

## ARTICLE

# *It was better before COVID: The impact of the social relief of distress grant on the lives and livelihoods of South African day labourers in Tshwane*

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## Abstract

Persistent high unemployment in South Africa rendered many in the informal economy structurally vulnerable to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The social relief of distress (SRD) grant was a government attempt to alleviate the pandemic's fallout. Given the lack of scholarly information on the impact and reach of the SRD grant within the informal economy, particularly on day labourers, this study investigates the impact of the SRD grant on the lives and livelihoods of South African day labourers in Tshwane, South Africa. The study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising in depth interviews, transcription, inductive qualitative coding and thematic analysis. Many day labourers could not access the SRD grant due to, for example the loss or absence of identity documents, and/or lack of Internet access and information on the application process. For those who received it, some pressure relating to the cost of transport and basic needs was alleviated. Occasionally, day labourers use it to supplement other funds to acquire specialised tools. Importantly, the grant was not a disincentive to continue their work-seeking activities. The findings question the effectiveness of policy responses to economic crises within the informal sector.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION AND AIM

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disastrous exogenous economic and social shock to the world economy, tearing through the lives and livelihoods of millions around the developed and developing world, including South Africa (Dzawanda et al., 2021). It impeded the functioning of the formal labour market and crippled the informal labour market (Stats SA [Statistics South Africa], 2023).

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In the formal economy, the second and third quarters of 2020 saw 2.2 million jobs lost. In the informal sector, approximately 640,000 employment opportunities have been wiped out (Stats SA, 2020). These statistics are even graver given the fact that South Africa's macro-economic context is already one of extreme levels of persistently high unemployment – forcing many individuals to turn to self-employment (through entrepreneurship) or informal wage employment (e.g. day labourers) for their livelihoods (Mahadea & Kaseeram, 2018; Theodore et al., 2015, 2017, 2018).

Furthermore, these figures articulate the *ex ante* position of vulnerability of many participants in South Africa's informal economy. Many informal sector participants are structurally vulnerable to exogenous shocks of this nature as they have very few reserves to fall back on during times of economic crisis (Khan, 2021). Day labourers who endure high levels of unemployment and variable and uncertain income levels (Theodore et al., 2015, 2018) also fall into this category. Lockdown restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus meant that day labourers could not go out and search for work. The loss of employment opportunities left these men, women and their dependents in positions of extreme precarity (Blaauw et al., 2021, 2022). The government responded with several policy initiatives to alleviate the impact of the pandemic – with the COVID-19 social relief of distress (SRD) grant notable among these.

The SRD grant was announced on 21 April 2020 by President Cyril Ramaphosa. The grant was initially intended to be paid out for 6 months. At that stage, unemployed South African citizens who did not receive any other kind of government grant, and who were not registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), were candidates for the SRD grant (Devereux, 2021). The SRD grant of ZAR 350 per month worked out to about 10% of the SA minimum wage (that was roughly ZAR 3500 at the time) and only slightly more than 60% of the value of the South African food poverty line that stood at ZAR 561 per month (Business Insider SA, 2020).

The advent of the SRD grant of ZAR 350 heralded hope, but knowledge regarding the grant's reach and impact across informal sector activities such as day labouring is limited and requires urgent research attention. This article addresses this gap by investigating the impact of the SRD grant on the lives and livelihoods of informally employed South African day labourers in Tshwane – within the theoretical framework of Sen's (1999a, 1999b) capability approach (CA). The findings provide important policy and managerial implications for the government's handling of future economic crises and their impact on the informal economy.

The literature review will provide the context and basis for the analysis of the SRD grant's impact within the context of the informal wage economy of day labouring.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Sen's (1999a, 1999b) CA forms the theoretical framework for this study. The CA is a normative framework that may be used to evaluate and assess the decision-making opportunities available to people that could ultimately enhance their quality of life (Robeyns, 2006). Sen argued that it is of the utmost importance to consider what people are actually able to be and do with and in their lives (Wells, n.d.). Therefore, the CA focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve (Wells, n.d.). In practical terms, this can for example relate to every individual's desire to be able to afford an acceptable quality and quantity of food, to be able to communicate, for example reading and writing, having access to a habitable dwelling, and to be able to enjoy a decent and healthy standard of living (Robeyns, 2005).

Sen's CA studies the quality of life concept in terms of two key components, that is 'functionings' and 'capability' (Wells, n.d.). Functionings can be described as states of 'being and doing' such as being well-nourished, and having shelter (Wells, n.d.) – as mentioned above. In terms of this study, the intention is to investigate how the SRD grant may have enhanced the capabilities of the South African day labourers of Tshwane. Another core element of Sen's CA is the concept of 'agency', which relates to the ability or freedom possessed by an individual to formulate and actualise their aspirations.

Whether or not the SRD grant could have had a beneficial impact on the ‘agency’ of participants in casualised employment (i.e. day labourers’) is therefore a further question to be investigated.

Day labour, as a form of casualised employment, is typified by individuals who gather next to petrol stations, in front of DIY stores, or on street corners (respectively referred to as connected or unconnected sites in the literature), in the hope of finding a temporary manual labour job (Schenck & Louw, 2005; Valenzuela, 2003, 2006). These day labour sites offer day labourers opportunities to market their skills and remain in operation for most of the year, including the unforgiving winter months during which construction jobs (and associated day labour demand) diminish.

Many consider day labour as supposedly belonging to an earlier economic period – a part of the labour market that should have diminished after successive industrial revolutions. This has not been the case. The accelerated informalisation within many occupations challenges the notion that day labour will simply dissipate (Theodore et al., 2015). The emergence and proliferation of day labour may partly be explained by the demand for casual workers to complete short-term construction/DIY projects and gardening work (Valenzuela et al., 2006).

Indeed, the continued expansion of flexible work arrangements and the casualisation of employment – observed in developed and developing economies – has structurally altered labour markets (Motala, 2008; Valodia, 2001). Informality in the labour market has expanded since the 1970s and is a common phenomenon in both the low-wage jobs segment and the higher wage segment (Valenzuela, 2003).

Wage discussions are not necessarily conducted at the time of pick up from a day labour site, as noted by Schenck and Louw (2005). Instead, the wage-bargaining process is mostly undertaken on the way to the worksite. As a result of intense rivalry for the available jobs, day labourers frequently do not undertake wage bargaining at all. Where discussions are held at the pick-up point, the wages paid to day labourers do not always match the wages negotiated during the brief conversations that were had with the employer (Mapendere et al., 2019).

These dynamics together form a precarious and vulnerable employment situation, which is further elaborated on below.

### 3 | DAY LABOUR: PRECARIOUS AND VULNERABLE EMPLOYMENT

According to Blaauw et al. (2006), just over 50% of the day labourers they had surveyed in Pretoria in 2004 had been employed in the formal sector at some previous time in their lives. Cyclical downturns and structural developments in the economy resulted in the retrenchment of many of these individuals (Blaauw et al., 2006). The share of day labourers who previously held formal sector jobs was confirmed in other day labour studies in South Africa (see, e.g. Blaauw et al., 2022; Mapendere et al., 2019; Theodore et al., 2015, 2017, 2018).

As the informal labour market operates mostly institutionally unregulated, wage rates are primarily determined daily through fierce worker-versus-worker competition. The bigger the supply of individuals competing for the limited number of available job opportunities, the greater the force working in on the wage rate and keeping it low for all (Theodore et al., 2018).

Employment rates in the day labour market are low. Theodore et al. (2017) found that day labourers in Pretoria were, on average, only able to secure work 1.2 times per week, and that the inconsistency in securing employment is one of the most difficult challenges that these men face. These circumstances ensure that individual day labourers have little, if any, bargaining power to negotiate better pay. Employers will seldom struggle to find someone willing to work at the wage rate they have set due to the oversupply of daily work-seekers, which many employers regard as substitutable, notwithstanding the individual’s skill level (Theodore et al., 2018). This drives reservation wages in the day labour market even lower.

As a result, day labourers experience persistent uncertainty around their earnings whilst having limited options outside of the day labour market (Theodore et al., 2015, 2017). This reality applies to both South African and foreign-born day labourers. Theodore et al. (2017) concluded that

earnings-income growth in the Tshwane day labour market is flat for both local and foreign workers, which results in the pervasiveness of poverty-level earnings across this market (Theodore et al., 2017). Day labourers earning a poverty-level income are necessarily relegated to the realm of the working poor (Valenzuela et al., 2006).

The inconsistent hiring patterns and depressed wages create significant levels of income insecurity for day labourers and negatively impact their ability to prepare in advance for potential economic shocks (Blaauw et al., 2021). This implies that the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant regulations were nothing short of a potential disaster for day labourers.

## 4 | THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

For day labourers, the curtailment of employment and resultant loss of income related to the pandemic, along with the incapacity to prepare for income shocks and highly volatile incomes, present unique challenges. Additionally, they generally lack the skills necessary to secure other types of employment quickly, and most informal jobs lack any form of social protection (Nguimkeu & Okou, 2020).

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the South African labour market (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2021). In response to the economic contraction, many formal businesses had to lay off some of their temporary workers, most of whom were already living under vulnerable socio-economic circumstances and lacking any social security. This resulted, among other things, in a significant drop in the levels of formal and informal employment. Job losses in the informal economy were more extensive in both absolute and relative terms (Rogan & Skinner, 2022).

These effects may not be limited to the short term. Over the medium term, the day labour market is likely to be oversupplied and experience additional pressure because of the large number of individuals who have lost their jobs in the formal labour market. Long-term, this negative effect could worsen as thousands of young people who have been forced to quit school due to the pandemic may have little other legal alternative but to seek employment in the day labour market (Blaauw et al., 2021).

Although the medium- and longer term effects on the day labour market necessitate a longer term longitudinal approach, the short-term impact deserves an immediate research response given the ex ante vulnerabilities of day labourers. Therefore, this study focuses attention on the impact of the SRD grant on the lives and livelihoods of South African day labourers in South Africa's administrative capital metro, that is Tshwane. The research context and research methodology employed for this purpose are discussed next.

## 5 | RESEARCH CONTEXTUALISATION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 | Contextualisation of the study area: the City of Tshwane

The northern region of the Gauteng Province is home to the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, or simply Tshwane. It is one of Gauteng's three metropolitan municipalities, with the City of Tshwane being the largest metro municipality compared to the City of Ekurhuleni and the City of Johannesburg. Tshwane shares boundaries with the provinces of the North-West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo (CoGTA [Cooperative Governance, and Traditional Affairs], 2020, p. 5). The population of Tshwane increased from 2 478 557 in 2007 to 3 555 741 in 2017. This translates to an annual growth rate of 2.92%, twice as high as Gauteng's growth rate or that of the country.

### 5.2 | Research design

To allow for an in-depth inquiry into and understanding of the dynamics pertaining to the informal labour market, this article relies on qualitative research, utilising in-depth semi-structured

interviews with day labourers (Creswell, 2014). Following transcription of and familiarisation with day labourer responses, inductive qualitative coding was applied to transcriptions, utilising Atlas.ti – a qualitative data analysis software. AI coding functionalities were employed to generate initial codes, whereafter codes were checked and further reviewed by the researchers, and themes identified by the researchers, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify patterns or themes within the responses collected during day labour interviews.

### 5.3 | Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through audio-recorded interviews with individual day labourers and groups, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of mostly open-ended questions, along with a few closed questions pertaining to demographics. Open-ended questions are the primary means of information gathering in qualitative interviews, which are frequently referred to as 'conversations with purpose' (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2010). The semi-structured interview schedule (available in Appendix A) enables understanding and insight into day labourers' personal and unique lived experiences. Furthermore, it guarantees that questions are not misunderstood or misinterpreted by participants (Bless et al., 2006).

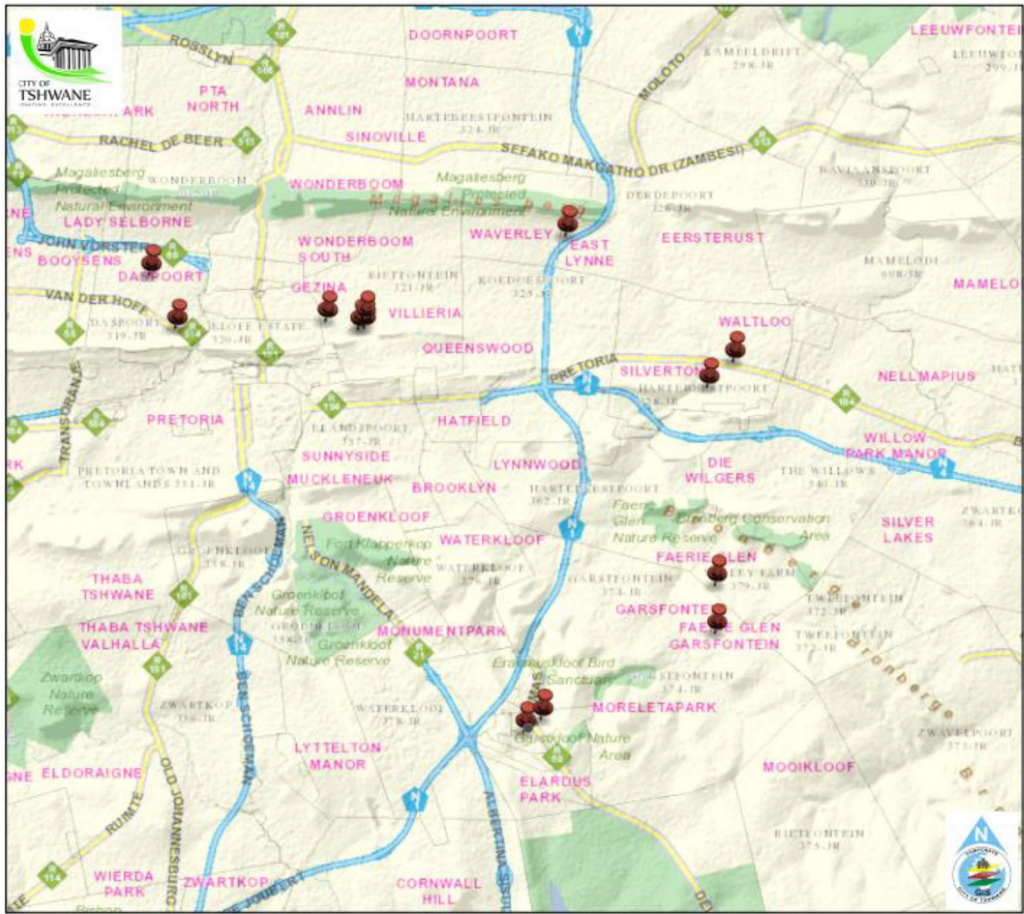
Previous research guided the development of the semi-structured interview schedule (see Blaauw et al., 2018, 2021, 2022; Harmse et al., 2009; Mapendere et al., 2019; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2015; Schenck et al., 2012.; Smith et al., 2021; Theodore et al., 2017, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2006; Xweso et al., 2022).

Interviews were conducted at preselected hiring sites based on previous research on day labourers in Tshwane (see Blaauw et al., 2006, 2018; Harmse et al. 2009; Theodore et al., 2017, 2018) while ensuring a good distribution throughout the city. Purposive sampling of hiring sites ensured 'rich information' was included in the case sample (Mills et al., 2010). In determining the research cohort, convenience sampling accounts for all instances where the fieldworkers might acquire access to the day labourers, given the dynamic way work is secured on the hiring sites (Bless et al., 2006). The convenience sampling method entails choosing potential participants who are accessible and willing to be questioned (Bless et al., 2006). The sample size, that is the number of interviews to be conducted, was determined when the point of data saturation was reached.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across four days in November 2022 and 2 days in March 2023. Although some interviews occurred one-on-one, others were group interviews. Whether an interview was one-on-one or in a group could not be determined beforehand, given the dynamic nature of the work environment in which day labourers were approached (i.e. in the street at various job search sites). Sometimes, a lone day labourer was interviewed one-on-one. At others, a group of day labourers standing at the same job search site was approached, with all of them agreeing to be interviewed. In total, eight group interviews were conducted with a median of 3 day labourers in each group – representing respondents in total. The remainders of the respondents (14) were interviewed individually.

Fieldworkers in the research team were fluent in English, Afrikaans, Setswana and Shona. Where necessary, fieldworkers could thus assist in translating and interpreting questions and answers. However, most participants were comfortable in English, and interviews were conducted mostly in English. Most of the day labourers the research team approached were willing to be interviewed. In total, 40 men<sup>1</sup> were interviewed during the data collection process. The men, aged between 20 and 66, were black Africans from South Africa or Zimbabwe, with a few from Mozambique.<sup>2</sup> The research team conducted interviews and gathered information until subsequent conversations did not yield any new data, that is themes, perceptions or insights (Creswell, 2014).

Figure 1 indicates the day labour sites at which data collection occurred.



**FIGURE 1** Data collection sites, City of Tshwane.

[Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijsp.12997)]

Source: Corporate GIS, 2023.

## 5.4 | Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University (NWU-00659-22-A4). All ethical standards that govern academic socio-economic research were upheld throughout the data collection process. The participants gave their informed consent to assure their free, voluntary involvement. Participants were assured of the opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any moment. The research team ensured that the participants' identities were safeguarded by not recording their identifying information.

The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) yielded the following findings – as discussed below.

## 6 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1 | Overview

Figure 2 presents the concepts cloud which identifies prominent noun phrases from the interview transcriptions. At a glance one sees that aspects such as tools, transport, jobs and the SRD grant were important concepts for participants.



FIGURE 2 ATLAS.ti concepts cloud. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

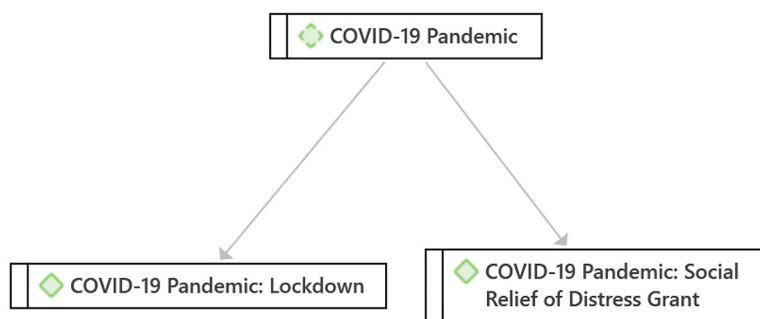


FIGURE 3 ATLAS.ti category code network: COVID-19 pandemic. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## 6.2 | Thematic analysis

Guided by the objective of the research, codes assigned to responses were inspected to determine relevance and further sorted and merged. Flowing from this process, the following themes were identified: COVID-19 pandemic, access and assistance, and economics and employment.

In the following sections, the themes are unpacked as follows: A diagram visualising the theme and its constituent codes is presented. Next, participant quotes are reported and integrated with the relevant discussion and interpretation. Note that, given the context of data collection (busy roads with background noise), interviewers often had to recapitulate participant responses for the sake of accurate audio capture and transcription. Some of the illustrative quotes presented below are therefore interviewer summaries of responses that had been received from the day labourers interviewed.

Figure 3 presents the category code network from the first theme, that is the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 6.2.1 | Theme 1: COVID-19 pandemic

This theme comprised two main codes: *lockdown* and *SRD grant*.

#### COVID-19 pandemic: lockdown

The individuals who participate in the day labour market made it clear that employment prospects are, overall, not what they were before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shuttering of the

economy. These findings align with the work done by Nguimkeu and Okou (2020) and Blaauw et al. (2021).

The following quotes illustrate this vividly:

[Yeah, before pandemic, this situation was created before pandemic because I think all of us, we were doing better before pandemic, but after pandemic, our jobs, only because of that COVID.]

[Yes, but 2010 was a nice place. Yes, always got the job. But now it's getting less, and less and less.]

Some day labourers report that job availability has steadily declined since 2010 – the year in which South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup – continuing this downward trend until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020. In late 2022 and early 2023, with all lockdown restrictions having been lifted, it seemed as though the level of employment opportunities had returned to its pre-pandemic height in some areas. Unfortunately, this was not very high to begin with, and clearly, not all areas have recovered yet. This poses significant downside risk for the capability of day labourers to provide in their basic needs as per Sen's CA. Moreover, access to the SRD grant was not always ensured to day labourers, as discussed below.

#### *COVID-19 pandemic: social relief of distress grant*

The SRD grant was intended to aid those most vulnerable during the pandemic period. Unfortunately, many of the day labourers who were interviewed were impeded in accessing the grant. For example, many men who had been formally working were retrenched during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Those registered for UIF were subsequently disqualified from receiving the SRD grant. The answers below illustrate the various reasons why not all day labourers had access to the SRD grant:

Do you receive the SRD grant? [Yes.] When did you start receiving the grant? [2021.]  
Do you still receive the grant? [Yes.] Where do you receive your grant? [Standard Bank.]  
What do you do with the grant money? [I buy food, and I use it for cleaning.]

Have you guys heard of the SRD grant? Are you South African? [Yes.] But did you get that R350? [No.]

[No, not received]

[Yes, we got it. But now, it has stopped.]

[They said we have to apply again.]

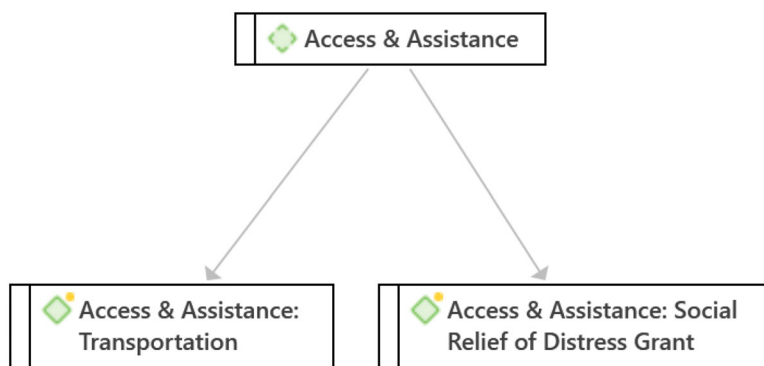
[I, I, got last year; now, I got nothing.]

[I haven't got it now.]

[I got nothing, from April last. I got last year, December, only.]

[I got that money of 350, from 12 months, in 2021. And this 2022, I didn't get anything, even now.]

Although the authors had initially been excited to find day labourers who had received the SRD grant, this feeling soon dissipated as the men continued speaking, reporting that the government aid had



**FIGURE 4** ATLAS.ti category code network: *access and assistance*. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

been short-lived. Shortly after receiving the SRD grant, many day labourers were abruptly cut off and have once more been left to fend for themselves. Some of the men stated that they had, until that day, been unable to access the SRD grant, usually due to an ID issue. Devereux (2021, p. 439) furthermore confirmed that access to the SRD grant was subject to large administrative backlogs. These obstacles are further elaborated on in the second theme identified, namely *access and assistance*.

## 6.2.2 | Theme 2: access and assistance

Figure 4 presents the category code network from the theme 2, that is access and assistance.

This theme also comprised two main codes: *transportation* and *SRD grant*.

### *Access and assistance: transportation*

Even when day labourers live relatively close to the sites where they search for work, transport costs (specifically taxi fare, in this instance) remain a major financial component for these men to consider. The following responses clearly illustrate the transport and other constraints that participants have to consider with regard to this particular informal employment endeavour. Responses are concerning questions on where they live and what it costs to arrive at the particular hiring site:

[Ga-Rankuwa.] [R25 one way.]

[Nelmapius.] [One way, it's R24, R25.]

[R25, one-way.] [Mamelodi]

[Soshanguve, Mamelodi] [R35.]

[you have to sleep here because how can you afford R300+ per week?]

These findings are in accordance with the work done by Rogan and Skinner (2022). Furthermore, the findings speak to the need identified by Harmse et al. (2009) for more transport-oriented data to be collected among day labourers.

These men undertake significant financial risk by simply going out to find work. They search for work 7 days per week, yet successfully secure it only twice per week, on average. Transport costs that range from ZAR 50 to ZAR 70 per day, warrant that these men's opportunity costs add up to

between ZAR 350 and ZAR 490 per week. For the remaining 5 days a week on which these men are unsuccessful in securing work, they are spending money, they do not have on taxi fares, and they will never be able to recoup. Their sunk costs therefore add up to between ZAR 250 and ZAR 350 per week. That is catastrophic, considering that they earn ZAR 700 per week, on average. Most of these men do not have access to cheaper public transport alternatives. Many of these men cannot afford the transport opportunity costs and must sleep at or near the sites where they search for work during the day. These findings concur with the work done by Valenzuela et al. (2006) and Theodore et al. (2015).

Even though day labourers contend that taxis are one of the best modes of transport, they are also fully aware that this is not a cost-wise alternative.

[At the moment, the taxi is the best form of transport because it is faster than like, for example, like a train. It's faster, even if you get a call, you quickly get to the client in time.]

[To my side it's good. I'm using the train. And it's costing R16.50 to and from. It's actually good with the train. Very good.]

[Train.] is [R15. From Mountain View.] [You walk].

[For those who use the train, it's a bit less for them. But my side, there's no train. A lot of people use train.]

[Well, you can use a bicycle if it's not that far to your work. But a bicycle for a long distance; it won't make it. So, the transport, it will just be like this. Maybe worse.]

Some men are forced to walk, starting early in the morning, to seek work. If successful, they need to put in an entire day's work after having had to expend energy just to secure employment for the day. If unsuccessful, they will be forced to walk back home empty-handed. Walking means saving on transport costs – but paying with time and energy. Trains are an excellent solution, considering the trade-off between cost and time. Trains may be less convenient than taxis regarding drop-off points and the time it takes to get to your destination, but the cost benefits can become significant to low-wage workers over time.

An important finding was that the men who were able to receive the SRD grant did report that it assists them in covering at least a portion of the transport cost that they face. Referring back to Sen's CA, the SRD grant can enhance – albeit on a limited basis – their capability to continue their job search effort.

Some of the men said that the grant helps with the transport – a least for a couple of days:

[Yeah, you see, if you maybe use the transport every day and then, can help you for one week.]

The SRD grant can – and has – helped many day labourers to afford transport for at least 1 week out of every month. The positive impact this must make on these men's morale by providing a slight financial buffer and affording them the opportunity to conserve some energy that would otherwise have been expended on walking to and from their search sites must not be underestimated. The SRD grant as a supplementary fund can theoretically also allow day labourers to search for work on additional days, potentially improving their chances of securing employment. The SRD grant can not only make a direct positive impact on the lives of day labourers but can also have a positive impact on the day labour market if access to the grant can be expanded and simplified. Below, the challenges faced with accessing the SRD grant are further elaborated upon.

*Access and assistance: social relief of distress grant*

Most people who receive the grant live in such precarious financial circumstances that they use the ZAR 350 grant immediately on basic goods such as food and clothes. The SRD grant can help in the fight against poverty and hunger and contribute to better employment outcomes, but the beneficiaries must first receive it. The findings reveal significant obstacles and challenges experienced by the day labourers in Tshwane attempting to obtain the SRD grant.

For instance, a South African participant indicated that he did, in fact, apply but did not get it:

[Mmm, asked for it, but nothing.]

Other participants echoed this problem:

[That 350, I didn't get it. Other people got it; me, no]

[I didn't apply (for the SRD grant). They say there at the Internet café; they say when you go to apply there, they want something, maybe like R20 or R30. When we are not working the piece job, it's not easy to go there.]

[No, I go there the post office... now it's closed.][Lost it, that ID of mine. And without the ID; you cannot apply. And getting the ID costs money]

Internet access and money to apply for identity documents are some of the factors that made it difficult for many South African day labourers to access a grant specifically designed to help people trapped in forms of extreme precarity. The reasons for these delays and irregular payments were technological and administrative in nature (Devereux, 2021). For example, on 21 April (when the SRD grant was announced), around 12 to 15 million people were estimated to be eligible in terms of the criteria (Devereux, 2021). A month later, 5.1 million applications had been received, 2.6 million of which were being processed. A mere 11,000 were 'about to be paid', but just 9 people had actually been paid (Devereux, 2021). By the 15 of July, 3 million people had been paid. However, this was already 3 months down the road at a time when the lockdown made it impossible for many (day labourers included) to try and earn some income. There was a large backlog still not even processed at the time (Devereux, 2021). As the day labourers also reported, many unsuccessful applicants were rejected for invalid reasons, and very few successful applicants received payments every month, with two or three payments during the 6 months of the programme's duration a common occurrence (Bhorat & Köhler, 2020; Devereux, 2021).

No deserving person must be left behind due to bureaucracy (Rogan & Skinner, 2022). The pandemic exposed the ill-preparedness of important government institutions needed to sustain local livelihoods in developing and underdeveloped countries in times of economic strife (Molefe et al., 2018). This theme therefore places a spotlight on the effectiveness of policy responses in times of economic crisis within the informal sector context. It illustrates the necessity of a holistic approach in terms of policy design and implementation – including the informal economy, and particularly marginalised groupings such as day labourers. The absence of such an approach will reduce the potential contribution of the SRD grant to enhanced capabilities for day labourers. The importance of this is further highlighted by the discussion of theme 3, which will further clarify the broader economic and employment-related challenges faced by day labourers during the pandemic.

### 6.2.3 | Theme 3: economics and employment

Figure 5 presents the category code network from the third theme, that is economics and employment.

This theme comprised four main codes: jobs, tools, technology and SRD grant.



**FIGURE 5** ATLAS.ti category code network: *economics and employment*. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### *Economics and employment: jobs*

As outlined in the literature (Theodore et al., 2015, 2017, 2018) as well, most day labourers stand for the whole week at the hiring site in the hope of securing employment:

[Every day.]

[Yeah - Monday through Sunday, no days off]

[Monday to Saturday...Church on Sunday.]

The literature (Theodore et al., 2015, 2017, 2018) reports that the employment rates of the day labourers are very low – creating uncertain and variable income for day labourers in the process. The findings of this study confirm that it is a rare occurrence to find employment:

[Once per week.]

[Sometimes nothing. Sometimes two, three times a month.]

[Not every day. Even today, I don't know if I can get job.]

[Sometimes you don't even get work the whole week. You come here from Monday to Sunday; sometimes you don't get work. Sometimes two days a week. Maybe.]

The following responses from the participants provide an overview of the tasks being performed by day labourers when they are able to find employment opportunities. It also presents the findings in terms of the income earned by the day labourers through these endeavours:

[Painting, gardening... 250 is the average]

[Painting, gardening...R250-R300.]

[Painting and tiling...R350 for the painting.]

[People; maybe they come for you for two hours, they say I'm going to pay you 200 or R100 or 150... it's just in that range.]

Day labourers perform a multitude of jobs, ranging from gardening, painting and plastering to even plumbing and welding. Men doing plumbing work are seldom paid per day but rather per job, as the completion of the work may take a few days. This automatically provides them with far greater employment and income security than individuals who are offered work for the day only or part thereof. See the example below from one participant:

[Me? It was there at that school, there at \_\_\_ High School. This year, January, February - I work two months. I got 250 a day, I was busy there mowing grass, painting... lots of work.]

[The pay for gardening; I get 300 rand.]

[The paintwork, because most every month end, people they like to paint. The painting gives me more and fast money. Ceilings sometimes two times per month, but painting almost every week...R300-R350.]

[Painting, paving, plastering, cutting...Minimum is 300...maximum 350.]

[Basically, minimum is 200, 250 for garden work. So, but if you talk about the builder, tiling, plumbing, it's more than that; it was supposed to go, to pay us, maybe 350 or 400 per day.]

Some of the most prevalent day labour jobs in Pretoria are gardening, painting, plastering and paving. Wages for gardening range between ZAR 250 and ZAR 300 per day, on average, and wages for painting range between ZAR 300 and ZAR 350 per day, on average. Painting, which may require more skill, usually pays slightly better. These findings align with the work done by Blaauw et al. (2006) and Theodore et al. (2015, 2017). There are also instances where day labourers will be offered piece jobs below their reservation wage, which many of these men cannot refuse as they are struggling to survive.

Most day labourers face daily uncertainty and precariousness. They go out and search for work essentially everyday of the week. All the while, they run the risk of going home empty-handed at the end of the day. These findings are in accordance with the work done by Blaauw et al. (2006), Mpendere et al. (2019), Theodore et al. (2015, 2017) and Valenzuela et al. (2006).

Some day labourers undertake wage negotiation before they accept a job offer. See the excerpts from the interviews below:

[I'm going to ask the job; what kind of job...How much are you going to pay?]

[If he wants to push me, like the price that I don't like, I must leave the job. Because sometimes this job is a risk. Sometimes I can end up not getting something from that. I can see the price that he wants for me is not worth it, then I leave.]

[If you go there, sometimes people say we pay like 250 or maybe 200. But when you are there, you show the people how you know that job; then they can maybe change their price. Because they see you know your job.]

Bargaining for better pay could, theoretically, allow them to push up the remuneration that the employer has offered for the work discussed. If wage negotiations fail, a day labourer could decline a potential employment opportunity, but very few are in a secure enough financial position to say no to a job. This confirms the literature pertaining to bargaining power as a key characteristic of the functioning of the day labour market. It also illustrates that day labourers are capabilities

constrained – they do not have the freedom to be and do whatever they deem best for themselves, with the resources at their disposal (Sen, 1999a, 1999b). Potentially, social support in the form of the SRD grant could increase their bargaining power (affording them a stronger fallback position) and, ultimately, enhance their capabilities set as per Sen's CA.

Sometimes employers are so impressed with the skill of the day labourer they had employed that a better-than-offered wage is paid. Employer satisfaction could ultimately lead to additional work.

The lower skilled day labour jobs, such as gardening, come with lower pay compared with the more technical professions of building, tiling and plumbing. Individuals who can perform work which requires greater levels of skill are in a better position to negotiate and charge more for their labour. Most of these men own specialised tools which they have mastered. This sets them apart and acts as a possible form of marketing, as is illustrated next.

### *Economics and employment: tools*

Some men argue that the best way they can improve their chances in the day labour market is to 'upgrade' themselves by owning some of the specialised tools they need to perform their job. They assert that by owning tools, employment opportunities may follow more readily. Moreover, certain types of jobs, such as tiling, are so specialised that most employers will not own the specific tools required for the hired person(s) to be able to perform the task at hand. Many day labourers realise this and attempt to acquire the necessary tools themselves to capitalise on the opportunity. See the responses from the day labourers below:

[The first thing is tool before you look for employment. Tiling, you cannot do tiling without tools. You have to have your own machine, own those things in small pieces. For me, I've got those things; then you know you're at the right position to start working. You upgrade yourself.]

[Also, if the customer comes here – if he says, I want someone who knows how to do the paintwork, you can just say, this is me. But they must see your tools; you have it, the rollers, we have the brushes, you have the scraper, you have everything, and also the paint stick. So, it shows that you are serious.]

[The tools which cost us, it makes us money, with the tools. Once the clients see the tools, they become happy. So must keep them safe, and also stay longer, always clean after doing the work, something like that.]

[It's true. So, if I talk about myself, I'm a builder. I've got my tools inside of my bag. So, when people say, come here. So, then I, I charge him. I charge him. Take it or leave it. If he don't want, don't want my price, he is supposed to give me his tools. Then I'm going to work. I can't use my tools.]

By owning and displaying the tools of their trade, they are sending out a clear message to potential employers that they are 'serious' and ready to provide specific day labour services. These findings concur with the work of Blaauw et al. (2006) as well as Mapendere et al. (2019).

Day labourers who own the tools of their trade are in a better position than those who do not. However, specialised tools are expensive, and few day labourers are in the financial position to purchase the very equipment that may help to elevate them to a more secure position.

See the following responses in this regard:

[No, actually, for now, I don't have my own tools. Because after when I was working there, at Industria, because they retrenched us 2005. Then I came here in Pretoria; I got a job from another guy was doing a plumber, is the one who teach me for plumbing. So, he

was having his own tools, the white man. But now he is divorce with his wife, and then he is no longer working; it's around maybe now, seven years. So now I was struggling getting the piece job, then that money is not, was not enough so that I can budget and buy my own tools.]

[I will get more jobs ... (but) there is no money for tools.]

Having access to capital and being able to buy tools is a major factor that sets the more successful day labourers apart from the men who cannot afford their own tools and who do not enjoy the accompanying benefits. A day labourer who owns his own tools can sharpen the skills required to master the use thereof, ultimately gaining the advantage of improved visibility to potential employers and thus securing work more regularly at better wages. Assisting day labourers financially through the SRD grant could provide many of these men with at least some of the capital required to buy their own tools and allow them to develop their skill set, consequently expanding their capabilities set and placing them on higher ground. These findings are in accordance with the work done by Rogan and Skinner (2022). In addition to tools, technology emerged as an important consideration under the theme of economics and employment. The following subsection analyses this in greater detail.

#### *Economics and employment: technology*

The adoption and use of technology can be a ground breaking development in the world of day labour – enhancing their capabilities and ‘functionings’ in the process. Owning a basic mobile phone allows many of these men to be contacted by previous employers who were satisfied with their work, or potential employers to whom they were referred. See the view of one of the participants below as illustration:

[Then sometimes I've got friends who are doing the same thing. If they've got a job, they can come and tell me then we can work together, as I do because I'm alone. So, I get the job, I phone of my friends, then we come and do the job. Yeah, you must have a mobile phone number, and you must always have airtime. Like me, I don't have a truck. I can have something that needs to be taken away to the dump. So, we use a truck. So, I've got to call some friends with the truck. I just call people to come here and say I've got a job. Here's my number, I've got a bakkie. Then I can choose which bakkie to use.]

Moreover, a day labourer can, after being contacted, travel directly to the client, thereby saving them time and money. Mobile phones also allow day labourers to contact one another when they need to enlist additional assistance. Smarter mobile phones can run applications such as Facebook, allowing some men access to its marketplace.

[Actually, I'm interested in Facebook. So, anything that you want from Facebook, I can Google. So, it's very interesting. I have known a lot of things through Facebook.]

[It will be easier if you have Wi-Fi. I'm marketing. I don't have to buy data or something; I use Wi-Fi. I can communicate with the customer.]

Some day labourers already use Facebook and Google to access employment information, but these platforms require Internet access, that is data. Free public Wi-Fi could change their lives. The spotlight is next placed on the SRD grant as it relates to the theme of economics and employment.

#### *Economics and employment: social relief of distress grant*

The SRD grant does not discourage work-seeking activity among day labourers but supports them in their quest to find employment. For people working in the informal labour market, having the SRD

grant increased and made permanent would be an incredibly beneficial government policy (Rogan & Skinner, 2022). See the views of the participants below:

[That 350, that's why I say, I work for 350 a day. It's the same as when I worked, just one day for 350. I take 25 rand; I travel. I buy something; I buy something for the children. Tomorrow, I have to come again.]

[Here six days a week and will still come six days a week even after receiving the grant.]

We argue that this is an important finding given the view that is often expressed in the literature that social assistance programmes of this nature may discourage people from searching for employment. The grant assists, but day labourers are fully aware that it is nothing more than assistance, which does not change their job-searching behaviour in any significant way. The positive impact of the SRD grant on their capabilities and agency should not be overlooked or underestimated.

## 7 | CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

South Africa's macro-economic landscape (even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic) was one of extreme levels of persistently high unemployment – forcing many individuals to turn to self-employment (through entrepreneurship) or informal wage employment (e.g. day labourers) for their livelihoods (Blaauw et al., 2021; Theodore et al., 2015). Many of the participants in the informal economy were therefore *ex ante* vulnerable to negative economic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic wrecked employment and livelihoods – especially at the times of the various strict lockdowns imposed in South Africa. The government attempted to alleviate some of this burden through the introduction of the SRD grant in 2020. This study analysed the reach and impact of the SRD grant on the lives and livelihoods of day labourers in the metro of Tshwane, South Africa.

The findings showed that although the grant was meant for South African citizens, not all citizens were able to access it for a variety of reasons. These include the loss or absence of identity documents, difficulty to access the Internet and other applications, as well as a possible lack of communication reaching the day labourers. The practical implication of the finding is twofold. First, impediments in accessing the grant negate some of the positive impact that the SRD grant could have on the capabilities and agency of those day labourers who did receive it. Second, it emphasises the need for government to be more effective in the execution of its policy initiatives in order to avoid these negative externalities. A case in point is the recent admission by Minister Lindiwe Zulu that over the last 3 financial years, the South African Social Security Agency paid no less than ZAR 140 million to around 75,000 dead beneficiaries (Jacobs, 2024). Getting rid of corruption and increasing effectiveness would be a significant step in enhancing the quality of life of those who are meant to benefit from these policies – as is suggested by the rest of the findings.

For the day labourers who were able to access the grant, the positive effect on their capabilities set was in the form of alleviating at least some of the existing pressures of financing their transport to and from the hiring site. Furthermore, some basic needs could be addressed, and in a few cases, day labourers may be able to use it along with other capital funds to acquire some of the specialised tools that may improve their chances of finding employment with better income possibilities. Another critical finding is that the grant did not act as any form of disincentive to continue their work-seeking activities – it merely acts as support for this very endeavour. This finding is in contrast to the argument that grants may disincentivise the recipient from attempting to find additional income. This finding provides an important answer to the 'so what' question that must be asked after a study of this nature.

The findings are further evidence that we do not have a complete picture of the workings and dynamics of the informal sector and all its manifestations in South Africa. The need for evidence based policy

interventions is particularly accentuated through the findings, which provide further credence to the work of authors such as Devereux (2021). Their research highlighted the gap in the social protection system faced by informal workers and accentuates the need to continue high-level policy debates around the possibility of a universal basic income grant or at least some form of basic income support for unemployed 18–59-year olds in South Africa following the COVID-19 pandemic (Devereux, 2021).

The implication is that government should view and implement such policy engagements as part of a holistic, evidence-based approach to the activities of the broader informal sector. Practically, this implies that government agencies can fund research (also in the form of action research and other forms of participatory and experimental research designs) to improve our understanding of the intricacies of informal sector activities and its responsiveness to government policies. Such a future research agenda must, for example, include the study of the medium- and long-term impact of the pandemic and its aftermath on the medium- and long-term labour market dynamics of the informal sector activity of day labouring in South Africa. The findings also beg the question as to what the impact of the SRD grant was and still is on other informal occupations such as car guards and informal recyclers (see, e.g. Blaauw & Pretorius, 2023).

Notwithstanding the above, we acknowledge that, given the time and funding constraints applicable to this study, the geographic area covered in data collection was limited to the City of Tshwane. This limitation is acknowledged, and results from this study should therefore not be seen as the representative of the entire country's day labourer population.

While acknowledging the obvious limitation stated above, for South Africans in the day labour market, the findings present a compelling case for a continuation of the grant to alleviate some of the precarity that characterises the daily lives of thousands of men (and more and more women) on the street corners of South Africa.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in drafting this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

To ensure the privacy of the participants, data is not publicly available.

## PEER REVIEW

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## DISCLAIMER

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Previous findings showed that day labouring is a male dominated informal sector activity. This explains the fact that the sample is exclusively male, as there were no female day labourers at the hiring sites visited in this study.

<sup>2</sup>Foreign migrants were interviewed regarding commonly shared lived experiences such as employment rates, wage rates and transport needs. Day labourers, both local and foreign, face the same daily working conditions and some of these shared experiences and more quantitative aspects were analysed during coding for the thematic analysis. Previous research confirmed a conversion between the labour market outcomes of foreign and South African day labourers (Theodore et al., 2017; 2018). However, foreign migrants per definition did not qualify for the SRD grant and therefore would not have been asked questions regarding access to and uses of the grant money – leaving such responses out of the thematic analysis.

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## APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. After the 'hard lockdown', when did you resume your employment search? (When did you return to your site where you stand and wait for work?)
2. When did you apply, and when did you start receiving the SRD grant?
3. How many hours do you have to wait in the queue to receive your SRD grant payout?
4. Do you lose a day of employment search (standing at your site waiting for work) when waiting in the queue for your SRD grant payout?
5. How many people form part of your household (including those that do not live in the same dwelling but are dependents)?

6. Continuing from question 5: Please specify their age and gender.
7. Continuing from question 5: Are they all dependent on your income?
8. Whom amongst your household (including those that do not live in the same dwelling but are dependents) receives some form of government grant (including the SRD)?
9. What grants (including the SRD) do they receive?
10. Whom amongst your household (including those that do not live in the same dwelling but are dependents) are employed?
11. Has receiving the SRD grant made your life or the lives of your household members easier in any way? or What are some of the benefits of receiving the SRD, with regard to your own life and according to others?
12. Do you use the SRD grant for transport purposes, and if so, do you use the grant to go to hiring sites further away than usual to get better opportunities?
13. Did you or would you use the SRD grant payout to buy new overalls, work shoes or tools such as paint brushes that may help you stand out from the crowd and improve your chances of attracting the attention of a potential employer?
14. Have you heard of people starting their own businesses with the SRD? Would you?
15. Have you continued to search for work for the same number of days, even after receiving the SRD, or do you search for fewer days per month?
16. What is your reservation wage (the lowest amount you are willing to work for per day)?
17. Are you still willing to work for the same amount of money after you started receiving the SRD, or do you now charge more for your services?