

“Strategic, dual sense of place” among middle-aged migrants in the diaspora

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Abstract

Purpose – Compared to younger and older generation migrants, middle-aged migrants in the diaspora seem to be more conflicted regarding their belonging. This paper aims to explore how middle-aged migrants in the diaspora define themselves in space and time.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork done among Malawian migrants (herein referred to as Lydiatians) settled at Lydiate informal settlement in peri-urban Zimbabwe.

Findings – The paper reveals that, while younger migrants have a “radical transnational stance”, and older migrants regard their place of settlement as their final home, middle-aged migrants prefer to maintain a “strategic dual sense of place” regarding their place of settlement in the diaspora. These middle-aged migrants can be entrepreneurs considering their current settlement as a strategic place for petty commodity trading or those who find informal settlements to provide needed opportunities for cheap housing as the migrants pursue work in the nearby towns.

Practical implications – The paper offers a deeper understanding of how middle-aged migrants navigate their sense of place and contribute to host nations by functioning as key resources, dynamizing local economies through entrepreneurial activities and labour provision for various industries. The implications of this research should encourage states to positively interact with migrants, leveraging their potential for societal and economic development.

Originality/value – The finding that migrants in the diaspora have a dual, strategic view of their settlements is fascinating, if not new. Before this, scholars presented migrants as transnational figures, successively moving to a better place, which finally becomes home. However, the data presented in this paper suggests that this characterization associating migrants with maintaining a “stable, sedentary, bounded and fixed perception of home” is oversimplified. This is because migrants can sometimes continue to cherish the idea of informal settlements in the diaspora as home, just as the migrants also entertain the nearby established towns as useful places in their life.

Keywords Dual sense of place, Strategic, Migrants, Middle-aged, Malawians, Informal settlements

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Human mobility has been a central factor in African history. Over the generations, Africans have migrated in response to economic, demographic, political and other factors, including environmental disasters and conflicts (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016). Three types of migrations can be distinguished in Africa throughout history:

1. movement from outside into the continent;
2. movement from the continent outward; and
3. intra- and inter-country (internal) movements of people within the continent (Rossi, 2018).

Within the African continent, the large population movements accounted for the rapidity of changes in culture and the spread of new ideas. Trade across different African regions and

the seasonality of production propelled free migrations of traders and workers involved in long-distance trade (Rossi, 2018). Following the abolition of slavery and the slave trade (Lachance, 2019), free labour migrations rose in importance (Kitimbo, 2015; Rossi, 2018). During this period, many ex-slaves became seasonal labour migrants, migrating to other African regions. These migrations grew in importance because of the colonial rule that brought capitalism to Africa. During this period, Malawian descendants also constituted a part of the labour migrants in Southern Africa.

By the mid-twentieth century, a widespread culture of labour migration had developed in Southern Africa (Groves, 2020; Rossi, 2018). The British colony was central to southern Africa's labour migration history. Under British colonial rule, thousands of African men left Nyasaland – now Malawi – to seek employment in the settler colony of Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe (Groves, 2020). This was largely because Southern Rhodesia was characterized by high levels of industrialization unparalleled in other African regions (Rossi, 2018). Malawian migrant workers gravitated towards urban jobs and mines, while the majority became labourers on white farms and plantation estates. During that time, these jobs offered relatively stable livelihood options for the migrants. While Malawian labour migrants, by definition, were only supposed to be absent from Nyasaland temporarily, in reality, the majority stayed away from home for years or decades, while others never returned. These “Nyasa” migrants who lost contact with home became known as *machona* – “the lost ones”. These “lost ones” have become an integral component of Zimbabwean social, economic and political history (Daimon, 2015). Nonetheless, the colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwean state historically marginalised these Malawian descendants, or diasporas, now living as minorities in a state of unbelonging (Daimon, 2015).

While the history of Malawian migrants to Zimbabwe, clearly linked to colonialism, is known, it remains a mystery how the Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe now defines themselves in place and time. This aspect is of interest, particularly after Zimbabwe's violent land distribution programme of post-2000 that led to the displacement of farm workers of Malawian origin. This historical event has significant implications for understanding the current dynamics of communities like Lydiat (the area of the study), its survival as a settlement and perceptions of place and visions for the future among the Malawian migrants. Regarding the aspect of perceptions of place and visions for the future among migrants, some scholars generally present data showing how migrants continue to belong to their countries of origin. There is, however, an emerging African scholarship showing how migrants increasingly disentangle themselves from natal places (Bhanye *et al.*, 2021; Landau, 2019). These migrants increasingly identify as metropolitan or transnational citizens. While the metropolitan and transnational migrants may continue to remit stuff and only visit their original homes, especially during holidays, the majority prefer to be laid to rest in their place of birth (Dzingirai *et al.*, 2015; Mutopo, 2014). These migrants, especially the youth, see themselves as belonging to these new spaces that often simultaneously torment them to death. Whilst there is some clarity among the perceptions of place among ageing first-generation migrants who often prefer to remain attached to natal settlements and younger migrants who often have a radical transnational stance regarding their future; middle-aged, often second and third-generation migrants seem to be more conflicted about where they belong.

In light of this, the primary purpose of this paper is to investigate how middle-aged migrants in the diaspora define themselves in place and time. Specifically, the paper explores the strategic dual sense of place that middle-aged migrants hold concerning their settlements in the diaspora. This dual sense of place may manifest as an appreciation of informal settlements as homes or a recognition of nearby established towns as practical locations for livelihood pursuits. To achieve these research objectives, this study is grounded in intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Malawian migrants, herein referred to as *Lydiatians*, settled in the Lydiat informal settlement in peri-urban Zimbabwe. The paper

employs a theoretical framework drawing from migration studies, including diaspora and transnationalism, to provide new insights and challenge conventional characterizations of migrants as solely transitional or settled figures. The paper offers a deeper understanding of how middle-aged migrants navigate their sense of place and contribute to host nations by functioning as key resources, dynamizing local economies through entrepreneurial activities and labour provision for various industries. The implications of this research should encourage states to positively interact with migrants, leveraging their potential for societal and economic development.

Theoretical framing: diaspora and transnationalism

“Diaspora” and “transnationalism” have become trendy terms among anthropologists, sociologists, migration scholars and advocates of multiculturalism in the past decades (Paerregaard, 2010, p. 91). Influential works by scholars such as Gilroy (1993) and Clifford (1994) from the early 1990s have led to an increasing focus on the transnational and diasporic dimensions of contemporary migrant populations. Although both terms – diaspora and transnationalism – refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has been often used to denote national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants’ durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations (Faist, 2010, p. 1). Thus, while some authors seem to use diaspora and transnationalism (or their derivatives, diasporic, transnational, etc.) interchangeably, in truth they are overlapping but distinct concepts – “awkward dance partners”, Faist (2010, p. 9) calls them. A migrant can be diasporic without being transnational, or transnational without being diasporic, or both, or neither.

Three fundamental features define the essence of a diaspora. These three core features of a diaspora provide the framework for this paper, focusing on the Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe. These features are, firstly, a scattering’ from an earlier “homeland” territory, provoked sometimes by a tragic event (war, famine, ethnic cleansing, etc.), sometimes by other forces (poverty, trade networks, labour recruitment, etc.); secondly, a sense of boundedness which preserves the group’s distinctive ethnic identity in its various exilic locations; and, finally, the strong salience of the homeland, often expressed via a desire for return or for some kind of restoration of the homeland (Brubaker, 2005, p. 5). The first characteristic – the “scattering” – draws attention to the variety of migratory circumstances that lead to diasporic outcomes for Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe, starting from the colonial labour migration period in the 1890s. The second feature refers to how the collective memory of migration, exile and the homeland produces both a profound sense of ethnic consciousness and identity and a narrative of return shared by the community (all or some members) and transmitted across the generations. The third canonical feature of diaspora, the aspiration to return to the diasporic homeland, is also important for this study. By examining the Malawian migrants’ perspectives and experiences regarding the possibility of return, I aimed to gain insights into their strategic dual sense of place and how it relates to the concept of diaspora. In the following, I present the study context: Lydiat informal settlement.

In Africa, diaspora and transnationalism have also become significant areas of study among scholars, offering insights into the experiences and complexities faced by African migrants living outside their home countries. Researchers such as Crush (2011), Manning (2010) and Crush and Tevera (2010) have significantly contributed to these fields, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of transnational practices and the dynamics of African diasporic communities. The Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe is characterized by diverse generational cohorts, each with unique experiences, aspirations and challenges shaped by historical events and socio-cultural factors. Understanding the dynamics of these generational cohorts provides valuable insights into how the sense of place has evolved over time within

Malawian diaspora communities like Lydiatians. First-generation migrants, also known as pioneers, are the earliest members of the Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe. They belong to the cohort of individuals who ventured to Zimbabwe during the colonial labour migration period, starting from the late 19th century. These pioneers were often recruited as labourers for various industries, including mining and agriculture. Their migration was driven by economic opportunities and the search for better livelihoods. As pioneers, they faced considerable challenges, including labour exploitation and harsh working conditions. Despite the difficulties, they established the foundation of the Malawian diaspora community in Zimbabwe, maintaining strong ties to their homeland and preserving their distinctive ethnic identity (Bhanye, 2023). Second-generation migrants, born to the pioneering generation in Zimbabwe, have a unique set of experiences that reflect their dual heritage. Growing up in Zimbabwe, they were raised within the diaspora community while maintaining cultural connections to their Malawian roots. Some of the second-generation migrants had for some time maintained a strong sense of belonging to both Zimbabwe and Malawi, often navigating between these two identities (Bhanye, 2022). They carry with them the memories and narratives of their parents' migration experiences, forming a collective memory of migration and exile. For some second-generation migrants, the desire to return to their parents' homeland remains strong, while others embrace their new Zimbabwean identity, although the majority remain in the peripheries of the country's social, economic and political fabric. The third and subsequent generations of Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe are increasingly influenced by the contemporary socio-cultural landscape. Born and raised in Zimbabwe, these later generations have a less direct connection to Malawi, yet they are shaped by the diasporic heritage passed down through their families. The experiences of these generations differ significantly from those of their predecessors, as they grow up in a multicultural environment and interact with diverse communities (Bhanye, 2022). For some, the sense of attachment to Malawi may diminish, and their sense of place becomes more closely tied to their current settlement in Zimbabwe. This generation of Malawians born and raised in Zimbabwe forms part of the middle-aged migrants who are the focus of this study.

Throughout the generational cohorts, the concept of transnationalism plays a pivotal role. Pioneering generations often maintained strong ties to their homeland through remittances, regular communication and the aspiration for return. For subsequent generations, transnational ties become more fragmented, especially as they had limited direct contact with Malawi over time. Instead, they engage in transnational and transactional activities within the broader local and global context, connecting with other communities beyond their Malawian roots. Understanding the generational dynamics within the Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe offers valuable insights into the sense of place observed among middle-aged migrants in the Lydiatians diaspora community. Each generation's experiences and perceptions contribute to the complex and evolving identity of the diaspora, reflecting the interplay of historical legacies, transnational connections and the ever-changing socio-cultural context in which they reside. Through a comprehensive exploration of the middle-aged migrants (one of the Malawian generational cohorts in Zimbabwe), this study provides a deeper understanding of the multi-dimensional identities and sense of place among the Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe.

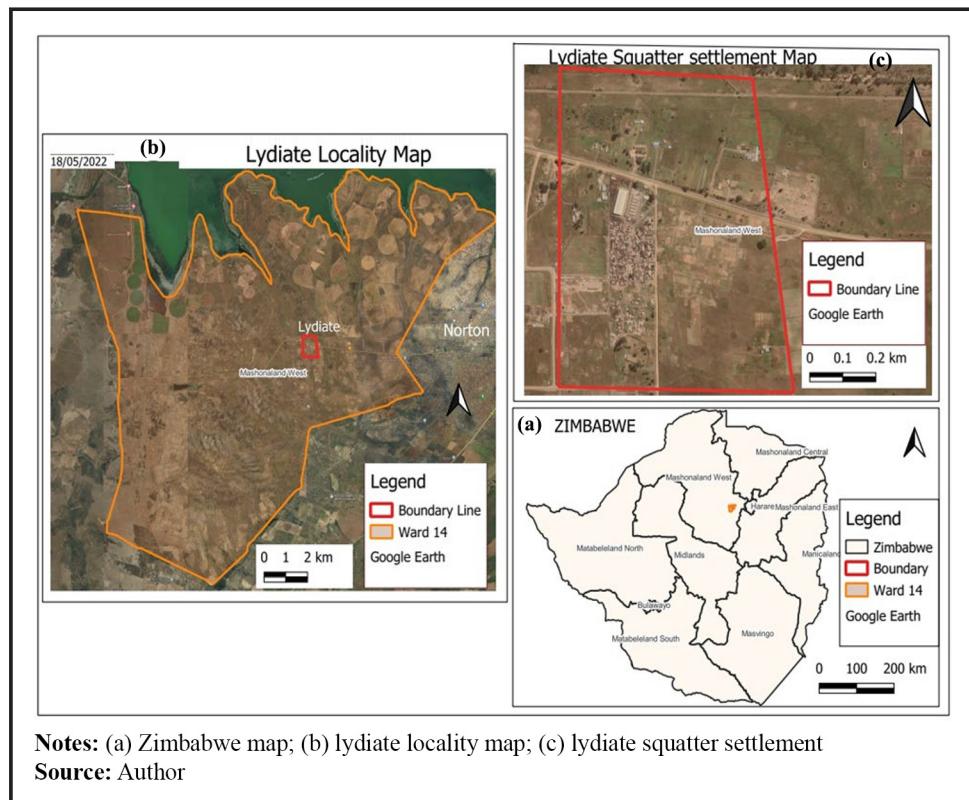
Study context: Lydiatians informal settlement

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Malawian migrants (herein referred to as *Lydiatians*) in Zimbabwe. The "transnational" quality of Malawi-to-Zimbabwe migration can be traced to the colonial period. Malawian descendants originally came to Zimbabwe as labour migrants during the colonial labour migration period from the 1890s to the 1970s (Daimon, 2015). The Republic of Malawi came into existence only in 1963. For the decade prior to that (1953–1963), Nyasaland was part of the Federation of Rhodesia and

Nyasaland (or the Central African Federation, CAF), which consisted of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, respectively). This political geography coloured the life history of some Malawian diaspora who did not cross the border but rather got crossed by the border, as Terence [Ranger \(1986\)](#) wrote that Southern Africa's borders were created precisely to sift labour and strip migrants of rights. Malawian diaspora in Zimbabwe became simultaneously estranged from both communities – the original home of Malawi and Zimbabwe the destination – and therefore always in a state of conflicted emotions. This, in part, explains the tendency to cling to ethnic enclave groupings as an attempt to salvage a measure of community belonging. The majority of the Malawian diaspora and their descendants have remained on the margins of both social, economic and political affairs in Zimbabwe. They have constantly been regarded as “migrants” or the “other” as expressed through labels, such as *Vatevera njanji* (those who followed the railway line on foot), *Vabvakure* (those who came from afar), *Mabwidi* (those without rural homes) and “totem-less ones” ([Daimon, 2015](#)). The Mugabe regime introduced the category of “indigene” and “the other” to disfranchise workers and white commercial farm owners, justifying the Fast Tract Land Reform Programme. The continued self-marginalisation of the Malawian diaspora as migrants and Zimbabweans as indigenes primarily lies in the events of Fast Track Land Reform Programme and Operation Murambatsvina, which both systematically stripped Malawi and Nyasaland-derived residents of all rights to land, shelter and safety. In short, the “indigenous Zimbabweans” category represents political expediency rather than a long-standing social identity or cleavage. [Figure 1](#) below shows the area of study, Lydiate.

The area of study, Lydiate informal settlement, is one such Malawian migrant ethnic enclave in Zimbabwe. Lydiate area is located in Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe, in Ward

Figure 1 Area of study



14 under Chegutu Rural District Council and in the vicinity or peri-urban area of Norton town. Lydiate informal settlement currently comprises first, second, third and fourth-generation Malawians. Most first-generation Malawian migrants settled at Lydiate Farm directly from Malawi between the 1950s and the 1970s. Other first-generation *Lydiatians* later came to Lydiate through the 1980s, coming from other farms and mining areas in Zimbabwe where they were working. The years when the second, third and fourth generations were born in Zimbabwe vary from family to family in Lydiate. There is also evidence of intermarriages between Malawians and Zimbabweans in the community, which has diluted the demography of Lydiate. Nevertheless, the Malawian and Chewa cultures and practices like *Nyau*, male circumcision and *Chinamwali* remain dominant in the community.

Life in the informal settlement is not easy. *Lydiatians* often face victimisation by local indigenes who perceive them as squatters that should be evicted to increase the value of the recently developed agro-residential plots adjacent to the informal settlement. To adjust to the fear of evictions, *Lydiatians* tend to forego making long-term investments in improving their living arrangements, limiting themselves to the most rudimentary shelter (Bhanye and Dzingirai, 2020a). Most housing structures in Lydiate are temporary to semi-permanent shacks made of pole and dagga, tin and zinc roofing sheets and some plastic and metal scrapes. Only recently, some middle-aged *Lydiatians* are building standard two-bedroom dwellings using farm bricks, cement for flooring and iron sheets for roofing. The community's basic infrastructure, such as running water, indoor plumbing and paved roads, is virtually non-existent, while electricity is only available to a few privileged households. As is the case in other African informal settlements, the general livelihood situation in Lydiate is poor. Casual and unskilled jobs that are the dominant ones in the area pay meagre wages for *Lydiatians*. Peri-urban petty farming production is not helpful since *Lydiatians* did not get land during the infamous Fast Track Land Reform Programme, dubbed the "Third Chimurenga", that was implemented by the government of Zimbabwe in 2002, resulting in white colonial farmers losing land to local Zimbabweans (Scoones *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the greater Lydiate area is made up of plots and agro-residential plots exclusively owned by indigenous Zimbabweans who occasionally engage *Lydiatians* for labour. Some of these properties, together with large-scale commercial farms to the immediate west, are vacant and often attract the attention of the migrants in the compound. In Lydiate, there is also a white man, Adam, who owns and operates a tobacco processing plant that is located in the midst of the village. The plant used to operate from May to September and, at the height of activity, employed close to 500 migrants. However, the operations of the tobacco-grading shed have been down for several years, worsening the hopes of *Lydiatians*, who had depended mainly on it for employment.

In terms of organisation, *Lydiatians* belong to kin groups. However, these kin groups are not locked to specific spaces; thus, it is common for members to be diffused throughout the settlement according to land availability. Elders in kinship groups remain important and occasionally meet to deliberate over matters affecting their members. There is a culture of reciprocity between members; people assist each other with basic needs and will attend each other's funerals or celebrations alike. *Lydiatians* also have internal differences based on the history of settlement. To begin with, there are *vaui vakare*, long-term migrants who are settled in the core of the settlement. Then there are *vaui vazvino* or recent migrants. These newer migrants are settled on the periphery of the settlement in areas known as *kuma nyusitendi* (new stands). Currently, the informal settlement comprises first, second, third and fourth-generation Malawians. The majority of the first-generation Malawian migrants settled at Lydiate Farm directly from Malawi between the 1950s and 1970s. Other first-generation *Lydiatians* later came to Lydiate through the 1980s, coming from other farms and mining areas in Zimbabwe where they were working. The years when the second, third and fourth generations were born in Zimbabwe vary from family to family in Lydiate (Bhanye and Dzingirai, 2020b).

In Lydiate, leadership in the community is clearly defined. Within the compound, selected leaders “maSabhuku” (village heads) maintain a register (*bhuku*) of the settlement. At the micro level, the compound is divided into five units, each represented by a “Sabhuku”, chosen by the community and officially appointed by the powerful chief Chivero. The *maSabhuku* command respect from the migrants, who regard them as instrumental in facilitating land access. Also active in the compound are *Vakuru-vakuru* (big men). These include *vakuru venzvimbo* (the councillor) representing the state; *vakuru vemusangano* (the local political party chairperson); and finally, *mukuru wevechidiki* (the local youth chairman). It is common for these leaders to oscillate between Lydiate and the towns of Harare and Norton. These big men have the power to change the politics on the ground, including facilitating access to and security over resources like land.

Lydiatians are highly religious. There are various religions in the community, but the dominant ones are Christianity and Islam. There is a mosque by the road, and there are multiple churches whose shrines are dotted in and outside the compound. It is common for members to belong to multiple faiths, and visitors are similarly expected to do likewise. The researcher was invited to attend Islamic ceremonies while he was also expected to be part of what happened in the other local churches built by the roadside. Finally, the enchanting and dramatic Nyau cult has a voice and influence on settlement and related transactions. This cult organizes dances and initiation rites for the youth. The much-subscribed Nyau ceremonies and dances take place at weekends, usually after church services. Like all other religious leaders, Nyau’s leadership is respected among *Lydiatians*. Its leadership is presumed to have ritual powers capable of inflicting harm or bringing down illness on those who are insubordinate and go against its decisions (Bhanye, 2023).

Methodological note

This paper is based on my doctoral research on mobility and sociality in Africa’s emerging urban. It draws on two years of ethnographic research conducted among Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe (2018–2020). Data for this study was collected using a qualitative ethnographic approach to gain a more detailed and extensive account of migrants’ perceptions of place and migration aspirations/visions for the future. Ethnography involves direct and sustained social contact with research agents, paying attention to shared meanings and activities (Hammersley, 2006). Through participant observations in Lydiate community, I managed to capture the migrants’ sense of place, for example, by observing their daily community activities. In the community, I participated in various social spaces like church activities, Nyau ceremonies, community meetings and informal youth gatherings. I also undertook in-depth interviews with selected participants. Of the many migrants, I encountered in the community during the fieldwork, approximately 50 became my key respondents. These became sources of information on the migrants’ perceptions of place and visions for the future in relation to their new “home” – Lydiate. While this paper only focused on the middle-aged migrants’ perception of place, the selected informants in this study were a diverse group of migrants, which corresponds to the significance of range and heterogeneity in ethnographic (and generally in qualitative) research. In this regard, the research group comprised men and women, the widowed, the single and the married. I found these groups essential for the interview as they are directly or indirectly linked to aspects of the sense of place regarding Lydiate community. The key questions during the study were:

- Q1. What are the perceptions of place among middle-aged migrants in Lydiate?
- Q2. What are the reasons behind having a strategic dual sense of place in Lydiate?

While the paper focused on middle-aged migrants’ perceptions of place, however, I also acknowledged the relevance of their familial ties and the general Malawian migration experiences, including the intergenerational aspect of migration, which was the broader focus of the doctoral study. The findings of the perceptions of place amongst older

generation migrants are already published in the paper “Lydiatians are now our home of a sort: perceptions of place amongst ageing first-generation Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe” (Bhanye, 2022). The findings for the perceptions of place by migrant youth at Lydiat settlement are consolidated in the manuscript to be published soon, titled “This settlement is just a launch pad to move to the city’: Perception of place and migration aspirations among young migrants in the diaspora”.

Doing research among undocumented migrants, like in the case of Lydiat, calls for a researcher to be very observant of research ethics. This is primarily because of the vulnerable position of the migrants – in particular, their unresolved citizenship status. I collected data for this study after obtaining informed consent from the respondents. Participants were informed to voluntarily engage in the research after receiving complete information about what it means to participate and giving consent before doing so. Migrants/respondents were also ensured of their privacy and confidentiality during the research and in writing the findings through the use of pseudonyms. All the pictures for this study were also taken with permission from the study participants.

Study findings: Lydiat informal settlement as a dual functional place

The study revealed that most middle-aged *Lydiatians* have a “dual sense of the place” regarding Lydiat informal settlement. The ages of these middle-aged migrants range between their mid-30s and late 40s. They regard Lydiat as both home and a strategic place from which to move to other nearby places, as they take advantage of other opportunities there. This is contrary to the perceptions of the majority of ageing first-generation Malawian migrants at Lydiat now regarding the informal settlement as their “final home” (Bhanye, 2022). To the ageing first-generation Malawian migrants, Lydiat has now become a home, despite not being the original homeland of Malawi. An 82-year-old *Lydiatian* expressed this perception clearly:

Although Malawi is my original homeland, Lydiat has now become a “home of a sort.” This is the only place I have known ever since I came to Zimbabwe. It is now my new home! [Interview with Kireni Bonzo, Lydiat Farm, June 28, 2018].

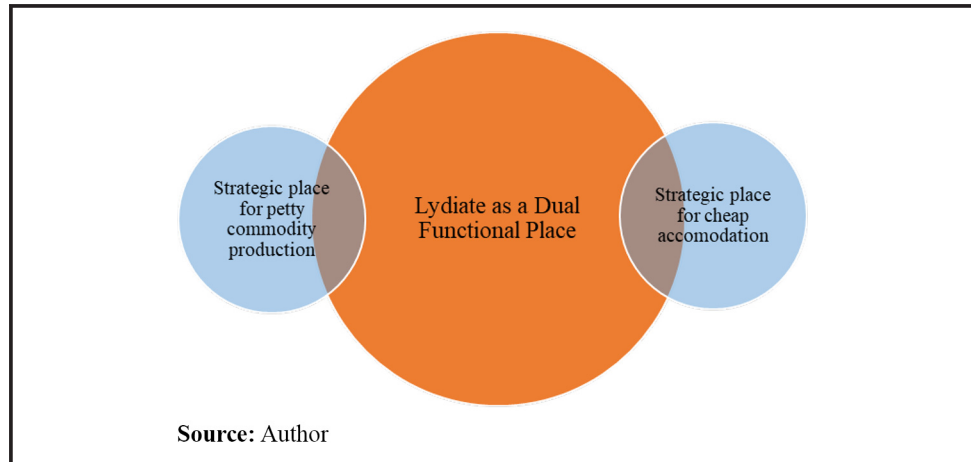
Contrary to the perceptions of older first-generation migrants about the settlement, the youths at Lydiat community regard their settlement as just a launch pad to move to the city. They dream of leaving their natal place because of rough living conditions, as opposed to the conveniences offered by cities. Target destinations vary from nearby towns to as far as metro-cities of neighbouring countries. While the journey to the final preferred destination may be long, meandering and grim, the radical youths are ready to endure it.

To reemphasize, this paper is focused on middle-aged migrants who have a dual sense of the place regarding Lydiat informal settlement. Put differently, these migrants want to benefit from opportunities presented by the present settlement and the nearby urban areas, such as Norton, where some migrants have settled. From the field data, these migrants are middle-aged men and women engaged in petty commodity trading and those who cannot afford to pay a monthly rental in the nearby town of Norton. Figure 2 below summarises the middle-aged *Lydiatians* who regard Lydiat as a dual functional place.

Strategic place for petty commodity trading

The first category of middle-aged *Lydiatians* who have a dual sense of place consists of those migrants who view Lydiat as a strategic place for petty commodity production. During the study, I came across more than 20 middle-aged *Lydiatians* who survived through buying and settling at Lydiat settlement. For example, Adrian Mutendere (43) and his wife Sylvia (38) survive by buying and selling in and outside Lydiat compound. To them, Lydiat is a ready market owing to its growing and concentrated population. During

Figure 2 Lydiate as a dual functional place



the study, I observed a number of selling points at different households in Lydiate. Some sell vegetables; others sell processed food items. [Figure 3](#) below shows various items for sale and selling points by middle-aged migrants in Lydiate.

I managed to have an interview with Sylvia, mentioned above, who was attending their vegetable stall. On that day of the research, Sylvia's husband had gone to Norton town to purchase more items for sale in the tuck shop, whose total stocks generally average \$80. Responding to why they remain in this area, Sylvia heartily remarked:

We survive on buying and selling (*kutenga tichitengesa*). As you can see, people are overcrowded here and we take advantage of that. A day cannot pass by without you having sold something. We have a tuck-shop (a tiny shop) and a vegetable stall (*musika*). We get the supplies for the tuck-

Figure 3 Various items for sell and selling points in Lydiate community



shop from Norton town, while the supplies for the vegetable stall are from the nearby plots.

Sylvia's husband regularly goes to Norton town to source more items for sale in the tuck-shop in the community. In the tuck-shop, the couple sells basic items that are needed by households in the community – sugar, unrefrigerated drinks, cooking oil and *maputi*, zap snacks and biscuits for children. On the vegetable stall, they sell dry beans, green vegetables and potatoes. The middle-aged couple highlighted that they have been surviving through buying and selling (*kutengesa tengesa*) in Lydiate community for more than 10 years. From my observation, the couple lived a comfortable life compared to other migrants, especially the elderly, in the community [Interview with Silvia Mutendere at Lydiate Farm, 05 April 2019].

Another case illustrating this dynamic involves Jonas Mbeve. Jonas alternates between Lydiate and Mutare, where he orders fruits for sale in Lydiate and the nearby Norton town. Jonas Mbeve has been surviving on buying and selling ever since he came to Lydiate. As he remarked, "I have been doing this ever since I came here. I started staying in Lydiate compound about 15 years ago". Jonas was coming from Skey farm where his parents used to work. At the time of the study, Jonas was married to his 38-year-old wife, Mavis and together had three children. The couple started selling local vegetables, but they now supply fruits that they order outside Lydiate area. Jonas further remarked:

I travel to Mutare town, about 300km from here, to buy bananas and apples that I sell in the community and Norton town. I usually spend a few days getting the order of fruits and I transport them using *Magonyeti* (haulage trucks returning to Harare) as they are cheaper than other forms of transport. Because of the many people who buy my fruits here, my business is doing fairly well [Interview with Jonas Mbeve at Lydiate Farm, 29 March 2019].

In the third and final case, 39-year-old, Cosmas Mbeu saw an opportunity to sell fish in the compound – one of the best delicacies for *Lydiatians*. "I am a fish monger (*fish bonga*); that is how I take care of my family here", Cosmas remarked. Cosmas started fishing as a young teenager after being initiated and mentored by his father, Jacob Mbeu. Together with his three close friends, Taurus, Konayi and Dauti, Cosmas fish at the nearby Darwendale Dam and Lake Chivero. They make more money during the summer because the fish will be much easier to catch, as they are more ravenous because of the warm waters. Cosmas narrated:

During summertime, we are guaranteed to have good catches. It is only during the winter when we have difficulties in catching fish as the weather will be more frigid for the fish to come to the surface. On a good day in summer, I come home with a 20l bucket full of fish. My wife also operates a vegetable stall here, selling fish to people here. They love fish so much. My wife also occasionally travels to Norton town to sell both fresh and dried fish. I afford food (\$30) and school fees (\$20) for my 2 children.

While Cosmas maintains a dual, strategic sense of place, his desire for his children is different. He wants his children to pursue a better life out of Lydiate, as he highlighted:

We are comfortable here (*titoribhoo!*). For now, I take advantage of the opportunities that lie in this area and I do not see myself moving out of this community in the near future. But I am working towards educating my children so that they will have a better life than me outside of this community [Interview with Cosmas Mbeu Mbeve at Lydiate Farm, 29 March 2019].

Strategic place for cheap accommodation

The second category of middle-aged *Lydiatians* who have a dual sense of place are those migrants who view Lydiate informal settlement as a strategic place for cheap accommodation, not a marketplace as is the case with the three cases presented above. These middle-aged *Lydiatians* see Lydiate as a base for cheap accommodation while they

work in the nearby towns. Studies confirm that peri-urban squatter settlements are usually characterized by cheap accommodation, and in most cases, they are strategically closer to places where the squatters work, making them attractive places for migrants (Chirisa, 2014; Mahadevia and Gogoi, 2011). The 37-year-old Irad Kumbukani, who has no house in Norton and cannot afford to rent one, is a clear example from the study. Irad works in the nearby town of Norton as a security guard. He highlighted that it was much better to work in the town, as one is guaranteed a permanent job and better salary. But still, it was more strategic to have cheaper accommodation for him to take care of his family adequately. Lydiate informal settlement was the strategic solution. Irad narrated:

This is my fifth year working for the security company. However, housing in town is not cheap. I cannot afford to rent a house in town; therefore, I travel to work every day from Lydiate, where I have managed to build my shack. Otherwise, it will be unwise of me to rent in Norton. It is very expensive and some of the landlords even demand payment of rentals in US dollars.

Although located in the transitional zone of the town, Lydiate is just like other suburbs in Norton in terms of travel distance to work. Irad usually goes to work using his bicycle, and at other times he can even walk to and from work. At Lydiate informal settlement, Irad has built a home for himself and his family – a tiny two-roomed structure with a shack acting as a kitchen – after inheriting a piece of land from his deceased parents. During the study, Irad was planning to make the structures well-plastered and put new floors and new iron sheet on the roof to make them more appealing [Interview with Irad Kumbukani at Lydiate Farm, 30 March 2019].

The second case of middle-aged *Lydiatians* regarding Lydiate as a strategic place for cheap accommodation involves 41-year-old Thomas Vhuvha. His case echoes the above-mentioned Irad issue in that he regards Lydiate as a strategic place of settlement that supports town-based livelihoods. Thomas was born at Lydiate compound, and both his parents are from Malawi. During the study, Thomas worked in Norton town at Mr. Bristle, a white-owned company that manufactures wooden domestic and industrial brush ware. Thomas has been working for the company for more than 10 years, and he travels daily to work from this community. I do not see myself moving out of this community because it is cheaper to stay here. We do not pay any rentals. I had to keep another foot outside of this community for a livelihood; otherwise, I will fail to feed my family. If you are wise in this community, you must look for opportunities outside of this community to survive. There are no genuine opportunities to earn money in this compound [Interview with Thomas Vhuvha at Lydiate Farm, 30 March 2019].

Most middle-aged *Lydiatians* have built better structures for settlement compared to those of old-timers. These new, better homes are in the section of the community commonly referred to as *kuma nyu sitendi*, or “new stands area”. Figure 4 below shows some of the better dwellings that have been built by middle-aged *Lydiatians*.

Within the settlement, there is quite a distinct pattern of household arrangements and type of infrastructure between the new stands area (*kuma nyu sitendi*), where most middle-aged *Lydiatians* reside, and the core Lydiate area, where older first-generation migrants reside. The area where the middle-aged reside has better infrastructure, with two-bedroomed structures of bricks, some well-plastered, with well-polished cement floors and iron sheet roofs. The strategic middle-aged *Lydiatians* also have distinct amenities like electricity, solar panels, satellite dishes, sofas, bicycles, televisions and radios, the result of their hustle outside the community. This demonstrates the permanence of settlement in the community and the desire to give comfort to the wife and children, who often remain in the settlement while the father hustles outside the community. For a considerable period, the middle-aged migrants who leave Lydiate for other places of opportunity often leave family members or lodgers to use the stand and other property so that if they decide to come back, they will still possess their property. This was clear through the cases of Mr. and Mrs. Nguguya, who

Figure 4 Some of the better dwellings being built by middle-aged Lydiatians in the new stands area



Source: Fieldwork

left Luckson Machakwa as a lodger on their property while they temporarily moved to Norton town, and Thomas and Gilbert Dhairesi, who were left to take care of Mr. Kalembe's property while he was temporarily living outside the community [Interview with Luckson Machaka and Thomas Daires at Lydiate Farm, 23 May 2018].

Conclusion and future directions

This study, among middle-aged Malawian migrants in Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe, has shed light on the migrants' unique and complex perceptions of place and their aspirations for the future. Contrary to the views of ageing first-generation migrants, who now regard Lydiate as "the final home", and younger migrants who see the settlement as a "launchpad to the city", middle-aged *Lydiatians* exhibit a "dual sense of place". They consider Lydiate both as a home and as a strategic place from which to leverage opportunities in nearby urban areas. One significant aspect of this dual sense of place is the strategic role of Lydiate as a marketplace for petty commodity trading. Many middle-aged migrants engage in buying and selling activities, taking advantage of the growing and concentrated population within the settlement. From vegetable stalls to tuck-shops, these migrants have found a way to make a living and support their families through entrepreneurial ventures. Their adaptability and resourcefulness have enabled them to thrive in an environment where formal job opportunities are very limited. Moreover, another category of middle-aged migrants views Lydiate as a strategic place for affordable accommodation while they work in nearby towns and farms. Due to the high costs of renting houses in these urban areas, Lydiate serves as a cost-effective base for them to commute to work. The settlement's proximity to towns like Norton enables them to access job opportunities while maintaining a relatively lower cost of living. This strategic approach allows them to provide for their families while saving on housing expenses. The study has also highlighted the socio-economic dynamism of middle-aged *Lydiatians*. They have been actively improving settlement infrastructure by constructing better dwellings in the "new stands area". These structures are equipped with modern amenities such as electricity, solar panels and satellite dishes. Additionally, middle-aged migrants often leave family members or lodgers to utilize their properties while they temporarily move to other areas for

work. This supportive family arrangement ensures that their assets are preserved, and they can return to their settlement if needed.

The novel observation in this paper that migrants have a “strategic dual sense of place” view of the informal settlement is fascinating, if not new. Before this, scholars presented migrants as transnational figures, successively moving to a better place that finally becomes home (Kihato, 2009; Landau, 2019; Phillips and James, 2014; Walker, 2017). Indeed, Landau (2019) has shown how foreign migrants in informal settlements always aspired to be city dwellers, arguing that foreign migrants actively resist implanting their roots, instead opting to access and navigate the city from a position of partial inclusion and transience. Mutsindikwa (2020) made the same point, showing how urban migrants aspire to have their own homes away from the informal settlements that housed them upon arrival in the city of Harare. Nyamwanza and Dzingirai (2020) also made a point that for migrants, informal settlements are rough neighbourhoods fraught with dangers and hostilities, only useful because there are no alternative and established settlements. However, the data presented in this paper suggest that this characterization associating migrants with maintaining a stable, sedentary, bounded and fixed perception of home is oversimplified. This is because migrants can sometimes continue to cherish the idea of informal settlements in the diaspora as home, just as they also entertain the established towns as useful places in their life, thus maintaining what I have term a “dual sense of place”. In Lydiate, the middle-aged migrants’ dual sense of place reflects their adaptability and resilience in navigating their lives as migrants on the margins in the “rough” peri-urban Zimbabwe. Their perception of Lydiate as both a home and a strategic base for pursuing opportunities in nearby towns showcases the nimbleness and agility of marginalised migrants and, broadly, the complexity of migration experiences.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of migration and sociality dynamics in Africa’s emerging urban spaces and offers important insights for future research, policy and community development efforts. I hope that the study inspires further exploration of the experiences and aspirations of different cohorts of migrants on the margins in Southern Africa and beyond. In this paper, the middle-aged migrants got my attention. Unlike the youth and older-age migrants, those in the middle of their life courses are rarely studied, less so from the perspectives of sociality and vulnerability. This paper demonstrated that middle-aged migrants not only deserve to be studied on their own rights; this group opens theoretically, politically and socially relevant avenues which can revitalize our understanding of mobility and sociality in the age of rapid globalization and urbanization. Being middle-aged as a migrant is a position of significant vulnerability. As usually perceived, middle-aged people will be at their peak in terms of their career, economic wealth and social status; however, the precarious and migrant variable of middle-aged migrants destabilises this perception.

To further enhance the livelihood opportunities in migrant communities like Lydiate, policymakers must develop local markets and support infrastructure. Creating an environment that fosters economic diversification and entrepreneurship empowers the residents and stimulates local growth. Collaborative efforts between researchers, policymakers and advocacy groups can promote policy changes and social support for migrant communities. Addressing socio-economic disparities is equally vital to creating sustainable and inclusive development in migrant communities like Lydiate. Advocating for affordable housing options in nearby towns will enable more migrants to access better living conditions while pursuing economic opportunities. Empowering marginalized communities through education and skills training can lead to long-term improvements in their socio-economic status. Preserving cultural identities and promoting social cohesion among different migrant groups are also essential components of ensuring harmonious and inclusive communities. In the case of Lydiate, for example, acknowledging and respecting

the diverse religious and cultural practices, such as the Nyau cult, will foster understanding and mutual respect. For future research, the paper emphasizes the importance of longitudinal research to understand how migration, sociality and settlement dynamics evolve over time. Investigating the long-term effects of migration on different generations and analysing the socio-economic development of migrant settlements will provide valuable insights for policymakers and migration researchers.

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Further reading

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