



**Women in Informal Employment
Globalizing and Organizing**

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Location, Location, Location:

The Life of a Refugee Street Barber in Durban, South Africa

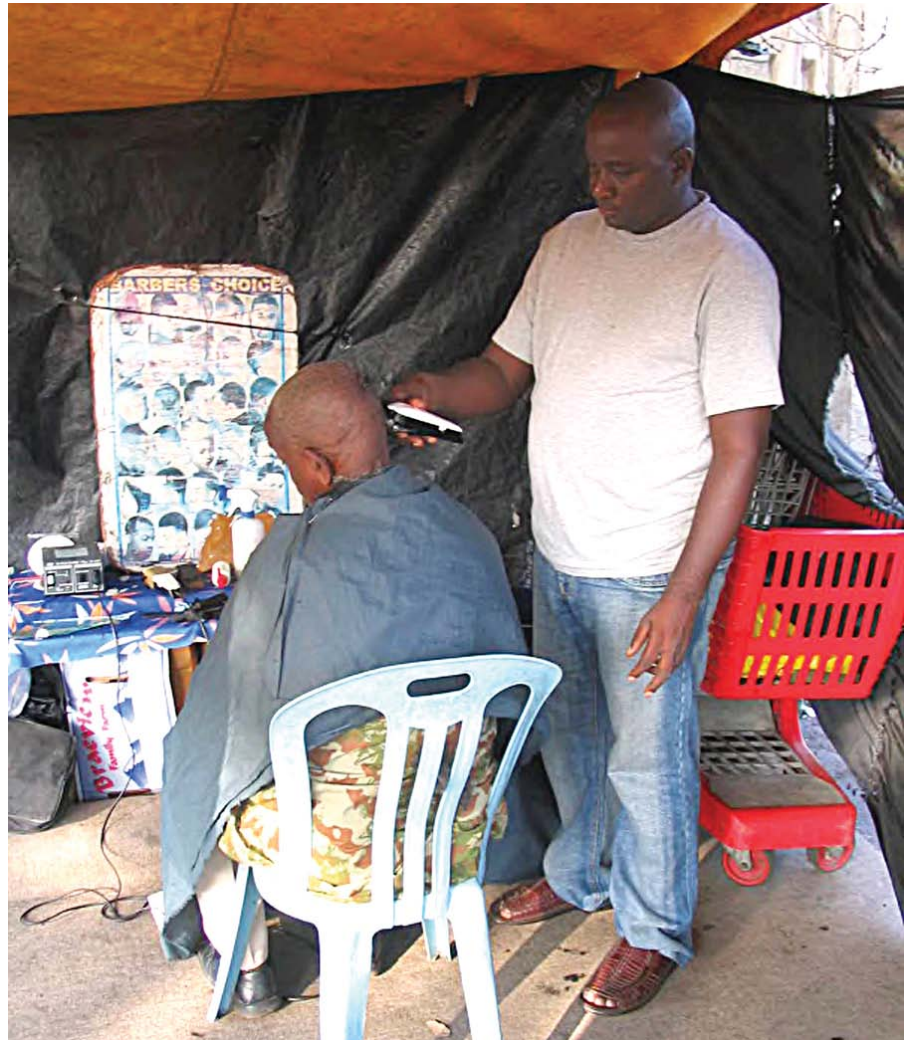
by **Françoise Carré¹**

Choma Choma Nalushaka made an arduous journey from war-torn Congo to South Africa—then waited years for his family to join him. He has established himself as a street barber in his new home in Durban, but the challenges of an informally-employed refugee are many.

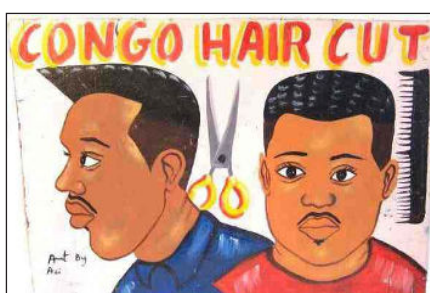


Being a refugee means—and this is true almost everywhere—that one's degree, professional or vocational certification will not be recognized... Choma Choma, who was a schoolteacher back in Congo, cannot teach secondary education in urban areas of Durban.

For a barber in Durban's busy Warwick Junction, location matters most. Customers have options about hair cutting, so when a man decides the time is right—or when he has some money in his pocket—he will look for some place to get a quick haircut or a shave. Convenience is crucial. The location of Choma Choma Nalushaka's stall at a main intersection in Warwick Junction is very good. His booth is large, and it's accessible to foot traffic.



Choma-Choma at work at his Warwick Junction booth in Durban.

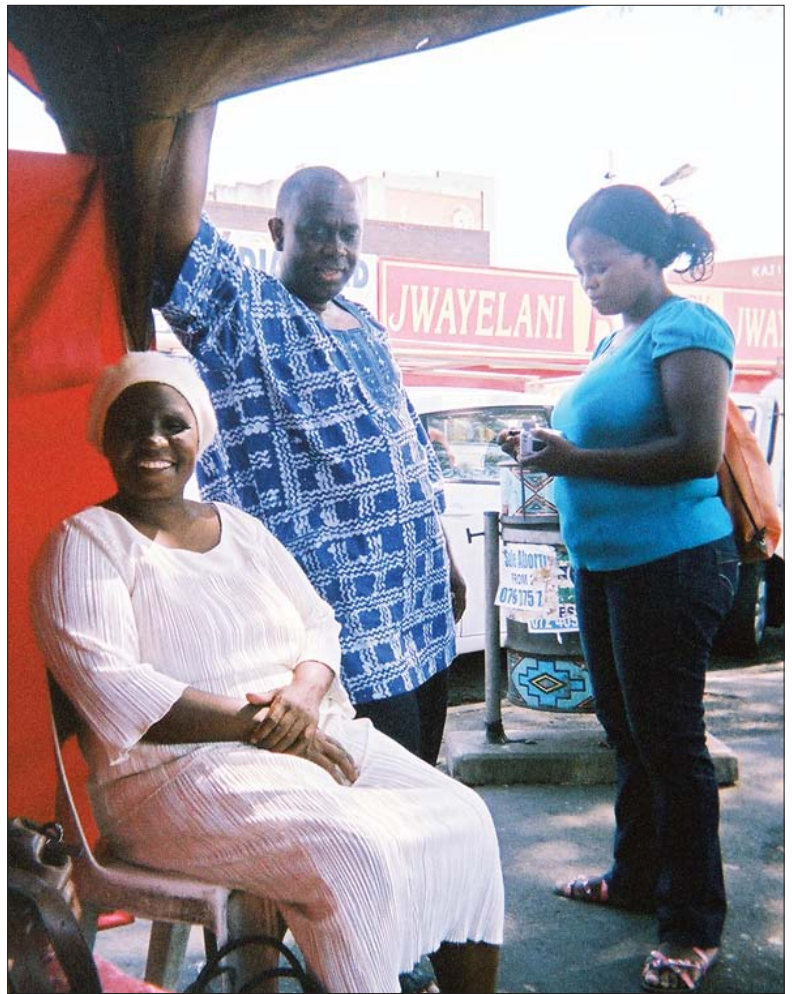


What is not so good, according to Choma Choma, is that his booth is temporary; everything must be dismantled at end of day, stored safely, and put up again very early the next morning to catch the commuter crowd. This makes for a long work day, one that begins at about 6 a.m. and carries on until after the evening rush ends around 6 p.m. But finding a permanent stall in Warwick Junction's organized market with reasonable rent has not happened yet; all the good locations are already taken. And establishing a permanent site on a side street is too expensive and would require a level of upfront investment he simply cannot muster. So Choma Choma continues

¹ This profile is based on reflections written after two visits the author and others made to the family, one in 2007 and a second in 2011, as part of the Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Exposure Dialogue Programme. Leslie Vryenhoek provided substantial editing support to shape this article. It reflects Choma Choma and his family's circumstances in 2011. Françoise Carré followed up in person with Choma Choma in 2013, and a postscript is included at the end.

barbering in a temporary location and holds on to the hope that he will find another way to earn a living.

Livelihoods are not easy to come by for non-citizens in South Africa, and Choma Choma is a refugee from Eastern Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo). Wars have ravaged his port city home, Uvira on Lake Tanganika, a contested harbour for competing armies. In the 1990s, it became impossible for him to make a living there and the risk of being a male—subject to being drafted into one of the armies or just caught up in the fighting—led him to make the arduous journey alone across many borders to South Africa, which recognized the refugee status of Congolese. He was helped in his journey by the Pentecostal church network, and he now serves as a pastor for a Pentecostal congregation of Swahili speakers, mostly refugees from parts of East Africa. He offers regular church services in a make-shift community hall. But this work is not building toward a career or providing a livelihood. Rather, Choma Choma said, “It is for my life.”



Being a refugee means—and this is true almost everywhere—that one's degree, professional or vocational certification will not be recognized. Policies for setting “equivalency” between certifications do not exist unless an immigration flow is steady and large. Choma Choma, who was a schoolteacher back in Congo, cannot teach secondary education in urban areas of Durban—those with foreign credentials are considered only for the most risky assignments in isolated rural areas where teen pupils are considered very unruly.

He settled in Durban and was fortunate to find an apprentice situation with a Congolese barber. Choma Choma worked for free in exchange for learning the trade, one of the few trades open to Congolese refugees. When his mentor left Durban, he gave Choma Choma the tent and the equipment, and barbering on the street became the principle means of earning a livelihood for Choma Choma.

Barbering with an electric shaver takes handling the shaver close to the skin. Careful attention is needed to learn this skill, but it can be learned in a brief while. What takes a bit longer to learn, and what not everyone develops, is the personal touch, the ability to make customers feel comfortable so they will return to your stall rather than someone else's. Choma Choma is very good at this; he gives close attention and care to his customers.

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Family and Household

This is our life.... This is our life...now.

Choma Choma's second daughter

The family's crowded house positively hums with activity and all seem to have more than one economic activity.

Choma Choma endured a long, lonely stretch of about six years in Durban before he was joined by his wife Jeanne and their sons. Choma Choma and Jeanne have three daughters. The eldest is married to a Congolese and lives in the Free State province. The second stayed behind in Congo, but finally joined the family in Durban in 2011. Although she is trained as a nurse, her certification from Congo is unlikely to be recognized. She is taking English classes and works in a food store, which contributes to the family income.

And then there is the baby, born in South Africa in 2004 after the family reunited and now a thriving young girl—a girl whose name means “luck.”

The children are full of curiosity and, fluent in English like their father, are lively conversationalists. Jeanne, however, is more quiet and retiring, and speaks Swahili, the language of the East Congolese community.



The family's crowded house positively hums with activity and visitors—adults consulting with each other, teenage boys in perpetual movement in and out, and children from the family and neighbours bouncing around the edges of the conversations. The home is visited regularly by fellow Congolese and other foreigners. All seem to have more than one economic activity—they add selling clothes, refurbished shoes, or other things to their main

livelihood. Expenses are high, and rent rose to 2,400 rand in 2011. While the family enjoys both supermarket and some fresh market goods along with basic consumer goods—furniture, electricity, gas, cold water, a television, even a refrigerator—meeting core expenses such as housing, schooling, transportation, and medical care (beyond basic clinic care) is an ongoing challenge. The family carries some debt, to which regular expenses such as groceries contribute. To bring in additional income, the household takes in boarders. One young man, recently arrived from Congo, is working at the barber stall for his room and board. In 2011, a young couple with an infant, both East African immigrants, also moved in. During the day, another woman uses the space to work on a sewing machine. Jeanne is paid to watch the boarders' infant when both parents are working. In addition, a 17-year-old relative is staying with them while taking secretarial and business classes.

Jeanne is kept busy with housekeeping for this very large household and making meals, which must be prepared and eaten in the breezeway and back court because the kitchen has been made into another bedroom to accommodate all these newcomers.

While the family home is affectionate and each member contributes through their efforts, disorder reigns outside the walls. The insecurity of central city Durban has a major impact on Choma Choma's family, and the doors to their very pleasant house are gated and padlocked at all times. Robbery is a risk. Choma Choma and his family must contend with a noisy bar across the road and its unruly customers. Choma Choma also spoke of power outages and uncollected refuse. But a dilapidated house nearly opposite his home is cause for greater concern. Abandoned by its owner—who has not been mandated to shut it down—it is the locus of an ever shifting set of young residents and a trade in alcohol and illegal substances. Local police appear to have been of little help; enforcement is lax.

On Choma Choma's family's home, a charred wall attests to the dangers of getting into an altercation with one of the transient neighbours. Fortunately, the fire set by someone staying in the squatter house was put out by another neighbour.

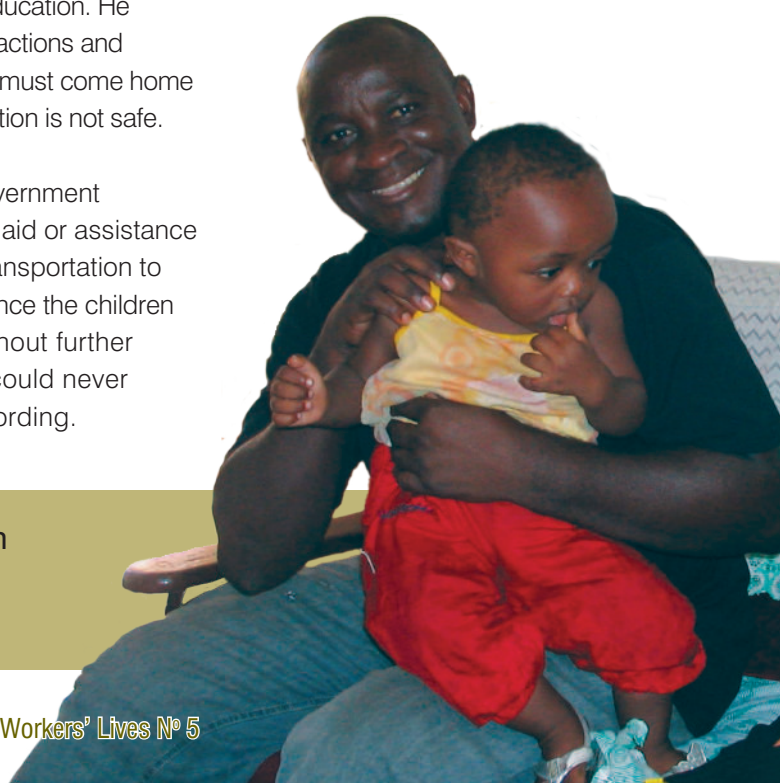
Of paramount importance to Choma Choma is his children's education. He is vigilant in ensuring that his children not lose focus to the distractions and dangers of the street in the central city. The children, he insists, must come home immediately after school; playing in the streets of Warwick Junction is not safe.

Education is a high cost for the family, which receives no government assistance because non-citizens are not eligible for financial aid or assistance with tuition for secondary and post-secondary education. Transportation to school for several children is also a significant budget item. Once the children finish secondary school, there is little to do but start work without further training. Still, they have options their newly arrived father could never have conceived. One son has his hopes set on music recording.



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Choma-Choma with his youngest child, born in South Africa in 2004 after the family reunited. She is now a thriving young girl.





Choma Choma's youngest daughter (left); his wife Jeanne (right); and the author Françoise Carré with relatives of Jeanne's (above).



Refugee Status

Despite living here since the late 1990s, and despite his leadership role in the community and how well-respected he is, Choma Choma and his family are still outsiders, still denied access to so many benefits and protections. In South Africa, which has had limited experience with immigrants and with organizing structures for immigrants due to its historical isolation from the rest of Africa, life is particularly hard for refugees (asylum seekers). There are no formal resettlement programmes, and it appears that South African institutions are simply not set up to accommodate non-citizens.

The restrictions on refugee economic activities are many and multifaceted. While it is difficult to sort out what is policy and what is practice, from a refugee standpoint, the results are one and the same.

According to Choma Choma's friend and colleague Gaby Bikombo, the procedure to get status as an asylum seeker has lengthened in recent years, stretching the time spent in limbo for many newcomers from Congo, Somalia and other parts of East Africa into months and even years. There are insufficient government staff assigned to the process and no prospect of improvement. The limbo—whether intentional or expedient—has clear economic consequences; it makes subsistence difficult. Even after refugee status is obtained (which has become rarer), one is still a foreigner, a non-citizen in the country. By law, foreigners have separate status; they are barred from security work (working as a security

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Choma Choma enjoys his friends.



The most striking obstacle is the expectation within the public administration that the primary identification to register for services is the “green ID,” the official South African ID. While South Africa officially accepts East Congolese fleeing the war, this official acceptance seems not to have reached throughout public agencies.

guard had been an accessible occupation) and must pay more for utility deposits, for example. They are not eligible for many scholarships and training opportunities. They are not eligible for the primary social protection programmes: the old age pension, the child care grant, and the disability benefit. Only basic health care is accessible. Resources for training and economic development, such as small business loans, are nearly out of reach to refugees, while utility deposits and other living expenses are higher for foreigners than for South African citizens.

The most striking obstacle is the expectation within the public administration that the primary identification to register for services is the “green ID,” the official South African identification card. While South Africa officially accepts East Congolese fleeing the war, this official acceptance seems not to have reached throughout public agencies. For example, until 2003 only one school took refugee children; all others maintained that a green ID was required to attend. This was only remedied because the Catholic Archdiocese refugee programme representative visited each school to negotiate acceptance of refugee children.

Since 2000, an official refugee ID card has been in place. It is supposed to confer legal status and rights to some services. However, the card is maroon, not green—a distinction the UNHCR has pointed out is inadvisable in a country where xenophobia is common²—and is not recognized by most agencies or many individual public officials. Whether this is official policy or the result of ignorance or possible resentment of foreigners is unclear. Potential employers may not know what the maroon ID is. If they do, they may also note that the new card must be renewed every two years (and the renewal process itself takes over a year) so that a new hire is less appealing because he/she may lose this refugee status in the next renewal.

For refugees, South Africa is a complex setting where an unrecognized refugee status makes formal work unattainable, and where the small informal economy offers far fewer opportunities to absorb a newcomer than it would in another country with traditional markets and lively street trade.

Nevertheless, within the South African informal economy, refugees and other immigrants can and do play a vital role. They bring long traditions of street vending and knowledge of informal markets from their societies of origin. This helps feed the growth of some forms of self-employment and lends vitality to Durban’s informal economy. Newcomers also bring new products and new business skills. It is said that Congolese refugees came up with the trade in used clothing. While the importation of used clothing is now forbidden, the example is one where newcomers found a market that was previously untapped. A particularly successful small vendor of bakery goods in Warwick Junction is another example; the baker/vendor is a Ghanaian who used a recipe from his country for muffins. This simple change resulted in success as people were willing to pay a bit extra for the new taste. Similarly, Congolese barbers have disseminated hair cut styles previously unknown in the area.

² This is discussed in an article on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) website: <http://www.unhcr.org/406c1c3c4.html>.

The Street Barber Trade in Durban

Street barbering provides only low earnings, even for a man with a stall in a well located intersection, a man well known and respected among Congolese residents and who gets along with South African neighbours. Choma Choma thinks that his business is remaining static and possibly falling behind as costs go up. But expansion within the trade is difficult, and he lacks the investment income to equip a full salon with the hair dryers and sinks necessary to draw a female clientele and charge for more elaborate hairdos.

Longstanding challenges include a limited market size. Haircuts and shaves are services sold to a population that is itself very low income—street vendors cannot tap into a slightly higher income market. For all in Warwick Junction, opportunities for growth are hemmed in by the city's residential and commercial patterns. Unlike in many other countries, informal traders have only limited access to customers with income even a notch higher than themselves. The urban and commercial patterns inherited from apartheid—confining people to suburban townships and restricting any African street trade—is a heavy legacy that burdens commercial expansion. It affects who travels through Warwick Junction, what goods and services can be offered, and consumption patterns. In South Africa, people purchase goods grown by large scale farms and processed by large companies; the tradition of small scale production goods sold by street vendors seems almost non-existent (except for traditional medicines and a narrow range of produce items). The foot traffic through Warwick Junction offers good but limited opportunities for vendors—though these are better here than in many other locations in the city. Nevertheless, street vendors have access to only one slice of working South Africans' expenditures; the rest likely goes to large formal enterprises.

In central Durban, the trade of barbering is practiced on male customers by men using electric shavers and manual trimmers to provide short hair cuts in multiple styles, shaves of the entire head, and beard shaving. Hygienic procedures (e.g. spraying the shaver with alcohol) should be observed and the work should be done gently and with a definite amount of personal touch. The customer has to be made comfortable so he will come back.

The trade is organized in a “guild”, albeit one that does not enforce barriers to entry. All barbers hang a similar yellow sign that indicates the most common hairstyles and name of the owner. In Durban, the majority of street barbers are foreigners, primarily Congolese, some Ghanaians, and a few other East Africans. Choma Choma's friend Gaby Bikombo observed that getting close-cropped hairstyles has become more common now that the Congolese barbers have settled here. In effect, a market might have grown because the supply is there.

Earnings are generally low. Weekly earnings from barbering range from 600 to 800 rand. The municipality charges 150 rand per year for a permit and right to use the space, and the cost to rent the space itself is 50 rand per month. While Choma Choma inherited his stall and equipment from the man who trained him, many newly-arrived

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barbers have to rent the tools—the tent, chairs, mirrors, a portable battery and electric tools. Hygiene supplies must be bought, and things wear out and must be replaced regularly. There are additional costs for storage, shavers, blades, and electricity. Finally, most barbers must pay a fee to charge their shaver battery. Choma Choma, however, has been able to purchase a small battery charger that he uses at home to save on this cost.

There is always new competition as there is a regular influx of new barbers, many of them Congolese introduced to the trade out of necessity by the Archdiocese refugee programme. This relationship has historical roots: a senior Archdiocesan cleric had once served in Congo and knew the population (and other Swahili speaking groups). The earliest Congolese arrivals knew how to barber, so the Archdiocese began and continues to connect new arrivals to settled ones so they can learn the trade and start earning quickly.

Other insecurities add more pressure. Crime plays a constricting role, and stalls have to be guarded because tools are stolen and then sold cheaply to other traders desperate to save on their costs.

And occasionally, a customer will refuse to pay, claiming some dissatisfaction with the service. There isn't much recourse aside from negotiation—a haircut or a shave can't be taken back—so the barber must just accept the loss. On a larger scale, there is always the threat of development pushing the barbers and other street vendors out. A development plan to turn parts of Warwick Junction into a formal mall was defeated by the sustained, organized opposition of street traders and their allies a few years back, but other such schemes are emerging. It is impossible to know how future plans for development will affect Choma Choma and other street barbers who live and work in Warwick Junction.



Siyagunda, the Barber Association

In his community of Congolese barbers, Choma Choma is a leader, one with long standing experience in Durban and in barbering. He is the treasurer of Siyagunda, the street barbers association. Gaby Bikombo also has an active leadership role in the association. Siyagunda brings together many of the barbers in the area, who each pay 50 rand per annum to join. The association offers a range of financial and personal services for contributing members, from business services and loans to translation services, court assistance, and funeral services. In a community where access to formal sector networks and services is impossible, this association is vital.

Siyagunda plays a critical role around issues such as the use of space—by negotiating with the municipality and with township governing bodies and by engaging in public advocacy overall. In recent years, Siyagunda has achieved three significant objectives that have improved things financially for its membership.

Firstly, it negotiated a higher price that barbers could charge for a haircut and shave. For 10 years, the price was held at 10 rand while the price of everything else went up—including what barbers had to pay to charge the battery of their electric shavers. The collectively agreed price increase—to 15 rand in 2011—is significant though somewhat difficult to implement in the economic environment. Siyagunda relies on voluntary compliance from members and new arrivals. In areas on the edges of the central market area, and those away from it, members reduce the price when business is slow. Even in the central area, toward the end of a slow day, pressure is great to reduce the price or to accept doing less, e.g. cut hair but forego the shave, for only 10 rand.

Secondly, Siyagunda rents batteries and has purchased a battery charger to provide charging at cost. A member of Siyagunda operates the service through a business arrangement—he pays Siyagunda 500 rand per month and retains the rest of the earnings. This arrangement works well and lowers costs for members; it was devised after an earlier trial with shared management of the battery charger proved too fraught.

Thirdly, Siyagunda established a small revolving loan fund to help when a member's equipment is stolen. Members have welcomed the loan fund, but it is dicey to manage because there is no official means to enforce reimbursement. The association must rely on social obligation and peer pressure (plus the threat of future refusals) to receive payment.

Not all of the association's efforts have met with success. Siyagunda was unsuccessful in negotiating with municipal authorities to gain access to a new stall location in the area.

Choma Choma is the treasurer of Siyagunda, the street barber's association, which plays a critical role around issues such as the use of space—by negotiating with the municipality and with township governing bodies and by engaging in public advocacy overall.

The Congolese refugees are a small community in a very large country. In Durban, they live primarily in the old central city area. They feel safer here than in the townships, where they fear being lost in the crowd or being resented as outsiders.

Congolese Refugee Community

The Congolese refugees are a small community in a very large country. In Durban, they live primarily in the old central city area. They feel safer here than in the townships, where they fear being lost in the crowd or being resented as outsiders, and where they have a sense that, were something to happen to them, there might not be enough concerned people to help them. But living in the central city has consequences. Housing is expensive and old. For example, a joint water meter for three contiguous buildings is attached to Choma Choma's residence. Since the rate per litre goes up with total volume consumed, each household pays more per litre than it would with an individual meter. Theft and personal violence on the street are also a concern.

Still, for Choma Choma, the proximity of his home to his market stall is vitally important. The stall remains open for long hours, but he can move away from it to go home for a meal or attend to community business and return quickly. His oldest sons run the stall in his absence. They set up the stall in the morning and take it down at the end of the day. They and the Congolese apprentice/boarder—a recent arrival—cover the long opening hours, particularly on weekends. This enables Choma Choma to spend significant time away from the stall while still maximizing the hours it can provide service. He is centrally located for members of his congregation and of the broader community, including Siyagunda members, to drop by and discuss important matters. A possible displacement of work space or living quarters would create significant hurdles.

So for Choma Choma, although living in the central city has some dangers, it makes it possible to accomplish the many diverse activities that are key to his livelihood, community and family life.

Choma's nephew Jonty feels he owes his life to Choma Choma. This shy and gentle young man was forced to flee the Congo (where he was studying to be a vet) 3 months ago. His uncle has taken him in and given him work helping run his Warwick Junction stand.



Church and Community

Choma Choma's responsibilities as a pastor for a Pentecostal congregation are central to his life. It is a church of Swahili speakers, primarily Congolese. It draws and hosts refugees and appears to have become the entry point into Durban life for many refugees. A number of his sons sing with the choir, and one son plays the church's electric organ. The church itself rents space in a business building close to Warwick Junction. The walls in the church suite are decorated with wall hangings and flowers.

Barbering right on the street, with long days that can include periods without customers, at least allows Choma Choma to conduct much of the pastoral work during the day. There is a steady flow of visitors, all of whom come to consult with him at the barber stall, at home, and in encounters on the street. Recent arrivals from Congo come for assistance and orientation. People also bring family trouble, disputes, and other concerns for counsel and help.

Increasingly, domestic violence is a concern—one of the new challenges appearing among younger members of the community. More recent arrivals in particular are under great pressure to deliver support and resources to family experiencing hardship back home. Tensions are high, and both Choma Choma and Gaby report they more frequently encounter incidents of significant domestic violence, wife beating in particular, and discuss whether there should be more systematic community attention and support.

Choma Choma's church draws and hosts refugees and appears to have become the entry point into Durban life for many refugees. A number of his sons sing with the choir, and one son plays the church's electric organ.



Hope sustains Choma Choma's life. It drove him to take a risky, arduous, and lonely overland trip to South Africa on his own in order to find a better place for his family, a place where his children can go to school safe from the dangers of war and its aftermath. Hope also carried him even as he worked without pay...

Faith and Hope

Faith is a big part of this family's life. There is prayer time in the morning and over meals. At the beginning and end of the day, there is listening to inspiring East African gospel.

Hope is central, too. Hope sustains Choma Choma's life. It drove him to take a risky, arduous, and lonely overland trip to South Africa on his own in order to find a better place for his family, a place where his children can go to school safe from the dangers of war and its aftermath. Hope also carried him even as he worked without pay, even through his six year wait to be reunited with his family. It has been a long and difficult journey for Choma Choma and his family.

Now, he has embarked on another long journey. Becoming a permanent South African resident is now Choma Choma's goal, but this takes a long time. There are so many administrative delays. Worse, the process is considerably uncertain. The application may get lost, or the card may be stolen from the mail and sold—he simply cannot count on getting a permanent resident card despite his vigilance. Still, it is the only way to secure his family's future and enable his children to apply for financial aid. In South Africa's modern economy, a foreshortened education will put the children at a disadvantage.

Hope also pushes Choma Choma to seek out ways to get more income out of barbering, to seek subsidies to expand and acquire better equipment, or find new ventures that will yield greater income than barbering. Since 2009, he has been purchasing one used car at a time to fix up and resell at a weekly open air market. This has required an outlay of cash to pay for repairs and retrofitting—done by informal panel beaters and mechanics in the area—as well as for storage. Choma Choma, however, is ineligible for any state-sponsored incentive plan for business start-ups or investment. He tried applying to a bank for a small loan but was turned down, probably due to being self-employed. So like many other informal workers, he has had to resort to private, informal arrangements, taking out a loan from a member of the community.

To see any return on his investment requires patience. The resale market can be slow—it has taken a full year for a used vehicle to sell, and so far, net income from this venture has been low.

But the family has made gains in other ways. Choma Choma's children are growing strong and healthy and have taken root in this country. There is much self confidence in the family.



Postscript 2013

In February 2013, Choma Choma was part of a group of Durban informal workers, some of whom are members of the newly formed South Africa Self-Employed Women's Association (SASEWA), who participated in the release of a book of essays based on their work and lives that addressed the inter-connections of "labour, informal employment and poverty." The book, *Bridging Perspectives*³ was launched at Ikes' Books and Collectables in Durban, where Choma Choma joined several women informal workers to speak about their experiences in interacting with WIEGO and other researchers. Choma Choma spoke of how proud he felt about his family and being able to show his work, congregation and family life to visitors and to his "sisters", the South African informal workers who also participated in the Exposure Dialogue Programme. And he said he appreciated how comfortable the visitors from the programme felt around his family. We did.

As of 2013, Choma Choma has become a non-citizen permanent resident, which bestows a few rights. Certain South African regulations now no longer exclude him. He can open a bank account more easily, and the bank does not turn down his request for some services based on citizenship (previously he had been turned down by a retail money order business to send money to another city because he was not a citizen). A bank loan is still out of reach because he is self-employed and informal. He has applied to a government loan programme—one that focuses on improving informal businesses—for funds to renovate his stall and equipment, though at time of interview he had not had a response and it was unclear whether being a non-citizen might be an obstacle. He can also now apply for a school teacher certification training program (there is a waiting list) and return to the occupation he practiced in Congo.

However, it will take five more years before he is eligible for citizenship. His wife and sons are also still waiting for this status. Only his youngest daughter, born in South Africa, is eligible for a little public monthly grant. His second daughter, who had been trained as a nurse in Congo but was unable to practice, has moved away. Nonetheless, the family perseveres. One son is up for "matriculation" (exam to open access to university) and two younger ones are a year away from the examination.

Choma Choma's service and leadership within the community has continued to expand. He has become the vice-chair of Siyagunda, the barber's association. He is member of the Warwick Junction street vendor association and serves on the Warwick Committee as well.

While many challenges still lie ahead, there is great hope for Choma Choma and his family.



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³ *Bridging Perspectives: The Cornell-SEWA-WIEGO Exposure Dialogue Programme on Labour, Informal Employment and Poverty* was edited by Namrata Bali, Martha A. Chen and Ravi Kanbur, and published by SEWA Academy in 2012.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers, statisticians and development practitioners working on the informal economy. For more information see www.wiego.org.

