

Vivimos Juntxs, Comemos Juntxs

Hidden Resilience: Entrepreneurship for Undocumented People

Final Report

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September 2022

Produced with Financial Support From: The Metcalf Foundation

Partners: FoodShare Toronto and Toronto Queer Media & Arts Centre



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Introduction

People who face precarious immigration status¹ enter the Canadian labour market at a disadvantage for a number of reasons. Firstly, immigration and work permit policies that restrict the rights and movements of those facing precarious status are mechanisms the Canadian state uses to ensure a large pool of exploitable migrant labour. The notion of a “scarcity of resources” is often used to justify this restriction of rights that then creates structures and systems of exploitation. It has also been well documented that newcomers’ previous credentials and employment experience are generally disregarded, and instead Canadian work experience is upheld as an expectation for employment leading to deskilling and greater precarity in employment (Hande, Akram and Condratto, 2020). Moreover, for migrant workers, a Social Insurance Number (SIN) number starting with the number nine identifies temporariness, leading to increased risk of exploitation and precarious work (Landolt and Goldring, 2013). For undocumented workers without a SIN, the challenges are amplified, frequently resulting in extremely precarious, exploitative and at times dangerous employment (Foster, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a widespread increase in financial insecurity, worsening both employment precarity and dangerous working conditions for migrants, especially undocumented people. Since every federally-funded COVID-19 support program required a valid SIN, undocumented workers were left with no access to supports should they lose their job or get exposed or sick. Despite evidence that im/migrants and refugees were disproportionately being exposed to and contracting COVID-19 (DeClerq, 2020), no level of government made any effort to offer support or protection. Moreover, workplace safety issues, which were already almost entirely ignored by employers, became amplified in sectors populated by migrant and undocumented workers, such as farms and factories (Bragg, 2021, MWAC, 2020).

Despite these tremendous obstacles, migrant communities continue to be extremely resourceful, and many undocumented workers have discovered legal ways of generating income through their own entrepreneurship. Anyone, regardless of immigration status, can apply for a business license in Ontario for a small fee. With this license, entrepreneurs can open bank accounts and accept payments in the business’

¹ We use the term precarious immigration status to refer to the complicated constellation of immigration statuses and processes experienced by migrants in Canada. Statuses are often temporary and the social rights connected to these statuses are often shifting. We use this umbrella category interchangeably with the term migrant, and within it we include undocumented people, refugee claimants, refused refugee claimants (who may or may not be undertaking an appeal), humanitarian and compassionate ground applicants, pre-removal risk assessment applicants, and people on temporary resident permits.



name. Since entrepreneurship is one of the few ways undocumented people can legally participate in the economy in Ontario, starting a business may provide greater financial stability and security for the most precarious workers.

This research aimed to understand how people who face (or have faced) precarious immigration status navigate the various pathways of entrepreneurship within the mainstream Canadian economic market. Our primary objective was to explore the experiences of entrepreneurship of people who had no immigration status (i.e. undocumented), but we also wanted to provide space for people who may have had some other form of precarious status and who had unique experiences. Our goals were both reflective and forward-looking, as we wished to 1) provide a platform for community members who face (or have faced) precarious immigration status to share their experiences establishing different forms of entrepreneurship (including a single proprietor business, a corporation, a co-operative or a non-profit organization), 2) identify any barriers they experienced or support systems they utilized; as well as 3) create webs of support for people facing precarious status who wish to create their own businesses in the future.

While we explored various ways to engage in the mainstream economy, our framework sought to challenge dominant neoliberal capitalist constructs, and to uphold anti-colonial and anti-capitalist approaches to community support. We began with the fundamental premise that capitalist economies seek to artificially keep the costs of labour - and therefore the welfare of most of the population - as low as possible. This project thus centered the understanding that capitalist economic systems and business practices are antithetical to the well-being of migrant workers in particular as well as to all workers on this land, as practices to suppress wages, rights, and organising of migrant workers drives down the wages, rights, and organising abilities of all workers. As such, the goal of this project was to foreground a new way of thinking about work, relationships, and business that promotes the ability for all to live and thrive, rather than to teach migrants how to become the exploiters of others for their own gain. We wish to create easier access to community-based knowledge, encourage anti-capitalist understandings of the labour market and entrepreneurial success, and challenge the policies that exclude many precarious status community members from economic security. In this report, interviews with various entrepreneurs demonstrate new and innovative ways of thinking about business organisational structures and options that lead to more egalitarian distribution of resources that can benefit all.



Who We Are


This research was initiated by Vivimos Juntxs, Comemos Juntxs (VJCJ), a migrant-led, migrant-decided collective with a diverse membership of over 100 current and former migrants. VJCJ was founded in September 2019, and started by providing monthly community dinners and workshops for undocumented people in the GTA. The purpose of these dinners was to share information and strategize about how to collectively secure and access resources for survival, while also addressing immediate material needs through the provision of a healthy meal. The dinner and workshop series provided a safe space for undocumented community members to share and support each other to access essential services and resources in order to survive and eventually thrive.

VJCJ initiated this research project in response to community concerns about increased financial hardship during the COVID-19 crisis. As a first step, the project organizers established a community advisory committee which consisted of people who had lived experience of facing precarious status as well as allies who had many years of experience working with precarious status populations in various settings. The advisory committee participated in the research design and assisted with the recruitment of participants.

The researchers on this project, and writers of this report, also either had lived experience of precarious immigration status or were well-established allies. Our research experience varies, but we came to this project with a commitment to community-led participatory action research, alignment with the anti-capitalist, anti-colonial values of the project and the desire to support the sharing of knowledge among undocumented entrepreneurs.

Methodology

In 2020-2021, VJCJ consistently heard from their membership how the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent economic collapse had disproportionately affected people who face precarious immigration status. In order to address this grave inequity and support the resilience of undocumented community members, this research was proposed. The research was developed by and for people who face (or have faced) precarious immigration status with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which placed participants at the forefront of the research, and ensured they were included in every step of the process. We aimed to provide research participants with the ability and platform to narrate and share their own experiences in their own



languages to bolster a sense of agency that is not commonly seen within mainstream Canadian narratives about migrant workers.

The research began with an investigation and “mapping out” of the policies, procedures and processes required in order to establish each avenue of entrepreneurship: sole proprietor/partnership, corporation, not-for-profit and cooperative businesses. This included the legal information and obligations related to starting a business (i.e. incorporation, health and safety, equity and inclusion, taxes, municipal licensing, etc).

Simultaneously, we undertook an ethics review for the research through the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO). Since this research was not connected to a university, accessing CREO ensured that any ethical concerns or potential risks were addressed before the interviews started. Once we received approval, participants were recruited through an invitation email and information flyer, which were distributed through trusted networks. All interested participants were asked to contact the research team directly to express their interest in order to avoid any additional influence from other community members or service providers. Nine people participated in semi-structured interviews held using the video call feature of the signal app to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the participants. Two participants submitted the answers to a condensed interview by email. Interviews were offered in English, Spanish and Portuguese, with one additional interview translated from Mandarin.

Of the eleven participants, all but one had some post-secondary education, including college, university or trades. All but two had incorporated sole-proprietorship businesses, with one participant having incorporated a non-profit organization, and one being unable to complete the incorporation process. The entrepreneurships identified were diverse, ranging from cleaning (Frida, Ana, Jupiter, Grace), pet services (Luna), caregiving (Whitney), food preparation (Pocahontas), hairdressing (Christina Rocha), dry-wall repair (Arturo Carmona) and the arts (Ken). Mary, who wanted to open a massage parlor, was unable to incorporate her business. Note that all names used in this report are pseudonyms that were chosen by participants themselves.

Knowledge dissemination is a key aspect of this research and of our PAR approach. In conjunction with the production of this report, a toolkit was prepared to clearly outline the steps to incorporating a business, promising practices noted in the research and tips for overcoming common barriers. The toolkit will be shared by VJCJ within their communities to increase access to entrepreneurship possibilities for populations facing precarious status.

Entrepreneurship Options

Single Proprietor Business

A sole proprietorship is a type of enterprise owned and run by one person, in which there is no legal distinction between the owner and the business entity - this means, the owner is responsible and accountable to all the benefits as well as the risks of the business entity. The entrepreneur can work alone or employ other people.

This method of business is often chosen by members of our community, as this brings an opportunity to work as a subcontractor and be paid legally. Additionally, sole proprietorships are also known for being easier to open and manage, and an overall good option for small businesses, as long as they do not face much liability.

Non-Profit Organization

A non-profit is a corporation that is a distinct entity from its members, which means that the non-profit exists by itself, and can have legal duties, benefits, and obligations separate from its members. Non-profits are managed by a board of directors, which is elected by its members. The board of directors does not actually own the non-profit, and cannot use it for personal monetary gain. However, the non-profit can overall

Corporation


A corporation can be understood as the registration of a business, by one or more entrepreneurs, with the provincial or federal government. For this to happen, documents that describe the type of business, its officers, directors and bylaws must be submitted for approval.

Corporations bring to the table a unique set of advantages, often used when businesses reach a large-scale of economic activity. Some of these advantages include: limited liability - meaning its members can only lose up to the amount of their investments; easier access to financial support - such as borrowing money at lower rates; indefinite duration - its duration goes beyond the life of its members; and its distinct entity from its members - meaning their legal duties and benefits are separate from its shareholders.

Cooperative

Co-operatives are meant to support the local economy, business and community development. They have a versatile model that can be used in various organizational sizes and businesses. Co-operatives (co-ops) can still sell shares, but in comparison to corporations, shareholders can only have one vote regardless of how many shares they hold.

Profits from the co-op can be distributed



engage in activities that benefit its members and community. Any money gained through activities must be used to benefit its members.

in various ways. The surplus can be given to members based on their use/need of the co-operative. Members can also join and leave at any time. Co-ops also have the ability to own property, take mortgages, and enter contracts.

Factors Hindering Undocumented Entrepreneurship

Throughout the interviews, participants actively shared the barriers they encountered before, during, and after registering their business. These hurdles manifested themselves in various ways, such as a limited ability to speak English, experiencing gatekeeping from other individuals, and the fear of potential repercussions, such as detention and/or deportation after sharing information with ServiceOntario.


A lack of permanent immigration status exposes migrants to dangerous and exploitative work environments. Several participants discussed the difficult jobs they had before starting their business. Long hours, less-than-minimum wages, unsafe work conditions, and lack of job opportunities were all factors that participants mentioned in their interviews. As Luna shared,

“I don’t think I could change this, but if I could avoid it—as an undocumented immigrant, we go through so many situations where we’re exploited, and we suffer, people take advantage, they speak to you a certain way, treat you a certain way. And you’re just going through so many things.”

Additionally, having precarious status often imposed a sense of disconnection from friends and other community members who had not experienced difficulties regularizing their status. As Grace states,

“Because even my friends don’t even understand how I feel, because they don’t know my situation. They don’t know how, what is my burden. Because they have status, they don’t experience what I experience. You know? They don’t experience how it’s so difficult without status.”

As is evident from Grace’s example, precarious status has an impact on how migrants navigate relationships. Migrants are often unable to discuss their immigration journey due to fear that they would face stigma, or that they would be reported to immigration authorities. Many of the participants stated that they were unaware of the connections between the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) and ServiceOntario, and



expressed fear attached to these entities potentially sharing information with one another. However, both institutions function at different governmental levels (federally, and provincially respectively), and since immigration is a federal issue, the province of Ontario has no responsibility to report or surveil individuals with precarious status. Nevertheless, migrants were hesitant about inputting their information into the ServiceOntario database. As Jupiter stated,


“I think the only issue was the fact that I was afraid of the consequences of it; but, now that I know, for example, Ontario Services is not really connected to other federal entities. [...] I think at the time, I was just afraid that they were, and I didn't really know how to navigate that. I was like 'oh my gosh, what happens to that information?' but I think that was the only challenge that I had.”

Many of the participants also encountered language barriers when navigating their entrepreneurship projects. Since the ServiceOntario website and physical locations only offer services in English and French, many of the participants were not able to complete their business registration independently, and had to turn to friends or third parties to complete the process. Despite having the support of someone to help translate, Mary was unable to overcome the language and technology barriers. On the day she tried, she was not able to incorporate her business. As she explained,

“I do not read English and the website is not user friendly. The translator helped me through the process of registering. I do not use the internet often so I have a hard time to know where the right place is. I have no clue on what it is on the website. It would be great if there is a paper format to submit the documents in different languages so that I can read over and write the answers by myself.”

Several participants utilized third parties to incorporate their businesses, and reported having to pay higher amounts than the fees listed on the ServiceOntario website. Although participants reported feeling a sense of relief at the time after paying the higher fees, some stated that they would have liked to have someone else explain the process so that they could pay the minimum provincial fees, and not be overcharged by private parties. As Frida explained,

“Obviously, you arrive without English, you arrive with absolutely nothing. And all you want is support in your language. [...] If it's people from your own country, that's even better. That is what I would have wanted. At least for someone to tell me “you know what, look. Do this, this, and this.”



While Frida's desire for support and information was echoed by several participants, the absence of communal support frequently manifested itself in experiencing gatekeeping from other community members. Participants shared that some individuals they encountered who had settled in Canada already or had a higher amount of experience navigating the employment market would not share key information with them, such as how to register a business, or where to find help regarding employment law. As Ana shared,

“Sometimes I would come across people that did not want to share information with me. I had to learn through bad experiences that I could not do that to other people who were going through similar situations.”

Keeping information from other migrants, as Ana described, was used to establish power dynamics in which gatekeepers withheld information because they felt that newcomers had to “struggle” or experience the same amount of lateral violence as they did to “earn” such knowledge. Participants shared the ways these power dynamics excluded them within their own communities for not having enough knowledge of the system or not speaking English well enough.

The barriers identified by participants also highlight how current immigration policies seek to further criminalize, and place people who face precarious status in highly vulnerable situations. Instead of experiencing accessible pathways to regularize one's immigration status, migrants must jump through many systemic hoops, such as the deskilling of their careers, exploitative labour environments, and navigating Canadian mainstream society while facing precarious status. As Grace expressed in her interview,

“But my only hindrance is I can't fly like I said before. I want to fly more higher but because of my situation right now I'm stuck. I can't do what I want to do, like, I want to – because this time I'm only working with my employer because he's paying me cash. But I cannot apply to other jobs because they're looking for a working permit or SIN. So, if I have PR or work permit, I can make more jobs.”

Grace echoes the sentiments of other participants: the desire to live a dignified life where they are able to work in their fields of study, and to obtain permanent residence to access a wider variety of employment opportunities. This would be easily attainable if the federal government of Canada provided an accessible and permanent pathway that would allow people facing precarious status to obtain permanent residency.

Factors Supporting Undocumented Entrepreneurship

As we proceeded with the interviews, it was undeniable how the effects of good relationships within the community were important and life-changing to our participants. Elements such as trust, empathy, partnership, and support were often mentioned, and seen as reasons to keep participants moving forward. As Pocahontas clearly expressed,

“Without that support, one, I wouldn’t be able to know what I know, and two, I wouldn’t have sold anything, you know? I think that support has been everything, it has even given the whole purpose to the creation of this company. It means everything to me and my business.”


For Pocahontas, the support she received from her community of family, friends and neighbours was crucial to successfully starting her business. Similarly, Luna expressed that the bond she had with her community meant that she did not feel alone when starting her business. As she shared,

“Because there’s challenges but they’re always like ‘let’s go for it!’ It becomes us. It becomes our problem. It becomes our struggle. It becomes our things. It’s never like ‘ugh, you should look into it’, it’s more like ‘let’s look into it together’. And I’m very grateful for my friends and my partner because of that.”

These reflections on the power of community to disrupt the individualistic neoliberal paradigm demonstrate the importance of connection and support. For many participants, being part of a community meant much more than simply being part of a group and having something in common. Links to community were as deep as family ties, and as such brought a sense of safety and belongingness, such as Ana shared,

“And you can’t go on without it. We were all so isolated here in Canada. We didn’t have family, and none of my friends had family here. It was just us. We formed our families here.”

On top of the emotional support, positive ties to the community often brought job opportunities to our participants, which were fundamental and interconnected with their financial stability and overall security in the country. While Jupiter shared their struggles with their community when new in the country, they were able to heal from those experiences, and create new relationships founded on a willingness to help and support one another:



“I think one of them is being more connected to the community – because that’s where a lot of the jobs come from.... a lot of the jobs my mom gets and she is unable to do, she will pass to other people; so, it’s all about who you know [and trust] because a lot of the people who are hiring the workers want someone who’s going to stay there for a long time and they want someone with experience, and if one of the workers that they have can vouch for them, it will be way easier. So definitely, be connected with more people, or try to.”

For undocumented workers, employment referrals become an essential survival tool, as many cannot look for work in traditional ways. Therefore, Jupiter’s reflection highlights the importance of community connections for finding reliable and safe work, and building a sustainable business.


In addition to community support, other positive and advantageous factors identified by some participants were their ability to comfortably speak English and being somewhat computer savvy while navigating the necessary steps to open their businesses. These skills allowed participants to be confident in the process of incorporating their business and shielded them from risks of being taken advantage of. As Jupiter commented in their interview:

“I think the only challenge, because like, I spoke English fairly well, and I was able to go through the process, and it was pretty straightforward, none of the questions were hard to understand if you spoke the language... like, I can definitely see being a barrier for other folks who are not fluent in English, but thankfully for me, that wasn’t the case.”

Likewise, our participant Ken shared their experience and highlighted the effects of their privilege while going through processes such as opening a bank account connected to their business:

“But the fact that I’m very educated, white, means that people don’t look at me and think that I’m probably undocumented and because I speak perfect English and all of that, and so that is a privilege and a benefit to me in terms of all of this, no one is questioning me.”

For other participants, the strong and trustworthy community connections they had helped them overcome their lack of language fluency or limited computer skills. As Grace shared, having a close friend who could help her navigate the process to start her business was invaluable. She explained that,



“My friend, he’s the one who accompany me to the ServiceOntario, and he’s the one who sit at the computer and typed my name because I don’t [chuckles] I’m not too knowledgeable about computers. So, he’s the one who helped me.”

The sad reality is that depending on factors, such as trusted community networks, ability to speak the language, experience navigating the system, skills with technology use, among others, participants would have a different experience while going through these processes and would face distinct barriers and exclusionary treatment that are often very difficult to overcome. Therefore, in disrupting the hegemonic capitalist ideas of business success, this project builds on the identified importance of community to further support future entrepreneurs.


Sites of Resistance

Throughout the interviews, participants’ resilience and resistance also became apparent, as they described the ways they had found to contest the exclusion they faced. Some had clear and defined arguments countering the hegemonic discourses that criminalized them, while others rationalized their actions based on their own needs and desires. While the level of political awareness and analysis differed, the notion that everyone had the right to be present, to sustain themselves, and to work with dignity shined through. As Luna shared,

“Once you start opening your eyes [...] you see that it’s not you. It’s not your family. You’re not a criminal, you’re not an outsider, none of that makes sense. They just want you to believe this other reality that doesn’t exist and only benefits some.”

Luna’s reframing of her situation importantly identified how she learned to reject the exclusion that criminalized her and other migrants for the benefit of others. Ana echoed these realizations, as she explained,

“But someone [...] said something that helped me a lot. They told me ‘the meaning of ‘resident’ means that you reside in this place’, and it just magically clicked in, like ‘oh yeah, I live here’. And when people asked me ‘are you a resident?’, I would answer ‘yeah, I live here’. That removed all the bad gunk in my brain. I live here—because you’re always looking for little hooks to hold on to and make your stay a bit better and feel like there are less risks.”




The refusal to accept the negative framing of migrants and the desire to minimize the risk that participants both tangibly experienced and affectively felt was discussed frequently. Several participants outlined the ways that starting their own business helped them to feel less afraid and gave them new tools to navigate the labour market in ways that they considered safe. The fact that a business number resembles a SIN allowed some of the participants to feel safer as they may “pass” as Canadian workers. As Ana shared, “I learned that the business number looks like — has the same number of digits like a SIN — so it was a bit comforting being able to say, ‘if they ask me, I have everything’.”

Others also discussed the importance of the business number to allow them to participate in the economy and to enact citizenship by paying taxes. Through the business number, undocumented community members are able to work “legally” and be financially accountable to the state, which again had both practical and affective benefits.

As Grace explained, “when I’m paying to the CRA that’s what I’m using, my business. So, I’m still like, I’m still legal [laughs] you know what I mean?” She further elaborated that, “you have confidence that you have a license. You have the right to do your job, you know what I mean? You’re confident because you have a license.” Practically, having a business and paying taxes can help strengthen immigration applications for permanent residence, particularly Humanitarian and Compassionate Grounds (H&C) applications. Whitney shared that her “main idea to have this business was to have access to pay taxes” to support her H&C application, which she was not overly excited about, but then she also realized that the business number would allow her to work in a different way: “it was more of a survival technique than anything else.”

Participants also discussed the business-related benefits of starting a company, and the ways that these benefits helped them avoid exclusion from the job market in different ways. Many were encouraged by community members or potential employers to register a business so that they could be paid officially. As Pocahontas shared, “I was about to start a new job and they told me “You need a company so we can pay you”. That’s how I found out about the business.” Others talked about “doors closing” until they learned about incorporating a business. Frida explained that,

“The jobs I would have wanted were not given to me because I did not have the company. So that was, in a certain way, they placed barriers in front of me, or the system pushed me to have that company. That’s how it is [...] the advice I would give them is to open the company, without any fear. So many doors will be open



after that. It is the advice that I would really share. Maybe not like they were opened to me, maybe even more so to them. ”

For Frida, it was important to share her learning with others who might also experience the closing of doors in the labour market because of their lack of permanent immigration status. Ana also described the doors closing when she was looking for work. She shared that she,

“began to work a cleaning job that paid cash... but the companies noticed ... it was a way to protect themselves. Then, they began to ask for our own companies and began to hire us as subcontractors in case they had an issue with Canada Revenue.”


This connection to taxes again is a relevant one, as the business allows all parties to comply with taxation policy.

Arturo further elaborated on the benefits of having an incorporated business, as he felt that it provided legitimacy in a different way. As he explained, “having a company also helps you since the client has more confidence because they are not paying a person, but rather an established business.” This credibility helped him to achieve certain goals for his work that he might not have been able to otherwise.

Others also discussed their goals and aspirations for their business, and for their own lives. For Ken, these goals were not just personal, but were community driven to care for themselves and others in the process. As they explained,

“I knew the 2020s were going to be hard time and I wanted to be able to survive it, and I thought my only chance of surviving it would be to build up an organization, that not only took care of me, but also took care of a number of other people, that I wouldn’t be able to do it alone, that I would need to do it with others, and I had to bring others along with me, and that planning for that, and shooting for economic stability [...] we were all able to get through it together.”

This theme of survival was repeated by several participants. This in itself resists the core tenants of migrant exclusion, that mark people facing precarious status as exploitable and expendable. So while some participants described their business as a way to achieve their dreams, others talked about their own and their family’s survival as the primary objective. As Ana explained:



“things began to happen and falling into place where - I never dreamed of being a millionaire, I never thought ‘after this, I’m going to make the company grow, or I’m going to hire people’. It was never about that. My dream was to support my family, and if we were good... it was more focused about being at peace.”

Frida further elaborated on those ideas to challenge the exclusionary state logics and to frame her resistance to it, and her survival within it, as success. As she shared,

“Look, I feel successful here because 1) I am a person with a precarious status who has been here for 15 years. That we live independently, working hard, obviously. But we have what it takes. I'm not rich, not at all. I don't have luxuries - as a car would be a luxury for me. I don't have it, but I'm not going to die without those luxuries either.”

While migrant resistance can take different forms, we posit that surviving with dignity and peace is resistance against the capitalist paradigm that frames people facing precarious status as extremely exploitable. Participants further challenged the competitive, individualistic and exploitative nature of the capitalist economy by sharing knowledge and supporting others in similar situations. As Luna expressed,

“So we break that mentality that people have of ‘I went through so much, you need to go through so much’. Fuck that! Because I went through so much, you *don't* have to. It can be easier. We are here to help each other and grow. And anyone who tells you otherwise, they need therapy.”

By rejecting the supposed meritocracy of struggling and overcoming hardship, participants shift the dominant ideas of who can succeed and what success would mean. Jupiter drew on the same analysis when they explained, “that’s when people feel like ‘oh I went through this, so now you will have to go through this as well’... like, no! The point is we don’t have to go through it anymore.” These perspectives capture some of the overarching goals of this project. By sharing information and offering support, a different way of engaging with the system is possible. As a result, having more control over their working conditions and their engagement with the labour market and the state enables migrants to resist their exclusion and work towards shaping the life they want.

Moving Forward and Sharing Knowledge

When participants were asked what they learned, wished they had known or wanted others to know, a range of information was shared. For Ken, the utility of asking for help and sharing knowledge was a crucial lesson that was learned,


“I really regret not getting more help in a lot of ways, there’s a lot of things I would have done differently, and there’s lots of things I didn’t know how to do differently, and that’s part of it, and that’s also part of getting support and help, and I hope something like this project can really help people, and share some of the information that could have really helped me make better decisions and not be so overworked and debilitated by the overwork.”

The importance of sharing knowledge and learnings was clear from the details given by participants. One key theme that was raised by several participants was the lack of information they had had about the ways their immigration status would affect the process of starting a business, which was mentioned in the *Factors Hindering Undocumented Entrepreneurship* section. Participants wanted to ensure that other undocumented entrepreneurs would have all the information they needed to make informed decisions about starting a business.. As Christina shared, “Just wanted to mention that no one needs immigration status to start a business. At no point in my journey was I asked for status.” Therefore, as a starting point, it was clear that immigration status was not a requirement to start a business, and Christina wanted people to know they would not be asked about it. Frida’s points built on that, as she directed future entrepreneurs to

“lose fear, because—it’s true, one thinks, and with the mention of ‘the government’ [...] you think about it twice. But if someone explains to you ‘look, just do this’, and you explain to them well what the company is for, nobody is going to bother you.”

While incorporating a business does involve engagement with government bodies, it does not put undocumented entrepreneurs at risk. Ana clearly explained why not, as she described the information that is so often missing, but important to share,

“Who can explain how Canada works? And that ServiceOntario is not connected to CBSA, since it’s a provincial department, and CBSA is a federal one. So, explain the process overall and know that there is a minimum risk.”



Besides immigration enforcement related questions and concerns addressed by participants, other questions that came up related to the relations with the state included concerns about filing taxes properly for the business and protection for undocumented entrepreneurs in case of an accident or emergency since they were self-employed. Several participants also shared that they would be interested in more information and further guidance in regards to building their business after it was initially incorporated. For Grace, growing her business would involve hiring more people in similar precarious situations to offer them support. As she explained,

“Some of my friends asking me if they can work with me, and I said, ‘I don’t know how to do that you know?’ [laughs] I don’t have any idea because I never do like this, to hire people [...] In the future I will have more bigger cleaning, I can hire some people because [...] they want to earn more extra money to, you know, to make more money to pay all their expenses, their bills. So, I’m willing to help them, you know, through my connections. That’s what I want to be.”


Grace framed the importance of growing her business, not through a capitalist accumulation lens, but rather as a community effort to support others. She wanted to learn how to hire people properly with the hope that she could help them work with dignity and satisfy their material needs. Whitney expressed similar goals, as she shared that she would also like to grow her business to help others get work,

“I wanted to do it because it would’ve been an opportunity for people without SIN numbers, and these things, to be able to work comfortably enough, and have that access. Because a lot of jobs want this and the other, but it takes a lot of work. In the long run, if I could as a partnership.”

While Whitney strongly believed in utilizing her business to support others, she was also concerned about the limits of her capacity, and suggested additional community connections/partnerships to achieve that goal.

Pocahontas also wanted to learn how to grow her business effectively, particularly in terms of acquiring the right amount of supplies to increase production effectively. As she shared,

“What I have been having trouble with is finding momentum. [...] One big thing was that COVID hit right when I was at the height of ‘I’m going to make my sauces!’ And when things started running out—they ran out because [...] I made



a small investment, you see. Once my products were done, everything was done. Because I didn't have more money to invest. And that's where I got stuck."


While Pocahontas had struggled to move her business forward, she did not worry about having customers to sell to. She described the importance of the support she got for her business from her community, explaining that "it might only be 30 people, but they're loyal. [...] They come back. I think there is hope!" Knowing that she could rely on people to support her business helped Pocahontas see past the challenges she had faced.

Conclusions

While people facing precarious immigration status experience significant challenges in the capitalist Canadian labour market, there are strategies, tools and pathways which allow people to survive and even thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted migrant worker communities, as the jobs became more precarious, dangerous and exploitative. Yet the resourcefulness and resilience within these communities cannot be overlooked. This research was initiated by Vivimos Juntxs, Comemos Juntxs, a migrant-led, migrant-decided collective, to respond to community concerns about increased financial hardship during the COVID-19 crisis. In collaboration with the research team, a Participatory Action Research project was undertaken in September 2021, which aimed to 1) provide a platform for community members who face (or have faced) precarious immigration status to share their experiences establishing different forms of entrepreneurship, 2) identify any barriers they experienced or support systems they utilized; as well as 3) create webs of support for people facing precarious status who wish to create their own businesses in the future.

Our research highlighted the importance of community relationships, which either helped or hindered entrepreneurs facing precarious status. Participants described some of the relationships they encountered as negatively impacting them, as support and information was withheld to instead demand neoliberal individualist achievement. However, participants also shared the benefits of positive relationships, which offered support in many different ways and was seen as crucial to the successful establishment of their business. These supportive relationships disrupt the primary tenants of capitalist accumulation, as participants discussed helping each other and supporting others facing precarious status in different ways.

The importance of English language and computer skills were also forefronted as essential for the successful establishment of a business. For those who did not independently have those skills, the importance of a supportive community was again



emphasized. Participants also described resilience and resistance through their businesses, as they were able to reject the dominant structures that treat migrants as exploitable and expendable. With the incorporation of their own businesses, participants were able to find safety and survival through economic security. They wanted to then ensure that other migrants were able to achieve that same security by sharing information and promising practices.

While our research project explored a new area of migrant resistance, there were limitations that could be addressed in future research. Given that the population centered in this research was hard to reach, we had a limited number of participants and were only able to discuss sole proprietor businesses and non-profit organizations. Further studies could focus on entrepreneurs in other areas with different types of businesses.

Finally, highlighting migrant “success” provides new understandings of resistance against the exclusionary Canadian settler-colonial state and capitalist paradigms. This project centered an anti-capitalist framework to explore a new way of thinking about migrant labour, relationships, and business creation that promotes dignified work, collaboration and community support. Through this report and the corresponding toolkit, we aim to encourage access to community-based knowledge and challenge the capitalist structures that exclude many precarious status community members from economic security, ultimately working towards a more egalitarian distribution of resources for all.

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