

Interrogating the Plight of Hidden Contributors: Informal Traders in South Africa's Premier Tourism Landscapes

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Abstract: In the confluences of high-quality tourism areas in South Africa lies a peculiar relationship- a cohort of local informal traders who are oftentimes overlooked and undervalued. At prima facie, these traders may seem to be just food and souvenir vendors, yet they are significant custodians of tourism areas' novelty and authenticity, weaving the fabric of the tourism experience itself. This conceptual paper seeks to unmask the ignored activity of local informal traders who operate around South Africa's premier tourism attractions, focusing on their importance as significant contributors to the tourism experience. The paper stems from the currently existing gap regarding the marginalization of the local informal traders within the formal tourism frameworks, despite their contribution to the stimulation of local economies and enriching tourist engagement. The paper focuses on interrogating the dual impact of these local informal traders- their augmenting of tourism experiences and their plight from being excluded from the sustainable tourism development initiatives. The paper uses a desktop research method to identify the existing gaps in literature regarding the subject under investigation. This is done with a view to providing a framework that aims to assimilate the local informal traders into the mainstream tourism ecosystem. This paper underscores the need for the recognition of these traders not only as food and souvenir vendors operating around high-quality tourism attractions, but as vital drivers and enablers of both sustainable livelihoods and sustainable tourism experiences playing a meaningful contribution to the enrichment of the tourism sector in South Africa.

Keywords: Economic Integration, Local Informal Traders, Tourism Development, Sustainable Livelihoods.

Introduction and Aim

South Africa is renowned globally for its diverse tourism offerings- from breathtaking landscapes and world-famous wildlife to rich cultural heritage sites that attract millions of visitors annually (Mbaiwa & Siphambe, 2023). The tourism sector plays an instrumental role in the country's economy, contributing substantially to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), job creation, and community development, particularly in high-traffic regions such as Kruger National Park, Table Mountain, and the Garden Route (Planet et al., 2017; Mbaiwa & Siphambe, 2023). However, formal tourism businesses such as hotels, tour operators, and established retail outlets tend to dominate the tourism landscape, often overshadowing equally important, yet underappreciated, informal tourism businesses operating on the fringes of these premier destinations (Alcock, 2018). These traders, frequently dismissed as mere food vendors or souvenir sellers, are essential to the tourism ecosystem, offering unique experiences and products that enrich the tourist journey in ways that formal enterprises often cannot (Trupp, Shah & Hitchcock, 2023).

In South Africa, the role of informal traders in the tourism sector extends far beyond simple transactions (Rogerson, 2018). These traders embody a sense of authenticity, grounding the tourism experience in local traditions, flavors, and cultural narratives that would otherwise be absent from commercial tourism offerings (Chatzopoulou, 2018). Informal traders facilitate genuine connections between tourists and South African culture, through selling locally

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crafted goods, traditional foods, and regional artifacts (Rogerson, 2018; Saayman, Li, Scholtz & Fourie, 2020). They serve as cultural ambassadors, revealing insights into indigenous practices and heritage, which improves the visitor experience and promotes a sense of belonging and understanding among both international and domestic tourists (Chatzopoulou, 2018). Despite their invaluable contributions, informal traders remain marginalized within formal tourism frameworks, caught up by restrictive regulations, limited resources, and social stigmatization which affect their ability to operate freely and sustainably (Abdullah, Lee & Carr, 2023).

This paper's aim was to highlight the significant, yet overlooked, role of informal traders operating on close proximities with high profile tourism attractions in South Africa, exploring both their contributions and the systemic challenges they face. The exclusion of these traders from formal tourism policies represents a missed economic opportunity and diminishes the cultural richness of the tourism sector in South Africa. Current tourism policies tend to favor large-scale, formal enterprises over grassroots contributors, reflecting a critical gap in how inclusivity is conceptualized within the sector. Through this lens, the paper sought to unmask the overlooked impact of informal traders, positioning them as an important component of the tourism sector whose integration into formal tourism policies could yield both economic and cultural benefits. Three parts of material are presented- first, the methods section is presented next. Attention shifts to the discussions of this paper. The last part of the paper provides the concluding remarks, together with a proposal of future research direction regarding the subject under investigation.

Methods

In this conceptual paper, a desktop research approach was employed to achieve the aim of the research. This paper provides a robust theoretical foundation for future research by conducting a rigorous review of literature sourced from various literature databases. Table 1 presents the keywords search used to source data from various literature databases,

Table 1: Keywords search and literature databases

Key Search Words	Literature databases
'Economic Contribution of Informal Sector South Africa'	Academia.edu
'High-Profile Tourist Areas South Africa'	Google Scholar
'South Africa Informal Trade Statistics'	Grey literature (non-peer-reviewed literature)
'Tourism and Economic Inclusion'	JSTOR (Journal Storage)
'Tourism and Informal Economy'	Project MUSE
'Tourism and Street Vendors'	ProQuest
'Tourism and Urban Marginalization'	Researchgate
'Tourism Impact on Informal Traders'	SAGE Journals
'Tourist Attractions and Informal Economy'	ScienceDirect
'Tourist Zones Informal Trade'	Scopus
	Taylor & Francis Online
	Web of Science
	Universities libraries' databases

The researchers focused on literature published between 2014 and 2024. This was done to warrant relevance of the research to current trends in the South African's informal economy- especially within the context of post-pandemic changes in tourism and informality. This 10-year period is characterized by substantial policy changes, changes in market behaviors, and the evolving theoretical contexts on informal trade and marginalization, offering an up-to-date context of the daily realities of the informal traders operating outside high-profile tourism attractions. The collected literature provides insights into existing policies, the socio-economic realities and impact of informal traders, and sustainable tourism development frameworks. This study offers a framework and theoretical perspective on informal traders as 'hidden contributors' that future researchers may explore through qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By synthesizing the insights from this literature, this paper advocates policies and practices that formally recognize and support the role of informal traders. Its contributions are twofold; firstly, it positions informal traders as critical, yet underrepresented, players in South Africa's tourism sector, and secondly, it proposes a framework for their sustainable inclusion within tourism initiatives.

Discussion

Role of Informal Traders in Enhancing Tourism Experiences

Informal traders are often seen as the face of South African culture, providing tourists with an authentic lens through which to experience local traditions and practices (Visser, 2017). Their offerings, from traditional crafts and artisanal products to street food and souvenirs, carry cultural narratives that reflect rich and diverse heritage South Africa (Jethro, 2020). For instance, a vendor outside Kruger National Park may sell handwoven baskets, intricately carved sculptures, or beadwork that tells the story of indigenous art forms and local craftsmanship (Brunson, 2024). Each item holds meaning, providing tourists with a tangible connection to the cultural identity of the region. These cultural exchanges are increasingly valued by international tourists who seek experiences that move beyond the conventional tourist attractions they travel to see (Cetin & Bilgiham, 2016). Informal traders provide a sense of place, giving visitors access to local flavours, stories, and practices that deepen their appreciation for the destination (Chayada, 2017). For example, in Cape Town, informal traders offer a range of products that reflect the city's unique cultural blend, from handmade jewellery inspired by indigenous designs to delicacies that bring together African, Malay, and Indian culinary influences (Mthethwa, 2018). Tourists who engage with these informal traders gain a richer understanding of the local culture, often through conversations where traders share the history or personal stories behind their products (Cakmak et al., 2018). These interactions are more than transactions but moments of connection that add depth to the tourist experience, fostering respect and admiration for South Africa's cultural diversity (Maranz, 2016).

Beyond the products they sell, informal traders add immense value to the tourism experience through personalized interactions that create lasting memories for tourists. Castellani et al. (2020) highlight that these interactions allow tourists to connect with the local culture in a deeply personal way unlike formalized tourism services, which may lack personal engagement. Rattray (2017) argues that informal traders interact with tourists on an individual level, sharing anecdotes, cultural insights, and a warm welcome that often leaves a lasting impression. These one-on-one exchanges foster a sense of authenticity, as tourists feel they are engaging directly with the community rather than being reduced to mere consumers within a commercialized tourism landscape (Tiberghien, Bremner & Milne, 2017). Ekouoma (2017) observes that many tourists recount these encounters as highlights of their trips, sharing stories of friendly vendors who went out of their way to offer a genuine slice of local life. Ntuli (2020) notes that this level of personal connection is especially impactful, as in areas like Cape Town's craft markets and Durban's beachfront markets, where informal traders offer handmade goods, freshly prepared snacks, and friendly conversation. A tourist purchasing a locally made bracelet or necklace might learn about the symbolism of the colors used or the specific crafting techniques passed down through generations (Bradley, 2022). These details elevate a simple purchase into a cherished memento, imbued with cultural significance. Rogers (2022) contends that informal traders' knowledge of local customs, dialects, and culinary secrets provides tourists with experiences unlikely to be found in formal tourism spaces. Such personalized exchanges foster positive perceptions of South Africa, inspiring tourists to explore deeper and often encouraging them to return or recommend the experience to others (Madondo, 2016; Mkhize & Ivanovic, 2020). Madondo (2016) argues that this word-of-mouth promotion is invaluable in building South Africa's reputation as a welcoming and culturally rich destination.

In Cape Town, the markets surrounding Table Mountain National Park demonstrate the vital role of informal traders, providing tourists with accessible, culturally relevant goods that elevate the overall tourism experience (Dube & Muresherwa, 2019). These markets create an atmosphere of direct engagement (Nzoku, 2018). Also, Robben Island's ferry terminal hosts informal traders who enhance the tourist experience by offering culturally significant items to visitors awaiting their journey to this historic site (Planet et al., 2017). Vendors in these areas provide locally crafted souvenirs, beaded portraits of Nelson Mandela, and books on South Africa's political history, they serve as both souvenirs and educational tools (Witz, 2022). These products connect tourists with South Africa's deeper narratives of freedom and human rights struggles, enriching the educational impact of their visit (Kgagudi, 2019). Informal traders at Robben Island encourage reflection on the country's historical journey through offering a platform for tourists to acquire and engage with artifacts of cultural and historical importance (Krempel, 2021). Along the Garden Route, a prominent destination that spans towns like Knysna and Plettenberg Bay is also characterized by local traders who offer traditional foods and artisanal crafts that showcase the coastal culture and regional specialties (Visser, 2018). For a tourist purchasing a locally made shell necklace or a jar of traditional chutney, the transaction becomes a cultural experience, introducing them to the materials, flavors, and traditions. This defines the Garden Route's unique identity. Informal traders play an essential role in preserving regional heritage while simultaneously enhancing the appeal of these destinations, through directly bringing local culture to tourists (Rogerson, 2018a).

Beyond economic contributions, informal traders occupy an important role in the social and cultural landscape of tourism sector in South Africa. Saayman et al. (2020) emphasizes that these traders serve as important channels between tourists and local communities, facilitating cultural exchanges that not only deepen the visitor experience, but also promote a sense of belonging and connection among travelers. Informal traders enable meaningful cultural immersion by presenting an authentic, grassroots perspective, which contrasts with the curated and often standardized experiences offered by formal tourism enterprises (Duxbury, 2021). Through their unique offerings that range from handmade crafts to regional delicacies, informal traders provide tourists with direct access to cultural practices, traditions, and narratives that would otherwise remain hidden within the formal tourism economy (Dragouni, 2017; Bradley, 2022). Informal traders, therefore, act as cultural ambassadors, sharing stories, customs, and traditions that enrich the tourist experience and offer a deeper understanding of South African culture (Govender, 2020).

The impact on local economies

Informal traders are essential contributors to the economic landscape surrounding key tourist destinations in South Africa, particularly in communities with limited formal employment opportunities. These traders support local economies by generating income that sustains not only their own livelihoods but also those of others within their communities (Charman et al., 2017). The income generated by informal trading is vital for community well-being (Khumalo, Mthuli & Singh, 2019). In destinations such as Kruger National Park and the Garden Route, informal traders generate substantial revenue through the sale of handcrafted goods, traditional foods, and culturally significant items (Makwela, 2022). This informal economy creates a self-sustaining ecosystem that supports local suppliers and transport providers, ensuring that tourist spending remains within the community (Rogerson and Visser, 2021). In addition, the informal economy plays a vital role in enhancing the multiplier effect (Suleiman, 2017). Edgar (2022) describes the multiplier as an essential aspect for strengthening agricultural production and other local industries, for instance, a vendor selling locally sourced snacks or crafts may purchase raw materials from nearby farms, creating an economic ripple effect. Such economic interactions are important for the resilience of local economies, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where large-scale commercial opportunities are scarce (Kativhu, 2019). The economic benefits from informal trading extend beyond individual traders, improving community stability and providing employment opportunities (Rogerson, 2018). Saayman et al. (2020) highlights that the exclusion of informal traders within the tourism sector not only limits their visibility, but also prevents a full understanding of their economic impact on local development. One of the most tangible economic benefits of informal trading within tourism is its remarkable capacity to create employment opportunities for individuals who may otherwise struggle to secure formal jobs. In South Africa, where unemployment rates are high, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, informal trading provides essential livelihoods for traders and often for those they employ within their operations. This form of job creation extends beyond the trader alone, as it creates a ripple effect of employment that reaches various layers within the community (Charman & Govender, 2016).

The low barrier to entry in informal trading allows individuals with limited formal education or skills to participate in the tourism economy, thereby promoting economic inclusion and reducing dependency on formal job sectors that may be inaccessible. Informal trading serves as a critical and accessible pathway to the inclusion of the marginalized groups such as women, youth, and rural residents into the tourism value chain (Mabilo, 2018). This inclusion fosters social stability, as individuals engaged in income-generating activities through informal trading can support themselves and their families, reducing poverty levels and improving quality of life (Truong, 2018). Informal trading plays an indispensable role in promoting both individual and community resilience through facilitating broader access to the tourism economy, laying the groundwork for sustainable economic development within tourism hubs in South Africa (Maraka, 2024). Informal traders who sell local foods or crafts often source their raw materials from local suppliers, including farmers, artisans, and markets, which inject money back into the community (Rasul et al., 2021). This circulation of income stimulates additional economic activity, as the funds traders spend on materials, transportation, and other business expenses sustain jobs and generate revenue for secondary businesses (Cakmak, 2018). This interconnected economic relationship bolsters the resilience of the local economy, promoting inclusive growth that benefits the broader community by redistributing tourism-generated income among various local actors (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020).

In areas such as Cape Town's craft markets and the informal vendor zones near Kruger National Park, for every cent earned by an informal trader, a substantial portion is reinvested into the local economy, benefiting suppliers, transport providers, and even other traders (De Villers, 2022). This intra-community spending not only strengthens local economic linkages, but it creates a self-sustaining ecosystem where the success of one sector supports others (Snyman & Spenceley, 2019). By keeping tourism-generated income within the community, informal traders help

mitigate economic leakage—a common issue when tourism revenue flows to external or corporate entities. The economic multiplier effect facilitated by informal trading is crucial not only for supporting the livelihoods of individual traders but also for reinforcing the economic health and sustainability of the entire community.

Because they are located close to heavy tourist traffic into the high-profile tourism attractions, the local traders have easy access to many tourists, and they stand a better chance to get their goods bought at a faster rate compared to traders in different spots. These traders contribute to millions of rands annually to local economies, drawing both domestic and international tourists with their unique goods and services (Department of Tourism, 2022). In some areas of South Africa, up to 30% of tourist spending on local goods and experiences goes toward informal markets. This underscores a high demand for authentic, locally produced items among tourists seeking cultural immersion (Department of Tourism, 2022). Through directing tourist spending into community-based enterprises, informal traders foster a more equitable distribution of tourism revenue, ensuring that economic benefits reach individuals and families at the grassroots level. This contribution is especially important in rural and marginalized areas, where formal employment is scarce, and tourism income might otherwise bypass local residents. Recognizing these broader economic contributions challenges the prevailing narratives that often focus exclusively on formal tourism businesses, highlighting the need for inclusive policies that acknowledge the essential role of informal traders in driving community-level economic growth (Rogerson, 2016).

Challenges faced by the informal traders operating outside high profile tourism areas

The local traders, however, remain persistently marginalized within formal tourism frameworks. National and provincial tourism policies in South Africa often emphasize sustainable development and community involvement, yet these policies frequently lack specific provisions for integrating informal traders into the mainstream tourism economy (Dlomo & Rogerson, 2020). This gap creates a regulatory environment that systematically disadvantages informal traders, who are often excluded from high-profile tourism areas due to restrictive regulations, limited access to prime trading locations, and complex licensing requirements (Turok, Scheba & Visagie, 2017). According to Visser (2021), such policies effectively confine informal traders to peripheral spaces with minimal tourist foot traffic, thereby restricting their economic potential and reinforcing their marginalization. In addition to that, in South Africa's high-profile tourism areas, most tourists follow structured itineraries organized by travel agencies. These itineraries typically cover entry fees, activities, food, drinks, and accommodation, but do not include the purchase of souvenirs from local traders outside the main attractions. Tourists decide separately whether to buy souvenirs, and there is no negotiation for prices in those formal activities. However, local traders often face challenges as they are pressured to lower the prices of their goods to match tourists' budgets, and this is one of the major plights for the local traders operating outside high-profile tourism areas.

The marginalization of informal traders within formal tourism frameworks not only limits their access to opportunities but also stifles the cultural diversity and inclusivity that these traders bring to the tourism sector (Inaz, 2020). Lacking legal recognition or adequate support, informal traders remain vulnerable to harassment, eviction, and income loss, as they lack the legal standing to advocate for improved operating conditions (Roover, 2016). This exclusion perpetuates a harmful cycle, in which the contributions of informal traders are overlooked, leading to further policies that neglect their value within the tourism ecosystem (Mago, 2018). Rogerson and Visser (2021) argue that to build a truly inclusive tourism model, there is an urgent need for policy interventions that recognize and integrate informal traders as essential stakeholders, allowing them to participate meaningfully in tourism planning and development processes. A significant challenge for informal traders is their limited access to essential resources, such as financial capital, training, and market information, a barrier that is central to their economic vulnerability. Many informal traders operate with minimal capital, which restricts their ability to invest in quality materials, diversify their product offerings, or adopt marketing strategies that could expand their customer base (Mansur & Djaelani, 2023). Access to financing is particularly challenging, as informal traders often lack collateral or formal credit histories, preventing them from securing loans or other financial support (Adusei et al., 2019). This financial shortfall affects their ability to grow, reduces their competitiveness in the tourism market and limits their capacity to improve product quality.

In addition, informal traders often lack access to training programs that could strengthen their business skills, enhance customer service, or introduce them to effective marketing techniques (Nkrumah-Abebrese & Schachtebeck, 2017). Training in these areas would allow traders to provide a higher quality of service, which could increase tourist satisfaction and encourage repeat purchases (Amissah et al., 2022). However, without structured support from government or private sector initiatives, informal traders have few opportunities to develop these critical skills (Roever, 2016). The absence of market information further intensifies these challenges, with many

traders lacking insight into consumer trends, peak tourist seasons, and effective marketing channels (Madondo, 2018). This information gap results in traders having minimal growth and low earnings, unable to fully capitalize on tourism demand. Addressing these resource challenges demands targeted interventions, such as micro-loans, capacity-building programs, and partnerships with local tourism boards are essential for equipping informal traders with the tools necessary for sustainable business success (Craan, 2019).

Informal traders face significant social stigmatization that undermines their sense of legitimacy and often strains their relationships with both tourists and formal tourism stakeholders. Informal trading is often viewed as a less respectable or 'lower tier' economic activity, especially when compared to formal businesses in the tourism industry (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). This perception impacts informal traders' self-esteem, leading to internalized beliefs about the limited worth of their contributions (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). Mago (2018) argue that this stigma diminishes the perceived value of informal trading, influencing tourists' purchasing decisions. Some tourists may avoid engaging with informal traders due to unfounded concerns about product quality or trader reliability (Jonathan, 2018). According to Saayman et al., (2020), this social bias not only affects the income of informal traders, it also restricts the rich cultural exchanges and authentic experiences that these traders uniquely offer within the tourism space. According to Ntlangani, (2021), the marginalization of informal traders also impacts their interactions with formal tourism stakeholders, many of whom view them as competitors rather than as complementary contributors to the tourism ecosystem. Zulu (2018) asserts that formal businesses, particularly in high-profile tourism areas, benefit from well-established contracts and abundant resources, allowing them to dominate the market. In contrast, informal traders operate largely in isolation, their contributions often overlooked by policymakers and tourism organizations, limiting their ability to advocate for better operating conditions or equitable treatment (Bradley, 2022). Without the support of these stakeholders, informal traders remain marginalized, perpetuating a divide that prevents their full integration into the tourism experience (Cakmak et al., 2018). In order to address this stigma a cultural shift that recognizes and values the contributions of informal traders is required, supported by public awareness campaigns and policies aimed at fostering inclusivity within the tourism sector (Saayman et al., 2020).

According to Manetsi (2017), high-profile tourism areas in South Africa are governed by strict regulations. These tourism areas include, *inter alia*, national parks, nature reserves, and urban landmarks. The strict restrictions are said to be put in place to prioritize environmental preservation, visitor safety, and visual aesthetics. Roover (2016) argues that as these regulations serve important purposes, they often restrict informal traders to peripheral locations outside the main tourist zones, effectively limiting their access to potential customers. Vendors operating near Kruger National Park are typically stationed outside the main gates, where foot traffic is substantially lower than inside the park. Similarly, Hillyer (2018) highlights that informal traders at Table Mountain National Park are only allowed to sell goods at designated spots away from the entrance, which significantly reduce their visibility to tourists who might otherwise be interested in purchasing local products.

Maraka (2024) emphasized that economic constraints further compound these spatial limitations, making it difficult for informal traders to sustain their businesses in such high-profile areas. Restricted by limited access to prime trading locations, informal traders are forced into direct competition with formal vendors who benefit from greater resources and operational support (Rogerson, 2016). According to Mhlabane et al. (2022), this competition intensifies economic disparities between formal and informal traders, as tourists often prefer the convenience and perceived security of established businesses within the park or attraction. Addressing these issues demands a reevaluation of tourism site regulations, creating inclusive spaces that accommodate informal traders and enable them to reach tourists directly, thereby allowing them to participate more fully in the tourism economy.

Recommendations for the Integration of local traders into high-profile tourism areas

Establishing designated trading zones within or near major tourism sites is essential to provide informal traders with the visibility and access necessary to effectively engage tourists (Bradley, 2022). These areas would function as curated spaces where tourists could explore local crafts, traditional foods, and souvenirs in an environment that feels both authentic and accessible. Creating a designated marketplace at sites such as Kruger National Park or along pathways leading to Cape Town's Table Mountain would encourage tourists to interact with informal traders before entering formal tourism areas. Modeled after markets at global landmarks like the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the artisan zones near Machu Picchu, these designated areas could integrate informal traders seamlessly into the visitor flow, offering a cohesive and culturally rich experience. Designated trading zones would also provide informal traders with much-needed security and stability, allowing them to operate without fear of displacement or fines, which would encourage investment in higher-quality products and services (Middleton, 2023). These zones could enhance

working conditions for traders through offering amenities such as shelter, storage facilities, and basic utilities, aligning their operations with the expectations of international tourists, who often seek professionally presented local products. These zones could serve as cultural hubs, offering tourists live performances, storytelling, and craft demonstrations, thus transforming informal trading spaces into vital elements of the overall tourism experience (Middleton, 2023).

Effective integration of informal traders into South Africa's high-profile tourism areas requires active collaboration with formal tourism stakeholders, including park management authorities, tourism boards, and local businesses (Zulu, 2018). Partnerships between informal traders and formal vendors can foster mutual benefits, creating symbiotic relationships where each party enhances the other's offerings (Charman and Govender, 2016). For example, lodges, restaurants, or visitor centers could feature or sell locally crafted products from informal traders, giving these traders access to a broader customer base while allowing formal vendors to add authentic local value to their offerings (Rogerson, 2018). Collaborative marketing initiatives can further elevate the role of informal traders, shifting perceptions of informal trading from a marginalized activity to a respected component of the tourism ecosystem (Damanyanti, Scott & Ruhanen, 2017). Joint events, such as community markets or cultural festivals organized with tourism authorities, could offer seasonal or event-based opportunities for informal traders to showcase their products within high-traffic tourist areas. By promoting informal traders in marketing materials and tourist itineraries, tourism boards and businesses could help elevate the profile of these traders, transforming them from peripheral figures to recognized cultural ambassadors (Maraka, 2024). Additionally, these partnerships could provide traders with access to marketing channels, tourist data, and networks, which would otherwise be out of reach (Kimbu et al., 2020). Through collaborative efforts, formal and informal actors can create a cohesive and diverse tourism offering that appeals to a wide range of visitors.

Supporting informal traders through targeted training and capacity-building programs is vital to equip them with the skills necessary for successful participation in the tourism economy (Katire, 2024). Programs focusing on customer service, product quality, hygiene standards, and business management are crucial, as they empower traders to meet the expectations of international tourists, thereby increasing their competitiveness and appeal. Workshops on customer engagement could enhance traders' ability to connect with tourists, providing the personalized interactions that define the informal trading experience. Training in financial literacy and inventory management could also enable traders to make informed business decisions, ensuring profitability and sustainability. Magidi and Mahiya (2021) asserts that capacity-building programs could be strengthened through partnerships with local NGOs, educational institutions, or government agencies, providing trainers, resources, and funding to support traders' development. Aligning these programs with the specific needs and challenges faced by traders ensures practical, culturally relevant training that can be applied immediately. Additionally, offering certification for completed training would enhance traders' credibility, helping them gain tourists' trust by demonstrating adherence to quality standards (Cakmak et al., 2018). This formal recognition would act as a marketing tool, as certified traders could display their qualifications to reassure customers of product quality (Kellermann, 2019). South Africa's tourism sector can cultivate a skilled and confident workforce, through investing in the professional growth of informal traders enhancing the tourism experience (Butler, 2017).

Achieving meaningful integration of informal traders within high-profile tourism areas demands policy advocacy and regulatory reforms that foster an enabling environment for informal trading (Brown & Mackie, 2018). Currently, restrictive regulations are limiting the participation of informal traders in the tourism economy (Damanyanti et al., 2018). Turok et al., (2017) asserted that revisiting these regulations to introduce streamlined licensing processes, relaxed location restrictions, and supportive infrastructure could significantly improve informal traders' operational stability. For instance, policymakers could develop a specialized permit system allowing informal traders to operate legally within designated areas of major tourism sites, providing them with security against harassment or eviction. Policy reforms should also establish advisory councils or committees involving representatives from informal trader associations, tourism boards, and local government. These councils would facilitate dialogue, allowing informal traders to communicate their needs directly to policymakers and tourism authorities (Hillyer, 2018). Including traders in the planning and regulatory process ensures that tourism policies reflect the realities of informal trading, fostering an environment where these traders can flourish. Advocacy efforts highlighting the economic and cultural contributions of informal traders could also shift public perception, reducing the social stigma associated with informal trading (Peterson, 2023). By acknowledging informal traders as valued contributors to the tourism ecosystem, policymakers can create a more inclusive, equitable tourism model that maximizes socio-economic benefits for all South Africans (Hillyer, 2018).

To effectively integrate informal traders into South Africa's tourism ecosystem, policies must evolve to formally recognize their contributions and provide the legal and economic support necessary for their success (Damanyanti et al., 2018). The current regulatory environment restricts participation of informal traders in the tourism economy due to complex licensing requirements and limited access to high-traffic trading spaces within major attractions. A transformative approach would streamline these processes through tailored permit systems, allowing informal traders to operate legally in designated areas at key tourism sites like Table Mountain or Kruger National Park (Hillyer, 2018). However, policies should not stop at access alone. Economic support mechanisms, such as micro-loans and grants, are essential for empowering traders to improve their offerings and operations. Developed in partnership with financial institutions and government-backed programs, these initiatives would enable traders to invest in product quality, marketing, and operational enhancements (Weber, 2018). Establishing a supportive policy framework would affirm the cultural and economic value that informal traders bring to tourism, creating a path for sustained inclusion and fostering a diversified, equitable tourism industry (Hillyer, 2018). Structured training and capacity-building initiatives are crucial for empowering informal traders to elevate their services and engage more effectively with tourists.

Training programs focused on core business skills, such as customer service, quality control, financial management, and hygiene standards, would equip traders to meet industry standards and enhance the tourism experience they offer (Ngandu, 2016). By partnering with NGOs, local educational institutions, and government agencies, these programs can be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by informal traders, ensuring practical and relevant skills development (Mayombe, 2017). Furthermore, certification for program completion would serve as a mark of credibility, reassuring tourists of product quality and service standards (Foris & Popescu, 2018). Displaying these credentials within trading spaces would enhance traders' marketability, build tourist trust, and improve visitor satisfaction. Over time, these capacity-building efforts would foster a skilled, resilient informal trading sector that aligns with and amplifies South Africa's broader tourism offerings (Hillyer, 2018). A holistic approach to integrating informal traders necessitates active engagement and collaboration among a range of stakeholders, including local governments, formal tourism operators, community organizations, and the traders themselves (Kimbu et al., 2020). Establishing advisory councils or committees with representatives from each of these groups could facilitate open dialogue, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of the informal traders are incorporated into tourism planning and policymaking. Additionally, collaborative initiatives with formal tourism entities such as hotels or tour operators can create mutually beneficial opportunities (Jasingh, 2021). Ngoasong and Kimbu (2016) argue that formal businesses could showcase or sell locally crafted products made by informal traders, offering traders greater market access while enhancing the cultural appeal of formal establishments. Such stakeholder engagement initiatives promote a cohesive tourism environment, aligning the contributions of both formal and informal actors to create a well-rounded and rich cultural experience for visitors.

Benchmarking the best practices from successful global models of informal trader integration can offer South Africa's tourism sector valuable insights for crafting an inclusive and sustainable framework. Glen and Mearns (2017) highlight how countries like Thailand and Peru have successfully integrated informal traders by establishing designated marketplaces and cultural zones where local crafts, foods, and performances are embedded within the tourism experience (Trupp, 2016). South Africa could adapt similar strategies by creating designated cultural zones at major sites to showcase its diverse cultural offerings. Additionally, incorporating feedback mechanisms, such as visitor surveys, would enable tourism authorities to assess tourist satisfaction and continuously refine integration strategies to ensure they are effective and responsive (Lueng et al., 2018). Adopting best practices from these international models supports cultural authenticity and economic inclusiveness, fostering a tourism model that empowers local communities and enriches the visitor experience (Rahman & Baddam, 2021). Positioning informal traders as integral contributors to tourism landscape in South Africa, can create a dynamic and culturally immersive environment that benefits tourists, local communities, and the broader economy.

Conclusion

The integration of informal traders into tourism landscape in South Africa presents an invaluable opportunity to create a more inclusive, resilient, and culturally rich tourism sector. Informal traders play a vital role in shaping tourism experience, acting as cultural ambassadors, supporting local economies, and offering unique, personalized interactions that appeal to both domestic and international visitors. However, despite their contributions, informal traders face significant challenges, from restrictive regulations and limited access to resources to social stigmatization and competitive disadvantages. The recommendations provided in this paper advocate for a multi-faceted approach that includes supportive policies, capacity-building programs, stakeholder engagement, and the adaptation of best practices from global models. By recognizing and addressing the needs of informal traders, South

Africa's tourism sector can foster sustainable economic growth that uplifts local communities, preserves cultural heritage, and enhances the visitor experience. Implementing these strategies can establish a tourism model that is both economically equitable and culturally vibrant, ensuring that informal traders are not merely peripheral figures but essential drivers of a sustainable tourism future in South Africa.

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