these were only available to refugees and migrants with immigration legal status.

In some areas, the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to a spike in togetherness, particularly during the early stages of the public health crisis, while in other places, it had the opposite effect, weakening external support for migrants and refugees, especially asylum seekers (Section 22 of the Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998), undocumented migrants, and new arrivals. The majority of the participants recalled that it was very difficult to obtain government support. One of the participants noted that refugees and migrants who could have accessed government support in response to the pandemic in the form of UIF-based income relief and government relief packages for food distribution were those with permanent residence and formal employment (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023). He further commented on the government's social order for possible xenophobic threats:

“People who could have benefited were those with permanent residents and with formal employment. Those with the refugee permit (section 24), struggled since application for government support was done online. The system used to reject their applications at times and luckily, we filled that space for them as

well using our solidarity intervention. [...] As you know, xenophobia is real and it was clear during the pandemic, so the South African Police Services (SAPS) had to intervene in order to maintain the security (Interview No. 1, Cape Town, 06 November 2023).

As clearly shown in the findings above, there were various support initiatives made available by the South African government in response to the pandemic, but they were very limited, and refugees and migrants were hardly able to access them. This challenge negatively impacted the livelihoods of refugees and migrants, and only their solidarity initiative became an alternative solution as a humanitarian intervention and coping strategy to overcome the challenges caused by the pandemic.

5 Conclusion

This study examines how refugees and migrants in Cape Town, South Africa, have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through their solidarity initiatives. The study focuses on seven communities from the DRC, Uganda, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda, and Somalia, residing in the urban centers of Cape Town, namely, Bellville CBD, Parow Centre, Goodwood Centre, and Cape Town CBD. The study uses qualitative indicators such as practices of solidarity, nature of humanitarian interventions, practical responses, impacts resulting from solidarity actions, and South African government social support to gather information regarding the contribution of solidarity initiatives by refugees and migrants to the COVID-19 response. The study revealed that refugees and migrants from specific nationalities relied on a crucial solidarity initiative as a coping mechanism in response to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine measures. While the South African government increased cash-based assistance for citizens in response to COVID-19, this assistance often only covered refugees, as outlined in Section 24 of the South African Refugee Act No.130 of 1998. Additionally, NGOs provided refugees with various forms of support, including food and non-food assistance as the pandemic put their health, livelihoods, and security at risk. However, the delivery of this assistance, both from the government and NGOs, remained a challenge for migrants and refugees, and it was insufficient to cover all their basic needs during the quarantine measures. Despite limited external support, refugees and migrants used their solidarity initiative as a coping strategy to address the challenges caused by the pandemic.

The present study has some limitations. In the mapped research field, several refugee and migrant communities in Cape Town should have been included in the research population sample to examine the solidarity initiative over a large sample size of refugee and migrant communities. Unfortunately, researchers have been challenged by the lack of information and easy access to the communities of refugees and migrants. In addition, the resources of researchers were limited. Additionally, the study shows that much of the information provided by community leaders lacks the precise number of affected community members by the pandemic and to what extent humanitarian interventions have impacted them. The mixed method, both qualitative and quantitative, could have included a large number of community members as well as leaders, inevitably translating to a limitation regarding the results from research findings. The practical challenges associated with recruiting a large population of participants

and conducting this study on a large scale with representative samples that include leaders and members of refugee and migrant communities contribute to this limitation. Therefore, the research gaps that the current study highlights as being critical for further research include the absence of sound and comprehensive methodological approaches and measurable indicators of solidarity initiatives.

Despite these limitations, the present study also has some strengths. Based on the extensive investigation of solidarity initiatives on refugees and migrants staying in the cities, Cape Town in particular, this qualitative study offers an exceptionally thorough analysis of a significant but underestimated concept of solidarity initiatives within refugee and migrant communities. Despite the limited resources at their disposal, the key informants (community leaders) observed that the effectiveness of the communities was negatively impacted by the absence of financial resources, the lack of support from government bodies or other organizations, and a negative attitude toward migrants, including both refugees and asylum seekers. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the lived experiences of refugees and migrants in the urban context of Cape Town showed the success of solidarity initiatives and self-reliance within themselves, which would have been different if they were in refugee camps as these mostly relied on external support. Intercity refugee migration and its self-reliance model are currently less well understood, which is a critical research gap that needs further research.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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