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Double Informality and Labour Precarity: The Invisible Workforce in South Africa's Street Vending Economy

Authors:

Bongeka Princess Ndaba (bongekan2@dut.ac.za)
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa
ORCiD: 0000-0001-6461-2530

Abstract:

This paper examines the underexplored phenomenon of "double informality" within the informal economy of rural and semi-rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. While street vending is widely acknowledged as a key livelihood strategy, limited attention has been paid to the hidden layer of labour within this sector shopkeepers or assistants employed by informal traders. Drawing on the Structuralist Framework, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, and Location Theory, the study interrogates the lived experiences and entrenched precarity of these workers, whose employment status remains largely invisible in policy discourse and absent from formal labour statistics. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilised semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observations across the KwaDukuza, uMsunduzi, and eThekwini municipalities. Thematic analysis reveals that shopkeepers exist within a context of compounded vulnerability characterised by the absence of formal employment arrangements, reliance on unstable verbal agreements, and dependence on interpersonal trust. Their working conditions are marked by low and irregular earnings, often contingent on fluctuating daily sales, extended working hours, and exclusion from social protection mechanisms and occupational benefits. The findings further highlight a state of institutional voicelessness, wherein shopkeepers lack access to grievance procedures, labour protections, and occupational health and safety frameworks. Although some workers acquire basic business and entrepreneurial skills, significant structural constraints limit opportunities for upward mobility, reinforcing their position within cycles of economic insecurity. Consequently, many perceive their roles as temporary survival strategies rather than sustainable livelihood pathways. The study argues that addressing the precarity associated with "double informality" requires a fundamental reorientation of municipal and policy approaches from predominantly punitive and regulatory frameworks toward inclusive, participatory models that recognise informal assistants as critical, yet highly vulnerable, economic actors. By foregrounding this overlooked category of workers, the paper contributes to broader debates on informal labour, structural exclusion, and equitable policy reform in South Africa.

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Introduction

The informal economy in South Africa, particularly within the rural and semi-rural landscapes of KwaZulu-Natal, functions as a critical "urban safety net" for populations structurally excluded from the formal labour market. While scholarly attention has traditionally centred on the primary street vendor as a survivalist entrepreneur, there is a growing need to interrogate the "double informality" experienced by those employed within these enterprises, often referred to as shopkeepers or assistants.

As noted by Mthiyane, Wissink, and Chiwawa (2022), the collapse of rural livelihoods has entrenched a long-term reliance on informal vending, with middle-aged and female traders increasingly employing others to manage the daily operational demands of stalls. However, these employment arrangements are characterised by acute labour precarity, operating entirely outside formal labour regulations and social protection frameworks (Ndaba, 2025). This positions shopkeepers in a structurally vulnerable role, simultaneously excluded from both formal employment safeguards and policy recognition.

Recent studies (Renugadevi et al., 2022; Zogli, Dladla, & Dlamini, 2021) further demonstrate that, although street vending contributes significantly to local economic circulation, it exists within a persistent "policy vacuum," where municipal governance often prioritises urban order and aesthetics over the livelihoods of informal actors. For employed shopkeepers, this translates into a condition of "institutional voicelessness," marked by the absence of formal contracts, irregular income tied to daily sales fluctuations, and extended working hours without access to social security or health benefits (Bhoola & Chetty (2022).

According to the ILO (2023) and Alfers et al. (2022), such workers are among the most vulnerable to economic shocks, as their livelihoods depend on informal, verbal agreements and the unstable performance of micro-enterprises. Although they may acquire practical business skills, their prospects for upward mobility remain constrained by structural barriers, leading many to perceive their roles as temporary "stopgap" measures rather than viable long-term career pathways.

This paper therefore foregrounds the lived experiences of these "doubly informal" workers, with the aim of addressing a critical gap in the literature and informing more inclusive, contextually grounded, and spatially sensitive policy frameworks.

This study is guided by the following questions:

• How does "double informality" shape labour precarity and limit access to social and institutional protection among informal shopkeepers in KwaZulu-Natal?

• How do municipal governance frameworks and policy invisibility reinforce the institutional voicelessness of informal shop assistants and shape employer–employee power relations?

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• How do vending location dynamics influence economic viability, and what barriers hinder shopkeepers from transitioning towards sustainable entrepreneurial independence?

Literature Review

The following literature review examines the theoretical and empirical landscape of “double informality” and labor precarity, specifically focusing on individuals employed within the informal vending sector.

The Concept of "Double Informality" and the Hidden Labor Layer

Traditional scholarship on the informal economy often frames street vendors as autonomous, self-employed entrepreneurs. However, recent literature emphasizes a more complex hierarchy. Carré and Heintz (2013), as cited in the sources, introduce the concept of "double informality," a condition where both the enterprise itself and the employment relationship within that enterprise operate entirely outside of regulatory frameworks (Carré and Heintz 2013). Research by Portes and Haller (2005) suggests that individuals are pushed into these "doubly informal" roles not by choice, but as a "fallback position" due to structural marginalization (Chen 2012).

In South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, this layer of labour comprised of shopkeepers, assistants, and casual helpers is essential to the daily functioning and sustainability of the informal economy, yet it remains largely invisible in both policy and academic discourse. Drawing on the findings of this study, I argue that these workers occupy a structurally marginal position, operating at the intersection of economic necessity and regulatory neglect. According to the Oteng and Akuoko (2022), ILO (2023), such workers constitute a significant portion of the global informal workforce, lacking both the relative autonomy enjoyed by stall owners and the protections associated with formal employment. This study therefore foregrounds their experiences, highlighting how their invisibility perpetuates conditions of vulnerability, limited agency, and systemic exclusion.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Informal Labor

The experiences of informal shopkeepers are best understood through three intersecting theoretical lenses:

Structuralist Theory: This framework posits that informal work is a direct product of exclusionary labor markets and systemic failures in the formal economy. Research by Portes and Haller (2005) suggests that individuals are pushed into these "doubly informal" roles not by choice, but as a "fallback position" due to structural marginalization.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF): The SLF highlights how these workers mobilize social capital such as kinship ties and community networks to secure employment. For many shopkeepers in

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KwaZulu-Natal, these roles are part of a broader household survival strategy aimed at mitigating extreme poverty.

Location Theory: As articulated by Fujita, Krugman, and Venables (1999), the economic viability of these jobs is tied to the spatial logic of the vending site. Shopkeepers' livelihoods depend on the vendor's ability to secure high-footfall locations, such as taxi ranks and clinic entrances, to ensure sufficient daily turnover for wages

Dimensions of Labour Precarity: Wages, Hours, and Contracts

The literature consistently underscores the multidimensional nature of labour precarity among informal assistants, particularly in relation to wages, working hours, and contractual arrangements. A defining feature of this employment is the absence of formal contracts, with work relationships largely governed by fragile verbal agreements and interpersonal trust (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2023). Within the South African context, scholars such as Skinner (2008), Rogan and Skinner (2020), and Fourie (2018) highlight how informality is structurally embedded in labour markets, reinforcing insecurity and limited regulatory oversight. Drawing on these insights, this study contends that informal shopkeepers occupy an even more precarious position, situated within what can be conceptualised as a “double layer” of informality that intensifies their vulnerability (Bolarinwa et al. (2024).

Empirical evidence points to significant wage volatility, with earnings often irregular and directly tied to daily sales performance. Zogli, Dladla, and Dlamini (2021) demonstrate that income instability is a defining characteristic of informal employment, a finding echoed in South African studies which show that workers may earn nothing during off-peak trading periods (Rogan, 2016; Stats SA, 2022). In addition to income insecurity, informal assistants experience extensive temporal demands, frequently working long hours without regulated breaks or overtime compensation (Lund & Alfers, 2018; Skinner & Haysom, 2016). From the perspective of this study, such conditions reflect not only economic necessity but also a normalisation of exploitative labour practices within informal settings.

Furthermore, the absence of regulatory protection places these workers in a state of heightened occupational vulnerability. Operating within a policy vacuum, they are excluded from occupational health and safety standards, social security systems, and retirement provisions (Alfers, 2016; Rogan & Skinner, 2020; Benhura & Skinner, 2021). This study argues that this exclusion contributes to what can be described as institutionalised precarity, where workers are systematically denied avenues for protection, representation, and redress (Kakaza & Naudé (2025). Consequently, informal assistants remain highly susceptible to life-cycle shocks, including illness, injury, and sudden loss of employment, thereby reinforcing persistent cycles of structural exclusion in the informal economy.

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Institutional Voicelessness and Policy Invisibility

A recurring theme in recent literature is the "institutional voicelessness" of informal labor. Meagher (2013) argues that subordinate actors in the informal economy, like shop assistants, are structurally silenced because they lack grievance mechanisms to address mistreatment or wage exploitation. In KwaZulu-Natal, municipal governance often prioritizes "urban aesthetics" over the survival of informal actors, leading to what Skinner (2008) describes as "policy invisibility". When municipalities interact with the informal sector, they typically engage with stall owners, leaving the employed shopkeepers excluded from participatory planning and local economic development (LED) forums

Barriers to Upward Mobility and Entrepreneurial Autonomy

While many shopkeepers gain functional business skills such as cash handling and inventory management through experiential learning, they face significant structural "traps". Recent research by Skinner and Rogan (2019) confirms that while informal assistants often aspire to open their own stalls, they are thwarted by a lack of start-up capital, restrictive permit systems, and a lack of institutional support. Consequently, vending employment is frequently viewed as a "stopgap" or a necessary burden rather than a career path, with many workers hoping their children can escape the sector for formal office work.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to explore the complex phenomenon of double informality and labour precarity among shopkeepers in KwaZulu-Natal. The interpretivist approach is particularly suited to this inquiry as it prioritises the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and social realities of individuals operating within the informal economy (Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2000). By centering the voices of marginalised actors, the study seeks to uncover how structural constraints and socio-economic pressures shape informal employment relationships and everyday survival strategies. Methodologically, the research employs thematic analysis as a systematic and flexible analytical strategy to identify recurring patterns, key narratives, and points of divergence across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enables a nuanced understanding of labour precarity as both a structural condition and a lived experience.

The study is designed as a multi-site qualitative inquiry conducted across three municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal: KwaDukuza, uMsunduzi, and eThekwini, spanning rural, peri-urban, and urban informal trading contexts. Specific sites, including uMbumbulu, Inanda, Maphephetheni, Edendale, Sweetwaters, Verulam, and Nkwenkwezi, were purposively selected to capture spatial variations in informal economic activity and access to opportunities. The target population comprises informal shopkeepers (employees), street vendors (employers), and municipal officials responsible for regulating informal

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trade, thereby enabling a multi-perspective analysis of power relations, governance, and labour conditions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observations to ensure methodological triangulation and depth of insight (Denzin, 1978). Semi-structured interviews facilitated a detailed exploration of individual experiences, including income instability, migration pathways, and employment arrangements. Focus group discussions provided a platform for collective reflection on shared challenges, including municipal regulation, harassment, and informal support networks. Non-participant observations conducted at high-traffic trading sites such as taxi ranks and clinic entrances allowed for the documentation of daily work routines, physical labour demands, and infrastructural deficiencies.

All data were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded to generate themes such as institutional voicelessness, double informality, and spatial inequalities. The analysis was further interpreted through the lenses of Structuralist Theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, allowing for a theoretically grounded understanding of the findings (Chen, 2012; Scoones, 1998). Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participant identities, particularly given the vulnerability of the study population (Orb et al., 2001). To ensure trustworthiness and rigour, the study employed data triangulation and the use of verbatim quotations to anchor findings in participants' authentic voices, thereby enhancing credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted within a clearly defined geographical and social context in KwaZulu-Natal, focusing on rural and semi-rural areas across three municipalities: eThekwini, uMsunduzi, and KwaDukuza. Specific study sites included uMbumbulu, Inanda, Maphephetheni, and Verulam in eThekwini; Edendale and Sweetwaters in uMsunduzi; and Nkwenkwezi in KwaDukuza. These locations were purposively selected due to the prominence of informal economic activities driven by limited formal employment opportunities and the decline of traditional rural livelihoods, a pattern widely observed in South African informal economy contexts (Fourie, 2018; Skinner, 2008). In these settings, informal vendors typically operate in high-footfall spaces such as pavements, taxi ranks, clinic entrances, school gates, and open fields, strategically positioning themselves to maximise customer access and economic viability, consistent with spatial economic behaviour observed in informal trade (Fujita, Krugman, & Venables, 1999; Skinner & Rogan, 2019).

The study engaged three key participant groups to provide a comprehensive, multi-perspective understanding of the informal vending ecosystem. The first group comprised street vendors, who function as informal entrepreneurs and employers. The findings indicate that this group is predominantly

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composed of middle-aged women, with approximately 60% identified as internal migrants from surrounding rural areas or other provinces. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the feminisation of informal trading and its role as a livelihood strategy in contexts of structural unemployment (Rogan, 2016; Lund & Alfers, 2018). Notably, around 70% of these vendors have been active in the sector for more than five years, suggesting that informal trading represents a sustained livelihood strategy rather than a temporary activity (Fourie, 2018).

The second group consisted of shopkeepers or assistants employees responsible for managing daily stall operations, including financial transactions, stock management, and opening or closing stalls. This group largely includes youth, such as recent matriculants, and family members who enter the informal sector due to limited access to formal employment opportunities, reflecting broader trends of youth exclusion from the formal labour market (Stats SA, 2022). Their position reflects a condition of "double informality," as both the enterprise and their employment relationship operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, reinforcing patterns of labour precarity highlighted in informal economy research (Meagher, 2013; Carré & Heintz, 2013).

The third group included municipal and government officials, who provided insights into the governance and regulatory dimensions of informal trade. These participants indicated that municipal engagement with informal traders is often reactive primarily responding to challenges or disputes rather than proactive or participatory in nature a dynamic consistent with documented policy ambiguity and regulatory exclusion in South Africa (Skinner & Rogan, 2019).

Throughout the study, ethical integrity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying details to ensure the confidentiality and protection of all participants, in line with established ethical standards in qualitative research (Orb et al., 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Discussion Findings

The study reveals that street vending in KwaZulu-Natal constitutes a long-term livelihood strategy rather than a temporary coping mechanism, predominantly sustained by middle-aged women who remain structurally excluded from formal labour markets. This finding is consistent with recent South African scholarship, which positions the informal economy as a durable and essential component of employment in contexts of persistent unemployment and inequality (Mokofe, 2023; Rogan & Skinner, 2024). Despite structural marginalisation, these vendors demonstrate significant entrepreneurial agency and resilience, strategically locating their stalls in high-footfall areas such as taxi ranks, clinic entrances, and transport nodes to optimise income generation. From the perspective of this study, such spatial practices reflect an applied logic aligned with Location Theory, where economic survival is contingent on proximity to consumer flows, even in environments characterised by inadequate infrastructure, including limited access to water, sanitation, and shelter.

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A central finding is the fractured and often adversarial relationship between informal traders and municipal authorities, shaped by what can be conceptualised as policy invisibility. Recent studies highlight that governance approaches toward the informal sector in South Africa remain largely fragmented, exclusionary, and insufficiently responsive to the lived realities of informal workers (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021; Rogan & Skinner, 2022). In practice, municipal engagement is frequently reactive and punitive, prioritising urban order and regulatory compliance over livelihood sustainability. This has led to conditions of institutional mistrust, where vendors experience inconsistent enforcement, limited consultation, and exclusion from decision-making processes that directly affect their economic activities. This study argues that such dynamics reproduce a form of institutional neglect, in which the economic contributions of informal traders are systematically undervalued within urban governance frameworks.

Beyond individual survival, the informal vending sector functions as a critical driver of local economic activity, supporting household livelihoods, sustaining informal supply chains, and generating employment opportunities for youth and family members. However, embedded within this expansion is a less visible layer of labour characterised by what this study conceptualises as “double informality.” Shopkeepers and assistants who occupy subordinate roles within informal enterprises experience heightened labour precarity, marked by the absence of formal contracts, irregular and sales-dependent earnings, and limited access to social or institutional protection. Emerging literature on precarious work in Africa further confirms that such workers are often excluded from labour rights, representation, and social protection systems, reinforcing their marginalisation within already vulnerable economic spaces (Castel-Branco & Sefalafala, 2025; Koolwal et al., 2024). In line with these insights, this study contends that shopkeepers operate within a condition of institutional voicelessness, lacking grievance mechanisms or formal recognition despite their central role in sustaining the daily functioning of informal enterprises.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that street vending in rural and semi-rural KwaZulu-Natal constitutes a deeply embedded socio-economic practice rather than a temporary survival strategy. The findings reveal that participation in the informal economy functions as a long-term livelihood mechanism in contexts marked by persistent unemployment and structural inequality. In particular, middle-aged women emerge as key economic actors, demonstrating resilience through adaptive strategies such as securing high-footfall trading locations to optimise income generation. However, these opportunities are mediated by a persistent disconnect between informal traders and municipal authorities, characterised by policy invisibility, inconsistent enforcement, and limited inclusion in decision-making processes.

A central contribution of this study is the conceptual and empirical advancement of “double informality” as a critical dimension of labour precarity within the informal economy. While existing literature has

predominantly focused on street vendors as independent survivalist entrepreneurs, this study foregrounds the experiences of shopkeepers and assistants who operate under compounded vulnerability. These workers are subject to irregular, sales-dependent wages, the absence of formal employment contracts, and exclusion from labour protections and social security systems. Their position reflects a structurally embedded form of marginalisation that extends beyond conventional understandings of informality, thereby deepening scholarly debates on precarious labour in the Global South.

At the same time, the findings affirm that the informal sector remains a significant driver of local economic activity. Street vending contributes to household livelihoods, stimulates local consumption, and strengthens informal supply chains, while also creating employment opportunities for youth and other marginalised groups. Despite these contributions, the continued marginalisation of both traders and their employees underscores the limitations of current governance frameworks, which often prioritise regulation and urban order over economic inclusion and social protection.

In light of these findings, the study calls for a fundamental reorientation of municipal governance towards more inclusive, participatory, and context-responsive policy approaches. There is a need to explicitly recognise not only informal traders but also their employees as legitimate economic actors within development planning. Policy interventions should therefore prioritise improved access to social protection mechanisms, fair labour practices, and spatially just urban and rural planning frameworks that accommodate, rather than displace, informal economic activities.

Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of informality by highlighting the layered and relational nature of vulnerability within the sector. Future research could further explore the long-term mobility trajectories of “doubly informal” workers and assess the effectiveness of emerging policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusivity and economic security within informal labour markets.

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