

Coping Mechanisms and Challenges in Social Protection for Informal Sector Workers in Zimbabwe: Evidence from Glenview Area 8

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Abstract

The informal sector plays a significant role in Zimbabwe's economy, yet it remains largely excluded from formal social protection systems. This article presents the findings from qualitative research conducted in Glenview Area 8, focusing on the challenges informal sector workers face in accessing social protection and the coping mechanisms they employ. The study identifies key challenges such as income irregularity, lack of formal contracts, and the absence of categorization frameworks. Workers often rely on informal networks like *mukando* (rotating savings clubs) and income diversification strategies to mitigate financial risks. However, these mechanisms lack the sustainability needed to address long-term challenges like illness, old age, and economic shocks. The article proposes the Inclusive Social Protection Framework for Informal Sector Empowerment (ISPFISE), which integrates informal mechanisms into formal structures to bridge gaps in social protection. Recommendations are provided to strengthen policy frameworks and improve social protection access for informal workers.

Keywords

Informal Sector, Social Protection, Coping Mechanisms

1. Introduction and Background

The informal sector is an integral part of Zimbabwe's economy, contributing approximately 64% to the national gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) [1]. The informal sector forms the backbone of economies across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), employing about 2 billion workers globally. In Zimbabwe, informal workers face multiple layers of vulnerability limited access to formal social protection, unpredictable incomes, hazardous working conditions, and exclusion from health and welfare systems [2]. Historically, Zimbabwe's social protection systems were designed with formal, white-collar employment in mind, leaving African workers reliant on rural kinship networks or urban community structures [3]. This legacy prevails post-independence, as most social safety nets and benefits remain inaccessible to the fast-growing informal economy [4]. Despite this significant contribution, informal sector workers in Zimbabwe face exclusion from formal social protection mechanisms, including health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pension schemes [5,6]. These workers, often self-employed or casually employed, experience precarious work conditions, irregular incomes, and the absence of formal employment contracts, making it difficult for them to access contributory social protection schemes [7].

The challenges faced by informal workers in Zimbabwe are not unique. In developing countries, informal economies have long been understood as critical to both national economic resilience and as a means for millions of people to make a living. However, these sectors remain outside the reach of most formal social protection systems, largely due to the irregular nature of work and income in the informal economy [8]. This research explores the specific challenges in Zimbabwe, focusing on Glenview Area 8, a community where informal work is prevalent, and examines the coping mechanisms employed by these workers to mitigate the financial risks they face.

Glenview Area 8 in Harare is emblematic of this reality, home to thousands of market vendors, waste pickers, repair technicians, and informal traders. The district is marked by overcrowded housing, limited municipal services, and frequent economic and climate shocks. Workers report exposure to heatwaves, droughts, unreliable electricity, and market disruptions, exacerbating their precarious livelihoods [9]. Recent crises, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, amplified these vulnerabilities. Lockdowns and restrictions disproportionately hurt informal traders by curtailing movement and shutting down markets, while formal relief systems largely bypassed unregistered or uninsured workers [10]. Community-level responses, including informal lending, collective savings associations, and mutual aid groups, became critical survival tools, yet these mechanisms often proved insufficient in the face of large-scale or repeated crises [2].

The urgency to strengthen social protection for this sector is underscored by its scale constituting the majority of employment and by cycles of poverty exacerbated by ill-health, market volatility, and disasters. Current policies, often designed for wage-laborers in the formal economy, struggle to reach or protect informal workers, perpetuating

inequalities and limiting development gains [11]. This study is grounded in the need to both document these gaps and explore homegrown responses, with the aim of informing policy frameworks that are realistic, inclusive, and effective [12].

While global attention has frequently focused on the size and economic contribution of the informal sector, less attention has been paid to the lived experiences of workers on the ground how they navigate unpredictable incomes, exclusion from formal welfare systems, and frequent shocks. In Zimbabwe, chronic macroeconomic instability, currency fluctuations, hyperinflation, and repeated public health crises have worsened conditions for the urban poor [13]. Understanding local realities in Glenview Area 8 offers important insights into both the shortcomings of current social protection approaches and the resilience embedded in informal community networks [3].

1.1 Problem Statement

Current social protection systems in Zimbabwe are not designed to accommodate informal workers, who operate without the security of regular employment or predictable income streams. The reliance on contributory schemes, which require regular payments from both employers and employees, is incompatible with the nature of informal work, where income is often irregular and work contracts are non-existent [4]. As a result, informal workers are left to rely on informal networks and personal savings mechanisms, which are insufficient to protect them from long-term risks such as illness, disability, and old age poverty.

Despite the critical role informal workers play in sustaining households and the broader urban economy, they remain systematically excluded from social protection mechanisms. Challenges such as income irregularity, lack of formal contracts, and absence of labor rights deepen poverty cycles and increase vulnerability to economic shocks, illness, and old age. There is a need for frameworks that integrate and recognize informal coping strategies within more robust, inclusive protection systems [4].

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the specific challenges faced by informal workers in accessing social protection and to explore the coping mechanisms they employ. The research also aims to propose a framework the Inclusive Social Protection Framework for Informal Sector Empowerment (ISPFISE) that integrates informal mechanisms into formal structures, providing a pathway for improving social protection access in the informal sector.

- To examine the specific challenges that informal sector workers in Glenview Area 8 face in accessing social protection;
- To document and analyze the coping mechanisms employed at both individual and community levels;
- To propose the Inclusive Social Protection Framework for Informal Sector Empowerment (ISPFISE), which seeks to formally recognize and incorporate informal support systems into the broader social protection fabric.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on social protection in developing economies, particularly focusing on Zimbabwe's informal sector. The insights gained from the Glenview Area 8 case study offer valuable lessons for policymakers aiming to create more inclusive social protection frameworks that reflect the realities of informal workers. By proposing the ISPFISE model, this research offers practical solutions for integrating informal coping mechanisms into formal social protection systems. The findings contribute directly to policy debates about how to close the gap between formal policy frameworks and the lived practices of millions of urban Zimbabweans [3]. Furthermore, the proposed ISPFISE framework serves as a pathway for integrating informal, self-organized welfare systems with state-led initiatives, increasing coverage, efficiency, and social equity [4].

2. Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research design, focusing on the experiences of informal sector workers in Glenview Area 8, Harare. A case study approach was chosen to gain a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by informal workers in a specific context, allowing for an in-depth exploration of both individual and community-level coping mechanisms [14]. Purposive sampling was used to select 11 informal workers from various sectors such as carpentry, street vending, and tailoring. Additionally, five key informants from institutions such as the National Social Security Authority (NSSA) and the Department of Social Development were interviewed. The selection of participants was guided by their relevance to the research objectives and their engagement in informal economic activities in Glenview Area 8 [6].

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the personal challenges and coping mechanisms employed by individual workers, while the focus groups facilitated discussions about collective strategies and community-level responses. This combination of methods provided rich, qualitative data on the challenges of accessing social protection in the informal sector [15]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Zimbabwe, and the research adhered to the university's guidelines for ethical research involving human subjects [6].

3. Results

The study identified several critical challenges faced by informal workers in accessing social protection. These challenges were categorized into three major themes: income irregularity, lack of formal contracts, and reliance on informal mechanisms.

3.1 Income Irregularity

One of the most significant challenges highlighted by participants was the irregular nature of their income. Many informal workers reported that their earnings varied daily, depending on the availability of work, market conditions, and seasonal factors. For instance, street vendors explained that they earned more during specific periods, such as holidays, but experienced prolonged periods of low income during off-seasons. This income instability made it difficult for them to contribute regularly to social protection schemes, such as voluntary pensions offered by the NSSA.

Interview data overwhelmingly highlighted erratic and uncertain incomes as a core feature of informal sector work. One vendor described their reality:

"Some days you sell a lot, then next day, nothing. You can't really plan. Sometimes my children miss school because we have no money for the bus."

This unpredictability contributed to chronic stress and often meant that savings were quickly depleted during slow periods or emergencies. Another participant noted:

"Work is like fishing sometimes you pull, there is something, sometimes only old plastic which brings nothing. How do you budget for your family on this?"

Seasonal shocks, such as rainy seasons or heatwaves, further depressed earning opportunities, intensifying the risk of hunger or forced borrowing [2]. Women, in particular, reported that caregiving responsibilities and restricted mobility further limited their earning potential [8]. This irregularity also extended to other sectors. For example, carpenters reported that their income was highly dependent on demand, which fluctuated due to economic conditions. The absence of a stable income stream meant that they could not commit to making regular contributions to health insurance or pension schemes [13].

3.2 Lack of Formal Contracts

The absence of formal contracts was another significant challenge. Many informal workers operate in environments where employment relationships are either casual or non-existent. One mechanic explained:

"Even if I fix ten cars this month, there is no paper to show I am employed. If I get sick, who can help me? No one."

A female domestic worker echoed this concern:

"The lady I work for pays when she likes. If I complain, she says, 'then go home.' Who will follow up? No contract, nothing to protect us."

For example, domestic workers and small-scale traders typically engage in short-term or ad-hoc agreements with their employers or clients, leaving them without the legal documentation required to access formal social protection schemes [7]. Such informality precluded eligibility for social insurance, unemployment benefits, or legal recourse in the event of accidents or wage disputes. Workers shared that without documentation, they were "invisible" to both government and NGOs offering relief, even during crisis periods like lockdowns [9]. Participants explained that the lack of contracts also exposed them to exploitation, including delayed or non-payment of wages, which further compounded their financial instability. Without a formal contract, it was difficult for these workers to seek legal recourse or claim benefits such as paid leave or compensation for workplace injuries [15].

3.3 Reliance on Informal Mechanisms

Faced with the challenges of income irregularity and the lack of formal contracts, many informal workers in Glenview Area 8 relied on informal savings and social security mechanisms. *Mukando*, a form of rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA), was the most commonly cited coping mechanism. Participants explained that they contributed small amounts of money to a group pool, with members taking turns receiving the full amount. While *mukando* provided short-term financial relief, it was not sufficient to cover long-term needs such as medical emergencies, disability, or retirement. Participants also noted that these informal mechanisms were limited by the financial capacity of their members, making it difficult to scale up or provide comprehensive protection [16].

Coping strategies centered on informal safety nets, including family and community lending circles, savings groups (known locally as "marounds"), and mutual aid societies. A market vendor recounted;

"If my child falls sick, I ask my maround group for help. Everyone gives a little. This is our insurance."

A trader spoke to the limitations:

"We help each other, but sometimes all of us have problems at the same time. Then you see how thin the blanket is."

Others described how collective groups negotiate with authorities to resist market demolitions or lobby for basic services.

"Recently, we stood together to stop them from closing the market. Alone, they ignore you, but as a group, at least you are heard."

While these mechanisms offer some protection, workers repeatedly expressed their inadequacy in the face of protracted crises:

"The maround works for small troubles, but during COVID? It was not enough. We needed help from outside government, anyone. But nothing came."

The research findings highlight the significance of informal safety nets, such as family and community lending circles, savings groups (referred to as "marounds"), and mutual aid societies, in providing support during crises. Participants shared personal experiences, illustrating how these groups serve as a form of insurance, especially in emergencies like a child's illness. However, the limitations of these strategies became evident when collective struggles arose; members noted that simultaneous hardships can stretch their resources thin. Moreover, the ability of these groups to advocate for their rights, such as resisting market closures or demanding basic services, demonstrates the power of collective action. Yet, despite these strengths, respondents expressed a sense of inadequacy when faced with larger crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They emphasized that while informal support works for minor troubles, it falls short during significant challenges, highlighting a critical need for external assistance that was largely absent during such times.

4. Discussion

4.1 Challenges in Extending Formal Social Protection

The findings from the Glenview Area 8 provide a critical examination of the persistent structural barriers that hinder informal workers from accessing formal social protection systems. These barriers are not unique to Zimbabwe; they reflect global trends in the informal sector where workers often find themselves marginalized and excluded from essential protections. Workers in Zimbabwe face significant challenges, including income irregularity, the absence of formal contracts, and exclusion from contributory schemes. Such conditions resonate with existing literature that underscores the inadequacies of traditional social protection models for individuals who do not conform to conventional employment structures.

Informal workers in Zimbabwe grapple with a myriad of issues that prevent them from enjoying the benefits of formal social protection. The irregular nature of their incomes makes it challenging for them to contribute to social security systems, which are typically designed for individuals with stable, predictable earnings [8]. The lack of formal contracts exacerbates this situation, as these contracts are often prerequisites for accessing various forms of social protection. Without the documentation that formal employment provides, informal workers are frequently excluded from contributory schemes that could offer them safety nets in times of need [11]. This exclusion is in line with broader discussions in the literature on informal economies, which highlight the inadequacies of traditional social protection frameworks. These frameworks often rely on the premise of regular employment, leaving informal workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force in many developing economies, without the necessary protections [13]. The challenges faced by these workers in Zimbabwe mirror those encountered globally, illustrating a pressing need for reforms in social protection systems that can accommodate the realities of informal work.

In the absence of formal social protection, informal workers in Zimbabwe often resort to community-based coping mechanisms. One such mechanism is the concept of "mukando," which refers to collective saving practices within communities. These informal systems allow workers to pool resources to mitigate financial risks and provide short-term relief during times of crisis [12]. While these strategies can be effective in addressing immediate financial needs, they fall short in providing long-term solutions for critical issues such as retirement savings or health insurance. As noted in the literature, while community-based mechanisms like "Mukando" offer some degree of short-term relief, they are inherently inadequate for tackling long-term challenges. The lack of scalable, formal protection mechanisms leaves informal workers vulnerable to financial shocks, health crises, and other unforeseen circumstances. Without robust safety nets, these workers may find themselves in precarious situations, unable to access necessary support when it is most needed.

The findings from the Glenview Area 8 study reveal entrenched mismatches between existing welfare systems and the specific needs of informal workers. Formal social protection systems are predominantly designed around the assumptions of regular incomes, verifiable employment, and comprehensive documentation [11]. This framework effectively excludes a vast majority of informal workers, who do not fit into these rigid categories. As a result, they are left without access to critical resources that could enhance their social and economic stability. Additionally, the digital divide presents another layer of complexity [14]. Many informal workers lack access to the necessary technology and digital literacy to engage with formal social protection systems, which are increasingly moving online. Administrative complexities also serve as a barrier, making it difficult for informal workers to navigate the processes required to gain

access to available protections. Furthermore, the lack of proactive outreach by state agencies compounds these challenges, as many workers are simply unaware of the options available to them.

Efforts to extend social protection coverage to informal workers often falter due to various challenges. High operational costs associated with administering programs can deter governments from implementing inclusive measures [15,7]. Additionally, low awareness among target groups about the existence of these programs impedes participation. Mistrust of officialdom further complicates the situation, as many informal workers may be skeptical of government initiatives based on previous experiences or perceptions. The fractured policy response during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has exposed the limitations of current models of social protection. Relief funds that were intended to support workers often failed to reach those in greatest need, highlighting significant gaps in the delivery of assistance. This situation underscores the urgent need for intersectional and participatory approaches in the design and implementation of social protection systems. It is essential to engage informal workers in the conversation to ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are met.

The challenges in extending formal social protection to informal workers in Zimbabwe reflect broader global issues that require urgent attention and reform. The findings from the Glenview Area 8 study highlight the structural barriers that prevent these workers from accessing essential protections, as well as the reliance on inadequate community-based coping mechanisms. The mismatches between existing welfare systems and the needs of informal workers, compounded by operational and awareness challenges, further complicate efforts to provide effective support.

4.2 The Role of Informal Mechanisms

Community-based savings and support groups play a crucial yet largely unrecognized role in cushioning individuals and families against financial shocks while fostering resilience within communities. These informal associations, often built on trust and mutual support, can provide immediate financial assistance during times of need, such as illness, job loss, or unexpected expenses [3]. However, their coverage is often patchy, meaning that not all community members have equal access to these resources. Additionally, the capacity of these groups can be easily overwhelmed during systemic or protracted crises, such as economic downturns or natural disasters, leaving many vulnerable individuals without adequate support [10,16].

To enhance their effectiveness, there is a pressing need to formally integrate these community-based mechanisms into broader social safety nets, while also respecting their autonomy. This integration would recognize the valuable role these groups play and ensure they are not undermined by more bureaucratic systems [8,5]. By offering group-based relief, collective bargaining avenues, and psycho-social support, informal associations could act as essential bridges between state and social insurance schemes and households at risk. However, for this potential to be realized, these groups must be adequately supported and linked to formal policy instruments that enhance their capacity and reach.

While community-based systems like mukando and other informal savings frameworks provide crucial immediate financial relief, they cannot fully substitute for formal social protection systems. The limitations of these informal mechanisms become evident during prolonged crises, where the scale of need exceeds the capacity of local groups. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the importance of a more integrated approach that combines the strengths of informal mechanisms with the security and stability offered by formal social protection schemes [10].

The proposed Integrated Social Protection Framework for Informal Savings and Employment (ISPFISE) model addresses the existing gap by incorporating informal savings systems into formal social protection frameworks. This model envisions a collaborative relationship where informal savings groups are recognized as vital components of a comprehensive social protection strategy. For instance, the ISPFISE model could enable workers to contribute irregular amounts to a government-managed social protection fund, with these contributions supplemented by matching funds from the state. This approach would not only provide a safety net for informal workers but also encourage savings behavior and financial literacy within communities. By allowing for irregular contributions, the model accommodates the unpredictable income patterns typical of informal work, making it more accessible for those who might otherwise be excluded from formal systems. Additionally, the matching funds from the state would serve as an incentive, encouraging greater participation and investment in the social protection system.

5. Policy Implications

The findings suggest that Zimbabwean policymakers need to rethink the structure of social protection for informal workers. Traditional contributory models, which require regular payments from both employers and employees, are not feasible for workers with fluctuating incomes. Instead, policymakers should consider non-contributory or flexible contributory models that allow workers to contribute when they can, without the expectation of regular payments [13].

The ISPFISE model offers a potential solution to these challenges. By integrating informal mechanisms into formal systems, the model could provide informal workers with the flexibility they need while ensuring that they have access to essential protections such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pensions [6]. This approach would also require the government to invest in public awareness campaigns to educate informal workers about their rights and the availability of voluntary social protection schemes.

The policy implications developed are as follows;

- The research supports the development of an Inclusive Social Protection Framework for Informal Sector Empowerment (ISPFISE), emphasizing:
- Recognition of informal organizations (savings groups, marounds, traders' unions) as legitimate actors in welfare provision.
- Flexible eligibility criteria that do not depend solely on formal employment status or contracts.
- Public-private partnerships to foster linkages between informal and formal insurance schemes, encouraging gradual formalization without punitive measures.
- Community-driven mapping to identify vulnerable households and enable quicker, more accurate targeting during crises.
- Tailored communication and outreach programs using local languages and channels already trusted by informal workers.
- Gender-sensitive programming that accounts for unpaid care burdens and gender-specific vulnerabilities in the informal sector.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant challenges that informal sector workers in Zimbabwe face in accessing formal social protection, particularly income irregularity, lack of formal contracts, and reliance on informal coping mechanisms. The findings from Glenview Area 8 confirm that while community-based mechanisms like *mukando* provide short-term relief, they are inadequate for addressing long-term risks such as health crises, disability, and old age poverty.

To address these challenges, the article proposes the Inclusive Social Protection Framework for Informal Sector Empowerment (ISPFISE), which integrates informal savings mechanisms into formal social protection systems. The model provides a flexible, scalable solution that allows workers to contribute based on their income availability, supplemented by state support. This approach offers a pathway toward more inclusive and sustainable social protection for Zimbabwe's informal sector workers. Future research should focus on testing the ISPFISE model in different contexts to assess its scalability and effectiveness in providing long-term protection for informal workers.

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