‘It’s a disaster, nobody is coming’: International travel bans’ effect on Cape Town's informal traders

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has been one of the most significant events in recent history. Informal traders who depend on a thriving tourist market have been especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The resultant travel bans affected South Africa’s tourism-related informal economic activities. The aim of this study was to determine the effects of the pandemic on informal traders’ livelihoods and resilience in Cape Town, South Africa. Tourists have always constituted a large proportion of informal traders’ customer base. They are often willing and able to spend more than locals. The impact of travel bans on traders’ income, profit margins, and livelihoods has been disastrous. However, many traders have shown commendable resilience. There were obviously limits to the effectiveness of their mitigating strategies. There is an urgent need (from a social justice and a pure economic perspective) for further relief and assistance to supplement street traders’ efforts to survive as international tourism recovers.

Keywords: Informal traders; informal sector; informal employment; tourism; COVID-19

1. Introduction

South Africa is one of Africa’s most attractive tourist destinations with a diversity of offerings, including wildlife, natural wilderness areas and scenic beauty, distinctive cultures, many adventure and sporting activities, international fairs and exhibitions as well as appropriate infrastructure and air transport (Tifflin, 2004; Blanke & Chiesa, 2013; Du Plessis et al., 2017). It is therefore not surprising that tourism has generated largely consistent, positive growth rates ever since South Africa’s political transition in the 1990s (DoEAT, 1996; Du Plessis et al., 2017). Tourism is strongly associated with increased spending in a country, which helps to stimulate economic growth. Shopping for souvenirs and general goods is an important part of the total tourist experience (Saayman et al., 2020). For example, visits to many of South Africa’s popular tourist spots bring one into contact with informal street traders selling crafts and souvenirs. This is not unique to South Africa; informal traders and markets are important features of the tourism offering in many developing countries. Informal activities, such as selling souvenirs to tourists, are often the main or even sole source of income for local people operating in tourism-geared, informal labour markets in developing countries (Saayman et al., 2020).

Across the globe, informal sector work is not only a vital source of employment; it also often contributes to poverty alleviation, food accessibility and food security in the long term –

especially in developing countries (Blaauw, 2017; Rogan & Skinner, 2017; Fourie, 2018a; Tawodzera & Crush, 2019; Rogan & Skinner, 2020; De Villiers, 2021). For many vulnerable and historically disadvantaged individuals, such as the urban poor, it is the informal sector that gives them the opportunity to adopt a survivalist strategy (Andrag, 2011; Makaluza & Burger, 2018; Stats SA, 2019; De Villiers, 2021). For others, it enables them to decide their own destiny and put their entrepreneurial talents to use (Saayman et al., 2020).

According to Ashely et al. (2007), the tourism sector tends to employ, on an informal basis, a relatively high proportion of women since many tourism-oriented products, such as African crafts and foods, are produced by woman working in the informal sector. Makaluza & Burger (2018) found that these women generally carry a heavy burden of household responsibilities and costs, but on a limited income. Many individuals who participate in the informal sector cannot secure employment in the formal sector, mainly because of their low education and skills levels (Blaauw, 2017; Ledingoane & Viljoen, 2020; De Villiers, 2021).

Therefore, the role of tourism in providing opportunities for individuals and households to earn a living by participating in the informal sector should not be downplayed. In a developing country such as South Africa, tourism in cities like Cape Town offer many opportunities to the urban poor. However, tourism in South Africa was one of the sectors most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt cessation of international flights and tourist arrivals – the impact of which is still being felt. The brief respite that followed a spike in herd immunity and an extensive global vaccine rollout programme towards the end of 2021 was interrupted by the discovery of the Omicron variant in December 2021 (South African Tourism, 2022). Along with the second, third and fourth waves of the pandemic that were experienced throughout 2021, this may defer the anticipated recovery of the tourism sector by at least another six to 12 months.

Although Africa is viewed as one of the regions that has been least affected (relatively speaking) by the pandemic, millions of jobs and the livelihoods of many local communities have been severely affected or put at risk (UNWTO, 2021). South Africa, which over the years has achieved some notable socioeconomic gains and made strides on the sustainable development front through its tourism sector, has seen many of these gains and achievements becoming undone as a result of the pandemic (UNWTO, 2021). Statistics South Africa reported in 2021 that international tourist arrivals dropped from 15.8 million in 2019 to less than 5 million at the end of 2020 (a decline of 71%). Given the stark reality of declining tourist arrivals and South Africa's high and persistent unemployment levels and low economic growth rate, it is imperative to investigate the spill-over effects of the pandemic on the livelihoods of informal participants in the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2021).

To this end, we conducted a study on informal street traders in the CBD of Cape Town, one of South Africa's premier tourist destinations. Specifically, we set out to determine what the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been on the livelihoods of informal traders operating in the tourism sector in Cape Town and how resilient these traders have been to an external shock like the pandemic. This paper differs from other papers on COVID-19 in that it not only focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of informal traders in financial terms; it also offers deeper insights into informal traders' personal experiences of the pandemic and how these experiences have impacted their broader economic and subjective well-being.

2. Relevant literature

Prior to COVID-19, tourism was a growing industry throughout the world, with numbers of international travellers increasing annually (UNWTO, 2021). Although Africa's share of the global tourism market, before COVID-19, was still relatively low compared to that of the rest of the world, tourism in Africa was growing, with many countries on the continent believing that

tourism could contribute to poverty alleviation (Okech, 2010; Christie et al., 2013; ILO, 2013b; Saayman et al., 2020). Saayman et al. (2020) explain that the poor often do not benefit directly from tourism and tourism policies but rather experience indirect rewards by participating in informal sector activities, such as selling arts, crafts and curios.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the informal sector is identifiable by the characteristics of its individual workers and businesses (ILO, 2013a). Henderson & Smith (2009) define the informal sector as unregulated trading activities in which individuals and small operators typically engage (De Villiers, 2021). Informal trading is performed by individuals operating on a small scale and at a low organisational level, and there is little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production (De Villiers, 2021). In our study, we defined employment in the informal sector by using the ILO's working definition (Williams, 2015). As such, informal employment includes all persons either employed in the informal sector or engaged in informal employment. The informal sector in this context refers to private, unincorporated and unregistered businesses, or small businesses in terms of number of employees (Williams, 2015). Informal employment, in contrast, refers to jobs that lack basic social or legal protection or employment benefits. These types of jobs can be found in the formal sector, the informal sector, or households, e.g. small businesses run from home (Williams, 2015).

While falling under the broad umbrella of informal trade or the informal sector, the structure of individuals' trading operations differs (Saayman et al., 2020). The literature suggests that a distinction can be made between street vendors and traders at markets. Street vendors do not adhere to a specific operational structure, whereas market traders operate more formally, within a fixed structure (Saayman et al., 2020). The target population for this study had characteristics of both groups, as defined by Saayman et al. (2020). Some were traders working under essentially fixed structures, selling flowers on the Parade in Cape Town's city centre. Others displayed characteristics of street vendors who set up their gazebos near pedestrian routes but had the freedom to relocate to other areas if they felt it was more profitable to do so. We use the terms 'vendor' and 'trader' interchangeably in this paper in acknowledgement of the fluidity of South Africa's urban trading landscape.

Every day the streets in South African cities and towns teem with hawkers, street vendors, shebeens,Footnote[1] purveyors of cooked food, waste-pickers, craft sellers and spaza shops (Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation, 2018). The informal sector in South Africa is dynamic and diverse in its composition and all these informal activities are an important part of the South African economy (Baldwin-Edwards, 1998) – even though South Africa's informal sector is an international outlier (Kingdon & Knight, 2004; Nackerdien & Yu, 2019) due to its relative smallnessFootnote[2] compared to other developing countries.

Although not all segments are formally considered in the calculation of gross domestic product (GDP), Ligthelm (2006) estimated that the informal sector contributes 4.6% to South Africa's GDP. Stats SA (2014, 2020) confirmed the findings by Ligthelm (2006) and indicated that the informal sector's contribution to GDP remained relatively constant between 2008 and 2017, ranging from 5.5% in 2008 to 5.9% in 2013, before reaching 6% in 2017. The number of people employed in South Africa's informal sector amounted 4.8 million in 2020. Since 2010 (4.8 million), the number of people with jobs outside formal institutions increased generally, peaking in 2018 at 5.79 million. However, a significant drop of around one million people occurred in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2023). According to Petersen et al. (2016), the informal sector's contribution to Cape Town's gross geographical product (GGP) ranged from R4.3 to R6 billion (South African rands) in 2013. In terms of employment no less than 188 065 people were active in the Cape Town metro's informal sector in the fourth quarter of 2019. This represented 11.8% of total employment (City of Cape Town, 2020). In the first quarter of 2020, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, this

figure dropped to 173 223–11% of total employment (City of Cape Town, 2020). These statistics underline the local importance of the informal sector in Cape Town's economy.

The demographic characteristics of informal street traders often differ, depending on their geographical location and traders' specific activities and product offerings. This has been confirmed by Mkhize et al. (2013), Nkrumah-Abebrese & Schachtebeck (2017) and Tawodzera (2019), who investigated and compared the characteristics of informal traders in the South African cities of Tshwane, Durban and Cape Town, among others. Their results showed that the average age of informal traders ranged from 18 to 44 years, with the number of men and women being approximately the same. With regard to education, it appeared that informal traders had acquired some education, even if only a partial high school education.

Across South Africa's nine provinces, traders' income ranges from less than R4 000 to R6 559 per month, depending on their location and product offerings. Another factor to consider is that, apart from street trading providing an income for people who worked for themselves, it also created paid (and unpaid) jobs for both family and non-family members (Rogan & Skinner, 2017, 2018; Tawodzera & Crush, 2019; Washinyira, 2019). These additional employment opportunities are especially important in a country such as South Africa which faces immense employment challenges. The direct self-employment and indirect employment opportunities provided by street trading have nevertheless been under threat over the past couple of years due to the global fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a health crisis that has impacted the whole world.

The literature suggests that the tourism sector experienced one of the first, and also one of the most severe, shocks from the rapid global spread of COVID-19 (Mariolis et al., 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022). The spread of COVID-19 prompted a global recession in 2020, with high unemployment and severe income losses, and the legislated closure of hotels and restaurants. Air transportation was also severely affected, with the demand for tourism going into a steep decline (Plzáková & Smeral, 2022). Furthermore, Gössling et al. (2020) warned that the negative impact of the pandemic on tourism and related sectors would be even more acute in the poorer countries. Rogerson & Rogerson (2022) identified the informal sector as extremely vulnerable in this regard. Williams (2020) confirmed this in his estimation of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism workers in Europe's undeclared economy. He argued that these workers were severely impacted by COVID-19 as they did not qualify for government financial support (Williams, 2020). South Africa's urban tourist destinations and informal sector participants such as street traders suffered a similar fate, and the effects of the pandemic indeed proved to be devastating (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022).

After the national lockdown came into force in South Africa on 27 March 2020, accompanied by a ban on informal trading, large numbers of traders throughout the country experienced a sharp drop in sales (Hendricks, 2020; Thulare & Moyo, 2021). For example, Thulare & Moyo (2021) reported that around 97% of informal street traders and 95% of informal market traders in Ethekwini (Durban) suffered major losses of income in the initial phase of the lockdown. Although restrictions in lockdown levels four (May 2020), three (June 2020 to August 2020) and others (implemented from May 2020) permitted more economic activity, informal traders were still unable to work in many of their traditional markets. For example, they could only sell cooked food if they provided a delivery service. Informal traders were also hampered by limited access to transport, problems in procuring supplies, and stock that expired and was therefore no longer useable (Skinner & Watson, 2020). While the formal sector was able to access and benefit from the various fiscal and non-fiscal measures introduced by government, the informal sector received very little official financial and non-financial support.

While the long-term effects of COVID-19 remain uncertain, the resilience of individuals and communities has attracted a great deal of research interest from people in various disciplines

who have sought to observe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as an exogenous shock or event. The literature suggests that a resilient individual or community, when confronted by unexpected change and uncertainty (which impacts their livelihood), is either likely to endure the upheaval or adapt to it and undergo a transformation (Chen et al., 2020). Resilience can be defined as the ability of an individual or community to adapt while still maintaining their identity (Holling, 1973; Cumming et al., 2005). Morales (2020) studied the resilience of informal traders in Bolivia (which is another developing country in the Global South with a significant informal sector component) and how their resilience helped them to adapt to the 'new normal' that COVID-19 imposed. According to Megersa (2020), although informal traders and communities struggled in the initial stages of the lockdown in sub-Saharan Africa, many demonstrated their resilience by staying in business and diversifying their product offerings.

The concept of resilience helps to explain how the informal sector in the tourism sector responds to, and successfully adapts to, change and disturbances (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Tyrrell & Johnston, 2008; Chen et al., 2020). Resilience theory recognises that trying to predict the impact of global change, and how individuals, organisations and society will respond to such change while attempting to preserve their livelihoods, is fraught with uncertainty (Gallopín, 2006; Marshall, 2010). The livelihoods of informal traders, who had focused their attention on the tourist market, were suddenly under threat from an unexpected external stressor in the form of COVID-19. Yet to survive in such a fast-changing and challenging environment, they had to (and still have to) draw on their inherent resilience – resilience that needs to be bolstered through various forms of support. Possible support measures can range from municipalities waiving the rent for their stands for the period of the crisis to providing free sanitiser and masks for the traders.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework underpinning the study

The UK Department for International Development (DfID) developed a Sustainable Livelihoods Framework/Approach (SLF), which has become one of the most widely used livelihood frameworks in the world in development practice since the SLF was integrated in the DfID's programme for development cooperation in 1997 (Carney et al., 2000; GLOPP, 2008). The DFID adapted a version of Chambers Conway's definition of livelihoods (GLOPP, 2008). It is designed to conceptualise how people function in a vulnerability context which is shaped by different factors – e.g. variable seasonal employment opportunities as well as exogenous economic shocks such as the global economic financial crisis or COVID-19 – and how they draw on different livelihood assets to develop strategies aimed at achieving their planned livelihood outcomes (De Stagé et al., 2002).

Meikle et al. (2001) noted that people's livelihoods change over time as they are affected by shocks, trends and seasonal ups and downs, but their responses thereto are influenced by their capabilities. This is in line with the view expressed by Chambers & Conway (1992), namely that livelihoods refer to the capabilities, assets and activities that allow people to make a living and, moreover, that livelihoods are sustainable when people can cope with and recover from stressors and shocks. Robeyns (2017) describes human capabilities as those skills, talents, character traits and abilities, together with suitable external conditions (such as facilitative policies) and circumstances which enhance freedoms and choices.

It is important to emphasise that individuals – in this case, informal street traders – have limited or no control over the vulnerability factors that they face. Yet these factors have a significant influence on people's livelihoods and on the general availability of assets, e.g. savings or sufficient stock. Vulnerability emerges when people must face a serious threat or shock but have insufficient capacity to respond effectively. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

therefore offers useful insights into how street traders have attempted to reconfigure their livelihoods, generate income, ensure sustainability and seek overall well-being in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study relied on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, while drawing from Sen's capability approachFootnote[3] to investigate the ability of informal street traders in South Africa's tourism sector to generate sustainable livelihoods for themselves in the wake of exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of COVID restrictions. To this end, the informal street traders, operating in Cape Town's CBD, provided a suitable case study as Cape Town is one of South Africa's premier urban tourist destinations.

3.2. Research design

The study used a qualitative research design which involved the application of a descriptive case study method. The case study method is particularly appropriate when answers to questions such as 'how' and 'why' are sought in relation to a complex issue (Dul & Hak, 2008). The choice of research design and method provided an opportunity to conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on street vendors' livelihoods and socioeconomic circumstances in Cape Town's city centre. In addition, it enabled the researchers to explore the resilience displayed by these informal sector participants (Yin, 2009; Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The location in which the study was conducted was chosen because it had the necessary characteristics of informal street trade, i.e. close to transport infrastructure, such as train stations and bus stops, public transport routes, shopping centres, and formal business areas (Andrag, 2011: 12; Charman et al., 2019; Ligthelm, 2013; Tawodzera, 2019).

A semi-structured interview guide was designed for the purpose of conducting in-depth conversations with informal street vendors. The interview guide consisted mainly of open-ended questions (reflecting the purpose and objectives of the study), along with several questions designed to solicit standard demographic information. Before the fieldwork commenced, a pilot study was conducted to identify possible challenges with and/or shortcomings in the interview schedule. The necessary adjustments were made, and the actual fieldwork took place between 6 and 8 May 2021. Purposeful sampling was used to conduct the in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 informal street traders who sold arts, crafts and other souvenirs to the tourist market. The various trader characteristics were used as the inclusion criteria for the sample. The Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) of the North-West University provided ethical clearance for the project with the following ethics number: NWU-00776-20-A4. All standard ethical principles were followed. For example, the identity of the respondents was protected, and the necessary informed consent was obtained through the respondents' completion of a written consent form before the interviews commenced. A total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with street vendors before the point of data saturation was reached, after which further interviews did not generate new data, themes, insights, or perspectives (Creswell, 2014: 248). In order to re-evaluate the robustness of our findings, we decided to follow this up with further interviews (following the same protocol as the first round) in the following year. We did so in the second half of 2022 and an additional nine in-depth interviews were conducted. The findings forthcoming from these interviews were then integrated with our original findings – as discussed below in the relevant section.

The interview recordings and field notes were used to compile comprehensive transcriptions for each interview, and a consolidated dataset in Microsoft Excel that was subject to several quality control measures. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and describe relevant trends or themes (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Guided by the protocol of Du Plooy-Cilliers

et al. (2014) and Guest et al. (2012), the researchers reviewed the data several times and repeated the process of identifying themes to refine the analysis in both sets of interviews.

4. Findings, discussion and implications

4.1. Demographic and business characteristics

The findings discussed below contain the standard demographic and business characteristics of the 10 respondents interviewed in 2021. These serve as a precursor and background to the rest of the thematic analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on informal street traders whose focus was the tourist market. Regarding the street traders' demographic details, six (60%) were male and four (40%) were female. Half the respondents (50%) were between the ages of 35 and 50 years, two (20%) were between the ages of 25 and 34 years, one (10%) was between 18 and 24 years of age, and one (10%) was between 45 and 54 years of age. One respondent did not want to reveal their age.

Regarding the demographic and business characteristics of the street traders that participated in the additional interviews, five (56%) were male and four (44%) were female. All the respondents sold arts, crafts and curios (e.g. paintings, beadwork, carvings, upcycled sculptures, fridge magnets). Their years of experience as informal street traders ranged from 3 to 32 years. Five (56%) of the respondents joined the profession because it is a family trade. Two respondents started trading with the hope of attaining a better life, and the remaining two said they are passionate about and enjoy the profession.

In terms of the traders' current product offerings, Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents indicated that they sold clothes and/or shoes, with two (20%) selling arts, crafts and curios and another two (20%) selling jewellery, accessories and bags. One respondent (10%) sold books, and another (10%) sold medicinal/traditional plants and herbs (this was also part of his pre-pandemic offering). This overview of the product offerings is important since the thematic analysis outlined later in this section shows that the informal traders who had previously focused on product offerings aimed at tourists had subsequently changed their offerings in order to preserve their livelihoods. This reflected the vulnerability context of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

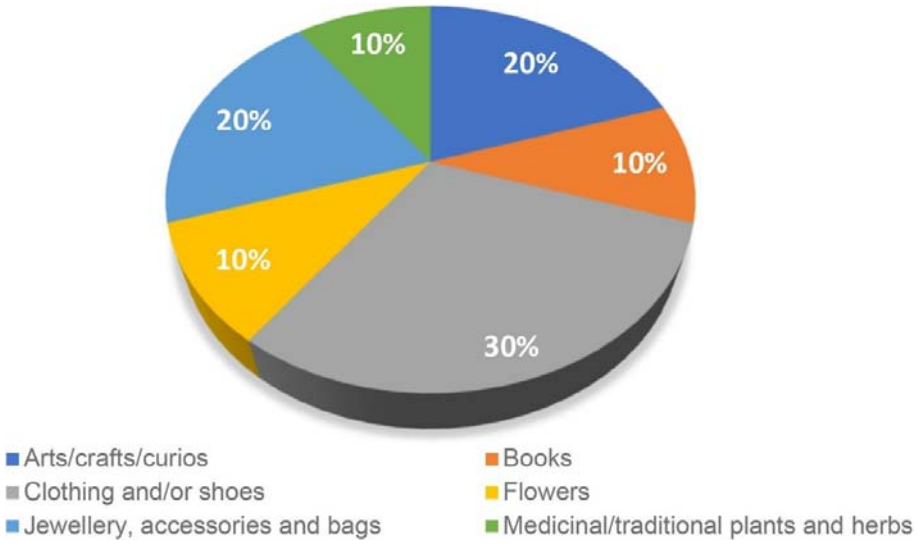

Figure 1. Main product offerings of street traders. Source: Compiled by authors.

To provide some context for the business characteristics of the informal traders focusing on the tourist market, their years of experience as traders ranged from 3 to 40 years. This highlighted the fact that the informal sector in South Africa is a long-term phenomenon, as reported by Chen (2007: 2) and Fourie (2018b). Two of the respondents entered the industry as young adults, learning the trade from their family members before eventually starting their own trading stall. Other respondents indicated that they became traders after previously being in other occupations. These previous occupations ranged from being a teacher or a taxi driver to working in the film and hospitality industry, in retail or in construction. Five of the respondents indicated that they had opted for a better life and that being a trader gave them the chance to own their own business. This was an important step towards attaining a potentially more promising livelihood and enhanced well-being, as noted by Teltscher (1994) and as reflected in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework within the context of livelihood outcomes.

4.1.1. Thematic analysis

The in-depth interviews confirmed the damaging effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had had on the livelihoods of the informal street traders in Cape Town's CBD. As reported in the vulnerability context in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, COVID-19 can be regarded as an external shock. The thematic analysis of the effects of COVID-19 – specifically the effects of travel bans and restrictions on tourist arrivals – on the lives and activities of the respondents revealed a number of broad themes, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Broad themes emanating from the thematic analysis.

Theme 1	Tourists constituted a large component of the customer base of several informal traders.
Theme 2	Tourists are willing to spend more money than locals.
Theme 3	No customers
Theme 4	Trader resilience
Theme 5	Income and profit margins
Theme 6	Renewed tourism activities are seen as offering a solution to some of the informal traders' challenges.

4.2. Theme 1: Tourists constituted a large component of the customer base of several informal traders

Almost without exception, the respondents indicated that before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic most of their clients had been tourists. One respondent indicated that tourists had made up 95% of their clients. The respondents stressed that they were struggling with the international travel restrictions that had been imposed on South Africa, with one respondent stating: '*We depend on the tourists; there are no tourists these days, so we are struggling to get customers.'*

One respondent reported that their product offerings were diversified and were not too dependent on tourists, which helped during COVID-19, and that locals were among their clients. The additional interviews confirmed that although local support is an increasingly important contributor, tourists remain the largest component of the customer base. One respondent made this patently clear: '*The locals they buy and support me yes, but many people they are coming from overseas.'* The importance of tourists as clients and the contribution they made to the street traders' livelihoods came to the fore when respondents explained that tourists always supported local street traders by not only buying souvenirs for themselves but also taking some items back home as gifts for loved ones. The disastrous impact of losing the tourist segment in their customer base was also reinforced in the second theme identified during the interviews.

4.3. Theme 2: Tourists are willing to spend more money than locals

The respondents indicated that, overall, tourists spend more money than local residents on items such as arts, crafts, souvenirs, books and food. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the locals did indeed try to support the informal traders, with one respondent indicating that '*even the locals they tried to support me, but not much, because even those locals, they don't have money'.*

One respondent indicated that he charged high prices for his products since his products were handmade and he could only make one or two per month. He had opted for this approach because the demand among tourists for authentic products was higher and so tourists were willing to pay higher prices for these handmade items. Since his products were aimed solely at the tourist market, his response (when asked about the effects of COIVD-19 on his business) was: '*I am the most hit.*' Another respondent concurred, indicating that local residents were only interested in '*cheap goods*' and were not willing to pay higher prices for quality or handmade products, whereas the tourists were. This was a double misfortune for the street traders. Not only did the advent of the pandemic and subsequent travel restrictions deprive these informal sector participants of the majority of their clients, but the lost clients were also those whose buying power and preference for higher-quality goods had encouraged the street traders to elevate the standard of their product offerings in many cases.

This unfortunate turn of events left the informal street traders with very few options other than to change their product offerings or turn to lower-value alternatives to satisfy the needs and preferences of local residents. Those traders who attempted to stick to their original product range faced dire consequences, as explained in the next theme.

4.4. Theme 3: No customers

Those respondents who continued to offer tourism-oriented products only and did not diversify their product offerings in line with the requirements of the local market indicated that they had no customers and that they were battling to survive, given the state of the economy. The following quotes reflect the challenges that traders faced:

> The tourists aren't here anymore.
>
> There are no tourists these days, so we are still struggling to get customer.
>
> We need customers to buy, especially tourists. There are no tourists in Cape Town to buy.
>
> There are no tourists. You can see, the streets are empty, no one is coming.
>
> There was no chance for us to trade because we are working with the tourists so most of our customers they were not around

The potential impact of pursuing an alternative course of action, i.e. by focusing instead on the local market, could have far-reaching, long-term effects on traders' socioeconomic context and circumstances. Some informal street traders displayed a greater resolve to mitigate the loss of customers and income. The next theme provides evidence of this.

4.5. Theme 4: Trader resilience

Some respondents indicated that they used to sell arts and crafts to tourists in Greenmarket Square in Cape Town, a popular, tourism-oriented market known for its diversity of arts and crafts. However, since there were no tourists, the respondents indicated that they had to find

other ways to make a living. During the interviews, it was evident that the traders who had previously focused solely on the tourist market changed direction and started offering products that would be more appealing to the local community. For example, one of the traders explained that he had to introduce bracelets and necklaces because there was no demand for his paintings among the local residents. One respondent reverted to selling clothes instead of arts and crafts, and another started to sew items for local residents.

Some respondents had to sell their own old and children's clothes to generate cash to cover immediate living expenses. One respondent reported that he lost his job as a trolley pusher in Green Market Square because there were no tourists. As a result, he had to set up his own stall selling fruit and vegetables to try to earn a living. The following quotes reflect these findings:

> Green Market Square was closed for months, and I was home for months. I had to use my savings for rent and then start selling my old clothes until it was finished and I had nothing left.
>
> I left my old stall and now sell clothes.
>
> I was working there by Green Market Square with other people, so then I decided to open my own business.

Commendable as these efforts to foster resilience were, they were never going to be enough to bring about long-term sustainability in traders' livelihoods. Traders' various alternative arrangements alleviated some of the short-term pain resulting from the travel bans. However, even if traders were able to muster resilience (either through direct or indirect actions), the medium-term consequences of the loss of income were severe, as illustrated in the next theme.

4.6. Theme 5: Income and profit margins

All respondents indicated that the absence of tourists, on whom they relied, had a severe impact on their income and ability, as informal traders, to earn a sustainable living in the informal sector. Respondents reported that there was a vast difference in their disposable income before and during COVID-19. One of the respondents noted that her weekly sales had been between R5 000 and R6 000 before COVID-19, but '*now even sometimes making a R1 000 is a struggle.'* One respondent indicated that he is lucky if he makes R200 a day, which is almost nothing compared to before the pandemic. Another respondent reported that, together with a reduced income, the profit margin on his products had been decimated: '*I can say by percentage, before COVID-19 I can say 75% but now I think it is only 10%. Only 10% because there are no tourists.'*

This is indicative of the difference between offering exclusive, handmade items to cater for a distinct demand and offering basic-need products that were vulnerable to high levels of competition from existing traders. Despite the respondents' best efforts to adapt and foster resilience, their actions went only so far; and it was not far enough. This is also borne out in the next theme which focuses on what the street traders saw as possible solutions.

4.7. Theme 6: Renewed tourism activities are seen as offering a solution to some of the informal traders' challenges

All respondents shared the view that travel bans between countries should be lifted as soon as possible so that tourists could return to South Africa. As mentioned before, the respondents expressed appreciation for the locals' support during this trying time, but they realised that the

local market lacked the scale of demand and buying power of international tourists. This is confirmed in the following quotes:

> The world need to be opened for the tourists to come and then you can be able to survive, otherwise, it is very very very difficult.
>
> They need to come back.
>
> Tourism is a big deal, it is the only thing that can salvage my business.
>
> The tourists must come back that is number one, but secondly, we would say, just if our people were more to show interest in the handmade craft stuff, it would be better also.

When asked what would make her happy, one of the respondents answered: '*if more people come back'* and business can become what it used to be … '*That is our prayer.'*

The fact that the street traders themselves viewed the resumption of travel and the arrival of tourists as the only real long-term solution to their plight highlights two key points. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event over which the street traders had no control. The pandemic had a devastating impact on tourist flows and accordingly diminished tourism's role in urban economies. South Africa's metropolitan areas (including Cape Town) experienced a proportionately greater decline in foreign tourists than in tourists from South Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022).

Secondly, despite street traders' best efforts to cope and remain resilient in the face of the hollowing out of their traditional market, their capacity to respond effectively to the crisis was limited. For example, some respondents indicated that they had to use their savings to pay rent and buy food and when their money ran out, they had to sell their belongings. Some traders displayed extra resilience by changing their product offerings from being tourism oriented to being suitable for the local community, such as clothes, shoes and books, although the traders mentioned that the tourists were willing to pay more for goods – even books – than local residents.

Despite these positive steps, their socioeconomic context and livelihoods were under serious threat. For this reason, COVID-19 can indeed be identified as a vulnerability context in terms of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DfID, 1999). One dimension of a vulnerability context, as referred to by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, is that exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have a significant influence on traders' livelihoods and assets, e.g. accumulated savings and working capital for their trading activities (DfID, 1999). This was confirmed in the discussion of the traders' demographic background and evident in the broader themes emanating from the thematic analysis. The challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed on informal street traders in Cape Town's city centre remain a reality that will continue to threaten their livelihoods for the foreseeable future.

The findings from the additional interviews conducted just over a year later in the same area do indeed confirm the persistence of the negative impact the pandemic has on their lives and livelihoods – despite the increase in recent tourist numbers. The following quotes reflect the continuous hardships that the traders face:

> Business is very slow, sometimes you don't sell almost a week or three days.
>
> Not yet good. Business is still down.
>
> It is better, but not much. Just to survive, just to get a bread.

When asked if business had recovered to pre-COVID levels, the respondent answered: *'No, we haven't reached there yet. It is going to take us a while to recover.'*

As is the case in many informal economic activities (see e.g. Rogan & Skinner, 2020; Blaauw et al., 2021), the aftermath of the pandemic is one of structural vulnerability. The notion of using their capabilities to foster dreams of moving from a survivalist approach (Makaluza & Burger, 2018; Stats SA, 2019; De Villiers, 2021) to a more entrepreneurial footing (Saayman et al., 2020) has been put on hold by the longer-term impact of the pandemic.

The respondents emphasised the fact that even though the tourists are slowly returning, their budgets have also been negatively impacted by the pandemic. As a result tourists' spending on arts and crafts has not yet returned to pre-COVID levels and the street traders remain structurally vulnerable to any future exogenous economic shock. We argue that this provides credence to the view that further relief or assistance to the informal sector in general, and street traders in particular (e.g. subsidising of the rent for their stands), can fulfil an important role in mitigating their vulnerability in the medium term and protecting their current set of capabilities. A successful approach in this regard may furthermore indirectly assist in building up additional capabilities (e.g. relevant business skills training) – serving as a platform to perhaps move toward a more entrepreneurial state in this informal sector activity in the longer term.

5. Conclusion

The crisis that was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic had an all-encompassing, devastating impact on social and economic life across the globe – but even more so in developing and poorer economies. The literature suggests that the informal sector is particularly vulnerable to the devastation caused by an exogenous shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa's informal sector was not spared in this regard. The impact of international travel bans on the greater tourism market during the height of COVID-19 and the lingering spill-over effects on the economy have gained much attention worldwide.

Yet a community that seems to have been overlooked in the process is that of informal traders engaged in the selling of arts and crafts, curios, books and food, primarily to tourists. Because of the bans on international tourists visiting South Africa, many informal traders had to abandon their specialist product offerings and switch to those that would attract local residents. This is despite the negative implications of such a move for income generation in the light of locals' weaker buying power and variable demand patterns.

With reference to Sen's capability approach (Sen, 2005), informal traders in the tourism sector's capability sets have both survivalist and growth-oriented components. When the capability approach is integrated with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and the COVID-19 pandemic is categorised as a vulnerability, the impact on well-being links with the survivalist approach. In the light of their feedback, it was clear that some of the respondents were merely trying to survive, provide for their families, and keep their businesses going, either by selling their personal assets (e.g. furniture) or using savings to pay rent and other expenses. Nevertheless, despite these hardships, the informal traders have demonstrated impressive levels of resilience as the COVID-19 crisis has played out. Other respondents indicated that they hoped to expand their informal street trading businesses and establish formal shops, while also training others. This suggests a growth-oriented approach and the pursuit of sustainable well-being.

The thematic analysis, however, showed that there is a limit to which these efforts and aspirations will be able to alleviate the material hardships that traders still face and reduce their vulnerability to the consequences of the pandemic. The reactivation of their primary

income stream in the form of ample numbers of tourists in Cape Town's CBD is of vital importance. Until this becomes a long-term pattern, we argue that there is a clear need in the interim for traders to receive further relief or assistance to supplement their own efforts to survive. Examples can include the subsidising of the rent for their stands or short-term finance or loan options as well as relevant business skills training. The exact nature, extent and areas of this envisioned assistance should ideally be the result of a meaningful and engaged consultative process with the street traders themselves – instead of a top-down approach. This consultative dialogue can be the aim of a fit for purpose future action research agenda.

The continued absence of meaningful assistance may be counterproductive, from both a social justice and a purely economic perspective. Protecting and extending the capabilities of informal street traders will go a long way towards ensuring that they will continue to play a key role in South Africa's urban tourism sector, for the benefit of cities and society at large.

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Notes

[1] In South Africa, 'shebeen' typically refers to an informal, licensed drinking place in a township.

[2] See Yu (2012) for a summary of the various reasons suggested for the relatively low level of informal employment in South Africa.

[3] The capability approach (CA) developed by the economist Amartya Sen is regarded as a theoretical framework of justice (Sen, 2009). The basic aim of the CA is not to equalise the income of people and to reduce monetary inequality, but rather to equalise and increase genuine choices, freedoms, opportunities and capabilities for every person to lead the life they value.

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