COVID-19 and street traders in the City of uMhlathuze, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: On responses and adaptation mechanisms

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Abstract: The paper analysed the response and adaptation strategies of informal street traders to the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the City of uMhlathuze, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A total of 30 informal street traders were interviewed using in-depth unstructured interviews as an instrument of data collection. Findings suggest that the informal street traders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by breaking COVID-19 regulations to secure incomes as well as by depending on social grants and saving schemes to survive during the COVID-19 crisis. All these suggest the need for disaster preparedness on the part of the government and relevant stakeholders to protect the informal economy and its immediate beneficiaries in times of crisis like COVID-19. This is pertinent because the informal economy plays an important socioeconomic developmental role for many people living in urban South Africa.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Urban Studies; Urban Economics; Urban Policy; Economics and Development; Hazards & Disasters; Human Geography; Political Geography; Urban Geography

Keywords: COVID-19; Informal street traders; adaption; uMhlathuze municipality

1. Introduction
In December 2019, the world learnt with shock of a virus (Corona Virus Disease 2019 or COVID-19), which resulted in the hospitalization as well as deaths of many people in Wuhan, China (World Health
Organization (2020, 2020). Amid the global outbreak of COVID-19, which continues to terrorize many parts of the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this virus a global pandemic (Shafi et al., 2020; Sharif et al., 2020). At present, a global synopsis on the spread of the virus reveals that approximately 249,477,773 people across the globe have contracted the virus which has claimed nearly 5,047,464 lives with 225,872,366 recoveries, statistics as of 05 November 2021 (Worldometers, 2020).

In Africa, many countries have been affected. In North Africa, Egypt has recorded 335,868 cases, Algeria 207,260 and Morocco 947,191, statistics as of 05 November 2021 (African Arguments, 2020). Furthermore, the African Arguments (2020) reveals that in West Africa, Nigeria has recorded 212,446 cases and Ghana 130,287, while in East Africa, Ethiopia has 366,424 cases and Kenya is at 254,149 cases, statistics as of 05 November 2021. In Southern Africa at the moment, South Africa is topping the list with a massive number of 2,923,054 cases, statistics as of 05 November 2021 (Department of Health, 2020). In response to the increase in the number of cases and like all countries in the world, the South African government announced a nationwide lockdown at midnight on the 26th of March 2020 to curb the spread of the virus (Nyashanu et al., 2020). The lockdown involved stringent regulations that led to the suspension of non-essential economic activities, travel bans and bans on social and religious gatherings (Khambule, 2020).

At a global level, these lockdowns have had serious consequences. For instance, they halted the global economy by disrupting the global value chain system which led to reduced demand and supply of goods and services between countries (Mofijur et al., 2020). This resulted in economic and social consequences such as recessions, retrenchments and food security issues (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2020). For example, in the United States of America, the severity of the pandemic has tilted the stock markets causing oil prices to plummet, affected business, sparked economic policy uncertainty and affected job security (Sharif et al., 2020).

In China, the world’s largest export economy, the outbreak of the pandemic disrupted agricultural export and sparked a panic of a possible shortage of supply of food across the world, which could affect food security (Lin & Zhang, 2020). While in India, the spread of the pandemic added to the economic woes of an economy that was already sluggish, with the manufacturing, agriculture and service sectors being severely affected (Kanitkar, 2020). The economy of Pakistan experienced serious economic losses leading to joblessness and poverty amongst the members of the society (Kouser et al., 2020). Before COVID-19, the Brazilian economy was stagnant, but this was worsened by the pandemic leading to a reduced supply and demand of goods and services and ultimately the shutting down of many businesses and loss of jobs (Lanchimba et al., 2020).

An African economic overview shows that Africa’s economic growth in 2020 was approximately 3.9%, however, due to the outbreak of the pandemic, estimates are that it dropped to around 0.4% (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). In light of the above, many African economies have endured economic difficulties as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ataguba, 2020). For instance, oil-producing countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Ghana and Algeria have seen a significant decline in the demand and supply of oil, resulting in a huge reduction in the crude oil price (Kanu, 2020). The key contributing factors to this dilemma are mainly the travel bans and lockdown restrictions which have prevented the mobility of people causing the demand and supply of oil to tumble significantly (Kanu, 2020; Mueller et al., 2020).

The tourism sector in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and South Africa has also registered severe economic losses (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). The preventative and control measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus such as the closing of borders and travel bans, hugely affected the tourism sector (Janssens et al., 2020; Lone & Ahmad, 2020). This has resulted in massive retrenchments and shutdown of many tourism-related businesses which are vital to the Gross Domestic Growth (GDP), and the creation of mostly seasonal employment opportunities around tourist attractions and destinations (Ataguba, 2020; Lone & Ahmad, 2020). Like many other parts of Africa, the South African economy has also suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the South African economy is mostly dependent on the mining sector, however, the closure of
ports and borders coupled with travel restrictions caused a reduced demand and supply of commodities such as steel, iron ore, coal and many other commodities (Hamann et al., 2020; Janssens et al., 2020; Lone & Ahmad, 2020).

Amongst other economic implications of the pandemic outbreak on the South African economy were the withdrawal of investors, which affected the Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) due to uncertainties on key revenue-boosting projects (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). The implications of all these have been evident from the escalation of industrial retrenchments as a way of curbing the high wage bill (Hamann et al., 2020; Kanu, 2020; Lone & Ahmad, 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused devastating consequences on the informal economy (Lone & Ahmad, 2020). In the South African context, at present, the informal economy employs approximately 3 million people, which is just under 20% of the employment rate in South Africa (The Department of Statistics South Africa, 2020). This means that, as a result of the COVID-19 induced lockdowns, measures, many people in this economic sector were affected (Chitiga-Mabugu et al., 2020; Iwara et al., 2020; Kambule, 2020).

A case in point is Johannesburg, South Africa’s economic hub boasting the biggest population size, in which informal transport operators suffered income losses due to lockdown regulations that prevented the mobility of people and goods (Ojioro et al., 2020). In the City of Tshwane, the prohibition of informal economic activities as a result of stringent lockdown regulations also resulted in an abrupt disruption and losses of income amongst roadside vendors, domestic workers, gardeners and spaza shops operators (Nyashanu et al., 2020). In a similar trajectory, lockdown restrictions also caused profound socioeconomic impacts to informal street traders in the EThekwini (Durban) Metropolitan (WIEGO, 2021). It is approximated that around 97% of informal street traders, 95% of informal market traders and 74% of waste pickers suffered massive income losses at the initial phase of the lockdown restrictions which started in April 2020 (WIEGO, 2021). Despite the relaxation of lockdown regulations around July 2020 by the South African government to allow economic activities, informal street traders in the informal economy of the EThekwini Metropolitan failed to recover and return to their pre-lockdown income levels (Kambule, 2020; WIEGO, 2021).

Many studies have focused on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the informal economy conducted by authors such as (Mofijur et al., 2020; Kanitkar, 2020; Kambule, 2020; Lanchimba et al., 2020; Rogan & Skinner, 2020; Komin et al., 2020; WIEGO, 2021). The highlights provided in the preceding part are intended to demonstrate how and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic had led to socioeconomic impacts on individuals and sections of the urban informal economy across the world. They also illustrate that in most instances, studies tended to focus largely on the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with little attention on the coping and survival mechanisms used by informal economic actors during this period of the pandemic. Therefore, it is against this background that this paper takes a different focus and analyses the response and adaptation mechanisms of actors in the informal economy, specifically informal street traders in the City of uMhlathuze, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This is because no research has analysed how actors in the informal economy, such as street traders have responded to the COVID-19 disaster in the City of uMhlathuze and this provides a gap which this paper occupies. To achieve this, the paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a brief theoretical framework that underpins this study, followed by a discussion of the literature on how actors in the informal economy respond to disasters and then the description of the methodology and lastly, an analysis of the results. In conclusion, the point is made that, COVID-19 pandemic left street traders in the City of uMhlathuze vulnerable and this forced them (street traders) to engage in a variety of strategies, some of which challenged and/or transgressed government regulations.

2. On coping appraisal theory
The coping appraisal theory states that cognitive personal interpretation of stressful events varies from one individual to another (Lowe & Bennett, 2003). As a result, individuals conduct different and independent appraisals which helps them to respond to and cope with stress during traumatic
experiences (So, 2013). The theory advances that stress appraisals which are conducted by individuals during a stressful event, come in two stages, namely the primary and secondary appraisals (Watson & Spence, 2007). The primary appraisal or evaluation focuses on the cognitive interpretation made by an individual in determining the threats, consequences and losses that come with a particularly stressful event (Lowe. & Bennett., 2003; Ruiter et al., 2003). The secondary appraisal stage allows a cognitive process that permits individuals to establish their response and coping methods and mechanisms towards a particularly stressful event (Bippus & Young, 2012).

The theory argues that since the experience of stressful events varies significantly from one person to another, the strategies and mechanisms employed by individuals in responding to and coping with difficulties will also vary. Hence the important process of conducting individual appraisals helps people to establish if they have sufficient personal resources needed to respond to and cope with stress, but also to decide as to whether coping mechanisms are adequate to deal with the stress (Bippus & Young, 2012; Lowe. & Bennett., 2003; So, 2013).

In the context of this paper, the coping appraisal theory is used as a lens to first understand the various survival and coping mechanisms used by individual informal economic actors (people involved in the informal economy, such as street trading in this example) during COVID-19, and secondly to assess the extent to which the coping strategies were successful or not. In this regard, the concept of coping appraisal theory is deployed to solely establish the forms of response and coping strategies instituted by individual street traders in responding to and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is accepted that there could have been other programmes that were put in place by the government to assist people affected by COVID-19, including street traders, however, the focus in this present contribution is on the agency of the street traders themselves. That is, how did the informal economic actors individually assess and respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their operations? It should be remembered that street traders are people who have already taken matters into their own hands to earn a livelihood and mostly without any assistance from the government. Thus, how they individually assessed, responded to and managed a pandemic like COVID-19 and with what success is a justifiable scholarly effort.

Stated differently, the coping appraisal theory is utilised to enhance focus on how the informal economic actors assessed, managed and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two stages (primary and secondary appraisals) of the coping appraisal theory provide a frame of analysis in this paper. This is in terms of establishing survival and coping strategies used by informal economic actors and also examining the vulnerability (whether it increased or decreased) of informal economic actors during the health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. This raises the question, which is addressed in this paper; How and with what result did the informal street traders in the City of uMhlathuze respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions on their street trading operations?

3. The informal economy and response to disasters
The informal economy remains a source of livelihood for more than two billion of the world’s population (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018). However, due to the nature and character of the informal economy, in many instances, it is exposed to risks which makes it vulnerable and disproportionately affected by devastating events. In different parts of the world, people in the informal economy have suffered from and responded to devastating events in various ways. A case in point is the floods that occurred in 2005 in India (Mumbai) which swept away the shops and trading stalls from street traders. As a way of responding to the devastating event, street traders in Mumbai embarked on their self-help by utilizing their key networks and capacity to mobilize resources. Their innovativeness in redesigning and planning spaces through low-cost options such as using natural resources and waste materials to rebuild trading stalls assisted them to relatively recover from the disaster (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018; Lama & Kuipers, 2019; Mendoza & Jara, 2019; Parthasarathy, 2015).
Other well-known devastating events which affected people in the informal economy include the 2009 cyclone in Bangladesh, the 2015 earthquake in Nepal and the 2016 earthquake in Ecuador. These caused massive disruptions to the informal economy and destroyed infrastructures such as trading stalls and power supply. The response by informal economic actors to those events was outside of the government legislative framework for disaster management and response. Through community initiatives and volunteerism, participants in the informal economy responded to these events by partnering with civic bodies such as religious organizations to galvanize aid needed to revive and refurbish structures as well as operational capital for informal traders (Chatterjee & Okazaki, 2017; Lama & Kuipers, 2019; Mendoza & Jara, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2015).

Meanwhile, in Thailand (Phuket), informal tourism enterprises are prone to devastating events (natural disasters) such as floods, landslides and forest fires. The monsoon season often causes devastating effects to seasonal informal traders, particularly in the tourism industry. Due to the seasonal occurrence of such devastating events, informal tourism enterprises in Phuket have established social capital networks that exist between family members and friends as well as social capital networks that exist between informal tourism enterprises and community groups. Through the established social capital networks, informal traders in the tourism sector of Phuket have come up with a strong capacity and network which enables them to respond and adapt to devastating events without the involvement of government institutions (Biggs et al., 2012; Hallegatte et al., 2020; Whittaker et al., 2015).

In Africa, with specific reference to South Africa; devastating events (natural disasters) such as floods and veld fires are a common phenomenon (Davis-Reddy et al., 2017). The occurrence of these natural disasters has caused varying impacts to infrastructure, livelihoods and property (Huyssteen et al., 2013). For instance, in 2000, 2010 and 2011, floods in Thulamela, a rural area in Limpopo (South Africa) and many other areas, affected the livelihoods of people involved in the informal economy when various trading stalls and informal markets were submerged by water (Khandlhela & May, 2006; Musyoki et al., 2016). In another incident in Cape Town (Langa, Joe Slovo informal settlement) in 2005, a fire ravaged the informal settlement including various types of informal businesses such as spaza shops (Luthango et al., 2017).

Similarly, floods have disrupted the livelihoods of informal economic actors like waste pickers in an informal settlement in the outskirts of Durban in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (Williams et al., 2019). In all these instances, the response to devastating events and the restoration of informal economic activities by South Africa's informal economic actors has been reliant on the social networks which informal businesses have established amongst themselves, including the involvement of civic organizations who averted humanitarian support to affected informal economic actors (Luthango et al., 2017; Musyoki et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019). This brief review of literature on the informal economy and responses to devastating events such as natural disasters are important to this paper to the extent that it provides a context for engaging with how the street traders in the City of uMhlathuze have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The point being made here is that, understanding how people in the informal economy in different parts of the world or South Africa for that matter have responded to other devastating events provides a necessary analytical context in engaging with the case of the street traders in uMhlathuze municipality and how and to what extent they have managed the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The starting point in assessing the street traders’ response in the City of uMhlathuze to the COVID-19 pandemic is to understand what similar actors in other parts of Africa and South Africa have done. For example, in Ghana, informal street traders particularly women disregarded lockdown regulations and continued operating their businesses (Akuoko et al., 2020). Similarly, in Nigeria, informal traders responded to the COVID-19 disaster in defiance of lockdown regulations (Onyishi et al., 2020). This involved operation of household-based informal businesses which transgressed lockdown regulations (Cotula, 2020; Onyishi et al., 2020). These transgressions were a clear
indication of the urgency and importance of securing livelihoods to ensure that informal street traders continue to meet their needs and support their families (Durizzo et al., 2020; Kanitkar, 2020).

In the case of South Africa, responding to the devastating socioeconomic challenges caused by COVID-19, informal street traders have employed various strategies which include both legal and illegal survival strategies (Otiendo et al., 2020). For instance, in their quest to get the informal economy into full operation amid the stringent lockdown regulations, informal street traders in South Africa successfully lobbied the government to ease lockdown regulations to allow informal street traders to operate their businesses (Rogan & Skinner, 2020; The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2020). Part of their success included the permission of spaza shops to operate but sell only essential household grocery items such as milk, rice, maize meal, bread, cooking oil and many other grocery items (Megersa K, 2020; WIEGO, 2021). Selling alcohol and cigarettes, however, was prohibited (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2020). The successful lobbying by informal street traders in South Africa also resulted in hot-food traders such as local restaurants being permitted to operate during lockdown (Rogan & Skinner, 2020; WIEGO, 2021).

In a series of meetings, the South African government and informal economy lobby groups agreed on a social support initiative which saw informal street traders from across many parts of the South African informal economy receiving food parcels that contained basic grocery items such as maize meal, rice, flour, sugar and many other related items (Otiendo et al., 2020; WIEGO, 2021). Other informal economic actors such as waste-pickers in various dumping sites across South Africa received food vouchers or electronic instant cash transfers (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2020; Rogan & Skinner, 2020; WIEGO, 2021). Notwithstanding that these were temporary or short term arrangements, it is worth noting that the initiatives added value in mitigating hunger amongst many informal street traders (Nyashanu et al., 2020; Rogan & Skinner, 2020; WIEGO, 2021).

In the City of Johannesburg, informal street traders of second-hand clothing took the initiative to approach the Gauteng Department of Economic Development to get permission to operate at De Villiers Street (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2020). They tabled a proposal of alternating shifts amongst themselves to ensure that in the process of securing a living, they also adhered to lockdown regulations such as social distancing (Otiendo et al., 2020; The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2020). This background on the informal economy and response to devastating events such as COVID-19 is important because it provides a context for the present contribution, which examines how the informal traders responded to COVID-19 in the City of uMhlathuze. In other words, the overarching question which guides this paper is; what and how successful were the responses and adaptation mechanisms of informal street traders to the COVID-19 pandemic in the City of uMhlathuze, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa?

4. Materials and methods

The City of uMhlathuze is located under King Cetshwayo District Municipality in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It is an economic hub of both King Cetshwayo District Municipality and the entire Province of KwaZulu-Natal, boasting massive industrial developments which are the drivers of economic growth locally and abroad. The City of uMhlathuze consists of four townships namely Esikhaleli, Nseleni, Vulindlela, Ngwelezane and two major towns namely Empangeni and Richards Bay. In terms of data collection, in-depth unstructured interviews were used as an instrument to collect qualitative data. A total of 30 informal street traders in the City of uMhlathuze were interviewed in the four townships of Esikhaleli, Vulindlela, Ngwelezane, Nseleni, and major towns that is, Richards Bay and Empangeni. Due to stringent regulations that prohibited movements of people and economic activities, these informal street traders were interviewed 3 days before the commencement of the lockdown which began at midnight on the 26th of March 2020 and that is the 24th—26th of March 2020. Further interviews were held between the 1st and 11th of April 2020, after the relaxation of national lockdown laws.
as applicable to the urban informal economic activities. In terms of the interview reschedule, research participants were interviewed on one-on-one basis. The interview sessions with each participant were structured in terms of three phases, namely; introduction, body and closing remarks. For instance, the first phase was the introduction part which allowed the researchers to make introductory remarks at the beginning of each research session with each participant. The second phase involved outlining the type of questions that the participants needed to answer. In the last phase, the researchers, emphasized that participation was voluntary, and explained the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant.

Since qualitative methods are exploratory (Creswell, 2014), unstructured in-depth interviews were utilised, which allowed street traders to share their experiences, knowledge, understanding, beliefs, views and perceptions about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their livelihoods. The rationale of opting for unstructured in-depth interviews was informed by the need to establish a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on the socioeconomic livelihoods of street traders. The main questions on which in-depth interviews focused were among others, the types of business they operated, the impact of COVID-19 on their operations and by extension livelihoods, operations or lack of the same during the lockdown, implications of the relaxation of the regulations, coping strategies during lockdown period and forms of assistance and interventions which they may require in future should similar pandemics occur.

Detailed responses from street traders assisted this paper to have a deeper understanding of the diverse response and adaptation mechanisms employed by actors in the informal economy during the COVID-19 crisis. Such responses were subjected to a content analysis approach in terms of capturing, interpreting and deriving meaning from textual data. Textual data were coded according to various themes in line with the interview questions. Through this analysis, the paper was able to explore the response and adaptation mechanism used by actors in the informal economy to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In terms of ethical considerations, this study was undertaken according to the South African government COVID-19 Protocols and Regulations detailed in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) GUIDE to planning, preparing for and conducting fieldwork in the context of COVID–19.

5. Lockdown regulations during COVID-19 and adaptation measures by actors in the informal economy

Results show that street traders operated informal businesses ranging from selling and rendering services in the streets of major towns and townships in the study area. These included the selling of fruits and vegetables, cooked food and beverages, clothing items, household cleaning materials, small items such as snacks and sweets, cell phones, car spare parts and electronic services such as fixing of cell phones. These operations reaffirm findings that informal economic activities carried out by street traders in the City of uMhlathuze are multifaceted just like in many other parts of the world (see e.g., Christine, 2015 & Diallo et al., 2017). Another finding in the study area, which resonates with examples from other parts of the world is that participants in the urban informal economy were predominantly women, some of whom are widows and divorcees without any other sources of income and had to provide for many dependents, mainly their orphaned grandchildren (see e.g., Guma, 2015; Kabeer et al., 2013). However, in the context of this present study, two issues need commentary here and these are; first the predominance of women in the street trading business and second why they took care of orphaned grandchildren. On the former, this study confirms that mostly women participate in the informal economy because this is indicative of the economic fault lines which are characterized by gendered economic spaces and structural economic disadvantages in which women are kept out of formal employment (see Kabeer et al., 2013). The latter indicates the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS-related deaths of many young adults whose children have had to be taken care of by their grandparents.
Before the COVID-19 pandemic, findings show that street traders were able to generate incomes through their various trades, despite some of these incomes being below the bracket of the South African Minimum Wage of R3,500. However, due to the recent pandemic which resulted in stringent restrictions imposed by Government, the incomes received by street traders recorded a massive decline. For instance, before the COVID-19 lockdown, street traders were generating incomes between the value of R300 and R800 daily (Interview with street traders, 25 March 2020, Esikhaleini). Spaza shops and local hot food sellers were generating incomes of around R2,500-R7,500 daily (Interview with street traders, 1 April 2020, Ngwelezane; 4 April 2020, Vulindlela). During the lockdown, the majority of the street traders were left without any source of income since their operations were halted by the bans on economic activities. As such, the livelihoods of informal traders in the City of uMhlathuze diminished as a result of the imposed lockdown regulations. Despite the relaxation of the regulations which permitted a category of street traders such as spaza shops and other types of informal street traders to sell essential items such as fruits and vegetables, grocery items and health products, the income was insufficient. Among other things, the restricted mobility of people impacted the low incomes which were realised by the informal economic actors (Interview with street traders, 25 March 2020, Richards Bay). This shows the susceptibility of the urban informal economy (see Akuoko et al., 2020; Kanitkar, 2020; Whittaker et al., 2015) and resonates with what happened in other parts of the world before and after the pandemic (see Biggs et al., 2012; Durizzo et al., 2020; Onyishi et al., 2020) based on the fact that participants in this economy lack social protection and adequate social safety nets (see “Altamirano,” 2017; Hallegatte et al., 2020). To reiterate, the loss of incomes by the informal economic actors in the City of uMhlathuze firstly confirms the vulnerability of the urban informal economy to socioeconomic risks and stress; secondly, it demonstrates the reality of lack of policy prepositions that seek to provide both social protection and sustainable social safety nets to the urban informal economy and informal economic actors (see e.g., Altamirano, 2017; Nyashanu et al., 2020).

In an attempt to respond to or even recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, some spaza shops started selling liquor and cigarettes (products that were banned by lockdown restrictions) in a bid to increase profits and incomes. This invited regular raids of such spaza shops and confiscation of liquor and cigarettes by the South African Police Services and South African National Defence Force, which aggravat...
These transgressions by informal economic actors in the City of uMhlathuze resonates with the examples of Ghana and Nigeria, in which informal economic actors simply defied COVID-19 induced restrictions. For example, in Ghana, informal street traders particularly women disregarded lockdown regulations and continued operating their businesses (see Akuoko et al., 2020). Similarly, in Nigeria, informal traders responded to the COVID-19 disaster by defying lockdown regulations (see Onyishi et al., 2020). This involved operation of household-based informal businesses which transgressed lockdown regulations (see Cotula, 2020). These transgressions were a clear indication of the urgency and importance of securing livelihoods to ensure that informal street traders continue to meet their needs and support their families (see Durizzo et al., 2020; Kanitkar, 2020). In all this and as indicated in the preceding part, it is evident that the informal economic actors are vulnerable to disasters (see Nyashanu et al., 2020) and this is why they resort to illegal, if not desperate survival strategies, whenever calamity and crisis strikes (see Akuoko et al., 2020; Onyishi et al., 2020).

Beyond the survival strategies which transgressed the law, street traders in the City of uMhlathuze also relied on savings schemes. These are various forms of stokvels\(^5\) constituted of individuals, groups and families for purposes of building a network and capacity to save monthly contributions as per their determination. Some of these stokvels give their members cash at the end of the year. In other cases, the stokvels allow its members to make monthly contributions of an amount that is following their determination and the benefits, in this case, came in form of grocery items (Interview with street traders, 26 March 2020, Empangeni; Interview with street traders, 24 March 2020, Nseleni; Interview with street traders, 4 April 2020, Ngwelezane). Similarly, these examples resonate with the survival and coping mechanisms employed by informal economic actors in Thailand during times of economic shocks (see Biggs et al., 2012; Hallegatte et al., 2020; Whittaker et al., 2015). For instance, informal economic actors (informal tourism enterprises) in Thailand (Phuket) established social capital networks between family members and friends. Through these established social capital networks, informal traders in the tourism sector of Phuket established a strong capacity and network which enabled them to respond and adapt to devastating events without the involvement of government institutions.

The resonance of the cases of uMhlathuze and Thailand suggests that indeed social networks are an integral part of the urban informal economy. Equally so, it also reveals the fault lines and lack of adequate socioeconomic intervention by the government in as far as keeping the urban informal economy and informal economic actors afloat during periods of socioeconomic shocks. Those informal street traders who neither had stokvels nor could manage to defy the lockdown restrictions and were predominantly old widowed women used various forms of social grants provided by the South African government in place of their closed street trading businesses. The various forms of social grants include grants for elderly people, disability grants, foster care grants and child supports grants. Evidence gathered from the interviews with street traders indicated that social grants as income alternatives used to compensate budget deficits due to the suspension of economic activities under the lockdown regulations were not always enough to support families (Interview with street traders, 4 April 2020, Ngwelezane; Interview with street traders, 26 March, 2020 and 06 April 2020, Richards Bay).

Viewing these research findings within the prism of the coping appraisal theory (primary and secondary appraisals), we see that, all street traders assessed the COVID-19 pandemic to be an extraordinary disaster that required them to use both legal and illegal strategies to survive. The sentiments of the street traders suggest that the COVID-19 disaster left them vulnerable, and to at least reduce this vulnerability, they had to engage in survival strategies that included selling prohibited goods and also defying law enforcement agents. Further, poor and lack of planning in terms of preparing and mitigating risks associated with COVID-19 appeared to be a factor that contributed to increased liabilities incurred by informal street traders. This resulted in a higher probability of vulnerability by informal street traders and the almost desperate measures by these actors.
Thus, there were no liability reduction plans to mitigate risks and reduce the susceptibility of the livelihoods of the informal street traders. Instead, measures implemented to salvage the livelihoods of informal street traders were a pure reaction to the emergency that prevailed since the first COVID-19 case was discovered in South Africa. The income losses incurred by informal traders pushed them to become more vulnerable than before leading them to engage in some desperate and unlawful income-generating activities such as selling banned products like liquor and cigarettes. Differently stated, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the informal street traders assessed that they were in big trouble. To survive the disaster, they had to resort to combining legal and illegal operations and/or strategies to survive.

6. Conclusion

To respond to the aim of the paper, which was to analyse how and to what extent individual street traders (informal economic actors) responded to and coped with COVID-19, this paper concludes that the response and coping mechanisms were inadequate and less successful in avoiding economic losses. In this sense, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has once again reminded us about the vulnerability of the informal economy and the unsustainability of the livelihoods of the people involved in it. This provides an opportunity at an institutional level, specifically municipalities and other government institutions to come up with mechanisms to help people (informal economic actors) respond effectively and efficiently to socioeconomic shocks such as COVID-19. This could include the establishment of area-based database information of informal economic actors per area. The essence of this is first; to try to quantify informal economic actors per area and secondly, to take stock of the nature of informal economic activities. This exercise will help government institutions (municipalities and departments) to have a sound diagnosis and precise response measures which will be per the needs of informal economic actors during socioeconomic shocks. On the other hand, mechanisms by institutions at an operational level could also include the allocation of resources for capacitating informal economic actors with training and education on strategies around responding to crises and/or other financial shocks. For instance, the focus could be on equipping informal actors with business management skills such as financial planning, budgeting, decision making and business strategy formulation. All this could articulate to a comprehensive proactive emergency response framework that identifies, mitigates, responds and enables individuals to recovery from any identified risks. Likewise, at the local government level, the findings of this paper point to an urgent need to reinforce the institutional emergency management systems from emergency preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery. In this case, the focus could be on organizing and setting a proper structure that oversees and defines processes, allocation and definition of duties, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation. In the final analysis, these findings present an opportunity for government and policymakers to look closely at policies and strategies which can be implemented to strengthen the capacities of informal economic actors in terms of ensuring that their livelihoods are sustainable and resilient. This will help in the establishment of a strong and resilient informal economy in South Africa that is capable to withstand any eventualities of social and economic shocks.

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Notes
1. Stockvel refers to an informal retail outlet selling a variety of household grocery items which operates within a space zoned for residential purpose such as townships (Tengeh & Mukwarami, 2017).
2. In the South African context, stockvels are defined as organized informal saving groups which makes fixed monthly contributions of a certain amount of money for a certain duration, in most instances for
a month. The savings are either shared as cashbacks or in the form of bulk groceries which are shared amongst members (Lappeman et al., 2019).

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