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**An Exploration of the Livelihood Strategies of  
Durban Congolese Refugees**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates Congolese refugees' economic activities in Durban in order to understand why some refugees adapt and integrate in the local economy whereas others fail and migrate to refugee camps outside South Africa. I use the concept of social exclusion to understand refugee action, and highlight the importance of social networks as a form social capital among refugees.

Quantitative data revealed that Congolese refugees are skilled and heterogeneous from various viewpoints. Their survival is based on a wide range of economic activities in both the informal and the formal economy. Income is also generated via the transfer of monies between Durban and other South African Cities, and between South Africa and other countries including the DRC.

Qualitative data further revealed that social networks are key to their livelihood strategies. These social networks may be positive or negative. Social exclusion, exploitation and xenophobia are the main problems that Congolese refugees face on a daily basis. Xenophobia is a result of perceived or real competition over scarce resources. Mistrust is an Achilles heel of this community for numerous reasons and represents a permanent threat and source of community fragmentation. The proliferation of small churches, ethnical political parties and self-help projects is symptomatic of this fragmentation.

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## Introduction

In 1997, four million refugees (UNHCR, 1997; cited in Siddique, 2001: 284) left their native lands in Africa and relied on the generosity of the international community and receiving countries in order to survive. The consequences of this huge movement of people on both sending and receiving countries, and the livelihood strategies of refugees in their host countries, including South Africa, remains under-researched.

Refugee migration is often a product of a partial or total breakdown of the state *vis-à-vis* provision of basic needs to its people in terms of human rights, socio-economic needs, and political opportunities. This breakdown may appear concurrently with repression by the state as a consequence of attempts to establish a new 'order.' It can also result from foreign invasion and the inability of the state to protect individuals who live within particular boundaries (Boswell, 2002: 1-5) such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Refugees from the DRC are the focus of this research.

Like other instances of migration, the current refugee movement from the Congo out across the world includes both the movements from the home country to a second country as well as the propensity to move from the second and nearest country to a third country. The first move may be caused by natural disasters and man-made tragedy. The second move often involves migration-supporting institutions such as humanitarian agencies, recruitment brokers or individual agents who get involved in these channels for economic gain and sometimes operate illegally. Migration supporting institutions can play quite contradictory roles - sometimes by playing key roles in illegal advice such as human trafficking but also sometimes being quite instrumental in developing and assisting existing social networks that are instrumental in supporting and perpetuating migration flows (Hugo, 2002: 34; Hyndman, 2002: 42; Massey *et al.*, 1998: 43; Arango, 2000: 291; Day and White, 2002: 18).

The arrival of refugees in their new host country, such as South Africa, worsens the xenophobic attitudes which may already exist since immigrants and refugees are considered to be a threat to the existing social fabric and, consequently, they are not easily integrated into the host society. To support their position, the proponents of anti-refugee campaigns accuse the latter of problematic behaviour such as bringing and spreading diseases (Pickering, 2001: 169), criminal activities and taking jobs from indigenous residents (van Nierkerk, 1995; Colyn, 1996; Salmon, 1996; Swanepoel, 1996; all cited in McDonald *et al.*, 1998: 8). As a result, policy-makers tighten immigration and labour policies thereby limiting further migration and excluding the refugee community already in the country from formal employment, social welfare and equal protection. Thus, the refugee community revives and strengthens both the informal and formal social networks in order to survive and adapt themselves in their new setting. Social networks may spontaneously appear between family members, friends and colleagues as a reaction to social exclusion. They also purposely emerge in organised communities in the form of refugee associations, ethnic organisations, professional ties, students' or neighbourhood organisations for the common good.

The research examines the livelihood strategies of Congolese refugees in Durban. This research argues that the Congolese refugee community in Durban remains poor and vulnerable as a consequence of their lack access to formal employment and social protection, trading licences and adequate access to trading sites in the informal economy in which they are active. This lack of access forces refugees to rely strongly on family ties to survive and thus exclude other people who do not belong to their close families. As a result, this situation remains a breeding ground for mistrust and further exclusion, and so struggles for inclusion occur in both Durban and the DRC.

The aim of this research is to understand how Durban DRC refugees integrate by examining how they organise their lives, get their first accommodation and first jobs, earn their living and cope with random events in the absence of citizenship; and secondly to tabulate and categorise these livelihoods.

The key questions addressed by the research are: What are the livelihood strategies of Durban DRC refugees? What role do social networks play in refugees' livelihoods? What role do officials and NGOs play in refugees' livelihood? And, what are some of the crucial problems experienced by refugees in Durban?

The importance of this particular study is to deepen academic understanding of Durban refugees' problems and coping mechanisms in the light of a lack of assistance from the authorities. It should further help both policy makers and the UNHCR in defining appropriate strategies to deal efficiently with the continuing influx of refugees.

## **Research design, methodology and methods of analysis**

In this research, participant observation and both structured and non-structured interviews with closed and open-ended questions were conducted at the home of interviewees and at "work" places (streets, taxi and bus ranks, markets, security sites, and formal offices for the lucky few). Participant observation was also used to cover the gap between interviews, questions and some relevant aspects of refugees' living strategies.

I used purposive sampling which consists of intentionally selecting the subjects from research interests (Babbie and Mouton, 1998: 166; Robson, 1993: 141; Babbie et al., 2001: 1142). As a result, my findings cannot be generalised because this method is not a probability sampling. I used a descriptive analysis for demographic and socio-economic data and NVIVO and the Constant Comparative Analysis for in-depth interview and participant observations. The two approaches support one another and permit the data to be reviewed in light of previous research and existing theories.

## Results and Data Analysis

### Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents

#### Gender and age

##### *Gender structure*

Table 1: Gender distribution of the sample

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of people</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	23	76.6
Female	7	23.3
Total	30	99.9

The majority of respondents, 76.6 percent, are males. Women represent a small portion of this population for diverse reasons including the fact that there are fewer women than men in the refugee population in Durban, and women are less willing to talk to strangers and thus to participate in this research. These statistics support Hunter and Skinner's findings on migrant traders which claim that in Durban women are under-represented among foreign traders. This contrasts with South African traders who are mainly women (Lund, 1998: 18; Lund, Nicholson and Skinner, 2000; cited in Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 9).

Tables 2 and 3 that follow are similar but they are purposely separated in order to investigate the possibility of trends regarding gender in both informal and formal sectors of the economy within the population under investigation in Durban

Table 2: Male distribution by sector of the economy

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of people</b>		<b>Percentage of economy</b>	
	<b>Informal</b>	<b>Formal</b>	<b>Informal</b>	<b>Formal</b>
	20	3	86.9	13.0



Table 2 reveals that 86.9 percent of male respondents work in the informal economy in areas such as hairdressing, shoemaking and repair, repairing appliance, or guarding cars. Given the lack of social security in this sector, lack of access to trading sites and licences, and the precarious conditions in which informal traders work, there is a reason to believe these livelihoods are not sustainable. There is also the constant influx of people into this sector from the formal sector due to either retrenchment or poor and non-marketable skills. This influx increases competition over space from which Congolese are excluded (Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 22-23). Only 13 percent of respondents work in the formal sector.

Table 3: Female distribution by sector of the economy

Gender	Number of people		Percentage of economy	
	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal
	6	1	85.7	14.2

Many females do unpaid housework, look after children, and are less willing than males to talk to outsiders. They are also, like their male counterparts, predominantly in the informal economy. The informal sector with its constraints and opportunities remains the main source of income for Congolese refugees in Durban regardless to their gender. However, women, by virtue of their status of being females, are likely to have more problems than men and consequently are more vulnerable.

### *Age structure*

Table 4: Age profile of the sample

Age	Frequency	% of total	Cumulative
11-20	2	6.7	6.7
21-30	20	66.7	73.4
31-40	4	13.3	86.7
41-50	1	3.3	90.0
51-60	1	3.3	93.3
61-70	2	6.7	100.0
Total	30	100.0	-

Age distribution of respondents revealed that the majority of respondents are young and fall into the 21-30 year age group, 66.7 percent, while 26.7 percent were older than 30 years and 6.7 percent were under 20 years. This research finding confirms the National Survey on refugees and asylum seekers which found, 'the average age of exiles in South Africa is 31 years (Mail & Guardian Online, December 11, 2003). It is also evident that both young and elderly people were represented in the sample. This finding confirms CASE's study (1995a: 6, as quoted by Lund, 1998: 20) in the Johannesburg CBD and Durban Metropolitan and Isipingo Study which revealed that 77 percent of respondents in the informal economy were between 25 and 49 years. This finding also supports May, Phelan and van Schalkwyk's findings (1997; as quoted by Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 10) that maintain that the majority of Durban traders were between 21 and 31.

*Age and gender distribution of the sample*

Table 5: Age/gender distribution of the sample

Age	Percentage of the Sample	
	Male	Female
11-20	6.7	0.0
21-30	46.7	16.6
31-40	13.3	3.3
41-50	3.3	0.0
51-60	3.3	0.0
61-70	3.3	3.3
Total	76.6	23.3

Most respondents, as table 5 shows, are males under the age of forty. Hunter and Skinner's (2002: 9) research on 'Foreign Street Traders Working in the Inner City Durban: Survey Results and Policy Dilemmas' supports these statistics and argues that there are more male than female informal traders. This distribution of the refugee population may be explained by two broad factors. Firstly, there are constraints that the journey to South Africa imposes on potential candidates who take the risk of travelling without proper documents. These limitations include lack of financial resources, sickness on the journey without appropriate treatment, police arrests and shooting during the illegal border-crossings, and wild animals in the Kruger National

Park. This finding may also be explained by a relative lack of interest in the elderly by the warlords in the DRC since this age group does not constitute a political or an economic threat to them when compared to younger people who are mainly targeted by the regular army, the traditional fighters, and rebels to join their ranks.

These limiting factors call for the rise of kinship and social networks, as well as a spirit of adventure which costs some unfortunate refugees their lives. Secondly, Congolese refugees find life on the streets as street traders, as car guards and as security guards very dangerous since they experience frequent violence. As a result, they prefer to leave their female counterparts where they live and where women feel relatively secure. Thirdly, females are shy to talk to strangers and to males in particular and were not happy to participate in the study while males were prepared to do so. Women who are married first need the permission of their husbands. The concept of gender equality does not mean to them that women can take part in interviews without the consent or presence of their spouses.

#### Education level, skills and training

Table 6: Education by gender

Category	Frequency by gender		% Sample category	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Under Std 5	1	0	3.3	0.0
Std 5-Std 10	11	4	36.6	13.3
Tertiary education (a)	11	2	36.6	6.6
PhD	0	1	0.0	3.3
Total	23	7	76.5	23.2

(a) Tertiary education was not necessary completed

Regarding education, table 6 reveals that 96.4 percent of respondents have been, at least, to secondary school. Even more significantly, 46.5 percent have at least some tertiary education. Although the sampling was judgemental according to particular features that the research aimed to explore and understand, it does not contradict other studies on migrants from Central Africa and the National Survey of 15 057

refugees and asylum seekers from 12 African countries (Mail & Guardian Online: December 11, 2003). Indeed, Kadima's (2001: 91) study in Johannesburg in the mid-1990s showed that Congolese nationals are relatively highly skilled. Since Congolese people move back and forth between South African cities, this finding can, to some extent, be applied in Durban. The National Survey (Mail & Guardian Online, December 11, 2003) revealed that 'nearly a third of refugees and asylum seekers were tertiary students before they came to South Africa.' In another study on, 'Foreign Street Traders Working in the Inner City Durban: Survey Results and Policy Dilemmas', Hunter and Skinner (2002: 13) revealed that 71 percent of foreign traders have had some secondary education whereas only five percent have no formal education.

Concerning gender, age, education and previous occupation; and employment type, current occupation and household income, 50 percent of respondents were students back home whereas the other half of respondents were working in the DRC. Among those working, 60 percent did get jobs in the field of their qualification back home. The National Survey made similar findings on refugees and asylum seekers which argue 'almost 70 percent of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa held skilled or semi-skilled jobs in their countries of origin' (Mail & Guardian Online, December 11, 2003). Yet, once in Durban, respondents reviewed their expectations in order to accommodate themselves to their host country. That is why, in both the formal and informal economy, one may find a wide range of people from primary to tertiary education. Artisans such as those involved in appliance repair are using skills learned in their own country and enjoy being in this field.

Education, previous and current occupation and income

Table 7: Gender, age, education and previous occupation; and employment type, current occupation and household monthly income

Gender	Age	Education	Previous occ	Employ Type	Current occ	hhminc
Male	22	Secondary	Student	Self-employment	Hairdresser	1200
Male	32	Tertiary *	Student	Wage-employment	Security guard	1200
Male	21	Secondary	Student	Unemployed	-	4000
Male	28	Tertiary *	Student	Self-employment	Car guard & stu	1200
Male	17	Secondary	Student	Self-employment	Hairdresser	1600
Female	24	Secondary	Student	Wage-employment	Hairdresser	1800
Female	20	Secondary	Student	Wage-employment	Hairdresser	500
Female	23	Secondary	Student	Wage-employment	Hairdresser	1400
Male	22	Secondary	Student	Self-employment	Hairdresser	1600
Male	24	Tertiary*	Student	Self-employment	Car guard	1400
Male	23	Secondary	Student	Self-employment	Car guard	1200
Male	22	Secondary	Student	Wage-employment	Hairdresser	800
Male	33	B.Com*	Student	Wage-employment	Security guard	1800
Female	21	Secondary	Student	Self-employment	Car guard	1000
Male	28	Technique	Electronic Repair	Self-employment	Electro Repair	5000
Male	28	Technique	Electronic Repair	Self-employment	Electro Repair	5000
Male	30	Technique	Electronic Repair	Self-employment	Electro Repair	4800
Male	37	Special	Teacher	Wage-employment	Security guard	3000
Male	38	Tertiary	Teacher	Wage-employment	Teacher	2360
Male	27	Tertiary	Teacher	Self-employment	Shoemaker	2000
Male	30	Tertiary	Accountant	Self-employment	Shoemaker	4200
Male	28	Primary	Trader	Self-employment	Car guard	1800
Male	63	Technique	Carpenter	Wage-employment	Security guard	3400
Male	51	Tertiary	HOD Railways	Unemployed	-	4000
Male	38	Tertiary	Nurse	Self-employment	Informal trader	4400
Female	30	Tertiary	Imm officer	Wage-employment	Security guard	2600*
Male	30	Technique	Agricultural Techn	Wage-employment	Hairdresser	700
Female	32	Tertiary	Social worker	Self-employment	Car guard	1000
Male	19	Tertiary *	Student	Self-employment	Shoemaker	1000
Female	62	PhD	Lecturer & Act	Unemployed	-	6500

act = human rights activist

Agricultural Techn = Agricultural Technician

current occu = current occupation in Durban

employ type = employment type

Imm officer = immigration officer

hhminc = household monthly income

previous occu = previous occupation in the DRC

secondary\* = secondary education unfinished

Tertiary\* = tertiary education incomplete

Previous education matters in income generating activities although I did not explore this in detail given the focus of this research is not on the links between education and earning. In fact, eighty percent of respondents who completed at least a secondary education are employed or self-employed in activities which provide, or if unemployed receive remittances of, at least R1800. Thus, the level of education strongly impacts household monthly income. This is more visible in 'electronic repair'<sup>1</sup> in which respondents performed the same activities as they did back home.

Household monthly income does not necessary come from individuals' economic activities. It derives also from a wide range of transactions, whenever necessary, between Durban and other cities of South Africa, and between South Africa and different countries around the world including the DRC from where respondents from wealthy backgrounds are still receiving money from their parents. It was not easy to capture remittances separately from wage and self-employment because respondents were reluctant to talk about these issues except for respondents who were unemployed and one security guard. The latter, for instance, revealed to the researcher that he/she works for R1400 and receives R1200 monthly from relatives outside South Africa.

There is, to some extent, gender discrepancy *vis-à-vis* economic activities resulting from culturally perceived as well as real threats in terms of costs and benefits that different income generating activities present. In fact, female respondents feel that working as a security guard is very dangerous for them due to long hours, bad working conditions such as rain, cold, and a lack of social protection. That is why, only 14.2 percent of female respondents work as security guards. Female respondents prefer to work as hairdressers and car guards. The reason behind this choice includes

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<sup>1</sup> DRC refugees who got formal training (from schools back home) or informal training (learning by doing) in electronics work in the same field in Durban as back home. They repair electronic and electric appliances including microwaves, TV, radio, video cassette recorders, etc.

flexible working conditions, a relatively secure environment and previous experience in the field such as hairdressing.

Regarding working as a car guard, women like this type of employment because it requires no training and basically they are self-employed. Respondents perceive working as a security guard as very dangerous. Yet, regardless of the potential threats that security guarding presents, male respondents and particularly male household heads prefer to work as security guards in the quest for economic activities with high and regular income insecurity. They are also self-employed due to the flexibility of working hours in this sector and the fact that they face less financial pressure; whereas a small group of mature respondents are wage-employed. Young and single people do not have the same financial problems as married people who are forced to work at all costs in order to support their families.

#### Marital status, family size and residence

Table 8: Marital status by gender

Status	Frequency by Gender		% of Sample Category		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Married	8	0	26.6	0	26.6
Widowed	1	1	3.3	3.3	6.6
Divorced	0	1	0.0	3.3	3.3
Single	12	3	40.0	10.0	50.0
Living Together	2	2	6.6	6.6	13.2
Total	23	7	76.5	23.2	99.6

Table 8 revealed that 50 percent of the participants have never been married, 26.6 percent were married, 13.2 percent 'Living Together', and the remainder are widowed or divorced. More men were single, followed by married, than any other marital status. Single people, including widowed and divorced, constitute the majority of the Durban Congolese community. One of the reasons may be that it is easier for single people to travel without travel documents from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Durban compared to married couples and married couples with children. People

who cohabit without getting officially married offend the Congolese who are culturally conservative. Indeed, cohabitation is a rare phenomenon in the Congo and there it is considered as perverted behaviour (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 21).

### Household characteristics

#### *Residence on arrival*

Table 9: Residence on arrival for males (as percentages of all males)

Sleeping on the beach	Hospital	Police Station	DRC friends		Others (a)	Total
			Same Tribe	Diff. Tribe		
4.3	4.3	17.3	39.1	30.4	4.3	99.7

(a) Others refer to Congolese sharing residence with others nationalities including South Africans and accommodation provided by churches and mosques.

On the subject of residence, this study revealed that there is strong solidarity amongst Congolese refugees. On arrival most of my respondents found accommodation with Congolese belonging either to the same tribe or different tribes who came during the earlier waves of immigration or asylum seeking in South Africa. Indeed, 39.1 percent of male respondents found accommodation with those from the same tribe while 69.5 percent of males in the sample spent their first nights in South Africa with their countrymen, whether from the same tribe or a different tribe.

Also important is the fact that South African individuals and the voluntary sector played, to some extent, the role of 'migrant supporting institutions' (Massey et al., 1998: 43) since they provide advantages to potential migrants in offering them information about migration routes and costs, and temporary residence on arrival. In fact, only 4.3 percent of males interviewed received their first accommodation from non-Congolese people and 25.9 percent of males in the sample, spent the first nights either on the beach, at the hospital or at a police station for various reasons.



Table 10: Residence on arrival for females (as percentages of all females)

Sleeping on the beach	Hospital	Police Station	DRC friends		Others (a)	Total
			Same Tribe	Diff. Tribe		
-	-	-	71.4	14.2	14.2	99.6

(a) Others refer to Congolese sharing residence with others nationalities including South Africans and accommodation provided by churches and mosques.

Female respondents relied mainly on Congolese networks to find their first accommodation. In fact, 71.4 percent of women who participated in the study found their first accommodation from Congolese of the same tribe whereas 14.2 percent have been helped by Congolese from a different tribe. Congolese networks play the role of supporting migration flows since the first to arrive lay a foundation for reception of further waves as was the case for men. Only 14.2 percent received their first accommodation from non-Congolese people. Unlike male respondents, females did not spend their first night on the beach, at hospital or at a police station.

### *Current accommodation*

Table 11: Current accommodation for males (as percentage of all males)

Sharing				Not Sharing
DRC friends	SA citizens	Others	Total	
56.5	13.0	13.0	82.5	17.3

Table 11 shows that 82.5 percent of Congolese males interviewed are living in shared accommodation and only 17.3 percent in this group live alone. Particularly interesting is that 56.5 percent of male respondents share accommodation with other Congolese refugees while 26.0 percent share residence with non-Congolese including South African citizens and other nationalities.

Table 12: Current accommodation for females (as percentage of females)

Sharing				Not Sharing
DRC friends	SA citizens	Others	Total	
85.7	-	14.2	99.9	0.01

(a) Female in this context refers to unmarried women 'Living Together' with a male, those staying alone, and married women living far from their husbands. It excludes teenagers under their parents' authority and married women.

Almost eighty six percent of respondents are sharing their residence with other Congolese refugee women. The remaining respondent was living with single males from a different tribe but from the same province of origin. The woman is of Angolan descent. She did not integrate into the Kisangani Province networks because she told the truth and introduced herself as of Angolan descent, even though she was born in the Congo and had never lived in Angola, and even though she was fluent in the tribal languages of the Congo.

If one looks at table 11 and table 12, it appears that females respondents stayed almost entirely with people from their tribe whereas male respondents stayed mostly with people from the DRC, not necessary their tribe.

### *Household size and number of dependents*

Table 13: Family size and number of dependents

Family Size	Frequency	% of Sample Category
0-1	15	50.0
2-3	8	26.6
4-5	4	13.3
6-7	1	3.3
8-9	0	0.0
10-11	0	0.0
12-13	1	3.3
14-15	1	3.3
Total	30	99.8

Table 13 shows that most respondents are single and their households are small with over three quarters having fewer than three people and with only two having twelve people or more.

Where single individuals are sharing accommodation, as clearly mentioned in tables 11 and 12,

they do not necessarily share a kitchen. Such individuals may live in one place but regularly eat in another.

Table 14: Marital status, male employment and number of breadwinners by household

Category	Frequency for males				% of respondents
	Married	L. Together	Single	Others*	
Sole breadwinners	4	2	12	1	82.6
> 1 breadwinner	4	0	0	0	17.3
Total	8	2	12	1	99.9

Others\*: Divorced and widowed

Eighty-two percent of male respondents are sole breadwinners including 4.3 percent 'Others', 8.6 percent who are 'Living Together', 17.3 percent who are married men, and 52.1 percent who have 'never married.' This group is also vulnerable because 86.9 percent of male respondents work in the informal economy. This means that in case of illness or long term unemployment these people will rely on Congolese informal networks to survive and provide their basic needs such as accommodation, food and medical care. Only 17.3 percent of male respondents represent households which have more than one income and consequently some kind of risk-spreading device.

Table 15: Marital status, female employment and number of breadwinners by household

Category	Frequency for females				% of respondents
	Married	L. Together	Single	Others*	
Sole breadwinners	0	0	1	2	42.8
> 1 breadwinner	2	2	0	0	57.1
Total	2	2	1	2	99.9

Others\*: Divorcee and widow

Almost 43 percent of female respondents are sole breadwinners including one female who has never been married, one divorcee and one widow. Among the sole breadwinners, there is only one female who works in the formal sector as a security guard without a formal contract. The other two consist of one unemployed woman who relies on remittances from her children and grandchildren, and a car guard in the informal economy. Therefore, one can argue that sole breadwinners are vulnerable since they either work without labour legislation or they simply rely on other people's goodwill. Consequently their livelihoods are not sustainable.

The remaining 57.1 percent represent female respondents who work and live with their male partners as married and 'Living Together' couples and have more than one income. This may appear as if households with more than one breadwinner have this as a risk spreading device. Yet, it is important to mention that in the context of this study, the concept of 'breadwinner' applies only to married couples and 'Living Together' partners. Nuclear and close family members who live under the same roof and share their incomes are not included and consequently information is not available for the extent to which they support one another.

A comparison between table 14 and table 15 reveals that there is a big difference between the two sexes in the proportion of 'sole breadwinners.' Among male respondents 'sole breadwinners' constitute twice the percentage compared to females.

My 'participant observation' field notes explain this. Single females are frightened to live alone for both economic and security reasons.

#### Household monthly income by employment category

The household income, in the context of this research, is based on household expenditure per capita from earnings that Congolese refugee households make from working as a security guard, hairdressing, shoemaking or electronic repair. Family size is important particularly with children of over 18 years who strongly influence the household's monthly income and expenditure. This influence can be positive or negative. It is positive when each household member regularly contributes substantial amounts of money. However, family size can be negative when there are adults who do not have access to a job or who are unwilling to contribute.

Congolese refugees face different problems in different economic activities. Indeed, those who work as street vendors are often victims of police harassment and illegal arrest, lack of access to trading sites and licenses (Hunter, and Skinner, 2002: 24-25). Yet, some Congolese refugees earn a living which compares to some wage employment in the formal economy. In car guarding business and security guarding, refugees have no access to a Security Officer Board registration number. Yet the majority of car guards are single because of flexible hours and their ability to cope with irregular incomes, whilst married people are attracted in security guarding due to fixed salaries. Most respondents who make ends meet through hairdressing are not business owners. Only a few are on a fixed salary. Some workers learnt this job in Durban whereas others were already active in this field at home. This is why business owners speculate on the experience of new employees. There is no contract and not any form of social protection at all. No work, no pay. That is why this economic activity does not attract many married people. Shoemaking and electronic repair are the most rewarding activities.

Yet income does not solely come from employment. It is also a result of remittances and constant flows of money between Durban and other provinces of South Africa, and between South Africa and the DRC and overseas family and friends networks since Congolese refugees keep contact with friends and family members who stayed behind in the DRC and those who live overseas and in other African countries, both refugees and immigrants. These backward and forward linkages allow money transfers to flow in a triangular fashion between South Africa, the DRC and other countries. First, there is the transfer of money from South Africa to the DRC and vice versa. Second, money can be transferred from overseas countries to South Africa and vice versa. Third, money can move from overseas to the DRC and vice versa depending on the family financial situation back home, and the constraints and opportunities that social network members in different places face at different times. As a result, there are situations whereby unemployed Congolese refugees have larger incomes than some refugees who are working. In the same fashion, loans, gifts, and investments are supporting Congolese refugees' livelihoods and further migration flows around the world.

### Social protection

Social networks of tribal members, nuclear family, and friends from the DRC or South Africa function as a social protection net. Whenever there is a problem, people go to their respective networks to get support. Congolese contribute monthly to their tribal networks rather than formal club savings such as Old Mutual and others. Only two of the people interviewed contributed to formal savings schemes.

Almost all respondents contribute to informal saving. There is no fixed amount that informal saving schemes' members must contribute to the informal savings networks since all members do not have the same possibilities. In some groups there are different contributions for male and female members on the assumption that males have access to better opportunities than females. The smallest contribution recorded is R5 coming from a lady who earns R400 per month whereas the biggest is R200. It

comes ironically from an unemployed woman who lives from the earnings of her children and grandchildren. The average is R50. A few people who work in the formal economy contribute to both informal tribal social networks and formal club savings. Formal savings are undertaken with a corporate institution such as Old Mutual. These contributions help members who save through the tribal networks, as well as those who also have formal savings, to deal with random events. They also support newcomers. However, whenever a death occurs in a specific tribe, given that it costs more than the tribal community can afford, all other Congolese refugee and immigrant networks contribute to cover the costs.

Savings and access to banking facilities represent another weak spot of DRC refugees' livelihoods in Durban since access to these institutions is central to secure saving. Indeed, three-quarters of the sample save some money, including income and membership fees, in their overcrowded apartments thus exposing the savings to the risk of theft or confiscation by corrupt policemen who regularly raid buildings and flats inhabited by Congolese refugees and foreigners in general. Only half of the respondents have access to banking facilities. Interviewees with access to banking facilities, representing 23.3 percent of the sample, are all working as security guards because security companies have some agreements with banking institutions for this facility.

During my participant observation and from my own experience, it appeared that every Congolese refugee draws on informal saving schemes at different levels even if he/she does not contribute. In fact, since the rationale of tribal networks and contributions is to make people mutually help one another at all costs, for those who do not contribute, the network members have the duty to assess the reason behind the lack of contribution. If the person does not have an income the tribal schemes unconditionally assist him/her as an emergency case. Then they teach the person survivalist economic activities. In the case of a lack of contribution without convincing reason, the concerned individual benefits from other members' contributions in very extreme cases such as death, illness, accident, or a funeral in the household in order to

motivate other members to contribute regularly for fear of being forgotten by the networks.

### Migration routes

Congolese refugees in Durban came via different routes compared to those in other big South African cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town. Indeed, in Cape Town, Congolese refugees come via Namibian refugee camps; those in Johannesburg come through the borders of the northern part of the country, whereas in Durban, Congolese refugees mainly come from Mozambique and find themselves stuck in Durban because of a lack of resources to continue their journey (Ballard, 2003:104). In fact, they belong to various tribal groups from different provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo and consequently exploit diverse networks and connections to come to Durban as it is illustrated below.

There are as many different points of departure as there are motives for the move. Unlike Congolese who settled in Johannesburg for economic and political reasons decades ago, the majority of Durban Congolese refugees left their country, according to the respondents and the participant observation, because of different 'liberation wars' and most of them came from the eastern part of the country which extends from Oriental Province to Katanga Province. That is why the different points of exit include Uvira/DRC (Route No 1) leading to Bujumbura in Burundi or Kigoma in Tanzania, Buakvu/DRC (Route No 2) leading people to Cyangugu/Rwanda, Bujumbura in Burundi, Kisangani (Route No 3) which led people to Kampala in Uganda, Bujumbura (Route No. 4) leading to Kigoma or Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, or Pulungu in Zambia, Goma/DRC (Route No. 5) leading to Kigali in Rwanda, Bujumbura in Burundi, and Southern Katanga (Route No. 6) including Lubumbashi and Kalemie channelling people to Lusaka in Zambia. Only one refugee in this study fled from Kikwit (Route No. 7), in the western part of the Congo, and went through Brazzaville and Pointe Noire in Congo Brazzaville. Regardless of their exit points, most of them entered



South Africa via Mozambique. For many, as already mentioned, Durban was not the intended destination.

### Length of residence in Durban

Almost half the respondents are newly arrived in Durban (less than two years), whereas a third of the sample has been in Durban between three years and less than five years. One eighth of respondents have been at least five years in Durban. This can be explained by the different waves of Congolese migration to South Africa and consequently different expectations in the country of destination. Indeed, according to Bouillon (2001: 40-44), there were three waves of Congolese migration into South Africa. The first wave occurred in the early 1990s when highly skilled and wealthy Congolese businessmen moved to South Africa for economic reasons in terms of employment and investment. The second wave took place between 1991 and 1994 and included many political refugees and economic refugees due to the breakdown of socio-political and economic conditions in Zaire, as it was known at that time. This breakdown resulted in brutal repression, massacres and massive human rights violations. The third wave occurred from 1994 stemming from the ethnic conflict in Burundi and Rwanda which spread through neighbouring countries including the Congo.

The third wave that Bouillon (2001: 40-44) talked about consisted of three major key moments of political turmoil after 1994. The first happened with the first 'liberation war', in 1996, led by Laurent Desire Kabila. It aimed to overthrow Mobutu's regime. The consequences of this on the civilian population were disastrous and consequently many people fled for security reasons. The second occurred in 1998. It focussed on putting an end to the government of Laurent Desire Kabila and was led by Kabila's former Tutsi allies from Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. Lastly, the massacre of *Makobola* and, a few months later, Kisangani in the 2000s sent shock waves of refugee movements towards South Africa. These critical moments translated themselves into

subsequent waves of refugee flows into South Africa, and Durban in particular, where the fact that many Congolese refugees have recently arrived is clearly evident.

The reasons for the move and subsequent different migration flows as well as the current political and military situation on the ground differently influence individual refugee's interactions within the Durban Congolese community as the section that follows illustrates.

### **Livelihood strategies & problems that Durban Congolese refugees face**

In this section, I am going to assess how the experience of the flight and the circumstances in

Durban impact Congolese livelihood strategies. This section examines the qualitative findings

pertaining to and influencing the decisions the refugees make regarding livelihood strategies. It shows that these experiences and circumstances in Durban circumscribe their employment opportunities. In the absence of easily obtained employment, respondents are dependent on social networks and organisation such as churches for financial and material support. Thus, the livelihood strategies are broader than simply employment.

#### Social networks, officials and organisation

##### *Social networks*

Social networks refer to ties of all kinds and various people and institutions and kinship which provide social, financial and political support in order to facilitate social development of their members (Al-Sharma, 2003: 18; El-Abed, 2003: 5). Responses from my structured and unstructured interviews, and the participant observation, revealed that in fact social networks play a crucial role in Congolese refugee's lives and constitute a reaction to the social exclusion they face in Durban. They also constitute a social net against random events such as illness, police arrest

and death. Congolese refugees' networks in Durban derive from those back home where successive governments have been unable to provide for the basic needs of their people. Hence, people have been forced to rely on social connections in both the formal and informal economy in order to make a living (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 12-19). Social networks are active well before, during and after the flight as the quotes below illustrates.

In Maputo, an Anglican priest told me that life is very difficult and dangerous in South Africa. When I insisted that I must come to South Africa, the priest gave US\$50. I paid my guide to help me cross the Mozambique-South African borders. On our way, my guide found 11 single guys each on them paying US\$45....

When the taxi stopped in Durban, the driver called a gentleman and told him he had foreigners who wanted to see their friends and relatives. We all jumped out and wanted to talk to the man. He divided us into five groups according to nationalities. Then he asked to the two Congolese, myself included, our provinces of origin and tribes.... Suddenly, I saw someone from Uvira and who belongs to *Bashi* tribe. He was so surprised to see me there and took me to their flat. ...I spent three months there with free meals and accommodation (Respondent No.7, September 27, 02).

The following again shows the importance of religious connections.

At midnight, my father helped me to cross the Rusizi River which separates the DRC and Burundi. Once on the other side of the river, my father went to hide me in a Roman Catholic Church at Kamenge/Burundi. The next day, he came to visit me and brought me US\$200 to pay for my transport from Bujumbura/Burundi to anywhere else where the Hutu and Tutsi issue is not as important as in Burundi and Rwanda. In the Parish, I met a lot of Congolese from the DRC who were asking for money from the priests to flee the war zone. We were three girls and two boys (Respondent No.7, September 27, 02)

Social networks are very dynamic. They link Congolese refugees to their country of origin, possible country of destination if known, to other relatives and family members across the world. They can be purposively well planned or spontaneously formed to face specific challenges such as unexpected events on the journey to the country of destination. Some refugees move in a group. Others prefer to diffuse the risk and create some back-up mechanisms by moving in small groups as the following quote points out. With regard to survival strategy, the quote below also illustrates the

need for reliance on others. This is important, as it will be seen to be a key component of the survival strategy of Congolese refugees in Durban.

We were so anxious about travelling without any travel document that we decided to move in three groups of two people. The first to go has to tell others how things are on the way, where the next team leaves, what route to take to avoid possible trouble with police or military, how to avoid getting sick without any chance of being rescued by others, etc. It was strategic to do so because we did not like to be trapped all together, for example. There must be a rescue team somewhere ready to intervene (Respondent No. 29, May 12, 02).

A wide range of people contribute to the journeys of Congolese refugees. These people include ordinary citizens, police and religious leaders (pastors and priests, and *Imams*). Also important are Congolese social networks which provide vital information about migration routes and costs, first accommodation and information about job opportunities, survivalist techniques, and welfare during their stay in Durban (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 7).

Whenever Congolese refugees arrive their first survival instinct is to locate people from their home country. Congolese refugees take advantage of any small, and sometimes negligible, details that may help them identify and meet their countrymen. These details include Congolese languages, hairstyles, clothing, appearance and way of walking. Migrants have had to develop these observational skills and use them as assets. The following quote gives an example of what happened, in one instance, on arrival and of the introduction into the informal activity of cutting hair and shows that this decision is dependent on a social network.

The taxi dropped us at Durban Station. I checked around and asked a black male where I could meet the refugee population. He told me to walk along Umgeni Road and ask people inside tents who were cutting hair. Then we found a tent and people speaking *Swahili*. ...We then asked where we could find *Fuliru* people. These people knew some of them. They led us to *Fuliru* informal tribal leaders. Once there, we got three months assistance in terms of free food and accommodation. Then they explained to us the job opportunities available to the refugee community. These jobs include hairdressing, guarding cars, being a security guard and doing shoe repairs. But they insisted that the easiest job was hairdressing. They taught me the job and I quickly became independent... (Respondent No. 2, November 20, 02).

The following quote illustrates the advantages of being identifiable:

The lady recognised us as foreigners from our clothing and hairstyles which were very different from local ones. Our accent and very poor English later confirmed the lady's assumptions. The lady asked us where they were coming from. We replied saying that we are Congolese. Then the lady started talking to us in *Swahili*, one of the four national languages of the DRC (Respondent No. 14, June 15, 02)

Yet, these identifying traits do not always bring happiness to Congolese refugees. They may also bring trouble and thus they become a problematic identifier since they help South Africans and the police to recognise them as foreigners. They may consequently become subject to harassment and, sometimes, to illegal arrests, as the following quote shows.

At Jozini, on 96.01.15 we found a roadblock. Police ordered all passengers to jump out and stand in line. Because many passengers, South Africans included, did not have ID, the police found another way of dividing people into two groups: locals and foreigners. They greeted people in Zulu with: '*Sahobona, Kujani baphwetu ...*' I failed the identification test and was consequently recognised as a foreigner because every black person and South African in KwaZulu-Natal must speak Zulu. I was arrested. Police exchanged few words with me. They continued with their identification procedure checking my left arm and concluded that I was Mozambican because of a vaccination mark. Then they looked at me carefully and said I was from Central Africa ... (Respondent No. 13, May 22, 02).

Indeed, in a purely local context where not speaking *Zulu* exposes Congolese refugees as foreigners and thus may subject them to xenophobic attitudes of some local people, speaking a language other than *Zulu* is dangerous. I recalled the advice of a South African policeman and friend: 'If you cannot speak Zulu at night, use signs to show your interlocutor that you are deaf. He will leave you in peace.'

However people who have been in Durban longer also have limited resources and hence need to be explicit about the limitations on their ability to offer continued assistance.

I told them that I am *Mushi* and they led friends and me to our tribal leader where we got free food and accommodation for a month. Then our leader told me that in South Africa, nobody is able to support visitors forever without working and, thus, contributing to food and rent (Respondent No 18, May 24, 02).

It is clear that the assistance of a social network is vital to survival, both immediate and regarding job seeking, and also that it is not just people from home that are crucial but also that other groups such as the Muslim community are particularly helpful.

When we reached Durban, the first two people we met gave us free accommodation, meals and clothes. They explained to us what kinds of jobs were available. I have chosen to train as a security guard because it needed just training. Our friends paid for me and showed me different training schools. They said it was much easier to get help from the Muslim Community before 1993. Even now, Muslims are still more helpful than other religious organisations in Durban. They provide accommodation, food, clothes, however small the quantity, and more importantly useful information on how to integrate into this hostile country. It seems that now the demand is so high that Muslims cannot assist like before (Respondent No 29, May 12, 02).

Social networks, as explored in the previous pages and backed up with respondents' statements, and empirical evidence around us, do however also have their downside. I will support this claim with the following example. Social networks may be a disincentive to new projects because the first members to arrive were not successful in that particular occupation for reasons such as lack of qualification, entrepreneurship, or perseverance. A respondent reports that Congolese refugees advised him not to count on his academic qualifications to earn a living, but rather to look for a job as a security guard or a car guard. However, the problem with this advice was the extent of competition in a field with few job opportunities.

### *Behaviour of officials and NGOs compared to refugees' expectations*

Congolese refugees in general experienced officials as inefficient and unprepared to be of assistance and reported that they found Durban to be very different to their expectations. Congolese refugees came to Durban for a variety of reasons but have a common background which consists of the invasion of the DRC by its neighbouring

countries, socio-political instability and massive human rights violations which means that they have a tendency to mistrust people while at the same time, as has been shown, they are heavily reliant on others. Refugees' expectations in South Africa accord with their knowledge of the 1951 UN Convention<sup>2</sup> and the 1969 OAU Protocol of African Refugees<sup>3</sup>. These treaties recommended to members that they fully assist refugees in a holistic way. The aspirations and hopes of Congolese refugees vary according to an individual's age, marital status, and family size, level of education back home, previous occupation and standard of living. But these aspirations also are influenced by experiences back home where the UNHCR fully supported refugees from other countries and hence refugees expected the same level of assistance in South Africa. Indeed, to quote some respondents:

We came to South Africa for three reasons. First, we believed that a country which overcame such bad racial segregation and human rights violations must be the right place to get asylum and protection because people know how bad war is, having experienced it. Second, as a Christian, I thought that South African people could teach me forgiveness and reconciliation that I would share with my brothers and sisters back home in the DRC. Third, in South Africa, I guessed that there should be a better opportunity for high standard education. But I am very disappointed. None of these have happened (Respondent No. 7, September 27, 02).

I came to South Africa for peace, security and protection because the Great Lake area is burning and our contact in Belgium advised my parents to send me here because it is safe (Respondent No. 27, September 27, 02)

Key people such as officials and NGO leadership are perceived to play, in general, a negative role in assisting Congolese refugees to establish sustainable livelihoods. Indeed, 83.3 percent of respondents reported having problems with Home Affairs, the city officials or the police. City officials repeatedly deny trading licences and sites to Congolese informal traders, whereas police harass and illegally raid their residences,

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<sup>2</sup> The 1951 UN Convention, article 6, sections 2 and 3; article 17 section1 and article 2; article 18

<sup>2</sup> Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. 1974. Preamble section 6; article 2, sections 1 and 2

arrest refugees and seize their assets. Home Affairs officials are said to deny proper identification documents, work permits for well-paid and qualified jobs, and trading sites and permits for the informal economy to refugees. While it may be correct to say that the comments regarding city officials could apply equally to poor South Africans, the perception of respondents, as the following quotes illustrate, show that respondents feel they are being targeted by Home Affairs.

My children have always been in big trouble with the Home Affairs officials since they force my children to extend their permits for a very short period of time and so keep them away from work. Every time they come back, other people are working in their respective sites. The children struggle all the time to find new places (Respondent No 11, September 27, 02).

Home Affairs officials and the police used to come in the salon looking for work permits and business licences even though they know that we do not have access to these document because we are refugees and we are involved in such small economic activities in the informal economy (Respondent No. 14, June 15, 02)

Congolese refugees experience many difficulties in order to comply with South African laws and regulations. It is stipulated, for example, that the Security Officers Board (SOB), should register everybody who wants to work in the security guard industry. Although there are few other job opportunities available to refugees, Congolese no longer have access to this registration. The officials in charge argue that only South Africans, and the few foreign nationals who have permanent residence, are entitled to be registered. As result, Congolese refugees go underground and either become registered through bribery or false SOB registration numbers. It is claimed that some officials from SOB are pushing refugees to bribe them. The following quote illustrates these points:

As security guards, we are not allowed to get a SOB number any more because we are foreigners. To avoid that barrier we are forced to bribe officials in that service or simply buy a SOB in the underground market. (Respondent No. 15, June 17, 02).



In the quotes that follow, respondents answered questions regarding the police. They claim that:

As informal traders, police said that we were not allowed to sell second clothes because they are dirty and shameful for South Africa and thus they seize them (Respondent 15, June 17, 02).

I had a lot of problems with metro police. They did not allow me to create my own business in the city so that I could earn more money (Respondent No. 1, September 7, 02).

Police harassment does not only occur in terms of the regulations of the city. It also includes their personal interests *vis-à-vis* the business that Congolese refugees are involved in. For example, respondents complained that some policemen want free service.

.... We have problems with the police because they want us to repair their things for free. If they pay, they pay less than other people (Respondent No. 28, June 29, 02).

... Police have begun to visit our business to check papers. They regularly arrest us without reason. We were forced to bribe them. One day, police arrived drunk and didn't pay. (Respondent No. 3, June 16, 02)

Besides problems with the police, Congolese refugees have no right to emergency health care. Whenever they go for medical consultation in public hospitals, the first question is 'Why did you come to South Africa and when are you going back home?' As a result, many Congolese refugees stay at home with their illness until they get money from friends, tribe members, and family members for consultations with private, expensive medical practitioners. Among my thirty respondents, only one household has joined a club saving and a medical aid scheme.

However, this general view of a lack of or poor service delivery to refugees from officials is counter-balanced by another where the police played a role in providing accommodation, of a sort.

... when we were chased out by the building supervisor because of overcrowding, at 18:00, ... we ended by being arrested by a police patrol van and which dropped us at Point Road Police Station where we were charged

with 'walking around without a well-defined destination.' But when we explained to the police what happened, we were arrested for seven days in quite unusual conditions since we were free to walk around during the day and come back to sleep at night. On our 8<sup>th</sup> day, we found a group of Swahili speaking refugees who agreed to give us free food and accommodation for seven days. We went to report the matter at the Police Station Commander who said: 'Guys, from this moment, you are free men. I will escort you to Park Street because I know the area very well, there are a lot of foreigners there and it is dangerous' ... (Respondent No. 5, November 23, 02)

Poor service and manipulation of the former Durban Refugee Forum and South African NGOs in general are uppermost in refugees' minds. However the generally negative perceptions of NGOs are countered by the following quote in which a KwaZulu-Natal NGO, the former Durban Refugee Forum, assisted one respondent.

We spent the first night at the hospital. My wife was giving birth while we did not know where to go. 'Refugee Forum' the following day helped my children and me. A Congolese we met at the bus stop because we could not speak English fluently took us there. Forum has paid for accommodation for us for a week but not given us food or cash. From there we met another Congolese who took us to his flat for two weeks and led us to a car guard company' (Respondent No. 17, May 4, 02)

### Problems affecting livelihoods strategies

Congolese refugees face many problems in their day-to-day challenges which begin from the time they plan or are forced to flee the DRC at very short notice for sometimes unknown destinations. These problems include social exclusion, sexual exploitation during the journey and at the destination, low and irregular wages, and mistrust among them both in South Africa as well as back home.

#### *Social exclusion*

In the context of this study, social exclusion means lack of entitlement to social-economic basic needs including employment in both informal and formal sectors, social services such as education, health care, equal protection by the police, and equality before the law.

Regarding employment which, in normal circumstances, speeds up the inclusion of foreigners in their host country and provides them with dignity and autonomy, the general perception of respondents and the field notes from participant observation point to their difficulties. The response to the questions 'Why did you become a trader? Did you have to apply for a trading permit? Do you enjoy being a trader?' show that DRC refugees feel excluded from the mainstream economy by 'key officials.'

I became a trader because I did not have an opportunity to be employed as a nurse to make enough money for my family. I have unsuccessfully applied for a South African Nursing Council registration number for four consecutive years... In the informal economy which I do not like, I have not succeeded in getting my trading site and licence, as do many other foreigners in informal trading. We never got it. (Respondent No. 13, May 22, 02).

Respondents believe that the Department of Home Affairs did not provide them with the correct identification (ID) document and that this has excluded them from education. To the question of 'did you have any problems with city officials, local traders ... or Home Affairs ', respondents said:

I have been in big trouble with Home Affairs officials who give us inappropriate identification documents which do not allow us to get the trading permit and site. The refugee status determination process is another problem because it is very slow. I have been in Durban since 07.07.2001 and today is 06.10.2002 I never got my status (Respondent No. 30, June 17, 02).

Also relevant is the fact that respondents were unable to open bank accounts. Indeed, 50 percent of respondents declared that they were unable to access banking facilities due to inappropriate identification documents.

Respondents consider that city officials sidelined them in terms of trading sites and licences forcing them to rent illegally from other traders and thus worsening their livelihoods. The following quote illustrates this:

I was charged at least once a week a fine varying between R300 to R400 without any reason just to try to discourage me in the business. One day, I found the door of my bar sealed by the police and it was the end of my business. I lost a

lot of money invested in beer and bar equipments and the electricity account deposit. I could not go to complain anywhere since it was the same institution which came to seal the door. I had the necessary papers to open and run the business, but still I cannot do it for obscure reasons (Respondent No. 3, June 16, 02).

Vawda (1999: 5) strongly agrees with these respondents regarding the social exclusion that the South African government structurally imposes on foreign immigrants and refugees. In fact, despite the 'right to seek work' which is given to refugees by the South African state, there is a 'lack of assistance in securing jobs as well as registration as work seeker with the Department of Labour', and a lack of access to basic social services. Vawda (1999: 6) continues arguing that:

... Often denied access to jobs that they have been trained for in their countries of origin such as teachers, medical personnel, engineers, economists, and technicians of various kinds, most foreign immigrants (refugees included) have turned to working for themselves in the informal economy such as street traders, car guards, tailors and security guards... In effect, regardless of their knowledge and professional support, structures effectively deny legitimate African immigrants access to work opportunities. This is further entrenched by a slew of racial xenophobic prejudices.

Yet, Vawda (1999: 5-6) attributes the social exclusion that foreign immigrants and refugees face in South Africa to political transition leading to economic reforms which 'legislatively favour the formerly disadvantaged black South Africans.'

Social exclusion also exists within the DRC refugee community. In fact, as the respondent below shows, mistrust, division and conflicts between DRC refugees occur along geographic and linguistic lines (Sabet-Sarghi, 2000: 63-64). This is effectively supported by the respondent below:

I told the truth that my family came originally from Angola as my parents were living in the DRC as refugees. I do not even speak Portuguese. I worry because I am not able to integrate into the Congolese social network and tribes in Durban. I paid the huge price of being excluded. (Respondent No 21, October 5, 02)

These findings on DRC refugees' social exclusion, as limiting factors to the refugee community livelihood strategies, accord with Hunter and Skinner's (2002: 22-23)

research findings in 'Foreign Street Traders working in Inner City Durban: Survey Results and Policy Dilemma.' They found that foreigners who work in the informal economy are not recognised as economic agents and as a result, 'key officials' deny them trading permits and sites, permanent sites and proper identification documents. Hunter and Skinner (2002: 22-23) also found that police harassment and bribery were other challenges that foreigners face in the informal economy in Durban. In a separate study, Ballard (2003: 105) argues that the slow and very long process of asylum application coupled with corruption, ineffective refugee status and identification documents, and 'marginalisation of migrants within policy making within the municipality' constitute barriers to refugees. Gotz (2003: 31) concludes on social exclusion and poverty that:

It is recognised that the 'poverty' suffered by the poor communities is not simply a problem of a relative lack of income. Poor communities generally struggle with lack of mobility; a lack of access to public facilities that might enable them to minimise their survival and social reproduction costs; inadequate opportunities to make connections into the arenas where power is exercised and resources flow; and stunted networks which would otherwise facilitate collective risk-sharing and reproductive endeavour.

### *Exploitation and abuse*

Exploitative practices also include 'voluntary' exploitation which is accepted by the recipient. This takes different forms and may conflict with the Congolese culture that refugees are trying so hard to protect. The incidence of sexual exploitation en route to South Africa has the effect of making women afraid of involvement in economic activities in the informal economy which remains the main sources of income of DRC refugees in Durban. This makes women more dependent on males. In the process of migration, women travelling to South Africa experience terrible things that they were not prepared to talk about because they want to protect their dignity

Various economic actors also exploit Congolese refugees from the country of origin to the country of destination. Indeed, from the informal agents of different nationalities who facilitate their journey to well-established Congolese refugees who arrived in the first wave and thus built networks on which the new arrivals drew to settle in their

host country, to the South African private sector (South Africans and others) which employs Congolese asylum seekers and refugees, many people in the chain abuse the newcomers. An example of exploitation in Durban came from an informal trader regarding the suppliers of goods for Congolese informal traders:

I made an ordinary order to my suppliers of sweets, chocolate, and spare parts who are based in Johannesburg by phone, as usual. Then I confirmed the order. But when I went to collect the goods one of them gave me different products from those I had ordered. It was what another customer had refused. Since I did not order these items, I refused to take them. Then this supplier took me to the police station in Hillbrow. The police officer in charge of our case obliged me to collect and pay for these products since I did not have any written evidence of what in fact I ordered .... I spent R2000 on that order and back in Durban, I could not sell these items. It was a huge loss from which I never recovered... (Respondent No. 10, July 20, 02)

As noted earlier, it is possible that South Africans may also suffer this exploitation in the informal economy but the perception of refugees is that it is directed at them and that this greatly influences their ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. An example of exploitation refers to the relationship between partners in which males may abusively exploit their female counterparts, forcing them into a perpetual cycle of dependency often created by teenage pregnancy. In fact, they became dependent because they are pregnant; and the pregnancies and the babies that follow make them more vulnerable to risk and random events such as illness and consequently more dependent.

Fortunately, few months later, I got a Congolese girl who is the mother of my daughter. She is so pretty that many guys were moving around to propose to her. I was so anxious and insecure that the only way to make myself feel safe was to make her pregnant as quickly as possible so that she would become less attractive to other guys both from the DRC and South Africans, and fully belong to me (Respondents No. 10, July 20, 02).

That is why there is a need to remember that one of the most frequent and easy means to make ends meet are exploitative sexual relationships which negatively affect more females than males and contributes to the spread of HIV/ AIDS. These relationships include 'concubinage' (Crisp, 2002: 16) or 'Living Together' in the South African

definition in which a woman or man receives rewards against sexual favours from regular partners. My participant observation revealed that 'concubinage' has spread to commercial prostitution through escort agencies in the 'Wheel Area', part of the area from which the sample was drawn. Due to the increasing number of single female refugees without substantial means of subsistence and the relatively easy access to locals this appears to be becoming more common. Locals can provide advantages to Congolese refugees since they can assist their boyfriends and girlfriends to a permanent residence permit and later to South African citizenship if they marry them, either as a proper marriage or as some kind of 'marriage of convenience.'

There was also exploitation of both males and females at their work place by business owners, in the following instance by a man who was also a Congolese.

After getting my papers to live in South Africa, I went to speak to the workshop owner who gave me a test. I passed the test so well that I got the job the same day. I was paid in terms of a percentage. Indeed, I was getting 12 % of the bill that my boss was charging his customers. A few months later, I realised that I was under paid because I should get 50 % of the bill, and him, because he was the workshop owner, 50 %. From there, my wish was to create my own workshop but I did not have enough money to do so. (Respondent No. 28, June 29, 02)

#### *Low and irregular wages*

The lack of access to formal employment and the xenophobic attitudes of some South African civil servants including Home Affairs officials, police and city officials constrains Congolese refugees to work under conditions in which employers, both South Africans and well established refugees, and employees disregard the South African labour law in terms of contracts and working conditions. There is, for example, a security company co-owned by a Congolese refugee and some locals which still employs Congolese refugees with no formal contract or a day off at R25 per day. Both the employers and the employees are aware that nobody is willing to interfere and thus there is no benefit in making a complaint.

The service sector is also an area in which Congolese have been exploited by both South Africans and the well-established refugee community as a whole. Indeed, with regard to shoemaking and repairs, radio, TV and VCR repairs for example, refugee workers, as shown in the previous chapter, do not earn more than R500 per month as an average wage. This corresponds sometimes to the bill for one or two appliances whereas, in fact, more appliances are repaired. Since refugees, and particularly newcomers, do not have any other alternative, they rely on these jobs to establish themselves or as springboard towards something better.

Exploitative practices are apparent and mainly target the newcomers and the less fortunate. The following section includes examples of indirect exploitation whereby individuals' desires come before the interests of the group. This again may increase tensions between different refugee groupings and within communities and consequently reduces the possibilities of seeing the refugee community acting as a whole, united and focused on common goals.

#### *Mistrust*

Throughout interviews, respondents repeatedly mentioned the lack of trust within the Congolese refugee community in South Africa. This lack of trust had its roots in the social and political turmoil, struggle to survive, and successive wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the one hand, and between them and their host community, on the other hand. The effect is that respondents are cautious about the very people and the networks on whom they are dependent in order to survive.

Well-established refugees, as well as those who have no socio-political status and strong social networks and ties within the refugee community and between the refugees and South Africans, are subject to manipulation from mainly South African NGOs in exchange for receiving some financial and material assistance. This practice increases the level of mistrust within the refugee communities. For example, the interview with the chairperson of the Mennonite Church Committee, (MCC) in Durban revealed that the availability of assistance for tertiary education is transmitted to the refugee community by 'word of mouth.' One can therefore question the



objectivity of the selection criteria. The information is not widely spread by conventional means such as radio, newspaper, and public notice in areas mainly occupied and frequently visited by Congolese refugees. These areas include Home Affairs, at the Refugee Reception Centre, churches, Albert Park, the Wheel, and South Beach.

As a result, well-established refugees strengthen their social and economic positions while those who struggle to survive try to keep their heads above water by spying and reporting, if need be, against other refugees. In practice, this situation results in making tertiary education sponsorship available for only Congolese refugees who come from one tribe and province. This manipulation and duplicity reinforces mistrust and social tension to such an extent that there has been no refugee community representative in Durban for six years. One respondent's story was that:

I stay alone because people say, 'Peace has no price.' I do not like problems any more. I come from a stable family in terms of income ... But unfortunately, one of the three guys flatmates I know from the DRC sent a letter to my father claiming that I had become a drunkard. The only thing I do in South Africa is drink beer and go out with *Zulu* girls. Thus my friend advised my parent to not send to me money any more because I could not study and succeed. Then my father and the whole family became angry with me and changed their mind. Can you understand that? And worse, the whole story is lies! I have tried my best to explain and convince my parents in vain! My parents dropped me because of my friends ... Can you imagine that! (Respondent No. 24, June 30, 02).

Participant observation reveals that his friends were indeed right about his behaviour, which is similar to that of the majority of refugees. This behaviour may be explained by the frustration of seeing their expectations vanishing with no hope of a bright future and by the erosion of 'old values and norms about essential issues such as the relationship between husbands and wives, parents and children, rich and poor' (Turner, 1999: 9). As a result, many Congolese refugees drink day and night, become violent, and use drugs 'to help them forget' their deception in Durban. Informal divorce is common when husbands are no longer able to support their families. Some married individuals become involved in informal prostitution to earn a living.

Many Congolese refugees do not trust other nationalities either due to the bad memories they have of past experiences. In reality, they have often been victims of crooks who robbed them of money or personal items during their trip.

At a specific point, we met six Mozambicans who offered to guide us by bus to the South African border without travel documents. We agreed. Then three of our guides advised us to leave our bags with them so that they could use a short cut and join us the other side of the border. They claimed that we had to trust them because we were still with their friends and colleagues. In the bush across the park, the three others pulled out their guns and knife telling us to drop everything... In turn, the three who stayed with us had to take everything from us as their part of the deal despite the agreement, from Mozambique, of US\$50 per person from the Mozambican border to South Africa. After taking everything from us, they too vanished into the bush (Respondent No. 1, September 7, 02).

Experiences such as this, I found in my participant observation, have made refugees very hesitant to trust others and have created difficulties in the establishment of small business. The questions for this interview, given its economic orientation, were not designed to capture xenophobic feeling. Despite this, it was evident that name-calling, hatred, verbal and physical aggression, and death have been mentioned as 'being part of everyday city life' (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 8). In addition to this, the wide range of problems that Congolese encounter with both officials and NGO leadership in reality decreases the level of trust towards South Africans. These experiences exacerbate the feelings of mistrust which earlier experiences had given rise to.

Nevertheless, as different Congolese interact with different South Africans, it is normal to expect various reactions. This was one response which shows a dislike of foreigners:

They are very different. Some customers are good and helpful, while others do not have a human heart. They ask when are we going back home. They claim that refugees are too numerous in South Africa (Respondent No. 17, May 4, 02)

A car guard responding to the question of 'how your customers treat you' went even further and revealed that his University fees were paid by one of his regular customers.

My customers are very good. One of them even paid for the registration fees and gave R2000 in cash (Respondent No. 5, November 23, 02).

Many Congolese refugees entered South Africa with the help of locals either as agents, a rural person on a farm, or a taxi driver. The dialogue below illustrates how people who met for the first time cooperated and understood each other, alone, late at night, without even a hope of meeting again. It also illustrates the unexpected kindness that refugees sometimes encounter from total strangers.

Respondent No 12 (June 1, 02): ... There (in van), I found another three passengers. It was very windy, cold and dark. I could not speak. They were all speaking Zulu. Then the first passenger jumped out. Since he could not afford to pay R50 for the transport fees, the driver took his shoes, watch, and clothes. The second passenger could not pay either. The driver confiscated his bags, shoes and clothes, except his underwear. The third passenger paid R50. I was scared that the driver would ask me for money which I did not have. I was expecting to meet my son's friend to pay for me in Durban. I had his home address. I remained the only passenger in the van. I tried to be as perfect as possible to the driver in order to avoid trouble. I started smiling without reason to in order to show him that I am confident and economically stable.

Driver: 'Come and sit with me in the front', he said.

Respondent: '... I am a refugee from DRC, Central Africa, far from here. I am going to visit my son's friend in Durban. He is going to pay my transport fees without any doubt. Please, do not disturb me!' I told the driver.

Driver: 'Do not worry *ubaba*. I will take you there but let me first leave the company van at my work place. I will do it with my own car until you meet your people', he replied.

The respondent continued: '... When we found the place we knocked on the door and someone opened the door for us. I introduced myself and they gave us seats. They then told us that my son was back from Cape Town. He was working nightshift. I asked them for R50 to pay the driver. They paid and added two bottles of beer as a sign of gratitude for everything he did for us.

Since it does not appear that these refugees will be in economic competition with them these locals do not worry about people entering illegally. This example also supports earlier statements regarding the fact that many locals are not unkind to refugees. That is why for many Congolese refugees:

Ignorance was seen as a key reason for hostility, with refugees complaining that many South Africans could not even identify the refugee's home country on a map. One speaker even told a refugee that he thought the DRC was somewhere near Cape Town. If a person's origin is not properly understood – Congolese refugees said – it is likely that they will 'think you are a demon' (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 8)

The problems with mistrust by refugees is clearly expressed by Robinson (2002b: 64; cited in Hynes, 2003: 9) who stresses that:

.... Many asylum seekers have had to learn not to trust people to survive. Their persecution in the country of origin may have been sparked by a casual comment made by a neighbour, a colleague, a friend or even someone who wished them ill. Thus prior to crossing a border and becoming a refugee, the capacity to mistrust is great.

.... Fleeing persecution involves the agent who arranges your flight will also not trust you. He will ask you for full payment in advance and he may not even tell you which country he is going to smuggle you into. You will not be told the route, the identity of your guides, even the identity of your fellow travellers (Robinson, 2002b: 64; cited in Hynes, 2003: 9).

In the United Kingdom, for city officials, the internal division among Somalis, the absence of an ethnic economy, and the lack of common political vision have been contributing factors to fragmentation among refugees (Griffiths, 2000: 228-289), as was the case with the Durban Refugee Forum *vis-à-vis* Congolese refugees in Durban.

### Search for economic well-being

Congolese refugee's economic well-being varies according to constraints and opportunities that refugees face at a specific time. The interviews make clear that the types of income earning activities depend on social networks and ties that refugees established on arrival. The further expansion of social networks within the refugee

community and toward South Africans depends on interactions between Durban Congolese refugees, and with other Congolese refugees and immigrants outside Durban and across the world.

Congolese refugees take whatever opportunities they can to establish their livelihoods and increase their resilience to shocks and uncertainty in the changing and new social environment they live in. That is why they are active in hairdressing, shoemaking and repairs, guarding cars, prostitution, and child labour as these comprise easily won employment in the informal sector which maximise their potential to survive. Also important is the fact that there is no clear division between the economic activities that refugees perform to survive since these activities overlap and refugees move between activities according to constraints and opportunities that emerge. Opportunity maximisation also includes combining more than one job, manipulation and maximisation of the few opportunities, income from sources other than employment such as creation of small community based organisations, creation of ethnic based political parties and churches, membership from various religious organisations, and providing more than one service..

### Emigration

Congolese refugees who are not able to cope with the hardship of their living conditions in Durban opt to move back to refugee camps around South Africa. These camps include the camps of Namibia, Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Others who adapt and do not foresee sustainable livelihoods in Durban and South Africa as a whole prefer to migrate to Europe, America, Australia, or Asia

### **Conclusion**

This research had three main objectives. Firstly, it tried to understand livelihood strategies of

DRC refugees by exploring social networks as a form of social capital. Secondly, this research focused on evaluating problems that Congolese refugees encounter in their day-to-day lives in Durban and the roles played by different key officials. Thirdly, this research looked at analysing the refugees' income generating activities and how Congolese refugees cope with random events such as death, long term unemployment, illness or arrest.

The key findings revealed that the Durban Congolese refugee community is diverse, complex, and heterogeneous.. Indeed, the youngest respondent is 17 years whereas the oldest is 62 years old; the least skilled respondent did not complete his primary education while the most educated had a PhD. But the majority of respondents were young and fell into the 21-30 years group and most have had at least a secondary education conforming with the refugee profile in South Africa (Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 9, 14; Mail & Guardian Online, December 11, 2003).

Regarding incomes, the informal economy remains the main source of income of Durban Congolese refugees. Household income does not come solely from employment. Remittances equally play a crucial role. However, Congolese refugees' incomes are mostly used to cover accommodation-related expenses since they live in town where rent is high compared to the townships around the city. If one considers administrative barriers that Congolese refugees face in this sector and the general trends and patterns of the informal economic activities, there are grounds to conclude that the livelihoods of the Durban refugee community are not sustainable since they are mainly active in the informal sector where individuals' livelihoods are insecure and precarious because

there are links between working informally and being poor since the average incomes are lower in the informal economy than in the formal economy. As a result a higher percentage of people working in the informal economy, relative to the formal sector, are poor. However, there is no simple relationship between working informally and being poor or working formally and escaping poverty (Chen, *et al.*, 2001: 15).

Hunter and Skinner's (2002: 18) findings sustain this view and argue that profit from informal activities is not dependable since:

...it is particularly difficult to assess profit levels of activities. Income in the informal economy is erratic – changing from day to day, month to month, year to year. Informal businesses seldom keep records that reflect these changes. Further, there is often little separation between business income and business expenditure, business and household expenditures...

Female refugees mostly work in hairdressing and as traders in different market niches around Durban and flea markets. As a result, their incomes are low and changing because these are occupations which are easily accessible, less dangerous and do not require formal training. Male refugees work in a wide range of jobs. Male household heads are well-represented in formal employment including security, hairdressing and repairing electronic appliances. According to respondents, male household heads prefer formal employment because it provides fixed and secure salaries as opposed to self-employment which is risky in terms of success and secure employment.

There is a link between education and income levels regardless of the field of activities although this link was not the focus of this study. Some respondents who have qualifications or technical skills have been employed in the same field as back home. This is more relevant for respondents who work in appliance and electronic repairs and are teachers. For others, despite being in the same job as others, my results show that respondents with a higher education, whether employed or self-employed, tend to earn a higher income. Yet, source of income includes also a substantial flow of money between Durban and other provinces of South Africa, and between South Africa and the rest of the world including the DRC. This money is used to start businesses (Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 15; Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 7), to cover the expenses of the journey or to be used as social security. The same has been recorded in Brazilians' migration to the United States of America and Canada (Goza, 1999: 10). As a result of this flow of money, in this case study of Durban Congolese refugees, only 10 percent of respondents are below the South African national poverty line of R345 per capita per month (UNDP, 2003: 41). Yet, this income is mainly used in accommodation-related expenses in town where the rent is high compared to

townships. As a result, there is little money left to cover the basic social services such as education, health care and balanced food.

Social networks are active long before the move from the DRC, during the move and afterward. Social networks play critical roles in the lives of Durban Congolese refugees and consist of a wide range of people including family members and friends, priests and illegal agents, South Africans and foreigners for different and sometimes conflicting reasons. This finding is consistent with other research, in South Africa and elsewhere (Hunter and Skinner, 2002: 15; Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 6; Goza, 1999: 15, Massey *et al.*, 1998: 48). However, these networks can also produce different sorts of exploitation, age and gender inequality *vis-à-vis* access to information and network resources because social networks are rooted in cultural values (Amisi and Ballard, 2004: 10; Goza, 1999: 4), both self and other-exclusion, and may cause a deterioration in the trust which should strengthen these social networks and families in exile. Nevertheless, mistrust is not unique to the Congolese refugee community in Durban. In fact, Bonacich's (1973) findings about minorities and Kunz' (1973) model of refugees in flight, cited in Stein (1981) argue that refugees are less likely to trust one another because:

Most refugees however, are subdivided into many waves and vintages that may differ greatly, have different experiences, and may even be hostile to one another. Refugees 'vintages' refer to the fact that those who leave a country at different points of time are fleeing from different pressures and have different backgrounds.

Robinson (2002b: 64; as quoted by Hynes, 2003:9) points in the same direction as Stein (1981) regarding refugees and mistrust. Griffiths' (2000: 294) findings on '... Somali and Kurdish Refugees in London' mainly attributes the lack of trust and hence fragmentation of the refugee communities to

'the absence of political projects in the refugee group and the group's relation to home society and the competition over resources mediated by the multicultural discourse of the local state.'



Other problems that Congolese refugees encounter consist of a lack of free education, a lack of proper identification documentation and thus a lack of access to banking facilities, and a lack of proper work permits for both the formal and informal economy of the city in which they live and contribute in various ways. They are also affected by police harassment, xenophobia and social exclusion. The findings of this research match with Sabet-Sarghi's (2000: 50) and Hunter and Skinner's (2002:18) research outcomes in Durban which revealed that refugees do not have rights to proper identification documents and thus to well-paid and secure employment in the formal economy or to employment and banking facilities. In the same vein, Vawda (1999: 6) maintains that:

In effect, regardless of the skills of immigrants from Africa, ... lack of local knowledge and professional support structures effectively denies legitimate African foreign immigrants access to work opportunities. This is further entrenched by a slew of racial and xenophobic prejudices... Often denied the access to jobs that they have been trained for in their countries of origin such as teachers, medical personal, ...most have turned to working in the informal economy as street traders, car guards, street hair salons, tailors and security guard. ...

This study has three limitations. I used purposive sampling in order to capture what I judged useful for my research and considering the difficulties of designing a sampling frame. As a result, my findings cannot be generalised because probability sampling was not used. In choosing respondents, there is a possibility of missing useful information from people that I excluded. Second, I am not able to claim that I have chosen the right respondents and justify it since accurate statistics on Congolese refugees are not available. Lastly, there may be some kind of bias because the researcher is also a refugee. These limitations were minimised firstly by including a wide range of respondents taking into account gender, marital status, family size, diverse previous and current occupations, and individuals from different places in Durban and different tribes and provinces in the DRC. Secondly, I planned to use thirty interviews with a wide range of themes and quantitative and qualitative analyses, and NVIVO software and Constant Comparative Analysis. Thirdly, I analysed my data with people who are

not involved in refugee related issues. That is why I am confident that my findings are accurate, fair and relevant.

These findings call for a holistic approach to the management of the city of Durban which includes all economic agents since each and every one has a role to play for the sustainability of local economic development. Refugee issues should not remain forever 'a blind spot in the Metro government or a taboo to policy development' (Ballard, 2003: 108) because, whether it is widely recognised or not, refugees are here to stay.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ID	Identification Document
MCC	Mennonite Church Committee
NGO	Non Government Organisation
OAU	Organisation for African Unity
SOB	Security Officer Board
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees

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