

# AT THE PERIPHERY OF THE MAINSTREAM ECONOMY: REALITY OF INFORMAL STREET VENDORS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Murembiwa S Mukhola  
Tshwane University of Technology

---

## ABSTRACT

Statistics South Africa indicates that in the third quarter of 2015 the rate of unemployment in South Africa increased to 26%. Joblessness has always been a post-1994 conundrum, exacerbated by the unstable global economy. Because of this, various economic means are pursued to sustain livelihoods. Among these is informal street vending – tinkering at the periphery of the mainstream economy. This article examines this economic activity, which in 1991, was deregulated. The contextual setting of the subject of the article is Polokwane – one of the largest urban areas in the northern part of South Africa. The question that is asked is: What is the implication of deregulating the street vending industry on the environmental conditions of cities and towns in South Africa? An attempt to provide an answer draws from the research the author conducted to understand the challenges facing informal street vendors. The article is biased towards street-food vending. The 1991 deregulation has provided the majority of poor black people with an opportunity to earn a living. However, this approach has

created more problems for towns and cities with regard to environmental control. Every corner and pavement of the towns and cities is inundated with street vendors trying to promote their wares, while pedestrians find it difficult to navigate through the cities. Street vendors hardly observe good hygiene practices, as litter and waste water are scattered throughout the selling points. It is recommended that control measures be put in place to bring back towns and cities while affording poor people an opportunity to make a living. This requires an imaginative policy approach and the ingenuity of governance, especially in the local sphere of government.

## INTRODUCTION

The inability of the mainstream economy to provide sufficient employment opportunities to people in the economically active age categories is the main reason that the street vending deregulation in South Africa was introduced in 1991 (Ekanem, 1998). This appears to be an irony as, according to Ok and Kuria (2005) and Ekanem (1998), studies done in Africa on street foods, as well as their unlimited and unregulated growth, has

placed a severe strain on the cities' resources such as water, sewage systems and sanitation. Because of this, why is street vending deregulated, instead of regulated? Perhaps an answer lies in yet another irony: the street food industry has an important role to play in South African cities and towns, as well as in many developing countries, in meeting the full demands of both rural and urban dwellers. This article untangles these ironies in the analysis of informal street vending, the objective being to determine the implication of the deregulation of this industry on the environmental conditions of cities and towns in South Africa. It starts with a discussion of the context of the subject. This is followed by an enunciation of the methodological approaches used to gather data. Thereafter, the findings of the study are presented and the article concludes with recommendations.

## **INFORMAL STREET VENDING**

Informal street vending is an industry that symbolises street life in Africa. It operates in an unstable and precarious state. This is because of its lack of legal recognition. In South Africa deregulation resulted in the mushrooming of this industry in the towns, cities and rural villages (Ok & Kuria, 2005). Informal street vending provides a security net, significant employment, improves the economy, and provides direct and indirect jobs for millions of the unemployed. Are these reasons for the deregulation of the informal street vending? As Willemse (2013) and Tenker (1999) observe, the fall of apartheid has attracted many foreign nationals who came to South Africa in search of better living conditions. This is because, compared to their countries of origin, the post-apartheid configuration of a South African state spawned political

stability and a relatively stable economy, although not strong enough to reduce the rate of unemployment. Statistics South Africa indicates that in the third quarter of 2015 the rate of unemployment in South Africa increased to 26%. Joblessness has always been a post-1994 conundrum, exacerbated by an unstable global economy. Because of this, various economic means are pursued to sustain livelihoods. Among these is informal street vending – tinkering at the periphery of the mainstream economy. This economic activity was deregulated in 1991.

*The Business Act*, 1991 (Act 71 of 1991), as amended in 1993, the first law to deregulate business removes certain barriers to informal trading and allows local municipalities to decide what should be allocated by formalising street vending bylaws. However, informal street trading is not without problems. Journalists and municipal officials label this economic practice a "nuisance". To many, street vendors are a representative of chaos in the cities' streets. They are regarded as the cause of congestion (Anjaria, 2006, Willemse, 2011; 2013). After 1990 street food vending became more conspicuous in towns and cities in South Africa. Street food is consumed each day by an estimated 2.5 billion people world-wide (Steyn & Labadarios, 2011).

Street vending is an activity that refers to either food vending, hair dressing or motor repair that takes place on pavements, kiosks, busy public areas, bus stations and open spaces in towns and cities (Steyn & Labadarios, 2011). The post-apartheid government instituted key measures for the deregulation of business activities and the removal of barriers to the operations of

informal food vending (Willemse, 2011). Although deregulation is still in place, the focus is now shifting slightly towards critical economic development, creating jobs and income for the poor and improving the management of informal economic activities through registration, site allocation, operating charges and bylaws (Willemse, 2011). Before the inception of the democratic dispensation in South Africa, street vending was not allowed, and in some cases strictly controlled through fines and confiscation of goods, among other methods.

The *Group Areas Act* 1950, (Act 41 of 1950) and the *Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act* 1945 (Act 25 of 1945) were the main forms of legislation controlling and regulating the informal activity. The *Group Areas Act* prohibited black South Africans from accessing more viable trading or manufacturing locations whereas the *Black Urban Areas Consolidation Act* imposed restrictions on economic activities. The majority of these activities took place without operating licence or permission from local authorities. In Limpopo, as in other developing countries, informal street vending generates income for poor households and is mostly dominated by women (Mukhola, 2006; Muyanjanja *et al.* 2011). In cities such as New York, street vendors are required to have a licence, a permit and a valid food safety certificate from the health department before operating. Many countries do not have proper policies or programmes on street food vending (Choi *et al.* 2013).

Before 1991 Polokwane was one of the cleanest cities in South Africa. One hardly saw any litter along the city's streets and anyone who was seen littering was liable to

a fine. These fines were employed to prevent street trading in the cities (Willemse, 2013). Informal trading takes place in front of formal shops, on city streets and pavements, and some operate from push carts or balance poles or stalls without permanent built up structure from which to sell (Brown, Lyons *et al.* 2010; Muyanjanja *et al.* 2011; Ekanem, 1998). The reality is that this industry is mobile and temporary in nature (Lues *et al.* 2007). Rane (2011), however, argues that street foods are perceived to be a major public health risk due to lack of basic infrastructure and services because this industry is unregulated and seemingly isolated from the prime restaurant sector (Choi *et al.* 2013). Street vendors lack factual knowledge with regard to the epidemiological significance of many street-vended foods, to basic food safety issues, and there is inadequate public awareness of the dangers posed by certain foods. This shortcoming has severely hampered the deployment of a precise scientific approach to this very serious public health and safety issue (Rane, 2011; Ekanem, 1998).

According to Benny-Olliviera and Badrie (2006), the safety, quality and hygiene of this food is affected by several factors, starting from the places where the street vendors are operating to the quality of water used; the manner in which food is handled, and storage practice. Rane (2011) states that the "condition under which some vendors work is unsuitable for preparation and selling of food for public consumption". In most cases, street vendors operate without the flow of tap water and hand washing facilities, which are non-existent in their areas of businesses. Places where food is prepared and sold are not always clean, and not far from the source of contamination. In fact the sale of

food in the streets is very controversial from a health stand point because of the poor hygiene practices associated with such food preparation and is likely to pose significant health risks for consumers (Arambulo III *et al.* 1994).

Street food is thus exposed to appalling environmental conditions such as the presence of insects, rodents and air pollution (Muyanja, 2011). Of great interest is the fact that street traders do not observe good food handling practices, consequently exposing food to dangerous conditions such as cross contamination, food prepared next to vendors cutting hair, doing motor repairs and other unsafe practices. As Muyanja (2011) observes, there is a general perception that street vended food is unsafe because of the environment under which it is prepared and sold. Garbage accumulates, the sites provide harbourage for insects, rodents and breeding points for flies and for growth of micro-organisms (Rane, 2011). This practice also interferes with the town plans through congestion and littering (Ekanem, 1998). It adversely affects daily life.

The reasons for the regulation and deregulation of this informal sector are equally sound. However, in the apartheid era, their regulation was largely intended to obliterate this sector. From this, yet another important question for the post-apartheid context is whether deregulation is an answer. What opportunities does it create for this economy, which is tinkering on the mainstream? What is the reality that informal street vendors are facing? These questions focused the research endeavours that this article is based on, using Polokwane as a case study. The methods used to generate data for

answering them are explained below.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES**

As explained above, this article is based on the research intended to examine opportunities created by deregulation and the reality facing informal street vendors in Polokwane, the objective being to gain an insight into how deregulation affected towns and cities in terms of environmental conditions. Initially the plan was to conduct individual interviews. The researcher conducted focus group interviews because street vendors indicated that they were more comfortable and preferred to share their experiences collectively. Because of this, focus group interviews with street-food vendors, as well as municipal health officials, were conducted. Additionally, observations of street vendors' surroundings, disposal of waste and cleanliness were conducted and recorded. Specifically, data was collected from 29 street vendors in Polokwane. The focus group discussions were conducted with groups of five participants. In asking questions, researchers followed the guidelines that stipulate that what is asked should stimulate responses (Merium, 1998).

The participants were purposively selected as they arrived at the selling points and only willing participants were interviewed. This voluntary participation is in line with sample selection procedures recommended by Leedy (2001). Focus group interviews were conducted in Northern Sotho – a language spoken by the street vendors in Polokwane, the area where the study was conducted. This was found to be ideal because it allowed the participants to provide their

own understanding of the industry and its relationship to environmental matters more freely. Secondly, the researchers made use of an audiotape recorder in combination with a video tape. All participants gave their consent to the use of technology (Mukhola & Mji, 2008). The use of these taped recordings as data-collection method ensured the capturing of as much of what was discussed as possible. This gave the researchers an opportunity to clarify with the respondents any issue that they required clarity on.

Typical questions in the focus group interviews assumed a format such as "Talk to me about your experience in this business of street food vending" were included. Twenty-four questions in nine categories were included. Categories were, for example, personal details of street food vendors, academic qualifications of street food vendors, involvement in street food vending, involvement in street food handling, facilities used by street food vendors, views of street food selling by vendors, training in street food handling, ideas of a successful business venture, and lastly use of a picture of a person handling food properly/badly. Furthermore, in order to validate what the vendors indicated, three city officials, one from Polokwane and two from the City of Durban, were also interviewed. These municipal officials are environmental health practitioners working for the cities' respective environmental health services divisions and were included in the research because of their involvement with city street vendors. These officials were asked questions regarding their experiences and challenges of street food control. All these activities were carried out in order to give a voice to street vendors and, based on that, to recommend training programmes that would

help improve their situation.

As indicated above, the discussions were conducted in the language of the interviewees. This was done because it was convenient to quickly verify with the participants whether what was recorded indeed represented their opinions. This also allowed for the researcher to internally validate the process by ensuring that the information provided was accurately captured, and correct. All the recordings were translated into English. The validity of this process was ensured by asking a language practitioner to transcribe and translate the recorded information.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

A constant comparative method of data analysis, developed by Glazer and Strauss in 1967, further developed and refined by Lincoln and Guba in 1995, was used to facilitate the data analysis process (USAID, 1996). The different responses were initially sorted out, coded and analysed for relevant and compatible themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). As indicated above, the study included 29 respondents, all of whom were vendors of street food in Polokwane. The demographic data obtained from the respondents revealed the following information: there were 26 (90%) black females and 3 (10%) black males. Their ages ranged between 16 years and 52 years ( $M = 34.5$  years;  $SD = 10.9$ ).

An important finding that relates to the question that this article asks, following the analysis of data gathered according to the methodological approach explained above, is that the 1991 deregulation has provided the majority of poor black people with an opportunity to earn a living. However, this

approach has created more problems for towns and cities with regard to environmental control. Every corner and pavement of the towns and cities is inundated with street vendors trying to promote their wares while pedestrians find it difficult to navigate through the cities. Another challenging aspect is that street vendors hardly observe good hygiene practices as litter and waste water is scattered throughout the selling points. It is therefore recommend that control measures be put in place to bring back our towns and cities, while affording poor people an opportunity to make a living. Other important findings of the study upon which this article is based relate to a need for an environmental education programme for vendors and the grievances of street food vendors. These aspects are considered below.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR VENDORS**

The majority of participants (street vendors) liked the notion of training for street food vendors. They indicated the need for training on the following aspects: food preparation; customer care; pricing and financial skills; stock control; purchasing dynamics; budgeting; food catering and the completion of tender documents related to such catering; health and security measures in relation to food. This is in line with the initiative taken by the City of Johannesburg, which graduated 350 street hawkers in business courses after four months of intensive training. The training was meant to impart entrepreneurial skills to hawkers (Mangena, 2005). The participants identified Wednesdays/Wednesday afternoons, or Saturdays/weekends as being the most feasible times to conduct training. This was also confirmed

by the three officials. The officials felt that vendors should undergo training in observing health, hygiene and sanitary measures. They also felt that the municipality should intervene with the introduction of courses that will assist vendors to understand the importance of selling food in the closed sheds that were provided within the city streets. For instance, Official 1 from Durban indicated: "The cultural way of respecting food and the people who must eat the food has somehow been lost. I think the respect for healthy food should be cultivated in those who are ready to continue selling street food."

### **GRIEVANCES OF STREET FOOD VENDORS AND ASSISTANCE REQUIRED**

In addition to the concerns that participants raised, they further indicated that they were always being harassed with evictions by owners of the premises in which they conduct their businesses. These owners (landlords) insist on rentals despite the lack of facilities. In this regard, one participant's view was more succinct when she stated the following: "These white people want to terminate our contracts for renting and for no reason. They always walk tall and talk proudly that they are the landlords. They always send us letters to chase us away from these spots."

In some instances landlords take the vendors to court. When a court ruling is in their favour – that the vendors should not be evicted – the landlords tend to retaliate by increasing rental amounts as a means of "revenge". The rental increments are meant therefore as a way of kicking the vendors out of the trading premises "officially" because vendors could not afford such increases. A further bone

of contention was the fact that vendors discovered that they were not paying the municipality the same amounts, depending on the type of wares they sell. Vendors who sell cooked food pay more tax than those selling vegetables. In certain instances some vendors were not paying anything at all. One participant noted that in the event of vendors not paying the municipality their dues, they are victimised and fines of up to R500.00 are imposed on them, and their goods confiscated without anyone ever informing them of their whereabouts. This happens regardless of whether they have paid or not. Essentially the vendors indicated that there is no structured system of payment from the municipality's side.

Some participants indicated that the municipality wanted them to move away from the areas in which they were operating. Their main concern was that these decisions were not negotiated with them. It turned out from the interviewed officials that the municipality wanted vendors to relocate to another area where they had built market shelters for them outside the city centre. However, the participants felt that for their trade to survive they should be where their customers were. In essence, the vendors were arguing that for them to move, the taxi rank should then also be relocated adjacent to them. The vendors' argument was that business must go to the people; it should not be the other way round – a notion they claim the municipality subscribes to. Participants also indicated that the municipality has to demarcate the sites from which they operate equally so as to quell confusion among vendors, and that they have to establish a flat rate for rentals.

It was felt that criminal activities had declined

since street vendors started to operate in the Polokwane centre. The presence of the street vendors became a deterrent to petty criminals as the vendors could report untoward activities to the police. Another view was that the municipality should not deter people from coming to the centre for vending purposes. In fact the prevailing view was that food vending should thrive. It was indicated, however, that more conducive conditions would prevail if mutual understanding and cooperation existed among street vendors and the municipality. In this regard one participant who expressed this viewpoint motivated his opinion thus: "Our street vendors ... are adamant in the sense that they do not want the municipality to introduce any change whatsoever. They want certain things from the municipality but do not expect the municipality to demand anything from them ... Even if the municipality wants to assist them, they see that as a challenge and start to rebuke whatever comes from the municipality."

Officials felt that if vendors could embrace the municipality's advice, more opportunities could be created for them. Participants elaborated further by indicating that the municipality could create schemes for funding people who want to start their own businesses. These can potentially be secured at reasonable rates of return.

## **WINDING UP: A REFLECTION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study outlined the importance of street food vending as a means of survival, largely for women. For, as research indicates, the majority of food vendors are women. The problems brought about by deregulations

cannot be overemphasised. The majority of towns and cities are facing crises with regard to environmental management. The importance of training street food vendors on matters of health and hygiene, customer care and skills for developing a business plan are underscored as very important cues for policy development. Health and hygiene are critical because it has been shown that nutrition education is useful in modulating "... the perception of the factors that influence the participants' food choices" (Anetor *et al.* 2013:188). This is further supported by health officials in the cities of Durban and Polokwane who agree that street vendors should be trained in observing health and hygiene as well as sanitary measures. It was suggested that such training take place on Wednesdays in both Polokwane and Durban, as on this day business is perceived to be less busy. This suggestion makes sense when viewed against training that has yielded similar results in the City of Johannesburg, with the involvement of the University of the Witwatersrand. The cooperation of health officials and street vendors in the example of the City of Johannesburg has illustrated how the sustainability of the industry can be maintained by working together for a common goal. The method followed by the City of Johannesburg proved to be acceptable to both street vendors and health officials in Polokwane.

Alleged harassment by local police and owners of business premises where vendors operate illustrates the persistent prejudicial views that still exist between people from diverse backgrounds. Vendors' grievances against harassment need to be looked at from the government side. Government intervention should be pursued to assist

the different parties to reach a common understanding and work together. It is important that a mutually acceptable solution for street vendors, business premise owners and health officials be found. It is important to create funding schemes for people who want to start their businesses. This will open opportunities for upcoming traders who may require capital for starting their own businesses. The success of any business depends on start-up funds. Investing in this industry will sustain operations as food is an important commodity for survival.

Knowledge of the investigated subject and activities of street vendors is important so that researchers can obtain more information on this emerging industry. Food safety practices of educated and knowledgeable street vendors will improve and the food that is sold will not pose a risk of food poisoning to the public. Food poisoning is common in South Africa (Draper, 1996) and many people die unnecessarily. Another part of the argument raised in the study relates to the gender of people selling goods in the street. In fact, in South Africa and particularly in Polokwane, 90% of vendors are women. Overcoming the problems facing street vendors and their ill-treatment needs joint cooperation of government, consumers and vendors themselves in the quest to improve the South African economy.

The 1991 deregulation has provided the majority of poor black people with an opportunity to earn a living. However, this approach has created more problems for towns and cities with regard to environmental control. Every corner and pavement of the towns and cities is inundated with street vendors trying to promote their wares

while pedestrians find it difficult to navigate through the cities. Another challenging aspect is that street vendors hardly observe good hygiene practices as litter and waste water is scattered throughout the selling points. It is recommended that control measures be put in place to maintain the cleanliness of the towns and cities while affording poor people an opportunity to make a living. The participants identified training as a critically important intervention. Four of the seven focus discussion groups stressed the importance of training. This suggests that the food vendors want to operate in a clean and healthy environment. Although their business is informal, it appears that they are conscious that for the business to be sustainable they need to be assisted in a number of ways.

First, there is a need for municipal environmental health workers to provide training and to accredit the vendors. Such accreditation will mean that the public who buys the food will do so with confidence knowing that it is certified clean, fresh and therefore healthy. Secondly, street vendors form an important component of the small business sector in South Africa. It is important that they should also be trained in how to run a business and manage their finances. Such training may help some grow into bigger enterprises and therefore contribute to the overall improvement of the economy. An example of a training programme is the one the City of Johannesburg runs with the University of Witwatersrand. At their graduation of the learners the Vice-Chancellor officiated. They received their qualification after they had gone through four months of intensive training. Government should consider intervening by providing free training for street food vendors.

## CONCLUSION

This article examined street food vending, which in 1991 was deregulated, as an economic activity. The contextual setting of the subject of the article is Polokwane – one of the largest urban areas in the northern part of South Africa. The question asked is: What is the implication of deregulating the street vending industry on the environmental conditions of cities and towns in South Africa? An attempt to provide an answer drew on the research the author conducted to understand the challenges facing informal street vendors. The article was more focused on street food vending. The 1991 deregulation has provided the majority of poor black people with an opportunity to earn a living. However, this approach has created more problems for towns and cities with regard to environmental control. Every corner and pavement of the towns and cities is inundated with street vendors trying to promote their wares while pedestrians find it difficult to navigate through the cities. Street vendors hardly observe good hygiene practices as litter and waste water are scattered throughout the selling points. It is recommended that control measures be put in place to recover towns and cities, while affording poor people an opportunity to make a living. This requires imaginative policy approaches and the ingenuity of governance, especially in the local sphere of government.

---

Murembiwa Mukhola is Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the Tshwane University of Technology.  
Email: mukholams@tut.ac.za

## REFERENCES

- Anetor G.O., Ogundele. B.O., Oyewole. O.E. 2013.** Effect of nutrition education on factors influencing food choices in relation to prevention of stomach cancer among undergraduates in South-West, Nigeria. *Anthropologist*, 15(2): 185-191.
- Anjaria J.S. 2006.** Street hawkers and public space in Mumbai. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(21): 2140-2146.
- Arambulo, P., Almeida, C.R., Juan, C.S. & Belotto, A.J. 1994.** Street food vending in Latin America. *Bulletin of PAHO*, 28:344-354.
- Benny-Olliviera, C. & Badre, N. 2006.** Hygiene practices by vendors if the street food "doubles" and public perception of vending practices in Trinidad, West Indies. *Journal of Food Safety*, 27:66-81.
- Brown, A., Lyons, M. & Dankoco, I. 2010.** Street traders and the emerging spaces for urban voice and citizenship in African cities. *Urban Studies*, 47(3):666-683.
- Choi, J., Lee, A. & Ok, C. 2013.** The effects of consumers' perceived risk and benefit on attitude and behavioural intention: A study of street food. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 22: 222-237.
- Draper, A. 1996.** Street foods in developing countries: The potential for micronutrient fortification. London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
- Ekanem, E.O. 1998.** The street food trade in Africa: Safety and socio-environmental issues. *Food Control*, 9(4):215-215.
- Leedy, P. 2001.** *Practical research: Planning and design.* New York: Macmillan.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. 1995.** *Naturalistic inquiry.* New York: Sage.
- Lues, J.F.R., Rasephei, M.R. Venter, P. & Theron, M.M. 2007.** Assessing food safety and associated food handling practices in street food vending. *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 16(5):319-328.
- Mangena, I. 19 July 2005.** Hawkers' graduation day. *Daily Sun*:vi.
- Maykut, P. & Morehouse, R. 1994.** *Beginning qualitative research. A philosophic and practical guide.* London: Falmer.
- Merium, S. 1998.** *Qualitative research and case study application in education.* San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers.
- Mukhola, M.S. 2006.** Guidelines for an environmental education training programme for street food vendors in Polokwane City. D.Ed. Unpublished thesis. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg.
- Mukhola, M.S. & Mji, A. 2008.** Challenges to informed consent: Proposing acceptance of alternatives. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 18:36-42.
- Muyanja, C., Nayiga, L., Brenda, N. & Nasinyama, G. 2011.** Practices, knowledge and risk factors of street food vendors in Uganda. *Food Control*, 22:1551-1558.
- Ok, M. & Kuria, E. 2005.** Hygienic and sanitary practices of vendors of street foods in Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of Food Agriculture and Nutritional Development*, 5(1):1-14.
- Rane, S. 2011.** Street vended food in the developing world: Hazard analysis. *Indian Journal of Microbiol*, 51(1):100-106.
- Steyn, N.P. & Labadarios, D. 2011.** Street foods and fast foods: How much do South Africans of different ethnic groups consume? *Ethnicity and Disease*, 21:462-466.
- Tinker, I. 1999.** Street foods into the 21st century. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16:327-333.
- USAID 1996.** *Conducting focus group interviews. Performance monitoring and evaluation tips.* Report No. 10, New York: Center for Development Information and Evaluation.
- Willemse, L. 2011.** Opportunities and constraints facing informal street traders: Evidence from four South African cities. *Centre for Regional and Urban Innovation and Statistical Exploration*. 7-15.
- Willemse, L. 2013.** Working conditions of sub-Saharan immigrant street traders in Johannesburg and Tshwane. *Africa Insight*, 42(4):166-184.