

# **Precarious labour in Mpumalanga, South Africa: A case study of informally employed day labourers in Mbombela and Emalaheni**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Precarious employment is becoming more prevalent again in the developed world while being widespread in developing economies. Day labour is precarious wage work that is emerging and re-emerging in the global North and South. Within the Global South context, we explore the socio-economic and labour market outcomes of day labourers in Mpumalanga. A comparable multi-case study research design reveals day labourers' precarious existence: low and uncertain incomes, struggle to provide for dependents, low levels of subjective well-being and structural vulnerability. The results reflect differences between a more diversified economy (Mbombela) and one subject to the mining industry's boom and bust cycles (Emalaheni). Social policy must be reconsidered to adhere to the South African government's developmental State vision.

**Key words:** Precarious labour; Day labouring; Precarious wage work; Labour market outcomes; South Africa

## **INTRODUCTION AND AIM**

Globalisation, together with an increase in labour market flexibility, has resulted in the rise of precarious work arrangements across the world (Standing 2011; 2014). Precarious work involves the absence of regulations that maintain the standard employment relationship, rendering workers more vulnerable (Benach and Muntaner 2007). This, together with labour market flexibility often means that, as the lines between being part of this flexible workforce and being unemployed become less clear, workers in these new “flexible” jobs bear many of the same labour market characteristics as the unemployed, e.g. lower credentials, low income and being an immigrant. Moreover, they also experience bouts of unemployment themselves (Dolley et al. 1996; Benach and Muntaner 2007). The concept of “precarious employment” as a sociological construct provides a viable alternative for conceptualising and measuring labour market outcomes associated with this trend (Rodgers 1989; Benach and Muntaner 2007).

Scholars see precarious work as situated on a continuum. At the one end is the social security provided by a standard (full-time, year-round, unlimited duration and with benefits) employment contract. The other end is characterised by a high degree of precariousness (Rodgers 1989; Benach and Muntaner 2007). Precarious workers in all probability work under different power relations than those in standard employment, with limited worker rights (Rodgers 1989; Benach and Muntaner 2007).

Precarious employment has historically been a common feature of labour markets in developed countries. This changed through increased government regulation and stronger political influence of labour (Benach and Muntaner 2007; Standing 2011, 2014). This trend is, however, reversing, with precarious employment becoming more prevalent again in the developed world while being widespread in developing economies (Benach and Muntaner 2007; Scully 2016). As such, studying the precarious work phenomenon has become a central focus in the field of labour studies as researchers endeavour to analyse the present to understand the possible future scenarios of work across the globe (Scully 2016).

Precarious work, in practical terms, refers to jobs that are insecure and uncertain. Work in this context is often described as 'informal/contingent/atypical' (Rodgers 1989; Benach and Muntaner 2007; Malinga 2015). These jobs are characterised by unstable and unsafe working conditions with little if any recourse to regulatory protection (Benach and Muntaner 2007; Theodore et al. 2009).

Day labour is a particular form of precarious wage work (informal and often associated with migrant workers in the United States) that is emerging and re-emerging in both the global North and South (Benach and Muntaner 2007; Theodore et al. 2015; Haro et al. 2020). Day labourers are unemployed people, mostly men, who search for temporary employment by advertising and selling their labour and skills on the street corners of cities and towns (Theodore et al. 2009, 2015; Schenck et al. 2012, 2018). Such employment opportunities are usually scarce, unstable and wages are often low. This creates pressure for day labourers to take on almost any job, which is often unprotected and unsafe (Meléndez et al. 2016; Visser et al. 2016).

There is little room for negotiation of work conditions and day labourers therefore often settle for work on the employers' terms (Theodore et al. 2015; Visser et al. 2016; Meléndez et al. 2016). Workers are often vulnerable to exploitation (Theodore et al. 2015, 2017). Furthermore, there is no trade union or organisation that protects the rights of these workers. Day labourers are generally paid in cash after the day's work and often operate "off the book" in terms of the employer (Schenck and Blaauw 2018).

Across South Africa, there are more than 50 000 day labourers, who daily congregate on street corners in the hope of finding a temporary job (Harmse et al. 2009; Theodore et al. 2017:143; Schenck and Blaauw 2018). This informal labour market is shared by South Africans as well as migrants from many of the countries in Southern Africa (Theodore et al. 2015, 2017, 2018). The significant numbers (Harmse et al. 2009; Theodore et al. 2015) as well as the permanency (Harmse et al. 2009; Theodore et al. 2015; Schenck and Blaauw 2018) that characterises the South African day labour market are the important reasons for the day labour market being the focus of attention in this paper.

Although research on precarious employment is gaining more and more traction and is becoming the focus of labour researchers (Scully 2016), more interdisciplinary research is needed to understand the nature, types and impact of precarious work in the Southern African context (Scully 2016). Scully (2016), responding to the work of Standing (2011, 2014), emphasises the difference in origin of precarious work in the Global South and North.

Unlike previous literature that either had a countrywide focus (e.g. Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw et al. 2018) or looked at individual cities (e.g. Blaauw et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2017, 2018), we take the literature further by investigating the day labour market within one province, but in locations with markedly different economic settings. The specific objectives of this paper are to explore the socio-economic and labour market outcomes of day labourers in Mpumalanga<sup>1</sup>, South Africa, by comparing day labourers searching for jobs in two very different socio-economic contexts within the same province. The paper makes use of a descriptive multiple case study design. According to Creswell (2013:97), the case study method: “...explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection...”.

The bounded system of this (multi-case) study is the activity of day labouring – with a specific focus on labour market and socio-economic outcomes. According to Yin (2003) case studies can be explanatory, exploratory and or descriptive. This multi-case study is distinguished and bounded by the activity of day labouring within distinct local economics settings – the two cities in the same province. The difference in settings is the geographical location as well as the economic foundation of the two cities. In accordance with Yin (2003), we use these different local contexts to explore potential differences within the activity of day labouring in the province.

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<sup>1</sup> Mpumalanga is a province with a variety of economic activities (including mining and agriculture). It is therefore an appropriate case study for this research.

## **RESEARCH LOCATIONS**

The two research locations provide an interesting comparison between the more economically diversified capital (Mbombela) and the more mining dependent city of Emalahleni in terms of the daily level of precariousness faced by the day labourers in the two cities. Mbombela (previously called Nelspruit) is the capital of the Mpumalanga Province. Being the capital, it is home to all the administrative head offices of provincial government departments as well as the recently established University of Mpumalanga. Its agricultural sector is well developed with fruit, sugar cane and vegetables being produced. Mbombela is also regarded as the gateway to Mozambique and Eswatini (Swaziland). According to the City of Mbombela (n.d.), the unemployment rate was 24.8% in 2017, which was lower than the national unemployment rate at the time.

The second research location was Emalahleni (previously known as Witbank). Emalahleni is situated in the Highveld region of Mpumalanga. The city owes its origin to the development of coal mining in the area. A number of open and underground coal mines are situated in the area – along with some of the biggest coal power stations and steel mills in South Africa (South African Cities Network 2014). In fact, there are 22 coal mines within a radius of 40 kilometres around Emalahleni. As a mining town, Emalahleni displays many of the characteristics of mining towns in other parts of the world, e.g. Australia (Pretorius 2019). Important for this study are characteristics such as a growing population as a result of migrants looking for employment and the obvious dependence on mining for the local economy (Pretorius 2019). The municipality estimates in their 2017 (latest available) Integrated

Development Plan (IDP) that as much as 60% of the local economy is directly and indirectly dependent on its mining and coal-powered electricity generation (Emalahleni Municipality 2017). According to the Emalahleni Municipality (2017), the city's unemployment rate decreased from 27.3% in 2011 to 23.2% in 2015 compared to the national unemployment rate of 26.5%.

In both cities the unemployment rates – although lower than the national average – are still very high. Unsurprisingly, both cities therefore have an active day labour market. The focus of this paper is on an analysis of the similarities and differences of the cities' day labour markets as a result of the economic reality of the two locations. In practical terms, the question to be answered through the chosen methodology is: What difference does location in terms of being diversified or mining-dependent make to the levels and depth of the day labourers' precariousness?

The research methodology used to answer this question comparison is discussed next.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A comparable multi-case study and mixed-method research design was used in the study (Gustafsson 2017). Our research design was based on a pragmatic research epistemology. A pragmatic inquiry is of the view that all research should emanate from a desire to produce useful and actionable knowledge and to find solutions to social problems (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020). Pragmatism also has particularly strong connections with mixed methods research.

This multi-case study design of comparing the two cities allowed us to differentiate and compare issues of precarity of the informally employed day labourers in two of

the major cities of Mpumalanga. To ensure methodological and scientific thoroughness the following processes were followed:

- **Reliability and validity:** Validity in research asks if the instruments used, measure what it is supposed to measure; while reliability asks to which degree the research methods produces stable and consistent results (Baskarada 2014; Mohajan 2017). A questionnaire, successfully used in other day labour studies since 2004, throughout South Africa, by the same researchers (see, for example, Blaauw et al. 2006; Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw et al. 2018; Theodore et al. 2017, 2018), formed the basis for the semi-structured interviews as the method data collection. The validity and reliability of the data collected with the questionnaire is ensured in the repeated successful use and refinement of the questionnaire in different studies and contexts in South Africa.

Social Work graduates from the University of South Africa (UNISA)<sup>2</sup>, who resided in the two cities (but have not found full-time employment themselves), were thoroughly trained by the authors, to use the data collection instrument in the research project. The UNISA students residing in these two cities were fluent in the languages spoken by the respective day labourers and therefore able to communicate easily and freely in order to administer the questionnaires and conduct the interviews.

- **Sampling process:** The research population was all the day labourers active in these two cities and the convenience and availability sampling procedure dictated that all day labourers over the age of 18, willing to be interviewed formed part of the study population. The street corners where the day labourers gathered and wait to be picked up were identified. On arrival at the

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<sup>2</sup> UNISA is an open and distance learning higher education institution (university) in South Africa.



space where the day labourers gather to wait for possible employers, referred to as “hiring sites”, data collectors will approach the day labourers, explain what the research is about, and if willing to be interviewed, the individual will be requested to sign a consent form. There were day labourers who were not interested to be interviewed, but most queued and requested to be interviewed. Day labourers were explicitly told that they may leave the interview when a job opportunity may arise. If a potential employer stops at the site, the interviewee will run to the employer. If not successful to be employed, they will return to complete the interview.

- **Data collection and analysis:** The data collection was conducted in October 2018. A total of 110 questionnaires were completed, 58 in Emalahleni and 52 in Mbombela. Two of the authors accompanied the fieldworkers - assisting with difficult questions and situations that arose (not all areas in which day labourers operate in South Africa can always be considered safe). The authors, on site, went through the completed survey instruments in order to check for possible mistakes or uncompleted questionnaires. Both the qualitative and quantitative answers were recorded in Excel. The quantitative analysis, on which this paper is based, was conducted using EViews. The data allowed for an analysis of the conditions facing day labourers in each city as well as a comparison of the two case studies.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Western Cape’s Human and Social Sciences Senate Research Committee number 14/3/10.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis focused on the demographic and socio-economic profile, employment history and income of the day labourers in the two cities. Table 1 provides a comparison of the demographic features of the study population from the two cities.

**Table 1: demographic characteristics of the sample.**

Demographic characteristic	Emalahleni: N=58	%	Mbombela: N=52	%
<b>Race and Gender:</b>				
African	58	100	52	100
Male	58	100	52	100
<b>Age:</b>				
Average	34 years old		40 years old	
<b>Education:</b>				
No schooling	29	50	16	30.8
Some primary schooling			5	9.6
Completed primary schooling	14	24.1	13	25
Some secondary schooling				
Completed secondary schooling	15	25.9	18	34.6
Post-school qualification				
<b>Housing arrangements:</b>				
Formal housing structure	5	8.6	37	71.2
Informal housing (shacks)	44	75.9	7	13.5
Other (veld, construction site etc.)	9	15.5	8	15.3
<b>Number of dependents:</b>				
Average:	4.8 people		3.5 people	
<b>Staying with their families</b>	12	21	36	69

Source: Survey data

The day labourers in Emalahleni and Mbombela can be considered homogenous in terms of race and gender as was the case in various other South African studies (Blaauw et al. 2006, 2018). The average age differs, with day labourers in Emalahleni being younger and responsible for more dependents compared to their

counterparts in Mbombela. However, significant differences are evident in terms of level of schooling, housing arrangements and whether they are able to stay with their families.

In Mbombela 69% of the respondents indicated that they were living with their families as opposed to only 21% of the day labourers in the Emalahleni sample. Furthermore, the results show that the Emalahleni day labourers for the most part (75.9%) lived in informal housing structures whereas the day labourers in Mbombela mostly stayed in formal (brick) houses (71.2%) with their families. The different economic bases of the two cities may help to explain this observation. Mining activity in Emalahleni acts as a pull factor for men from other provinces in South Africa, and even neighbouring countries, in the hope of finding employment on the mines. This can obviously lead to housing shortages and as a result such men often live in informal types of housing.

The importance of the labourers' home countries became a key element to consider in terms of the background of the day labourers in the two cities. This was subsequently explored, as illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Country of origin of the day labourers in Emalahleni and Mbombela**

Country of origin	Emalahleni: N=58	%	Mbombela: N=52	%
South Africa	41	70,7	41	78,8
Zimbabwe	3	5,2	2	3,8
Swaziland	1	1,7	2	3,8
Mozambique	13	22,4	7	13,5
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: survey data

Table 2 indicates that in these two cities there are fewer foreign-born immigrants working as day labourers (29,3% in the case of Emalahleni and only 22,2% in Mbombela) than in other South African cities, e.g. Pretoria and Cape Town. In Pretoria for example, Theodore et al. (2017; 2018) estimated that more than 70% of the day labourers are from neighbouring countries. Although external migration is present in the collected data, it does not form the majority of the research population (as it may do in other South African cities). Our focus therefore is on the issue of internal migration from other provinces in South Africa. In the case of Emalahleni, this phenomenon is present. Table 3 provides detail regarding this.

**Table 3: Province from where South African born day labourers originate**

<b>Province where South African day labourers were born</b>	<b>Emalahleni: (South African born) N=41</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Mbombela: (South African born) N =41</b>	<b>%</b>
Gauteng	3	7,3		
Mpumalanga	25	61,0	38	92.7
KwaZulu-Natal	2	4,9		
Eastern Cape				
Limpopo	11	26,8	3	7.3
North West				
Free State				
Northern Cape				
Western Cape				
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey data

The results confirm the presence of significant internal migration among the day labour population in Emalahleni in contrast to Mbombela. More than a quarter of the day labourers in Emalahleni were born in Limpopo. The pull factor of possible employment in the mines of Emalahleni is in all probability the reason for their movement from Limpopo. In the case of Mbombela, however, only 7.3% were born

in Limpopo. In Mbombela most of the day labourers were born in the province of Mpumalanga (92.7%). In total, almost four out of every ten (39%) day labourers in Emalahleni were born in other provinces. The attraction of the various coal mines may again explain this. In many cases, day labourers from other provinces emigrate to Emalahleni in the hope of finding employment on the mines. However, not all of them are likely to find employment (and if they do, keep it) in the mines as a result of the boom and bust cycles (Campbell et al. 2017) of the mining sector. Consequently, many are forced into informal wage employment such as day labour.

These labourers often live informally in shacks and without the support of family living with them. They usually have dependents who place their hope of material survival on them. This creates an additional level of stress on day labourers of Emalahleni. At the very basic level of existence, therefore, these day labourers are experiencing a precarious life - even before they arrive at the street corner in the hope of finding employment.

Once they are on the street corners, the labour market outcomes of the day labourers in the two cities are also markedly different. The first difference is observed in the number of days per week that the labourers in each of the two cities seek employment on the street corners. The day labourers in Mbombela stand for an average of five days per week. Their counterparts in Emalahleni stand at least six and often seven days per week in the hope of securing temporary employment. This leaves the latter group with no time for other activities such as visiting clinics or delivery points for social services. This begs the question as to how successful their endeavour in each of the two research locations is. The respondents were asked to

indicate how many times and for what purpose they were employed in the week before the interview. Tables 4 and 5 indicate the results for Mbombela and Emalahleni respectively. Since not all day labourers secured a job during the preceding week, the tables only reflect the activities of that sub-sample that did manage to secure a daily job.

The analysis of the Mbombela data reveals that only 48% (25 out of 52 respondents) of the day labourers were able to obtain any form of work in the week preceding the interview. This means that more than half of the respondents were not hired at all in the week before being interviewed. In Emalahleni, the picture was markedly bleaker. Here, only 38% (22/58) of the day labourers were able to find any work in the week preceding their interview – implying serious and perhaps even dire consequences for their livelihoods. The more diversified local economy of Mbombela offers relatively more employment opportunities – albeit still limited in absolute terms.

The precarious existence of the day labourers is even more evident when comparing Tables 4 and 5 in terms of the number of days that those fortunate enough to find temporary employment were hired. Securing some employment does not imply regular employment. The 25 respondents in Mbombela who found employment during the week were only hired for an average of 1.8 days. Only one respondent was hired for five days and another one had a job for four days. The rest were mostly hired for only one or two days in that week. This implies an unemployment rate of 83% (when taking into account the number of days per week that each day labourer in Mbombela stood in order to find employment). These results resonate with similar findings for recent studies in Pretoria (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018).

**Table 4: Success rates and type of jobs obtained by day labourers in Mbombela in the week preceding the interviews**

Day before inter-view	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>R E S P O N D E N T S  W H O  G O T  J O B S</b>	1	Painting	Painting				
	2	Bricklaying assistant					
	3	Loading and unloading	Loading and unloading				
	4	Plumbing work	Plumbing work				
	5					Helping people to move house	
	6	Loading and unloading					
	7	Paving work	Paving work				Paving work
	8	Painting	Tiling work				
	9		Loading and unloading				
	10	Gardening					
	11	Installation work	Installation work			Installation of air conditioner	Installation of air conditioner
	12		Painting	Painting	Painting		
	13	Gardening				Wiring of radio	
	14	Loading and unloading		Gardening			Gardening
	15					Delivery work	
	16	Wiring of radio					
	17	Cleaning					
	18	Cleaning					
	19						
	20	Bricklayer					
	21	Loading and unloading				Gardening	
	22		Levelling of building area				
	23		Building of dog shelter	Building of dog shelter			
	24	Tiling work	Tiling work	Tiling work			
	25					Serving food	

Source: Survey data

**Table 5: Success rates and type of jobs obtained by day labourers in Emalahleni\_in the week preceding the interviews**

Day before interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
R E S P O N D E N T S	1			Loading and unloading				
	2					Bricklaying		
	3					Painting		
	4				Painting	Painting	Painting	
	5	Gardening						
	6		Painting				Painting	
	7	Construction work	Construction work	Construction work	Construction work	Construction work	Construction work	Carpentry work
W H O G O T J O B S	8		Painting					
	9	Construction work	Construction work		Construction work	Tiling work		
	10	Welding work					Tiling work	
	11		Gardening					
	12				Gardening		Loading and unloading	
	13	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets
	14	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets		
	15			Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets	Handing out of pamphlets
	16	Construction work					Handing out of pamphlets	
	17	Painting						
	18				Loading and unloading		Loading and unloading	
	19		Gardening		Gardening			
	20	Helping people to move house						
	21	Painting	Painting	Painting	Gardening		Installing ceilings	Painting
	22							Cleaning

Source: Survey data

A similar analysis in Emalahleni reveals the same dire situation. Here day labourers stood, on average, an extra day or two per week. The corresponding unemployment



rate was therefore even higher at 85%. Interestingly, the few day labourers in Emalahleni that did find jobs were hired on average for 2.6 days in that week – which was higher than the figure for Mbombela. This figure must be treated with caution, as the explanation probably lies in the three respondents who were hired for a week to hand out pamphlets at the traffic light. This was almost certain a once-off occurrence. Had it not been for this, the figures would have been much worse.

From the tables it can also be noted that that the respondents who secured more work were mostly the ones who possessed better skills, such as tiling, painting and the ability to do electrical installations. Those with fewer skills seem to get fewer jobs. Furthermore, the skills that assist a day labourer in getting employment are not necessarily the skills that would be in demand in the mining sector. The skill set of a mine worker who lost his job on the mine and who became a day labourer does not distinguish him at all from his day labour colleague who has no skills. They are equally vulnerable for different reasons. The one is unskilled and the other has skills which are suddenly not in demand. Skills in the construction industry are clearly the ones in demand in the day labour market. This is a manifestation of the structural vulnerability faced by day labourers across South Africa (see Schenck et al. 2018; Xweso 2019). The day labourers in a mining-dependent city such as Emalahleni possibly face increased levels of precariousness as a result of not being skilled in the construction industry – skills which may actually be in demand in the labour market of the street corner<sup>3</sup>.

The above analysis shows that in terms of employment opportunities, the day labourers in Emalahleni are worse off than the ones in Mbombela. The explanation

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<sup>3</sup> Issues of skills-related underemployment are therefore an important area for further study.

for this lies partly in the increased vulnerability of day labourers operating in communities, such as Emalahleni, that depend on a town specialising in mining. The situation is further exacerbated by the decline in the mining sector. Emalahleni (like all mining communities) faces a number of realities that influence both formal and informal labour markets. Firstly, it experiences the volatility of all mining towns (known as the resource roller coaster — with periods of growth and contraction) (Franks et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2017). One of the factors responsible for this phenomenon is a change in patterns of demand that result from changes in commodity prices. This in turn influences mining operations and eventually translates into employment changes (Campbell et al. 2017). The second factor is the possibility that the resource may become exhausted or, in the case of Emalahleni, alternative green energy becomes a cheaper option for South Africa. It may well become uneconomical to operate the coalmines and mine closures may follow (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012). Retrenchments in the formal sector will then also affect the informal economy of which day labourers forms part.

The closing of the Highveld Steel Company in 2015 was an example of such a shock to the local economy. During this process about 1700 people were left unemployed (Giokos 2016). Many of these were not able to secure formal employment again and ventured into the informal economy in an attempt to make a living – thus increasing the number of day labourers. This expanded labour supply may have increased competition for the available jobs and hence led to fewer employment opportunities. We investigated this possibility and asked respondents whether they had previous employment in the formal sector. No fewer than 71% of the day labourers interviewed in Emalahleni indicated that they had previous full-time employment

(compared to 63% for Mbombela). Furthermore, 37% of the day labourers in Emalahleni who had previous employment lost their jobs as a direct result of the closure of mines and/or related activities.

The possible impact of structural unemployment and the resultant vulnerability of the day labourers in Emalahleni therefore seem more pronounced than in Mbombela, arguably because of a more diversified economic structure in the latter. In order to explore the impact of a more depressed day labour market in Emalahleni, the income generated by the day labourers in each city was analysed and compared.

Before reporting on the income analysis, we must stress that any analysis in a day labour market (in South Africa and abroad) must be treated with caution, as the income earned by these labourers is an extremely volatile variable due to their infrequent employment (Blaauw et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2015, 2017, 2018; Blaauw et al. 2018; Haro et al. 2020). In order to mitigate this in the best possible way, researchers often ask a number of questions regarding income earned to obtain the most accurate numbers (Blaauw et al. 2006; Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw et al. 2018). We followed this approach and additionally asked the day labourers to reflect on the income they earned in the month before the interviews as well as the income earned in what they would consider to be a “good” or a “bad” month. Table 6 summarises the results.

**Table 6: Comparison of nominal income earned by day labourers in Emalahleni and Mbombela**

Income variable in nominal South African Rand	Emalahleni		Mbombela	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Previous month	1 357.50	525	1 502.16	1 000
“Good” month	2 257.68	2 000	2 253.30	1 200
“Bad” month	652	300	706	450

Source: Survey data

The impact of a more depressed day labour market in Emalahleni manifests itself in significant differences between the income earned by day labourers in Emalahleni compared to Mbombela during the month before the survey and during a month that is deemed a “bad” month. During a “good” month, the reported income earned in these two cities was very similar. When times were good and jobs were regular, they were rewarded equally, but when jobs were scarce day labourers in Emalahleni fared worst. Unfortunately, the “good” months were far less frequent than the “bad” months. The same trend was observed in other South African studies (Blaauw et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2015). This finding complements those above in terms of the regularity with which employment was obtained. We therefore argue that day labourers in Emalahleni were structurally more vulnerable and endured a more precarious existence in terms of income as opposed to day labourers in Mbombela.

A cautionary note is appropriate here. The income earned by both sets of day labourers was not enough to sustain the day labourers and their dependents materially. In both cities, day labourers were in a precarious position, living in poverty and with uncertain and low income in spite of searching for employment almost every day. Therefore, even though day labourers in Emalahleni were worse off in terms of income than those in Mbombela, all of them were subject to extreme levels of precarity. The fact the day labour market in Emalahleni is influenced by boom and

bust cycles in mining (Campbell et al. 2017) and related activities (with shrinking employment in the mining sector as a result) as well as higher levels of migration, renders all Emalahleni day labourers structurally more vulnerable. The oversupply of day labourers in Emalahleni is also evident when one compares the ability of the day labourers in each city to negotiate their wages in the event of being offered employment.

In Mbombela, 85% of the respondents reported that they negotiated their wage before engaging in the job that had been offered to them. The fact that more than eight out of every ten day labourers had the opportunity and confidence to negotiate with prospective employers theoretically makes them less vulnerable to possible exploitation, something which often characterises day labour markets across the world (Theodore et al. 2015, 2017, 2018; Xweso 2019; Haro et al. 2020). In Emalahleni, the picture was very different. Here only half (51%) of the respondents indicated that they negotiated their wage before being hired. This was a far less encouraging result than in Mbombela.

This finding further underlines the relative weaker economic situation in Emalahleni and the resultant increased levels of structural vulnerability and precariousness of its day labourers. They are so desperate to earn some income that they simply cannot afford the risk to lose a job opportunity by attempting to negotiate the daily wage. These results must be seen in conjunction with the question of how many of the day labourers had refused a job in the past. As expected, only 22% of the respondents in Emalahleni indicated that they had refused a job before, as opposed to 29% in Mbombela. Where the respondents provided a reason as to why they rejected a job

offer, it was almost without exception due to the wages offered deemed to be too low.

Focusing on possible exploitation in such a depressed market (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018; Xweso 2019), we scrutinised the kinds of job, the hours involved and the payment received. We argue that these factors are important as the income levels referred to above are based on monthly estimates. In any given month a day labourer faces many days on which he will not be employed. In order to determine whether any exploitation took place, we considered actual jobs, hours and payments. The results of our analysis in Table 7 are both interesting and encouraging.

**Table 7: Hourly wage of day labourers in Emalahleni and Mbombela, 2018**

	<b>Emalahleni</b>	<b>Mbombela</b>
Total hours worked in the week before the interview	417.75 hours	310.5 hours
Total income received for hours worked	ZAR 9 221	ZAR 16 840
Hourly rate of payment	ZAR 22.10	ZAR 54.24

Source: Survey data

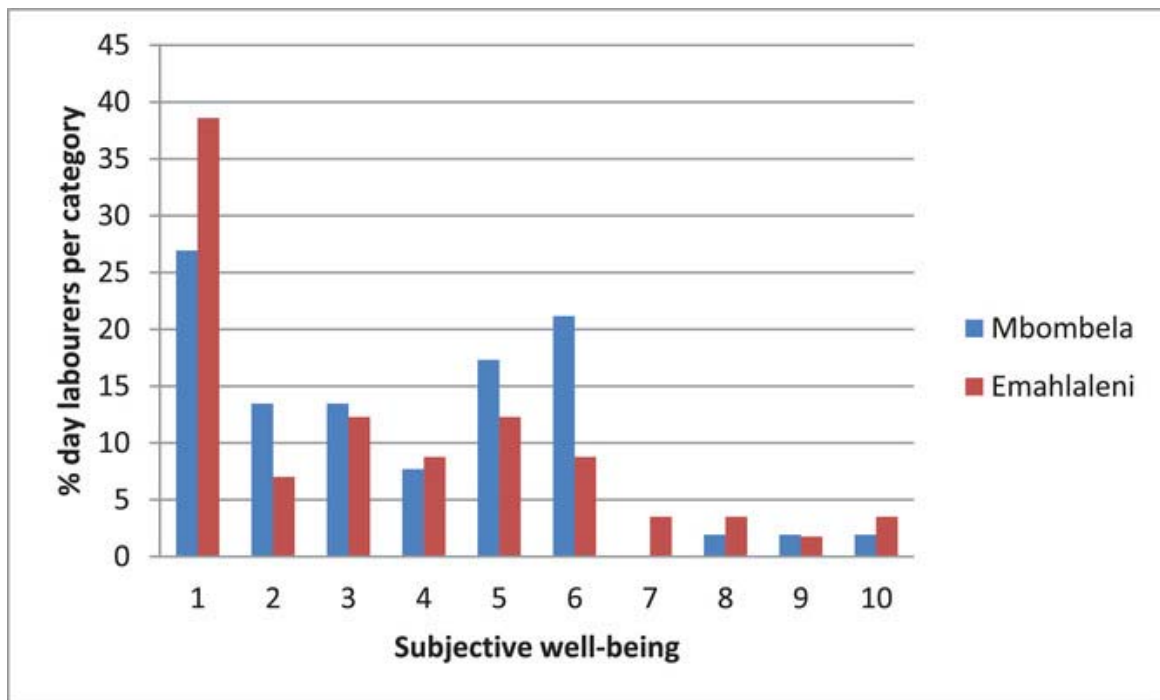
The hourly rate earned by day labourers in Mbombela was more than double that of the day labourers in Emalahleni for jobs done in the week preceding the interview. This significant difference again points to a relative oversupply of day labourers in Emalahleni. As expected, the oversupply drove wages down (see Theodore et al. 2017, 2018). However, the wages received in Emalahleni are in line with South Africa's national minimum wage of ZAR20 per hour or ZAR3 500 per month, depending on the number of hours worked. As reported by De Wet (2020), as of 1 March 2020, the rate had increased by 3.8% to ZAR20.76.

Therefore, even though employment opportunities were much scarcer in Emalahleni and the supply of day labour higher, the hourly wage rate earned cannot be deemed exploitative in comparison with the national minimum wage. In Mbombela, the day labourers earned twice the minimum wage when they were hired. The fact that the employers of day labourers Emalahleni's paid at least the minimum wage was encouraging, as the opportunity for wage exploitation is obvious. It must, however, be noted that it may still take place in individual cases, as suggested by other researchers (see for example Theodore et al. 2017, 2018; Xweso 2019). Furthermore, apart from the danger of being paid an exploitative wage, day labourers face the threat of wage theft, i.e. not being paid after a job is complete (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018; Xweso 2019).

In essence, a clear picture of day labourers in Emalahleni emerges. These workers were in a relatively more precarious position when compared to day labourers in Mbombela in terms of job opportunities, hourly wage rate and income earned. This is a reflection of the more diversified local economy in Mbombela, immigration, and the boom and bust cycles of mining (Campbell et al. 2017) in Emalahleni.

The survey results portray a picture of men that get up almost every day, venturing to the hiring site in spite of knowing full well that their chances of getting a job for the day were slim. Moreover, their chances of ever finding formal employment were almost non-existent. Their state of precariousness and poverty was a constant challenge and permanent feature of their daily existence. They share these experiences with other day labourers across South Africa (Blaauw et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2017, 2018; Xweso 2019). Long, continued spells of formal

unemployment and deprivation (because of the unreliable and insufficient income earned from day labouring) may have a significant negative bearing on the quality of their lives and general well-being (Haro et al. 2020). International literature confirms that spells of long-term unemployment are often reflected in relatively low levels of both objective and subjective wellbeing (Kivijärvi et al. 2019). The practical indicators of this can include poor health outcomes, depression, reduced self-esteem, and feelings of frustration and even despair (Hilbrecht et al. 2017; Haro et al. 2020). Investigating self-reported levels of well-being was therefore important to supplement our analysis. Figure 1 reports the results.



**FIGURE 1.** Subjective well-being of day labourers in Mbombela en Emahlaleni

We asked the respondents to answer a standard 10-point Likert scale question that focused on how they felt about their life at that moment. On this scale, the value of one represents the lowest level of subjective well-being and ten the highest. A comparison of the median and mean values of the two groups does not reveal



significant differences. The median of day labourers in both Emalahleni and Mbombela is three. The mean values for Emalahleni and Mbombela's day labourers are 3.4 and 3.6 respectively. The distribution of the values of each of the day labourers' subjective evaluation speaks to the structural vulnerability they experienced because of their precarious socio-economic position. An analysis of the distribution in more detail reveals important differences.

The distribution analysis indicates that the perception of day labourers in Emalahleni of their subjective well-being was relatively lower than that of the labourers in Mbombela. More than a third of the Emalahleni day labourers (38.6%) expressed their subjective well-being at the lowest possible level of one. This was 11 percentage points more than the 27% of those in Mbombela for the same category. This may be a further indication of the relative poorer economic outlook in Emalahleni, where day labourers experienced the impact of mine closures and other associated businesses as opposed to the more diversified economy in Mbombela. When a mine in Emalahleni closes, the short term result is often an increase in the supply of day labourers and more competition between them. In the medium term, when related businesses also close, the demand for day labourers may be reduced as well. These simultaneous processes are likely to drive down wages and the employment levels of the day labourers – making their lives even more precarious than they already are.

Furthermore, apart from the unpredictable nature of day labouring (Theodore et al. 2015), day labourers in Emalahleni face additional stress factors due to the fact that many of them are internal migrants from other provinces. Issues such as separation

from family (Organista et al. 2017) and inadequate housing highlight the precarious nature of these day labourers' livelihoods and well-being. It places them at an increased risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes (Organista et al. 2017; Haro et al. 2020). These issues are quite possibly also reflected in the concentration of responses in the lowest possible category. The subjective well-being perceptions in both Emalaheni and Mbombela were much more negative than those obtained in similar studies among day labourers in different locations and other informal self-employed workers such as waste pickers (see e.g. Blaauw et al. 2020; Van Wyk et al. 2020).

The lack of income coupled with commitments to their dependents can play an important role in explaining the relative low subjective well-being in the two cities. Malinga (2015) finds that for day labourers, the notion of being unemployed and unable to provide money and food for their families and dependents stands in direct contrast to their identity and commitment as breadwinner and caretaker. Discussions with the respondents revealed that they often could not bear the disappointed looks on the faces of their hungry family members. They knew that their chances of obtaining employment were slim, but standing on the street corners every day showed a commitment towards these dependents. The precarious nature of their livelihoods was evident in that almost half (47%) of all 110 respondents reported that for one day, and in some cases, up to 21 days in the previous month, there had been no food in their homes<sup>4</sup>. The low levels of subjective well-being among the day labourers in these two cities are therefore no surprise and highlight the negative

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<sup>4</sup> The role of government grants in supplementing day labour income and the impact it has on food security is another area for further study.

impact that random exogenous shocks may have on the subjective well-being of people in developing countries.

An investigation into the determinants of the subjective well-being of the day labourers does not fall within the scope of this article. However, because the literature (see e.g. Diener et al. 1993; Diener and Oishi 2000; Mahadea and Ramroop 2015) suggests that income is important for the subjective well-being of low-income earners, we conducted a preliminary covariance analysis to form an initial depiction of the role of income in the subjective well-being of the day labourers in our sample.

Pooling the observations from both cities rendered the following pair-wise correlations between the indicator of subjective well-being and the four listed variables:

- correlation with number of days worked 0.161 (statistically significant at 11%);
- correlation with income received in the month preceding the interview 0.216 (statistically significant at 3%);
- correlation with income received in a good month 0.158 (statistically significant at 11%); and
- correlation with income received in a bad month 0.307 (statistically significant at 1%)

The results of the preliminary covariance analysis show that the subjective well-being of day labourers in in both cities was more closely correlated with the income in a “bad” month than the other income variables and number of days worked in the

week preceding the interview. This is an indication that subjective well-being is influenced by the longer-term variables. Observing the trend in both cities is a potential first step in formulating a theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) on the determinants of day labourers' subjective well-being. In a further step this can be replicated in more cases in order to provide a stronger foundation for a potential theory. This remains a subject for further investigation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Precarious employment is a permanent feature of the modern labour market in the global South and North. Heeding to the call of Scully (2016) for more focussed research into this phenomenon from the perspective of the global South, we investigated the precariousness of the lives and livelihoods of day labourers in two cities (with different economic foundations and conditions) in Mpumalanga, South Africa.

We conclude that day labourers in Emalahleni and Mbombela endure a precarious existence, with low and uncertain incomes, the inability to provide for their dependents, poverty and low levels of subjective well-being. Specific to many of the day labourers in Emalahleni are issues of internal migration and housing as well as being separated from their families and dependents.

They are structurally vulnerable because of a number of national and local factors as suggested in the literature (Quesada et al. 2011). In line with international experience, these factors include status, job insecurity and the lack of a regular physical worksite (Quesada et al. 2011).

Furthermore, the results of the study confirm the important difference between the day labour market in the global South and North as suggested by previous comparative literature (Theodore et al. 2015, 2017, 2018). Whereas the day labour market in the global North may act as a point of entry and a route to the formal labour market for mainly migrant workers (Theodore et al. 2015), the day labour market in Mpumalanga reflect a similar long term nature and catchment area for men who lost formal sector jobs as the found in previous South African studies (Theodore et al. 2015; Schenck and Blaauw 2018) as well as in other developing countries such as Namibia (Van Wyk et al. 2020).

The results illustrate the different circumstances between a city with a more diversified economy as opposed to a city which is subject to the boom and bust cycles of the mining industry that form the backbone of a sub-national or local economy. The dwindling contribution of mining to the economy is particularly evident in the city of Emalahleni. This has an important impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals such as day labourers.

The results show that the position of the day labourers in Emalahleni is significantly more precarious than in Mbombela. Day labourers in Emalahleni enjoy far fewer employment opportunities with resultant lower income levels. Being more desperate, they do not often negotiate their wages and do not easily reject a job offer. As a result, they are more exposed to exploitation and harassment.

The results of the study contribute to the existing literature on precarious informal labour activities through an indirect questioning of the theoretical shock-absorber

function often ascribed to the informal sector in general. The results confirm that informal employment in such as day labouring offer a life not much different to that of being permanently unemployed in South Africa.

The results also suggest that a serious reconsideration of social policy is needed in order to develop improved social safety nets<sup>5</sup> for people (such as day labourers) attempting to earn a living in the informal sector. At present there are no existing safety nets for the wage-employed or self-employed (e.g. informal recyclers) in the informal economy. Given the catastrophic impact of COVID 19 on the informal economy, this is of vital importance. In order to achieve such a rethink, issues of precarious employment must be prominent in the research agenda of studies in the informal sector. As suggested by Benach and Muntaner (2007), the gathering of quality data by means of improved information systems is key to the success of such an endeavour. In addition, this research agenda should be include multiple scenarios of precarious employment in various socioeconomic contexts and for different types of uniquely South African informal sector activities, such as car guarding and informal recycling.

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<sup>5</sup> The South African government uses a social safety net, in the form of various social grants, to address the most immediate needs of the poor (Musakwa & Odhiambo 2021).

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