

Informal Work in South Africa and COVID-19: Gendered Impacts and Priority Interventions

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Pinafore dresses for sale at Warwick Junction, Durban. Made by homeworkers and sold by market vendors, these dresses are widely worn across South Africa. Photo: Jane Barrett

Key Points

- 1 In South Africa, informal workers in general, and women informal workers in particular, have been disproportionately hard hit by measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many have lost their jobs and those who continue to work report working fewer hours and/or earning less than they did prior to the crisis.
- 2 To avert chronic hardship, increases to existing grants need to be urgently reinstated, the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant continued, and unemployment relief rapidly extended to domestic workers and other informal wage workers.
- 3 To help restart work and inject much needed income into low-income households and communities, small business support must be extended to the informally self-employed.
- 4 The provision of publicly funded child-care services must be expanded to better enable women's economic recovery.
- 5 In vaccination roll-out, attention needs to be paid to the inclusion of informal workers at risk.

Introduction

In South Africa, as in many other countries, workers in the informal economy, and women in particular, have been disproportionately affected by measures to prevent the spread of

COVID-19 (International Labour Organization, 2020). For example, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) data suggest that in the strict lockdown in the second quarter of 2020, there

was a 29 per cent drop in informal employment relative to the same period in 2019. This compared to an 8 per cent decline in formal employment. While much is being made of the recovery as lockdown measures have eased, many informal workers who did not lose their jobs report working fewer hours and/or earning less than before the pandemic. Informal workers typically operate in the most vulnerable segments of the labour market, relying on daily earnings to survive and, as such, their prospects for recovery are far less certain than those of formal-sector workers. In addition, many informal workers support households that are below or near the poverty line.

This brief starts by outlining the size and shape of the South African informal economy. Drawing on nationally representative survey data, complemented by insights from WIEGO's smaller-scale studies, it then outlines what is currently known of the impacts on informal workers' livelihoods of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The extent to which informal workers have accessed cash grants, temporary employee relief and small business support is assessed. While some progress has been made in incorporating informal workers into the social security system, significant gaps remain. For each intervention, changes in priorities are identified. In the following section, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) recommendation 204 on formalizing the informal economy is outlined and progress with implementation reviewed with a particular focus on informal worker participation. Next, the importance of access to child care

as key to women's participation in the economy is reiterated, as is the need to prioritize informal workers at risk in the vaccination roll-out. As economic recovery overall remains muted, the ability of informal workers to regain or rebuild their livelihoods is constrained. All these interventions are urgently needed to avert chronic hardship and secure real recovery.

The South African Informal Economy

Official statistics on informal employment in South Africa are closely aligned to international statistical definitions. The three key terms include: 1) the 'informal sector', which refers to all employment and production that takes place in unincorporated, small or unregistered enterprises; 2) 'informal employment', which is defined as any employment without social or legal protection through the employment relationship (including employment both inside and outside the informal sector); and 3) the 'informal economy', an overarching term that refers to all units, activities, outputs and workers as defined above.

Using these statistical terms, several broad conclusions can be made regarding the size and shape of the South African informal economy. First, just under one-third (about 30 per cent) of all non-agricultural employment in South Africa is informal. Just prior to the COVID-19 crisis, this translated to roughly 5 million workers without legal or social protection.¹ Second, the largest component of the informal economy's workforce is, and has been for most of the post-apartheid period, the informal

¹ Informal employment includes all persons engaged in the informal sector as well as informal employees in formal firms and in private households who do not have a written contract of employment and are not entitled to a pension or medical aid.

sector.² About 18 per cent of total non-agricultural employment is in the informal sector.

For most of the past 20 years, a greater share of women's employment was in the informal sector. However, from 2010 onwards, this began to change such that a greater share of men's employment (about 22 per cent) is now in the informal sector relative to women's employment (about 17 per cent). However, because women are over-represented in domestic work (a type of employment which is largely informal) there is still gender parity in informal employment overall (30 per cent of both women's and men's non-agricultural employment). As is the case elsewhere, women in South Africa tend to be concentrated in more vulnerable and lower-paying informal activities and occupations. (See Rogan,

2019 and Rogan & Skinner 2018 for further details.)

Impacts of Lockdown on Informal Workers

There have been two estimates of the total number of jobs lost during the period of strictest lockdown measures – March to April 2020. Statistics South Africa's second quarter 2020 data estimated 2.2 million job losses across the April-June period (relative to the same quarter in 2019) while the National Income Dynamics Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM)³ data estimated that 3 million jobs were lost between February and April 2020. Using NIDS-CRAM data, Casale and Posel found that women accounted for two-thirds of lost jobs (2020:1). This is in line with findings elsewhere (Alon et al., 2020;

² Employment in the informal sector is measured as consisting of both employees and the self-employed. Employees are identified as being in the informal sector if they work in establishments that employ fewer than five people and do not report income tax being deducted from their salaries. The self-employed includes employers, own-account workers and unpaid contributing family workers in household businesses that are not registered for either income tax or value-added tax.

³ The NIDS-CRAM data is a broad nationally representative survey. For details on the methods and findings see <https://cramsvey.org>.



There were 254 000 fewer domestic workers employed in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. In the third quarter of 2020 some of these workers regained their jobs, but often working fewer hours or days. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

Collins et al., 2020; Costoya et al., 2020 and Madgavkar et al., 2020). Explanations both in South Africa and further afield are that women are overrepresented in sectors of the economy in which jobs have been lost and, with schools and educare centres either closed or on reduced hours, women have borne the brunt of increased care responsibilities. This ‘double-blow’ has led many to refer to the current recession as a ‘she-cession’. Less attention however has been paid to the impact on workers in the informal economy or on how women in informal employment, more specifically, have been affected.

Figure 1 shows the job losses using Stats SA quarterly labour force surveys (QLFS). It compares employment in the second quarter of 2020 to the same quarter in 2019.

As is clear from the graph, just under 1.5 million informal workers lost their livelihoods over this period compared to 840,000 job losses among formal workers. In relative terms, employment in the informal economy decreased by 29 per cent compared with an 8 per cent decrease in formal employment. Thus, in both relative and absolute terms,

informal job losses were far greater than formal job losses.

In addition, these data suggest that the impacts *within* the informal economy are being experienced unevenly.

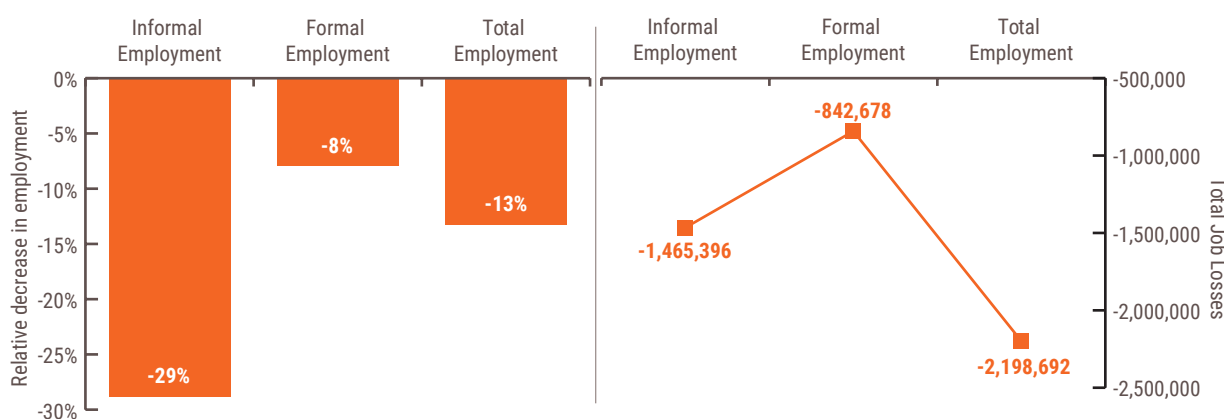
Figure 2 reflects relative and absolute decreases in informal and formal sector employment between the two periods.

The data show that job losses were far greater, in both relative and absolute terms, in the informal sector. The number of informal sector jobs decreased by about 25 per cent over the period, which translated to a net loss of about 814,000 jobs. Domestic work, a sector dominated by informal workers, decreased by 25 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. There were 250,000 fewer people employed as domestic workers in the second quarter of 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

“In the 50 years I have been involved with domestic workers, I never once thought I would face this crisis. How are we going to survive?”

Myrtle Witbooi, General Secretary of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) (Dachs Muller, 2020:8).

Figure 1: Job losses between 2019 and 2020 (Second quarter comparisons)



Source: Own calculations from the 2019 and 2020 QLFSs – Quarter 2. The data are weighted. Note: Job losses in formal and informal employment do not equal losses in total employment due to a slight increase in jobs not classified (‘other’) as formal or informal.

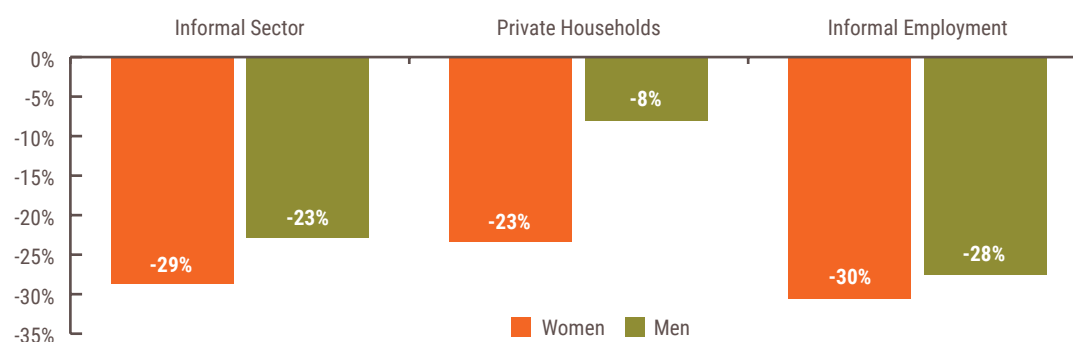
Figure 2: Decreases in informal and formal sector employment between 2019 and 2020 (Second quarters)

Source: Own calculations from the 2019 and 2020 QLFSS – Quarter 2. The data are weighted.

These data are broken down by gender in **Figure 3**. This shows women's job losses were substantially greater in all types of informal employment. The gendered differences in job losses are particularly acute in employment in private households (which is dominated by women in domestic work), with the decrease in female employment of 23 per cent compared with a reduction in male employment of 8 per cent. In the informal sector, women's employment decreased by 29 per cent in comparison to a 23 per cent decrease in men's employment.

Previous work, using the first phase of the NIDS-CRAM data, showed that, among workers who did not lose their jobs during the April 2020 lockdown,

hours worked per week decreased by as much as 50 per cent. Decreases in typical working hours were particularly large for women, workers in self-employment and informal casual workers. The NIDS-CRAM data also suggest that the self-employed were particularly negatively impacted in several ways. First, the decrease in hours worked within the informal economy was greatest for the self-employed where average hours dropped by a third and typical hours dropped by more than 50 per cent. Second, earnings losses for the informally self-employed were substantial. For example, about 37 per cent of the informally self-employed reported zero earnings in April. Overall, typical earnings in April for the self-employed were 60 per cent lower than in February. Women

Figure 3: Employment decreases in the informal economy between 2019 and 2020 (Second quarter comparisons), by gender

Source: Own calculations from the 2019 and 2020 QLFSS – Quarter 2. The data are weighted.

in informal self-employment experienced particularly large decreases in typical earnings during the month of April. For this group, earnings were almost 70 per cent lower in April compared with February. Accordingly, the overall gender gap in earnings in the informal economy widened noticeably between February and April. (Rogan and Skinner, 2020).

“We left the market on the 27th of March, thinking that we would be back in a month’s time, but that certainly did not happen... We experienced problems for over six months with getting the market opened.”

*Woman Market Vendor,
Durban (Heneck, 2020:3).*

Several smaller studies have also gathered detailed information on the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers. WIEGO is leading a global 12-city longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households. In South Africa, 185 informal workers – street vendors, market traders and waste pickers – were interviewed in inner-city Durban. The survey found that 97 per cent of street vendors, 95 per cent of market traders and 74 per cent of waste pickers stopped working in April 2020 during the heaviest restrictions. Echoing concerns across the country, food security was reported as a major problem. Eighty-one per cent of workers reported incidents of hunger among adult members of their household during lockdown. In households with children, 90 per cent reported incidents of hunger among children (WIEGO, 2021). This is far higher than any of the other 11 cities⁴ surveyed in the WIEGO study. This is also higher than national averages. Using

NIDS-CRAM data, Wills, et al found that 47 per cent of respondents reported that their household ran out of money to buy food in April and between May and June 2020, 21 per cent reported that someone in the household had gone hungry in the previous seven days and 15 per cent reported that a child went hungry in the previous seven days (2020b:1).

“I’m staying at home, I’m not working. The money that I’ve saved we eat... if it’s finished, it’s finished.”

*Woman Waste Picker,
Johannesburg (Grice, 2020:4).*

The WIEGO study also showed the increased levels of household and care responsibilities faced particularly by women informal workers. Women were more likely than men to report increases in cooking and cleaning responsibilities, and in households with children present, women were also more likely than men to report an increase in child-care responsibilities (WIEGO, 2021). This echoes findings by Casale and Posel (2020) who show that, due to the closure of schools during the lockdown in April, women reported a relatively increased child-care load than men, with almost 80 per cent of women reporting spending more than an additional four hours per day on child care compared to 65 per cent of men.

Many workers resorted to coping strategies of borrowing money, seeking help from family and friends, drawing down on savings and selling assets (WIEGO, 2021). While important for short-term coping, these will have a negative impact on workers’ resilience and ability to recover in the longer term.

⁴ The other cities are Accra (Ghana); Ahmedabad (India); Bangkok (Thailand); Dakar (Senegal); Dar es Salaam (Tanzania); Delhi (India); Lima (Peru); Mexico City (Mexico); New York City (USA); Pleven (Bulgaria); and Tiruppur (India).

Employment Impacts from June of 2020 and Beyond

The above data reflect on the period of hard lockdown. Wave 2 of the NIDS-CRAM Study, reflecting on the period up to June, found that there was a limited recovery in jobs after hard lockdown (Ranchod and Daniels, 2020). Women remained well behind men in reaching their pre-COVID-19 employment levels in June (Casale and Shepherd, 2020). Hill and Köhler (2020) suggested that the gender wage gap, estimated at 30 per cent in February, had increased to 52 per cent by June. They found the gap to be widest among low earners. This was largely due to reduced working hours for women. Compared to April, the hours men reported spending on child care in June fell by more than for women. The data also show that far more women than men found child care to affect their ability to work, to work the same hours as before lockdown, and to search for work (Casale and Shepherd, 2020).

The WIEGO study reflected on the period up to the end of July. Although

the majority of street vendors and waste pickers were able to return to work by July, 50 per cent of market traders were not able to continue working after the strict lockdown, with 53 per cent reporting zero earnings in July. Reasons for this include the high price of produce, insufficient capital to restock, health concerns and municipal regulations that have interrupted the footfall into the market. None of the occupational groups surveyed had returned to pre-lockdown average levels of daily income, with 72 per cent of workers reporting a drop in household income compared to pre-lockdown levels (WIEGO, 2021).

More recently, Stats SA released the 3rd Quarter 2020 Labour Force Survey data. These suggest a fairly modest recovery in the labour market. For example, there were only 540,000 more jobs recorded in the third quarter compared with the second quarter of 2020 (a 3.8 per cent increase). This represents a small recovery in the post-lockdown period compared with the estimated 2.2 million jobs lost in the second quarter.



Waste pickers mine Johannesburg's landfill mountains for valuable recyclables in order to put food on the family table. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

Notably, the (limited) jobs recovery was also somewhat uneven. Most of these 'recovered' jobs (about 300,000) were in the informal economy but this is still a relatively small number compared with the estimated 1.5 million informal job losses in the previous quarter. One positive finding is that the number of domestic workers in employment increased by about 16 per cent between quarters 2 and 3 of 2020. This represents about 120,000 more domestic workers with employment during the July-September period (relative to the lockdown period). Less positive is the finding that, apart from employment in private households, the recovery of jobs in the informal economy was skewed against women. For women in informal employment, the quarterly increase in employment was 4 per cent for the informal sector (12 per cent for men) and 6 per cent for the informal economy (10 per cent for men) as a whole. Therefore, job losses in the informal economy during the lockdown period were greater for women while job recoveries in the following period were lower for women.

There are two caveats to these most recent figures on employment losses and recovery during the crisis. First, the recovery of jobs does not imply a return to pre-COVID-19 working conditions, hours or earnings. More work is required to analyze the recovery of earnings, in particular, and whether there are gendered patterns in earnings dynamics. Second, the third-quarter data represent a unique point in the unfolding crisis in South Africa. For example, the period followed the harshest lockdown restrictions, but it also occurred during the lull between the first and second waves of the pandemic. More recent data will be required to analyze the longer-term impacts of the second wave of infections

and the accompanying re-introduction of curfews and restrictions at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021.

Informal Worker Access to Mitigation Measures

In April 2020, the South African government announced a range of measures to mitigate the impact of lockdown on employers, workers and households. These included increases in existing social grants, most notably the Child Support Grant (CSG), the introduction of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (COVID-19 SRD grant), the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) and support to small businesses. The extent to which informal workers have had access to each measure is considered below, as are priority interventions.

Cash Transfers

Increases in cash transfers have been widely used internationally as a relief measure. Gentilini et al (2020) estimate that, as of mid-June 2020, new cash transfers had been introduced in 131 countries. In South Africa, the child support grant was increased by R300 per child in May 2020, and then by R500 per caregiver for five months while the old-age pension and disability grant were topped up by R250 for six months. The COVID-19 SRD grant of R350 a month was introduced by the state in recognition of the fact that the unemployed and those in the informal economy had access to little or no support. It was initially introduced for a six-month period, and later extended twice, ending in March 2021. All those who did not already receive a grant and were not registered for unemployment benefits were eligible.

The poverty alleviation effects of this combination of cash transfers have proved critical. Bassier and Leibbrandt (2020) estimate that the caregiver's allowance and COVID-19 SRD grant prevented over 5 million people from falling below the food poverty line (Bassier and Leibbrandt, 2020).

Targeting, Coverage and Implementation of Grants

Prior to COVID-19, the poverty alleviation impacts of cash transfers through social grants in general, and the CSG in particular, were well established (see Bassier et al., 2020:5-6 for a review). The CSG is well targeted at poorer informal workers. For example, Bassier et al., show that 64 per cent of informal workers live in a household that receives a CSG (2020:12). The WIEGO Durban survey found that women informal workers were twice as likely to have had access to a government grant or top-up (WIEGO, 2021). This is likely due to the fact that the top-up to the CSG (mainly received by women) was able to reach its 7.2-million caregiver recipients more efficiently than the newly instituted COVID-19 SRD Grant (Devereux et al., 2020).

Unlike increases to the existing grants, the COVID-19 SRD grant entailed setting up a complex system. Applicants' details were run through seven government databases⁵ in addition to the banking associations to verify banking details. Unsurprisingly, initial implementation was slow, although processes improved with time. As of September 4, 2020, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) reported that it had received almost 9 million applications, with 5.5 million applications approved in July (2020:1). While the use of an updated

Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) database aimed to address earlier false rejections, rejection numbers remained high at almost 3 million (Seleka, 2020).

Köhler and Bhorat (2020) note that large numbers of individuals who would have been eligible for the grant did not receive it, with many living in households in the poorest income quintile. In relation to informal workers, this observation on the regressivity of exclusions is supported by the findings from the WIEGO survey. Only 39 per cent of the respondents reported receipt of a government cash grant or top-up, and the most economically vulnerable sector surveyed (waste pickers) were the least likely to report receiving grant money. While only 15 per cent of waste pickers reported receipt of grant money, over half of the street and market vendors interviewed had received money. The most common reported reason that waste pickers gave for not being able to access the grant was "lack of documentation", most often referring to the lack of a South African identity document (WIEGO, 2021).

Nevertheless, findings from the second phase of the NIDS-CRAM survey, conducted in July and August 2020, suggest that the COVID-19 SRD grant was fairly well targeted at those who had lost employment during the lockdowns, reaching more than half of those unemployed in June. The grant was also found to be relatively pro-poor, with over a third of recipients living in households in the poorest income quintile (Köhler and Bhorat, 2020).

Grant Adequacy

The adequacy of the grants has been questioned. Both the top-up amount and

⁵ To qualify, recipients could not be a current grant recipient, on the UIF database or receive a National Student Financial Assistance Stipend. In addition, their details were checked through the South African Revenue Services, Home Affairs, government salary and police databases.

the COVID-19 SRD Grant do not keep up with food inflation (estimated at 5.1 per cent for the period from September 2020 to January 2021, PEJD, 2021:6) and do not cover the monthly cost (R721) of a basic nutritious diet for one child, let alone the R4,051 needed for a household (estimates for January 2021, PEJD, 2021:2).

It is not surprising then that the WIEGO survey revealed that access to a cash grant made no significant difference to the incidence of household hunger reported by informal workers in Durban as compared to those who had not received a grant (Alfers et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the grants have been a positive intervention. As larger data sets have shown, they have kept almost 5 million people from falling below the food poverty line (Bassier and Leibbrandt, 2020). Also, in the absence of sustained business support measures aimed at informal enterprises, anecdotal evidence suggests that they allowed some informal workers to restock and start up their livelihoods again as lockdowns eased (WIEGO, 2021).

“The unemployment support grants were important, and I wish that the government will continue providing it even after the pandemic.”

Woman Waste Picker, Durban (WIEGO, 2021:11).

Gender and Inclusion Issues

According to SASSA’s own data, 68 per cent of those who received the COVID-19 SRD grant were men (2020:2). This is despite the fact that women are disproportionately represented in the very group this grant was meant to target. The exclusion of women from the COVID-19 SRD on the grounds of access to the CSG – which

is primarily intended to provide support for the care of children – has created a significant gender bias against individual women in the roll-out of cash support (Spaull et al., 2020). This is particularly so when considering the costs of sustaining a child’s nutritious diet cited above.

In its original conception, only South African citizens, permanent residents and refugees qualified for the grant. This was challenged and in June the Pretoria High Court ruled that SASSA must broaden access to asylum seekers and special permit holders (see Scalabrini, 2020). However, progress in reaching asylum seekers and special permit holders appears to have been slow, with only 1,300 applications from this group received by September 4, 2020 (SASSA, 2020).

Priority interventions:

- Reinstatement of the top-ups to the child support and disability grants and old-age pension: The poverty alleviation effects of these grants are well established, as is the institutional infrastructure to deliver them. They are well targeted at women in general, and women informal workers in particular.
- Increase the CSG top-up per child rather than per caregiver: A ‘per child’ CSG top-up has been shown to be more pro-poor than the ‘per caregiver’ top-up (Bassier and Leibbrandt, 2020).
- Extend the COVID-19 SRD grant beyond March 2021: Despite the pandemic’s continued impact on lives and livelihoods, the grant has only been extended until March 2021.
- Allow CSG recipients to access the COVID-19 SRD grant: Disqualifying CSG recipients from accessing this grant discriminates against

women and fails to acknowledge the individual social protection needs of women as workers.

- Make every effort to reduce administrative and technical barriers to access, particularly for the most disempowered groups.
- Institutionalize the COVID-19 SRD Grant: This grant should be converted into a Basic Income Guarantee for those aged 18-59.

The National Treasury has argued that increases to existing social grants and continuation of the COVID-19 SRD grant is unaffordable (Heywood, 2021). However, several creative financing options have been tabled (see Chatterjee et al., 2021; IEJ, 2021 and Gqubule, 2020 among others). Many have pointed out that the social and economic costs of not doing this will be far greater (IEJ, 2021).

Temporary Employer/ Employee Relief

TERS enabled employers registered with the UIF to claim on behalf of their employees. The funding covered a

percentage of the cost of salaries on a sliding scale with a maximum monthly pay-out of R6,730 and a minimum of R3,500 (DEL, 2020a). During 2020, the UIF paid R56.7 billion to 13.2 million workers from 1.1 million employer applications (Dludla, 2021). Despite implementation challenges and cases of employers not passing monies on to their staff, these funds have provided a critical lifeline to businesses and workers. At a minimum of R3,500, this pay-out is 10 times the COVID-19 SRD Grant of R350.

The TERS was discontinued with the Department only accepting applications for the period up to October 15, 2020. After pressure from both business and labour representatives at the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) the scheme was extended until March 15 but only for sectors that have been unable to operate because of lockdown regulations.

From the perspective of workers with informal wages, the COVID-19 crisis has brought to the fore the longstanding issue of lack of insurance



Street vendors in Durban before the pandemic. A WIEGO survey found that 97 per cent of street vendors, 95 per cent of market traders and 74 per cent of waste pickers stopped working in April 2020 during South Africa's heaviest restrictions. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

for unemployment. In 2019, only 20 per cent of South Africa's 1.2 million domestic workers reported being registered for UIF (quarterly labour force surveys, own calculations). This is despite registration being a legal requirement for employers of domestic workers. While domestic workers are the biggest group, this is also the case for other informal wage workers – farm workers, taxi drivers, waiters and construction workers – and for employees in informal enterprises.

The major barrier for informal wage workers is registration. Initially, TERS applications could only be made by employers and those already registered for UIF. This was challenged by the Casual Workers Advice Office, the Women on Farms Project and the Izwi Domestic Workers Alliance. The impending court challenge resulted in a Ministerial Directive at the end of May 2020 allowing previously unregistered individual workers to register for TERS⁶ (Kropman and Ramji, 2020). The change in the TERS system, whereby employers do not have to be previously registered and employees can apply directly, is useful for informal workers. Concerted efforts need to be made not only to publicize these changes among informal workers but to ensure the system is genuinely accessible.

Despite these efforts, and explicit commitments by the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) to actively 'track and trace' vulnerable groups like domestic workers, payment rates remain low. By October 2020, only 60,275 domestic workers had been reached by TERS, with payments amounting to R214 million (DEL, 2020b). This suggests that, for informal wage workers, there

are systemic problems in accessing the UIF system, even for the privileged few who are registered. As a result, the vast majority of informal wage workers who lost their jobs in 2020 have been left without any income or only the minimal support offered through the COVID-19 SRD Grant.

Priority interventions:

- Intensify efforts to improve informal wage workers' access to TERS: Many are not aware that they can now apply directly even if they had not been registered on the UIF system. The UIF must work alongside worker organizations and NGOs to inform workers.
- Launch a campaign to register domestic workers and other informal wage workers: The UIF and DEL need to both encourage employers to comply through streamlining the application process and to increase the capacity of their inspectorate to monitor compliance.
- Reform the UIF system so that registration is no longer reliant on the initiative of employers: Building on the changes in TERS applications, workers should be able to register themselves for UIF. This will also help to challenge the power relationships between employer and employee.
- Link UIF benefits to support for the re-establishment of employment opportunities: For example, reinstating funding for the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to support domestic workers in negotiating with employers to return to work.

⁶ The applications rely on verification from employers in the form of a signed statement attesting to a previous employment relationship. Both SADSAWU and Izwi Domestic Workers Alliance expressed concern that this alone will act as a barrier to access (Interview, November 2020).

- Include self-employed workers in the UIF system: In the longer term, UIF reforms should also include access to and provision for self-employed workers in the informal economy.

In these efforts and reforms, the UIF and DEL should partner with membership-based informal worker organizations – for example, SADSAWU, Izwi Domestic Workers Alliance, the United Domestic Workers of South Africa, the South African Taxi Drivers' Union, and the South African Public Transport Workers Organization (known as *Qina Mshayeli*). They should also work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a track record of supporting informal wage workers, such as the Women on Farms Project, the Casual Workers Advice Office and Masikhule.

While relief measures have been insufficiently tailored to the needs of informal workers, they have started to pull informal workers into the social security system. For example, if the UIF fulfils its commitment to include informal workers such as domestic workers, farm workers and taxi drivers, this will provide vital support in the face of future shocks. For all its faults, the COVID-19 SRD grant is establishing an administrative infrastructure for the inclusion of informal workers into the social security system and could be the basis of a much-needed universal income guarantee.

Small business support

The majority of people working informally in South Africa are in the informal sector - prior to COVID-19, around 3 million people. As noted earlier, the informally self employed in general, and female self-employed workers in particular, were disproportionately hard hit by measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. WIEGO's work has shown many used their last resources to feed

their families over hard lockdown and those who have returned to work face significantly constrained demand with a concomitant drop in earnings. Interviews with informal workers capture some of the challenges:

"We are all in debt, we had to make loans to assist us with restocking; even worse, some had to take loans to buy groceries during lockdown and now there is no business."

*Woman Street Vendor, Durban
(WIEGO, 2021:12).*

"We spent eight weeks at home with no orders. From being very busy we went to having nothing. Everything went quiet."

*Woman Home Worker, Cape Town
(Dachs Muller, 2020:1).*

"I'm not sure if we will recover as recyclers. The big companies do not want us anymore. Accessing waste is a mission now because the police are also adding a strain in our lives. The middle agents are still exploiting us and taking advantage."

*Woman Waste Picker, Durban
(WIEGO, 2021:9).*

Workers in the informal sector, who often service the needs of low-income consumers, are in desperate need of support to re-establish themselves.

The Department of Small Business Development (DSBD) launched several initiatives to assist small businesses, with an initial focus on debt relief for medium and small enterprises. In April 2020, R500 million was allocated to small businesses to assist with payroll, rent and utility commitments. By early September, just over R300 million had been disbursed to 1,159 businesses, indicating a few large loans (Ntshavheni, 2020:6). The Department's work to support the restarting of businesses has focused on

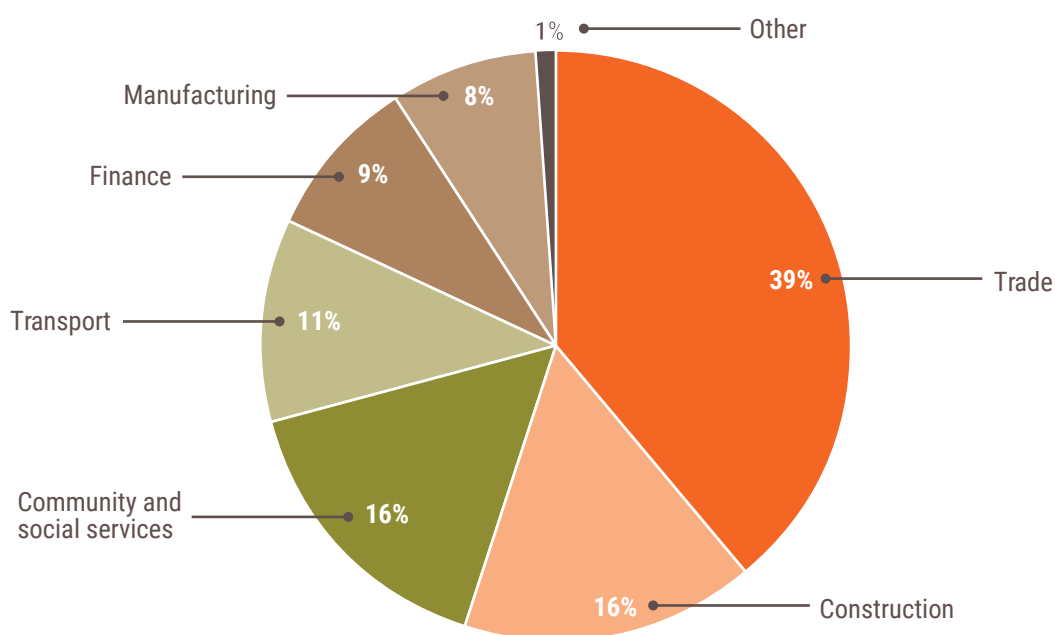
township and rural enterprises, targeting autobody repairers and mechanics; small-scale bakeries; clothing, leather and textile businesses; spaza shops and butcheries. This support, which has become known as the Township and Rural Enterprise Programme or TREP, is in the form of a 50 per cent grant, 50 per cent loan of between R7,000 and R10,000, depending on the sector. In September 2020, DSBD added cooked food and personal-care services as target enterprises and announced the introduction of grants of R1,000 to fruit and vegetable vendors. These and other funds are facilitated by the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) and disbursed by the Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA) and/or the participating bank, Nedbank. SEDA also provides business development sector-specific support services to recipients.

Figure 4 reflects informal sector employment by industry for the first quarter of 2020. Comparing DSBD industry targets to employment in the informal sector reveals important

gaps. While four in every ten people working in the informal sector are in trade, a visit to any market or street trading area will reveal a huge diversity of trade beyond food trade. Similarly, informal manufacturing is not confined to clothing, nor community and social services to personal care. In addition, no support is being offered to those in informal construction or finance.

To qualify for TREP support, entities must be registered with the Companies Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC), the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and the UIF. Few, if any, informal enterprises satisfy this registration criteria. In addition, applicants must be South African citizens and 70 per cent of their employees South African, with all others having valid work permits. This suggests that DSBD is using the opportunity to achieve longer-term ambitions of formalizing the informal economy and dealing with undocumented migrants. While formalization of the informal economy is indeed repeatedly cited

Figure 4: Informal sector employment by industry, Quarter 1, 2020



Source: Adapted from QLFS, 2020

as a 'fundamental goal' (Ntshavheni, 2020:13), the department appears to be narrowly focusing on onerous registration. The exclusion of immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, is not only generating extreme hardship among a particularly vulnerable group but, as successfully argued by the Scalabrini Centre in the case of the COVID-19 SRD grant, is likely to be unconstitutional.

The only grant that does not require CIPC, SARS and UIF registration is the fruit and vegetable traders grant. Of the R993.5 million allocated to TREP, only R40 million is allocated to these grants, or 4 per cent of the total. (Ntshavheni, 2020:15). Assuming no administration costs, this translates to 40,000 grants. Before the pandemic, there were about 560,000 street traders according to QLFS data (own calculations), which means that the need will quickly outstrip funds available. Together with the formalization criteria, these minimal funding allocations suggest that the informal sector is not a priority.

Since COVID-19 precautionary measures began, street trader representatives from all nine provinces have been holding their monthly meetings online. They regularly report on their members' access to support. At the January 2021 meeting, despite five months having passed since the announcement of the grant for fresh-produce traders, no representative knew of any successful applications. The following barriers to access were cited:

- Limited numbers of grants: 'SEDA told us that only 200 grants had been allocated for Greater Johannesburg' (Trader leader, Johannesburg, Gauteng).
- Slow pace of response: 'We submitted 100 trader names to

the municipality a long time ago but have heard nothing' (Trader leader, Ermelo, Mpumalanga).

- Needing a municipal trading permit: 'We don't have permits, many of us have been trading for 20 years without permits' (Trader leader, Polokwane, Limpopo). Trader leaders confirmed that this is the case in many South African towns and cities.
- Not having a bank account: 'They will disqualify you if you don't have a bank account, but many of us don't have accounts' (Trader leader, Ventersdorp, North West).
- Onerous forms/requirements: 'We are struggling to fill the forms SEDA has given us, it is so frustrating. We end up throwing them aside. What they require is unreal' (Trader leader, Cape Town, Western Cape).
- Forms being distributed but with no support or follow up: 'We were given the forms with no explanation' (Trader leader, Polokwane, Limpopo).

Traders from small towns noted that there was only one SEDA office in their district, so an application for these benefits entailed a time-consuming and expensive trip. Some had been advised to speak to local economic development department officials in their municipality, but due to COVID-19, these offices are closed, with staff working from home. These experiences paint a worrying picture of access for informal workers to this support.

Priority interventions:

- Increase allocations to the informal sector: Despite the rhetoric of supporting the nearly 3 million people working in the informal sector, DSBD's current financial allocations remain minimal. Industry targets need to be revised in line with informal

sector employment, prioritizing sectors where women predominate.

- **Revise requirements to access DSBD support:** The criteria need to be revised and relaxed. For example, CIPC registration is unattainable for those working informally. Excluding those without bank accounts and immigrants omits many in greatest need. Throughout the country, many street traders have no trader permits for the reason that the relevant local authority has either ceased issuing permits or has not expanded/revised the geographic reach of the permit system.
- **Streamline the application processes for DSBD support:** The application process for TREP needs to be simplified and support provided for informal workers to complete the documentation.
- **Establish fair systems of disbursement:** The current approach to selection of applicants is top down, with SEDA and/or municipal officials simply deciding on a limited number of recipients with little transparency or rationale.
- **Work with informal worker organizations:** Disbursement could be upscaled if DSBD/SEDA and municipal staff worked directly with informal worker organizations and NGOs. However, government officials should not expect these organizations to be a proxy for them in top-down processes.
- **Report on progress:** Repeated requests to DSBD by NEDLAC parties for reports on the disbursement of the TREP grants in general and trader grants in particular have been ignored. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Formalization and Informal Workers' Participation

In 2015, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted **Recommendation 204 (R204)** to guide countries in formalizing their informal economies. This instrument makes recommendations to governments on how to facilitate the transition of workers and “economic units” (including own-account workers) from the informal to the formal economy and how to prevent the informalization of formal economy jobs. R204 was never intended to be a prescription for tightening bureaucratic procedures for the registration of small businesses but rather to bring informal workers into the protective arm of the state and to create an environment that enables productive work. It encourages the negotiation of pathways to formalization at national and local levels. Such negotiated pathways include national policy frameworks; the extension of social security, maternity protection and social insurance to informal workers; the alignment of labour legislation; access to skills training; access to markets; access to business services, finance and infrastructure; among others. R204 enshrines the principle of engagement and commits governments “to respect, promote and realise freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining”.

The task team South Africa set up to implement R204, composed of representatives of government, business, the formal trade union movement and informal worker organizations, is accountable to NEDLAC. While a legal reform sub-committee was established in 2017, and an R204 implementation roadmap was agreed at a national multi-stakeholder dialogue in 2018, progress

on all fronts has been very slow. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020 there was very little formal engagement between representatives of informal workers and municipal officials. Informal traders and waste pickers across the country have described municipal officials as “missing in action”. Informal worker leaders report that many municipal offices are closed, that officials are either not taking calls or declining to engage “for reasons of COVID”, and that officials are declining proposals for virtual meetings. During strict lockdown, municipalities were instructed by the minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) to make themselves available to issue temporary permits to informal food vendors allowed to return to work. Despite this, traders across the country reported metro police harassing fresh food traders as they lawfully returned to work. Traders were left to their own devices to work out how to trade with appropriate social distancing and to have access to water for sanitizing. A prominent trader leader said: “If we depend on officials we will get nowhere. They are ducking and diving.”

Engagements with national government officials are said to have been more energetic, even if not more productive, largely due to the efforts of a representative of the community constituency within NEDLAC who has given expression to the interests of informal workers. Soon after South Africa declared a state of disaster, NEDLAC established a Rapid Response Task Team (RRTT), comprising representatives of its labour, business, government, and community constituencies. Via the RRTT, NEDLAC has engaged on cash grants; the interpretation of regulations relating to street vendors; public space management and behavioural change among informal traders and their

customers, taxi drivers and passengers; and relief and loan guarantee schemes.

These processes gave rise to participation in negotiations on an economic recovery plan, where it was agreed that excessive permit requirements for workers in the informal sector be waived; township and village economies be supported through better access to markets and finance; government support services for formal and informal SMMEs, startups and cooperatives be reviewed and integrated; emerging platform work be recognized and supported; and access to affordable and universal health care be promoted. However, none of the proposals agreed between the NEDLAC parties that had a direct bearing on informal workers were included in the final document presented to parliament. These clauses were replaced with general commitments that fail to address how economic exclusion and inequality can be remedied.

While the RRTT has recently been meeting with a national structure with a direct link to the government’s National Coronavirus Command Council, a consistent challenge for informal worker representatives in these national level engagements is that they do not have direct representations in NEDLAC via the labour constituency. Representation in key sub-committees is dependent on the imagination of the community constituency and the good will of the other constituency representatives and NEDLAC administration.

Priority interventions:

- Grant informal workers representation in all NEDLAC structures. In addition, agreements reached by the NEDLAC parties must be more respected by government as unilateral changes

to negotiated agreements undermine and delegitimize social dialogue processes.

- Inform relevant sections of all government departments about the enabling content of R204. DEL, COGTA and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) need to disseminate the contents of R204 with a view to shifting the emphasis away from seeing registration and/or permitting as the key to formalization.
- Give greater attention and resources to the R204 task team and enable departments that are part of the task team to prioritize this work. In addition, urgent attention needs to be given to the work of the R204 sub-committee on legal reform.
- Establish representative negotiating forums at a local level: In these forums municipal officials and informal workers can regularly meet and proactively tackle issues, such as processes for issuing permits, access to space for trading and to infrastructure such as storage space and toilets. Over time such negotiation forums should become statutory⁷.
- Facilitate ongoing engagement: The COVID-19 period has shown that meetings can happen virtually. National and local government officials should redirect spending from physical meetings (venues, lunch, etc) to funding data for informal worker representatives.

Access to Child Care and Vaccinations

Women workers in the informal economy are suffering disproportionately from the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in South Africa. This brief has highlighted the specificities of impact within the informal economy, pointing to the shortcomings of the policy response. Possibly the least visible area within the response, however, is the increased burden of care faced by women workers and its impact on their ability to recover. Wills et al., (2020a) note that less than a quarter of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres have managed to re-open post-lockdown, due largely to the prohibitive costs imposed by the regulatory environment, reductions in household income and fears of disease. As discussed in this brief, the reduced availability of early childhood care services will continue to act as a barrier to women's economic recovery if it is not addressed. Support measures to the sector should at the very least include a publicly financed relief package and a review of regulations and support to both formal and informal ECD centres in meeting health and safety targets (Wills et al., 2020a). The ECD community has raised concerns that they have not received any support from the Department of Social Development, despite R1.3 billion being set aside for an ECD stimulus package (C19 People's Coalition; 2021). The financing of the ECD sector should be seen not only as welfare expenditure, but as economic relief expenditure – assisting working families with child care and expanding the pool of jobs accessible to women workers in the care sector.

⁷ As in India, in accordance with the Town Vending Committee system enacted in the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihoods and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014.

A critical issue is access to vaccinations for informal workers. In the vaccine roll-out strategy, informal workers who are most at risk themselves as well as at risk of transmitting to others must be prioritized as essential workers in the second phase, with a strategy devised for accessing worker groups such as those in informal retail and transport. Given the high number of immigrants among informal workers, it will also be critical that vaccination roll-out is fully inclusive of all those living in South Africa, regardless of documentation. It would be against the principle of “no one is safe until everyone is safe” should immigrants be excluded. Again, working alongside membership-based organizations of workers will help secure rapid access to those who need it most. A major vaccination information campaign is needed.

Conclusion

What this brief has shown is that, despite some laudable efforts, informal workers have largely been missed in COVID-19 impact mitigation measures. This is despite the disproportionate impact informal workers have endured. To alleviate chronic hardship, the gaps we have identified need to be urgently addressed. Given the critical role informal workers play in supporting low-income households and communities, this support is also key to kickstarting the economy and resetting it on a more inclusive growth path. This is the moment for the government to act in a coordinated manner to arrive at negotiated solutions. It is also the time for informal workers and civil society to lobby as well as to work with the government to secure and advance existing gains.

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Durban's Warwick Junction in 2018. While four in every ten people working in the informal sector are in trade, a visit to any market or street trading area in the country will reveal a huge diversity of trade beyond food trade. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

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About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org



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