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Balancing Livelihoods and Regulation: A Scoping Review of the Socio-Economic Impact of Street Vending in South Africa's Informal Economy

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Abstract:

South Africa faces deep socio-economic inequality, with more than 18.2 million people living in extreme poverty. Street vending plays a critical role in supporting livelihoods, especially in rural and semi-rural areas where access to goods, services, and employment is limited. The removal of this activity would intensify existing hardships. This study aims to examine the factors driving street vending, the challenges vendors face, and the sector's contribution to the economy. The paper uses a scoping review approach. It synthesises literature published between 2020 and 2024. The review includes 31 studies identified through searches conducted in October 2024 using Google Scholar and the Sabinet African Journals database. Results show that street vending offers essential income opportunities for marginalised groups. However, vendors work under insecure conditions marked by weak legal protection, poor infrastructure, and inconsistent enforcement of bylaws. The findings also reveal that regulatory and formalisation efforts have begun, but progress is uneven. More targeted support is required. Policy measures should focus on improving working conditions, strengthening economic security, and recognising the developmental importance of street vending within South Africa's informal economy.

Keywords:

Street Vending, Livelihoods, South African Economy, Unemployment, Informal Economy

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Introduction

South Africa's informal economy, spanning street vending, spaza retail, and small service enterprises, functions as a critical livelihood system and shock absorber during periods of weak growth and labour-market stress. Recent national data indicate that informal employment accounted for 19.5% of total jobs in 2024, underscoring the sector's role in absorbing workers excluded from formal wage employment and sustaining household consumption in underserved urban and township spaces (Stats SA, 2024). Complementary field evidence from large-scale township enterprise studies demonstrates the embeddedness of informal trading in local economies, where micro-enterprises fill spatial and service gaps left by formal businesses and anchor everyday provisioning for low-income communities (SLF Research, 2024).

Despite its socio-economic centrality, informal trading, especially street vending, remains weakly integrated into urban governance and economic planning. Empirical work documents regulatory ambiguity, uneven enforcement, and limited infrastructural support, producing precarious working conditions and recurrent displacement or confiscation of goods (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021; WIEGO SLP, 2014). National guidance to municipalities has sought to standardise permitting and public-space management, but the implementation gap persists across cities, reflecting contested claims over high-footfall locations and limited institutional capacity to accommodate informal traders (Framework By-Law on Informal Trading, 2020; Arias, 2019). At the macro level, South Africa's exceptionally low employment rate and high unemployment relative to OECD and G20 peers heighten the salience of the informal economy as a labour-absorption mechanism while simultaneously exposing how structural barriers in product, labour, and urban markets constrain inclusive participation (OECD, 2025).

The COVID-19 period further revealed differentiated vulnerabilities: job losses were greater and recovery slower in the informal economy, with women traders disproportionately affected, amplifying pre-existing inequalities and fault lines in access to income and public space (Rogan & Skinner, 2022; Rogan & Skinner, 2024). These shocks reinforce the need for evidence-based, context-sensitive policy responses that recognize informal traders' economic contributions and address governance shortcomings in licensing, spatial allocation, and service provision.

In synthesising existing literature, this review aims to highlight enduring policy gaps, identify constraints on vendors' economic mobility, and contribute to broader discussions on how the informal sector can be better supported to drive inclusive economic growth. Scholarship consistently shows that harnessing the developmental potential of the informal economy requires targeted policy reforms that recognize the sector's contribution to employment generation, poverty alleviation, and local economic resilience (Durokifa, 2024). Strengthening support for street vendors, particularly women, who continue to shoulder

disproportionate socio-economic burdens can also help reduce inequality and foster more inclusive urban development pathways.

Location theory provides the core analytical lens for this paper by explaining how urban spatial structures, accessibility, and consumer flows shape street vending patterns. Vendors' locational choices reflect strategic responses to the city's spatial dynamics rather than randomness, aligning with principles such as central place dynamics and market catchments (Arias, 2019). Street vending thrives in high-footfall areas transport hubs, busy intersections, and township markets where dense pedestrian movement creates predictable demand (Hlengwa, 2016; Arias, 2019).

At the same time, location theory reveals how urban governance restricts vending opportunities. High-value trading spaces are often the most contested, with municipal by-laws, spatial cleansing campaigns, and renewal projects frequently displacing vendors or confiscating goods (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021; Arias, 2019). These patterns underscore that urban space is politically produced and shaped by competing land-use interests. Research also shows that informal traders adapt their positioning and stall organisation in response to risk, competition, and infrastructural constraints, demonstrating the relational and flexible spatial logic of informal markets (Charman & Govender, 2016). Grounded in these insights, location theory enables a deeper understanding of how spatial constraints and opportunities influence vendor livelihoods and why inclusive, spatially sensitive policies are essential for strengthening the resilience of South Africa's informal workforce.

Method

This study adopted a scoping review methodology guided by the five-stage framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which is widely used to map key concepts within an emerging field and identify gaps in the existing literature. The five steps included: 1) identifying the research question, 2) identifying relevant studies, 3) study selection, 4) charting the data, collating, summarising, and 5) reporting of results.

This approach was appropriate because street vending, the informal economy, and inclusive development intersect across disciplines including economics, urban studies, development studies, and public policy requiring a broad and systematic mapping of available evidence.

Identifying the Research Question

As part of this step, Arksey and O'Malley (2005) suggest starting with large definitions of Study Population, Intervention, and Context (PICo) to ensure comprehensive coverage of the search process, followed by setting parameters based on the scope and volume of references encountered. Accordingly, the research question for this study is: What are the key factors driving street vending in South Africa,

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the primary challenges faced by street vendors, the contributions of street vending to the national economy, and the views of the policymakers? The keywords for this study are shown below.

Data Source

A combination of scholarly databases, regional African research repositories, and institutional archives was used to ensure comprehensive coverage of both global and South African literature. The following databases and platforms were searched: Google Scholar and SABINET African Journals. These sources were selected because they offer broad interdisciplinary coverage, include policy-relevant literature, and contain both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies relevant to informal trade in South Africa. As a result, credible research institutions increasingly rely on robust, high-quality data to inform policy direction, guide strategic planning, and support evidence-based decision-making.

	Concept	Search Operation
#1	STREET VENDING and SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY	"Street vending" OR "street hawker" OR "street trader" OR "street walker" AND "South African economy" OR "SA economy"

Table 1: Keywords for search operation

Identification of Relevant Studies

A Boolean search was conducted based on the following key phrases: "Street Vending" OR "SV" OR "Street Hawker" OR "Street Trader" OR "Street Walker" AND "South African Economy" OR "SA economy". Two different search engines, Google Scholar and Sabinet African Journals, were used to ensure the best recall, precision, and result quality during the search process. Only research publications published in English between 2020 and 2024 were included.

Articles published in the five-year time frame were selected because they reflect the substantial social and economic shifts occurring during and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as intensifying existing vulnerabilities and prompting new forms of state intervention and public discourse around informal trading (lockdown measures, economic recovery strategies, evolving regulatory responses from municipal authorities), which profoundly impacted informal workers. Furthermore, there has been a notable increase in scholarly attention to informal work during this time, with researchers examining not

only economic dimensions but also intersections with gender, migration, spatial justice, and social protection.

A total of thirty-one peer-reviewed articles were deemed relevant and collected. References from the gathered literature were also analysed to identify relevant works not included in the original search. This selection of literature provides updated empirical findings, policy developments, and academic debates crucial to understanding the current dynamics of street vending. Such limitations ensure that the analysis remains current and aligned with contemporary policy challenges, opportunities, and theoretical developments in the post-pandemic economic landscape. to the phenomenon.

Study Selection Criteria

The initial literature search was conducted in October 2024 to collect studies published within the five-year time frame to ensure the collection of the most up-to-date relevant data. First, a systematic literature search strategy was piloted to assess determine the relevance of selected databases, the scope of literature covered, and key terms used during the literature search. All studies from the selected databases were then analysed and screened to exclude duplicates and studies that did not directly address the research questions, ensuring a focused and relevant final selection.

A systematic screening of titles from selected databases was performed by the reviewer. Based on the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria, a final list of all relevant titles was generated and shared for further screening and evaluation by various authors. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed based on the research questions to identify and select appropriate studies. Studies published in English that are relevant to the phenomenon, as well as studies that focus on South Africa, were used as inclusion criteria in the literature search. Studies that were not published in English and were not relevant on-relevant to the phenomenon were excluded from the review.

Furthermore, full-text articles were screened and stored for charting after the abstract screening was completed. A PRISMA diagram was used to summarise the process of selecting studies for inclusion in the systematic review. In addition to the specific South African focus, the discussion in this article is textured by other studies that have been cited in relation to the topic.

Data Charting

Data synthesis and interpretation utilised a narrative or descriptive approach. The data was charted on a spreadsheet using the following headings: Author(s); year of publication; title of study; Research Aim; and Research Question for Street Vending in the South African Economy. In following the process, all relevant information extracted from selected articles was synthesized and interpreted accordingly.

Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

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As indicated by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the emphasis should not be on the quality or weight of the evidence when summarizing and reporting the results; rather a thematic framework should guide the narrative account of existing literature. Detailed thematic discussions were provided about the various themes emanating from the data. This study used the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1) to report the number of studies identified and selected for inclusion in the scoping review. The process included data collection, data presentation, and result presentation. The authors conducted a thematic analysis, and all themes were cross-examined to determine their relationship to the research question.

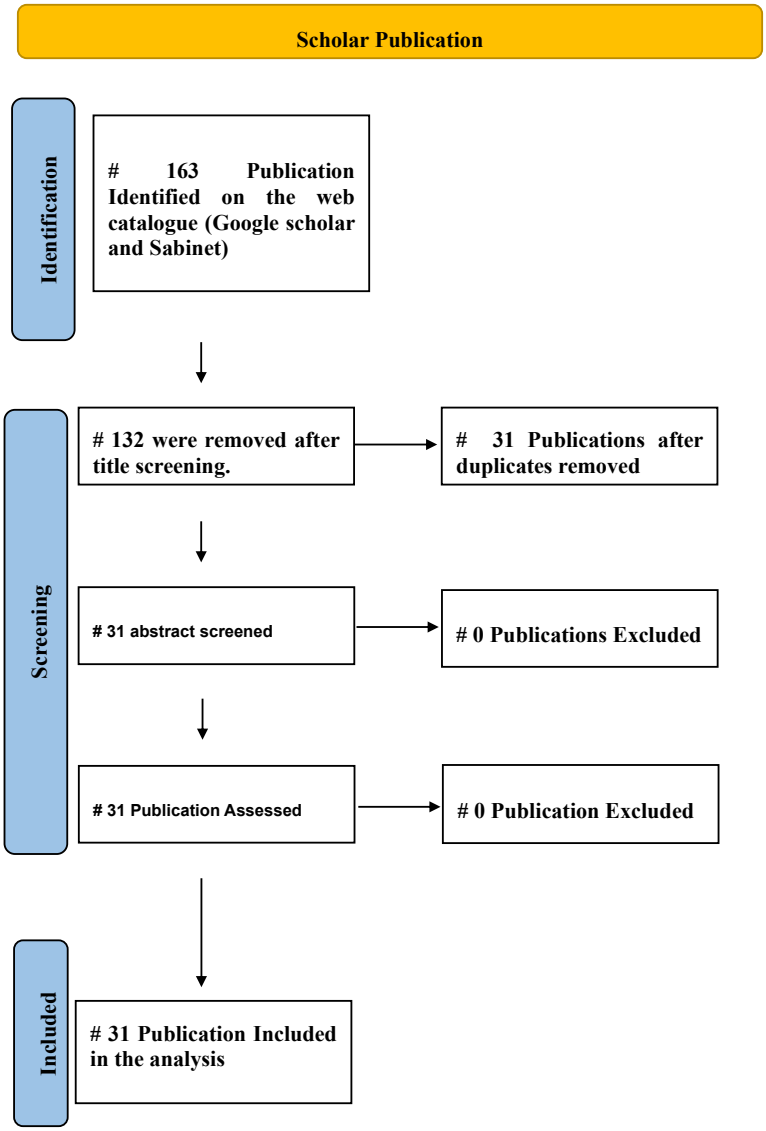

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart for search process

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Results

Based on the scoping review, it is evident that a substantial body of literature has explored various aspects of South Africa's informal economy, particularly in relation to street vending. However, there remains a gap in the literature when it comes to drawing integrated conceptual insights that balance the livelihoods of street vendors with regulatory frameworks. The analysis is crucial for informing inclusive policymaking and fostering a supportive environment where informal economic activities can contribute meaningfully to national development. Our findings highlight that long-standing structural challenges such as high unemployment, poverty, and socio-economic inequality continue to drive the growth of street vending across urban and peri-urban areas in South Africa. Numerous studies underscore the urgent need for more coordinated and inclusive responses to the daily challenges faced by street vendors, including harassment, lack of infrastructure, and legal insecurity. Addressing these constraints is vital not only for enhancing vendor livelihoods but also for supporting broader economic growth and social cohesion (Moyo & Gumbo 202, Etim & Daramola 2020, Ngomane 2020,)

Table 3.1 below provides a summary of the 31 selected studies on street vending and the informal economy in South Africa, published between 2020 and 2024. The table outlines key characteristics of each study, including the authors, year of publication, research methodology, geographic focus, sample size, and participant profile. This overview highlights the diversity in research approaches and locations, offering valuable insights into the socioeconomic dynamics of street vending across urban and rural contexts in South Africa.

Author(s)	Year	Methodology	Location	Sample Size / Informant
Etim & Daramola	2020	South Africa & Nigeria	South Africa & Nigeria	Thirty-one (31) primary studies (17 for SA and 14 for Nigeria
Ngomane	2020	Qualitative	Mbombela Local Municipality under Mpumalanga Province	Sixty (60) women female street vendors
Zulu	2020	Qualitative	Johannesburg	Twenty (20) Street vendors
Thantsha, Mosia & Landman	2020	Qualitative & Quantitative	Orlando west	Sixty-nine street vendors
Ngomane	2020	Qualitative	Mbombela	Twenty-five (25) street vendors
Maphosa	2020	Qualitative	Eastern Cape	Twenty (20) street vendors

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Charman	2020	Policy analysis; secondary data review	National (South Africa-wide focus)	Not applicable (report based on aggregated national data and secondary sources)
Deedat	2021	Qualitative analysis; desk-based research	Johannesburg	Focus on secondary data and literature on women in informal work; no primary sample
Juta, Mosia & Khumalo	2021	Mixed methods (survey and interviews)	Mafikeng Local Municipality	Fifty (50) street vendors
Mosia	2021	Qualitative	Selected township in Northwest Province	Twenty (20) informal business owners, including street vendors
Moyo & Gumbo	2021	Comparative policy analysis	Urban centres in South Africa and Zimbabwe	secondary data and policy documents
Urban Forum	2021	Qualitative policy review	Selected South African cities	analysis of governance frameworks
Recchi	2021	Systematic literature review	Multiple (comparative)	review of existing literature
Ndaba & Landman	2022	Qualitative (interviews and observations)	Pretoria	Twenty-five (25) street traders (semi-structured interviews and participant observation)
Bhoola, Singh & Mthethwa	2022	Qualitative exploratory study	Durban	Economically marginalized women food vendors; sample size not specified
PLOS ONE	2022	Mixed methods (surveys and policy analysis)	South Africa (various urban areas)	One hundred and fifty (150) street food vendors surveyed
ReliefWeb	2022	Report analysis	South Africa	Secondary data, media reports

Rogan & Skinner	2022	Mixed methods: literature review, secondary data analysis	South Africa	National-level data, informal sector workers
Peyman & Kamalipour	2022	Systematic literature review	Various (international)	Studies on street vending globally, no direct sample
Modiba & Mago	2022	Policy analysis and qualitative review	National (South Africa-wide)	Focused on reviewing existing policy frameworks and recommendations
UNU-WIDER	2022	Working paper Mixed methods analysis	South Africa	Informal economy actors, secondary data analysis
MDPI	2022	Quantitative survey and observational study	Urban areas in South Africa	One hundred and fifty (150) street food vendors; focus on exposure to health and safety risks
Human Rights Watch	2022	Desk review/report	Various locations in South Africa	General report on xenophobic incidents; no primary participants
Van der Merwe	2024	Mixed methods (survey and interviews)	Johannesburg	One hundred and twenty (120) street vendors, fifteen (15) municipal officials
Khumalo	2024	Qualitative (interviews, focus groups	Cape Town	Forty (40) street vendors and community leaders
Madonsela	2024	Historical analysis, qualitative interviews	Johannesburg	Twenty-five (25) street vendors and cultural experts
Mkhize, Tshabangu, & Adams	2024	Mixed methods: surveys and interviews	Johannesburg	One hundred and twenty (120) street vendors surveyed: thirty (30) interviewed
Nyalunga	2024	Quantitative survey	Johannesburg	One hundred and fifty (150) street vendors surveyed

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Ramutsheli	2024	Mixed methods (survey & interviews)	Johannesburg	One hundred and twenty (120) street vendors and 10 key informants
Sibiya, Ngwenya & Zulu	2024	Qualitative (interviews and document analysis)	Multiple urban areas in South Africa	Thirty-five (35) street vendors, eight (8) policy makers

Table 2: Summary of Key Literature on Street Vending in South Africa (2020–2024)

Q1: What Are the Factors Influencing Street Vending in South Africa?

According to existing literature (Bannett, Vanek & Chen 2019), approximately 61% of the global working population aged 15 and above is employed in the informal sector, amounting to around 2 billion workers. This sector accounts for nearly 90% of total employment in low-income developing countries, 67% in emerging economies, and 18% in advanced economies, highlighting the significant role of informal employment, such as street vending, particularly in South Africa as a developing country/an emerging economy.

Several factors drive the growth of street vending in South Africa, reflecting both economic realities and social dynamics. High unemployment and limited job opportunities push many individuals into informal trade as a means of survival (Mthethwa et al., 2023; Nyalunga, 2024). For many, vending offers flexibility, requiring little formal education or specialized skills (Singh, 2023). Immigrants and marginalized groups often turn to street vending as it provides a relatively accessible entry point into economic participation. The decision is mainly influenced by the low barriers to entry, such as minimal start-up capital and the lack of formal education requirements (Dunn & Maharaj, 2023). Additionally, the informal nature of street vending allows individuals without legal documentation or formal employment opportunities to earn a livelihood.

Consumer demand plays a crucial role, as people seek affordable goods conveniently available in public spaces (Maphosa, 2020; Madonsela, 2024). The urban population's need for low-cost food and daily essentials has made informal markets vital for communities, especially in low-income areas (Khumalo, 2020; Ndlovu & Sithole, 2021; Banda, 2023). Additionally, cultural norms and social networks help sustain street vending by fostering trust between vendors and customers (Jansen et al., 2023).

However, broader economic challenges, such as inflation and rising living costs, also encourage more people to engage in informal trade (Tlabela, 2023). In response, vendors often operate long hours in strategic locations to maximize sales and remain competitive (Zulu, 2020; Bhoola et al., 2022). Together, these factors create a dynamic environment where street vending not only provides livelihoods but also responds to the needs of consumers and communities.

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Q2: What Are the Challenges Faced by Street Vending in South Africa?

Street vendors in South Africa encounter multiple challenges that threaten their livelihoods, including operating without permits, which exposes them to harassment, confiscation of goods, and fines by law enforcement (Zulu, 2020; Zwane, 2023). Vendors also lack access to secure trading spaces, forcing them to work in overcrowded or unsafe areas (Mthethwa et al., 2023; Ndaba et al., 2022). Inconsistent policies and unclear regulations further complicate their operations, leaving vendors vulnerable to eviction from public spaces (Singh, 2023; Tlabela, 2023).

Health and safety risks are another persisting issue, as most vendors work outdoors without proper sanitation, shelter, or access to water (Ngomane, 2020; Tawodzera et al., 2019). Furthermore, vendors struggle with limited financial resources, making it difficult to access loans or government support to grow their businesses (Bhoola et al., 2022; Juta et al., 2021). Competition from large retailers and other informal traders also reduces profit margins, making it harder for vendors to maintain a stable income (Thantsha et al., 2020; Mkhize et al., 2024). Security risks, including theft and violence, add to the daily struggles faced by many vendors working in public spaces (Mkhize et al., 2023; Sibiya et al., 2024).

Aside from these general challenges, women vendors face the unique challenge of having to balance their businesses with household responsibilities, often without support (Deedat, 2021; Bhoola et al., 2022). Security risks, including theft and violence, add to the daily struggles faced by many vendors working in public spaces (Mkhize et al., 2023; Sibiya et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges requires more inclusive policies that protect vendors' rights while improving their working conditions.

Xenophobia and Harassment

Street vendors in South Africa face rising xenophobic harassment driven by economic hardship, unemployment, and social inequality. Migrant traders are frequently scapegoated for crime, job scarcity, and poor service delivery, leading to police raids, confiscation of goods, and intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ReliefWeb, 2022). Groups such as Operation Dudula have intensified these attacks by forcibly shutting down migrant-owned stalls and publicly harassing non-South African traders (Human Rights Watch, 2023; ReliefWeb, 2022). Local traders are not exempt, as tensions between migrant and South African vendors often escalate into conflict (ReliefWeb, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Violent events including looting, assaults, and the destruction of foreign-owned stalls further disrupt livelihoods, while law-enforcement raids justified under anti-counterfeit operations heighten vulnerability (Africa.com, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Systemic issues such as corruption in immigration and asylum processes restrict migrant vendors' access to documentation, legal support, and essential services (ReliefWeb, 2022). Although many traders show resilience by forming support networks and using tools like social media marketing, ongoing harassment and xenophobia continue to undermine the

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informal sector's ability to provide employment and strengthen community cohesion (Urban Transformations, 2023).

Lack of Infrastructure

Inadequate access to essential infrastructure and basic services serves as another significant challenge faced by street vendors in South Africa (Modiba & Mago, 2022; Ndaba & Landman, 2022). Many operate in environments lacking reliable electricity, clean water, sanitation facilities, and secure storage, which hampers their productivity and poses health risks (MDPI, 2022; PLOS ONE, 2022). For instance, vendors often rely on alternative energy sources, namely gas or wood for cooking, which increases operational costs and exposes them like gas or wood for cooking, leading to increased operational costs and exposure to harmful pollutants (Zulu, Adams & Ngwenya, 2023). The absence of proper sanitation facilities forces some to use nearby informal arrangements, compromising hygiene for both vendors and customers (Bhoola, Singh & Mthethwa, 2022). These conditions not only affect the vendors' health and safety but also limit their ability to expand their businesses and improve their livelihoods (Mkhize, Ngwenya & Zulu, 2023).

The lack of infrastructure support is further worsened by limited municipal engagement and investment in the informal sector (Juta, Mosia & Khumalo, 2021; Maphanga & Madonsela, 2023). Despite the crucial role street vendors play in local economies, especially in underserved communities, there is often a disconnect between policy frameworks and the actual needs of these informal workers (Moyo & Gumbo, 2021; Singh, Adams & Zulu, 2023). Municipalities frequently overlook the provision of essential services in areas where street vending is prevalent, leading to environments that are not conducive to safe and sustainable trading (Urban Forum, 2021). This neglect not only undermines the economic potential of street vendors but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and informality (Rogan & Skinner, 2022). Addressing these infrastructural deficits requires concerted efforts by local governments to recognize and integrate the informal sector into urban planning and service delivery (Khumalo, 2024; Van der Merwe, 2024).

Environmental Sustainability of Street Vending

Despite its crucial role in urban livelihoods, street vending presents notable challenges to environmental sustainability. In many cities and townships, vendors operate in areas with inadequate where waste management and sanitation systems are inadequate, which often leads to problems such as littering and illegal dumping. Because street vending is largely informal and frequently lacks regulatory compliance, municipalities struggle to incorporate it into their urban planning efforts. This dilemma complicates both waste collection processes and broader environmental governance (Maphanga et al., 2023; Urban Forum, 2021).

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A key environmental issue is waste management. Street vendors frequently produce waste such as food packaging and organic matter, which tends to pile up in public areas due to inadequate disposal services. In places like the townships of Cape Town, delays in municipal waste collection worsen these challenges, resulting in environmental decline (Urban Forum, 2021; PLOS ONE, 2022). Additionally, those working with food often use open fires for their operations. This practice adds to air pollution and poses risks to environmental health (MDPI, 2022).

In the face of these challenges, street vendors demonstrate resilience and adaptability by implementing sustainable practices. Many opt for environmentally friendly packaging or participate in community-led waste-disposal engage in community-led waste disposal initiatives to minimize their environmental footprint. Nonetheless, municipal support is still lacking; an integrated approach that includes vendors in planning and waste management processes could significantly improve environmental outcomes (PLOS ONE, 2022; MDPI, 2022).

To effectively address the environmental impact of street vending effectively, it is crucial to develop inclusive policy frameworks that align urban sustainability with the economic needs of informal traders. Establishing formal waste management partnerships between municipalities and vendors, along with promoting educational campaigns on sustainable practices, are vital steps in nurturing environmental sustainability while also supporting livelihoods (Maphanga et al., 2023; Urban Forum, 2021).

Limited Access to Finance and Business Support

Street vendors often lack access to formal financial services such as bank loans, credit facilities, and insurance products. Traditional financial institutions typically require collateral, formal business registration, and credit histories criteria that many informal traders cannot meet (Mosia, 2021; Dunn & Maharaj, 2023). This exclusion from formal financial systems forces vendors to rely on personal savings or informal lending sources, which are often insufficient for business expansion or coping with economic shocks (Mkhize, Tshabangu & Adams, 2024; Singh, Adams & Zulu, 2023).

Moreover, the absence of tailored business support services exacerbates these financial challenges. Street vendors frequently operate without access to business development training, mentorship programs, or financial literacy education (Modiba & Mago, 2022; Jansen, Landman & Motsoeneng, 2023). This lack of support impedes their ability to manage finances effectively, plan for growth, or navigate regulatory environments (Bhoola, Singh & Mthethwa, 2022). Consequently, many vendors remain trapped in low-income operations with limited prospects for advancement (Zulu, Adams & Ngwenya, 2023).

Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions that recognize the unique needs of informal traders. Implementing inclusive financial products, such as microloans with flexible requirements, and

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providing accessible business support services can empower street vendors to enhance their economic resilience and contribute more substantially to the broader economy (Khumalo, 2024; Mthethwa, Singh & Jansen, 2023).

Exposure to Economic Shocks and Market Instability

Street vendors in South Africa remain highly vulnerable to economic shocks and market instability due to their informal status and the absence of social protection mechanisms. Environmental hazards such as extreme heatwaves and flooding increasingly disrupt trading activities, damage goods, reduce operating hours, and contribute to significant income losses (MDPI, 2022). Social and political instability further heightens precarity; the 2021 unrest resulted in widespread looting and the destruction of vendor stalls, leaving many traders without stock, income, or access to compensation (ReliefWeb, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Health crises have similarly exposed the fragility of the sector during COVID-19, lockdowns and mobility restrictions drastically reduced customer footfall, while most traders were excluded from relief programmes because of their informal status (Rogan & Skinner, 2022; UNU-WIDER, 2022). Economic downturns and inflation compound these pressures by raising input costs and depressing consumer spending, further straining vendor profitability and deepening vulnerability (Nyalunga, 2024). Together, these conditions underscore the precariousness of informal trading and the need for policies that bolster vendor resilience before, during, and after crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly devastating for street vendors, disrupting livelihoods through stringent public health measures that limited direct human interaction. Lockdowns, distancing regulations, and mobility restrictions sharply reduced foot traffic, leading to severe declines in sales and income (Rogan & Skinner, 2022). Due to their informal status, most vendors lacked access to unemployment benefits or formal relief, leaving them exposed to economic hardship (UNU-WIDER, 2022; Singh, Adams & Zulu, 2023). Many also struggled to meet new health and safety requirements including masking, sanitisation, and contactless payments because of inadequate resources and infrastructure (MDPI, 2022). Reduced face-to-face engagement further weakened customer trust and loyalty, exacerbating income declines. The pandemic revealed deep structural vulnerabilities within the sector and highlighted the urgent need for innovative support systems such as digital financial tools, accessible health infrastructure, and community-based safety nets to improve future crisis preparedness (Moyo & Gumbo, 2021; Modiba & Mago, 2022). Overall, the crisis underscored the importance of integrating informal traders into broader urban planning and social protection frameworks to enhance long-term resilience.

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Q3: What Are the Contributions of Street Vending to the South African Economy?

Street vending plays an essential role in South Africa's economy by generating income opportunities for marginalised groups, including the unemployed, women, and immigrants (Skinner et al., 2019; Mthethwa et al., 2023). It absorbs segments of the labour force excluded from formal employment, thereby contributing to job creation and poverty reduction (Juta et al., 2021; Nyalunga, 2024). Informal markets further stimulate local economic activity by circulating money within communities and enhancing financial resilience (Ramutsheli, 2024; Jansen et al., 2023). As noted by Rogan and Skinner (2022), informal traders have sustained livelihoods for millions during economic instability, including the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the sector's ability to absorb labour that the formal economy cannot accommodate. This resilience highlights the sector's critical role in mitigating poverty, reducing social exclusion, and maintaining economic continuity during national crises.

Vendors also serve low-income consumers by providing affordable goods and services in convenient locations, thereby improving access to essential items (Maphosa, 2020; Tawodzera et al., 2019). In urban environments, informal trade enhances economic diversity by supporting demand for locally produced products (Zulu et al., 2023; Singh, 2023). Street vending is also central to food security, ensuring that vulnerable populations can access meals and daily necessities (Singh, 2023; Bhoola et al., 2022). According to Singh (2023), vendors help distribute food in areas underserved by supermarkets, offering convenient and culturally relevant options that reduce transport costs for consumers. Beyond these contributions, street vending fosters entrepreneurship and financial independence (Khumalo, 2024; Mkhize et al., 2024), while also linking with the formal economy through supply chains (Ngomane, 2020; Juta et al., 2021). With appropriate support, the sector can continue promoting inclusive economic growth, as vendors employ adaptive strategies to survive rising costs and shifting regulations (Etim & Daramola, 2024). Although operating informally, these activities generate income, circulate local spending, and build business skills that can evolve into formal enterprises, strengthening community-level economic resilience.

Socioeconomic Integration and Community Development

Street vending enhances community integration by fostering interpersonal relationships and strengthening local networks. Vendors often build strong relationships with repeat customers and fellow traders, forming social cohesion in urban environments marked by fragmentation. According to Jansen, Landman, and Motsoeneng (2023), street vendors contribute to urban vibrancy and social resilience, particularly in marginalised communities. Their activities not only support households economically but also contribute to the cultural and social life of cities.

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Filling Gaps Left by the Formal Economy

Street vendors frequently operate in spaces where formal retail fails to reach or adequately serve, including inner-city transport hubs, informal settlements, and high-density residential areas. As noted by Urban Forum (2021), vendors help maintain the functional fabric of cities by providing low-cost services and goods on a daily basis. Their presence ensures that economic activity is maintained in urban zones that might otherwise be economically stagnant.

Revenue Generation for Municipalities

Although street vending operates largely informally, municipalities do derive revenue from licensing fees, fines, and market rentals. Cities such as Durban and Johannesburg have established trading zones and permit systems to regularise operations, albeit inconsistently. This management shows that informal trade, when properly supported, can contribute to local government revenue streams. However, as Ndaba and Landman (2022) caution, this potential is often underutilised due to regulatory barriers and weak municipal engagement.

Q4: What Are Perspectives of Policymakers on Street vending?

Policymakers in South Africa display varied perspectives regarding street vending, often striving to balance economic inclusion with the regulation of public spaces (Zulu, 2020; Singh, 2023). Some policymakers regard street vending as an effective means to mitigate unemployment by acknowledging its role in job creation and entrepreneurship, particularly benefiting marginalized groups (Jansen et al., 2023; Nyalunga, forthcoming). There is a growing recognition of the necessity to assimilate street vendors into urban economies through supportive policy measures. These include initiatives such as training programs and access to social protection services (Mkhize et al., forthcoming; Mthethwa et al., Lewis ’23).

Nevertheless, a significant number of policymakers continue to express apprehensions regarding the informal nature of street vending. They frequently perceive it as disorderly and assert that it poses challenges to effective urban management (Tawodzera et al., 2019; Zwane, 2023). Concerns related to public health and safety especially within the context of food vending often prompt stringent enforcement actions (Singh, 2023; Tlabela, 2023). Vendors who operate without official permits or in overly congested areas are occasionally regarded as trespassers, leading to conflicts with law enforcement authorities (Ngomane, 2020; Bhoola et al., 2022).

Despite recent initiatives to formalize the sector, progress remains sluggish. Inconsistencies in policy implementation persistently generate uncertainty for vendors (Zulu et al., 2023; Modiba, 2022). Policymakers are progressively recognizing the need to balance regulatory control with economic inclusion and are exploring approaches to regulate the sector without adversely affecting livelihoods

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(Ramutsheli, 2024; Juta et al., 2021). Looking ahead, vendors must collaborate with municipalities and government bodies to develop policies that foster both urban organization and sustainable livelihood opportunities

Municipal Views on Street Vending

Street vending plays a crucial role in South African cities, offering economic opportunities to numerous marginalised communities. Despite this, municipalities frequently view street vendors as obstacles rather than valuable assets. This consideration often results in strained interactions between local authorities and informal traders (ReliefWeb, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Municipalities face the challenge of maintaining organized urban environments while also supporting informal economic activities. Consequently, many vendors experience regular harassment through police raids, confiscations, and fines that threaten their financial stability (Urban Transformations, 2023; Africa.com, 2023).

Municipal regulations often restrict vendor locations and operating hours leading to tensions between traders and law enforcement. Such enforcement is particularly challenging for migrant vendors who face systemic exclusion while dealing with convoluted licensing systems often tainted by corruption and discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2022; ReliefWeb, 2022). Local policies tend to prioritise city aesthetics and formal businesses over accommodating informal traders' needs, thereby perpetuating social exclusion and economic disparities (Urban Transformations, 2023).

Despite these obstacles, several municipalities are beginning to explore more inclusive methods by acknowledging the positive impact street vendors have on urban economies. In collaborating with municipal authorities through initiatives like policy change consultations, a mutual understanding can be developed and conflicts minimized (Africa.com, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Nonetheless, ongoing efforts are crucial to shield for shielding vendors from harassment and incorporate incorporating them into urban planning processes to achieve social cohesion and economic resilience (ReliefWeb, 2022).

Ultimately, municipal policies should transcend enforcement-driven strategies. By acknowledging vendors as crucial participants in the urban economy and including them in decision-making processes, cities can become more inclusive environments that benefit both formal and informal sectors (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Urban Transformations, 2023).

Legality Issues Surrounding Street Vending

Street vending in South Africa exists within a legal grey zone, where many traders operate without licenses and remain vulnerable to fines, confiscation of goods, and police harassment due to restrictive municipal by-laws and inaccessible formalisation pathways (MDPI, 2022; Urban Forum, 2021; PLOS

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ONE, 2022). Complex licensing requirements, corruption, and limited administrative support further hinder traders' ability to comply with legal processes, disproportionately affecting those with limited education or financial resources (Maphanga et al., 2023; ReliefWeb, 2022). Migrant vendors face even greater barriers, as restrictive immigration laws often prevent them from acquiring necessary permits (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Africa.com, 2023). Enforcement practices, including sudden confiscations and targeted policing, create conflict and deepen mistrust between vendors and authorities, especially in high-traffic areas where competition with formal businesses is intense (Urban Transformations, 2023; ReliefWeb, 2022).

Although some municipalities have begun piloting initiatives to streamline licensing and formally recognise vendors, these efforts remain limited and highlight the need for broader legal reform (MDPI, 2022; Maphanga et al., 2023). Strengthening legal protections would require simplifying bureaucratic procedures, engaging vendor associations in policy design, and raising public awareness of traders' rights. Ultimately, legalising and integrating street vending into urban governance can promote social inclusion, enhance safety, and support more sustainable urban economies (PLOS ONE, 2022; Urban Forum, 2021).

Discussion

The literature consistently shows that high unemployment, persistent poverty, and systemic socio-economic exclusion are central drivers of street vending in South Africa. Studies by Mkhize et al. (2023) and Nyalunga (2024) demonstrate that street vending has become a self-initiated solution to widespread joblessness, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas where formal employment options remain scarce. This is especially evident among women, migrants, and youth who face disproportionate exclusion from formal labour markets. Evidence from Singh (2023) and Ramutsheli (2024) highlights the sector's resilience during periods of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest, and inflationary shocks, with vendors adapting to social and economic volatility despite lacking formal protections. The reviewed literature (Bhoola et al., 2022; Singh, 2023) also shows that vendors play a crucial role in community food security by providing affordable, culturally relevant goods in underserved areas. However, the sector operates within hostile or ambiguous regulatory environments characterised by evictions, harassment, and exclusion from planning processes, as noted by Zwane (2023) and Urban Transformations (2023).

Infrastructure deficits emerge as another major constraint. According to Maphanga & Madonsela (2023) and Mkhize et al. (2024), limited access to water, electricity, sanitation, and secure trading spaces undermines productivity and reinforces cycles of poverty and informality. Studies such as Mthethwa et al. (2023) and Dunn & Maharaj (2023) reveal additional layers of vulnerability faced by women and migrant vendors, including discrimination, restricted access to capital, and heightened risk of

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harassment yet both groups continue to demonstrate strong entrepreneurial agency. Findings from Zulu et al. (2023) and Van der Merwe (2024) confirm that informal traders contribute significantly to local economies by circulating income, strengthening supply chains, and supporting micro-enterprise ecosystems. Nonetheless, Tlabela (2023) and Charman (2020) identify a persistent disconnect between national development goals and municipal regulatory practices, which undermines the sector's developmental potential. Across the literature, there is strong advocacy for policy frameworks that balance regulation with livelihood protection through participatory governance, inclusive planning, and targeted support systems such as training, microfinance, and legal safeguards, as synthesised in Table 4.

Research Focus Area	**Key Themes Identified**	**Supporting Literature**
Key Factors Driving Street Vending	• High unemployment and poverty • Lack of formal job opportunities • Low barriers to entry • Rural-urban migration Coping mechanism for economic instability	Bhoola et al. (2022); Rogan & Skinner (2022); Dunn & Maharaj (2023); Chakunda (2023); Deedat (2021); Sibiya et al. (2024)
Challenges Faced by Street Vendors	• Inadequate infrastructure and basic services • Regulatory exclusion and policy neglect • Xenophobic attacks • Vulnerability to shocks (e.g., COVID-19, unrest) Limited access to finance and business support	Peimani & Kamalipour (2022); Urban Transformations (2023); Human Rights Watch (2023); Singh et al. (2023); Zwane (2023); University of Pretoria Repository (2022); Mkhize et al. (2023)
Contributions to the National Economy	• Employment generation • Food and goods accessibility • Inclusion of vulnerable groups (women, migrants)	Singh (2023); Jansen et al. (2023); Khumalo (2024); Madonsela (2024); Zulu et al. (2023); Ramutsheli (2024); Van der Merwe (2024); Daramola & Etim

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	• Economic stimulation at the local level Strengthening community resilience and social cohesion	
Views of Policymakers and Institutional Actors	• Recognition of the informal sector's economic relevance is growing, but inconsistent • Policymakers see vending as both a livelihood and an urban management issue • Limited consultation with vendors in policy development • Tensions between enforcement and support Policy responses are often fragmented or punitive	Chakunda (2023); Dunn & Maharaj (2023); Tlabela (2023); Trade Intelligence (2023); Rogan & Skinner (2022); Zulu et al. (2023)

Table 4: Summary of Findings from Literature Review

Conclusion

Street vending in South Africa continues to be shaped by structural economic pressures such as high unemployment, restricted access to formal jobs, and the ongoing need for flexible, low-barrier livelihood strategies, particularly among marginalised populations. As shown throughout the literature, street vending is not merely an economic activity it is a critical survival mechanism that supports households, stimulates local commerce, and supplies affordable goods in underserved communities. Nevertheless, despite its significance, the sector remains undervalued and is consistently constrained by punitive regulatory environments, inadequate infrastructure, social stigma, and frequent harassment. These persistent challenges hinder the sector's ability to contribute more fully to inclusive economic development.

Research highlights the need for policymakers to adopt more enabling and participatory approaches to informal trade governance. Recommended interventions include the development of well-serviced, environmentally sustainable vending zones; training programmes focused on entrepreneurship,

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financial literacy, and sustainable practices; and reforms that shift enforcement from punitive to collaborative. Policy incentives for environmental stewardship, accessible legal compliance pathways, and meaningful engagement between municipalities and vendor organisations can strengthen resilience and promote formal informal cooperation. A holistic, integrated regulatory framework one that recognises the informal economy as a legitimate component of South Africa's development trajectory has the potential to enhance vendor well-being, secure livelihoods, and facilitate more inclusive, sustainable urban economies.

Theoretical Implications and Further Research

This study contributes to theoretical debates on the informal economy by reinforcing the notion that street vending functions as a form of survivalist entrepreneurship within contexts of structural exclusion. The findings align with the Livelihoods Framework, which positions informal work as a household strategy to manage risk, cope with economic shocks, and navigate precarious labour markets. The resilience demonstrated by vendors also supports theories of everyday urbanism and informal urban governance, illustrating how informal actors creatively negotiate space, regulation, and market dynamics. Moreover, the study enriches discussions within inclusive development theory, showing that informal economic activities can meaningfully complement formal sector gaps, particularly in semi-rural and urban-peripheral contexts.

Future research can extend these insights in several directions. First, there is a need for empirical studies that quantify the economic contribution of street vending to local and national economies, particularly given the sector's substantial yet under-reported value. Second, scholars could examine gendered experiences in street vending, exploring how women navigate intersecting barriers such as caregiving responsibilities, safety concerns, and unequal access to resources. Third, further work is required to understand the dynamics between migrant and South African vendors, especially in relation to social cohesion, competition, and urban policy enforcement. Fourth, longitudinal research could track how policy reforms, technological adoption (e.g., mobile payments), and urban restructuring affect vendor livelihoods over time. Lastly, comparative studies across regions such as contrasting urban and semi-rural vending ecosystems would deepen theoretical understanding of how local contexts shape informal economic behaviour.

In broadening the research agenda, future studies can continue to refine informal economy theory, inform evidence-based policymaking, and strengthen the integration of street vending into South Africa's broader development framework.

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