



STREETNET INTERNATIONAL **Street Vendors'** **Barometer Project**

Executive Summary
Harare, Zimbabwe



About the Barometer Project

It is estimated that informal employment accounts for **58% of total employment, comprising nearly 2 billion workers**. Street vendors and market traders are an important part of the informal economy, providing essential goods and services and making significant economic and social contributions. However most work in precarious conditions with unstable incomes, a lack of social protection, poor health and safety protections, and at risk of violence and harassment. Their work goes unrecognised in official statistics and policies. **In 2015, the ILO adopted Recommendation 204 to guide governments for transitioning informal economy workers into the formal economy while safeguarding livelihoods and rights.**

In 2024, Street Net International (SNI), together with the Global Labour Institute (GLI) launched the **Barometer Project** to monitor and document the conditions of street vendors and market traders, including livelihoods, characteristics and key issues, and to inform SNI on key thematic areas with particular reference to opportunities for the formalisation of informal employment. The project also set out to strengthen the research and monitoring capacity of SNI affiliates. Framed within the ILO Decent Work Agenda, the project set key benchmarks to frame monitoring including social dialogue protection from violence and harassment, right to work without restrictions, access to social protection, formalisation opportunities and decent employment conditions.

Two cities were selected as pilots for the Barometer Project - Harare, Zimbabwe, in partnership with the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA) and Buenos Aires, Argentina, in partnership with the Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (UTEP). This report provides an executive summary of findings from work undertaken in **Zimbabwe**.



Picture of participants of Barometer Project inception meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2024.

Methodology

The Barometer Project began with an inception meeting in November 2024 in Harare, Zimbabwe facilitated by the GLI. Representatives from SNI and participating affiliates discussed the project's goals, approved research tools, and agreed priorities and workplans. The study methodology including the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data through questionnaires, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and stakeholder interviews. Research tools were drafted around six project benchmarks, then refined through training, field observations, consultations with ZCIEA, and testing.

Fieldwork was conducted in January 2025 by a team of eight local volunteer researchers nominated by ZCIEA, all of whom were vendors and activists familiar with the sector. Additional guidance and data analysis was supported by locally-based research partner the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC). Before beginning data collection, the survey team participated in a training workshop which provided the opportunity for review and testing of the questionnaire survey and enabled the team to develop skills and experience to conduct the research. The survey questionnaire was designed with a mix of open-ended and semi-structured questions.

The survey was conducted across **12 markets in Harare and Chitungwiza, selected to represent a broad range of vendors, traders and other supporting occupations, and a representative sampling framework used to capture a target sample of 500.** Data collection included 548 validated surveys from formal and informal market settings. To complement the survey, six focus group discussions were held, including groups specifically held for women and young workers. The focus groups allowed deeper exploration of workforce issues, industry challenges and proposals for improvement. Additionally, 10 in-depth interviews with workers provided detailed insights into daily operations, costs and livelihoods of workers. Supplementary stakeholder interviews were also undertaken to gather perspectives on key issues and potential improvements in the sector. Data analysis involved quantitative and qualitative methods, and was supported by local research partners.

Informal Street Vending and Market Trading in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has faced significant economic and political challenges since gaining independence. Despite some recovery by 2023, ongoing issues including inflation, currency problems and environmental shocks continue to hinder growth. Its capital, Harare, and its surrounding areas, including Chitungwiza, are densely populated urban centres where many people rely on the informal economy for their livelihoods. This sector has grown due to a decline in formal jobs, deindustrialization, and economic crises over the past decades.

Informal economy work, especially street vending and market trading, provides essential income for many, particularly women and youth, but workers often lack legal protections and face harassment, evictions, and poor conditions. Local municipalities regulate street vending through permits and market rules, supported by national agencies focused on urban management, social security, gender equity, and economic development.

Worker Organisation

The **Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA)** is a national organization representing informal and self-employed workers across Zimbabwe. Founded in 2002 by informal traders' groups, it aims to improve living standards through organizing, educating, advocating, empowering, and representing its members. Developed from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), ZCTU continues to represent informal economy workers at national negotiation forums. **ZCIEA's diverse membership includes street vendors, traders, artisans, mechanics, miners, and small manufacturers.**

ZCIEA operates has a decentralized structure with regional, local, and community units, led by leadership teams inclusive of youth, women, and persons with disabilities. Despite growth and advocacy successes, members still face challenges including economic instability, gender inequality, lack of formal recognition, and harassment. ZCIEA also collaborates with other civil society groups, including the Vendors Initiative for Social and Economic Transformation (VISET), to support informal economy workers.



Street vendors in Zimbabwe during the participatory research process in January 2025

Key Findings

Workforce Characteristics

The informal street vending and market trading economy in Harare and Chitungwiza is diverse, with vendors operating in various settings—from fixed markets to mobile street trading—and selling a wide range of goods, primarily clothing, shoes, and produce. Most vendors earn their livelihood by selling goods, or services such as haircutting, tailoring, or repairs. Other roles include carriers/porters, transporters, security guards, storage providers, stall owners, and suppliers. Many vendors work close to home or from home-based setups, often in formal settlements despite a rise in informal housing.

The workforce includes both men and women, **with women more prevalent in street vending**. High rural-urban migration for work and limited formal employment opportunities mean that **much of the workforce is young**. Vendors generally have achieved secondary level education, though few have higher, vocational or specialized technical training, especially in digital and business skills. Experience varies, with longer tenures more common in formal markets, while mobile vendors face instability and shorter work durations. While some view it as a temporary solution, many rely on vending long-term. **Overall, workforce organization is low, which limits opportunities collective bargaining and advocacy.**

Livelihoods

Most vendors are **solely reliant on vending for their livelihoods**, though some hold multiple related jobs. Vendors face numerous challenges related to their livelihoods.

Vendors use various types of trading spaces, from simple tables to fixed covered shelters. Those trading directly on the ground are often street vendors with limited resources and unstable locations. There are significant power struggles over vending space, sometimes involving political groups. **While local authorities often control market spaces and collect fees, informal leaders, sometimes called 'space barons,' also exert control through unofficial means, sometimes using intimidation or political influence.**

Most vendors pay to use trading spaces, but payment structures vary widely depending on the location and formality of the market. Formal fixed markets tend to have the highest and most standardized fees, while informal markets and street vendors face inconsistent and often informal payments. Fees are collected by various actors including municipal officers, police, middle-men, and stall owners. **Many payments are informal, undocumented, or function as bribes or protection fees, leaving vendors vulnerable to exploitation.**

Most vendors are unregistered, leaving them vulnerable to harassment, evictions, and arbitrary fees. Only a small minority of vendors have formal business licenses or registrations. Many vendors pay fees without official recognition or documentation, limiting their access to formal support and increasing their vulnerability.



Group discussion during the participatory research process in January 2025

Most vendors do not take formal loans, relying instead on self-financing or informal savings groups. These informal financial cooperatives play an important role in providing access to resources. Men tend to access formal loans more compared to women, who rely more on informal credit sources. Loans are primarily used for start-up costs and business operations, but repayment can be difficult due to high interest rates and unstable incomes.

Earnings are generally low, unstable, with thin profits margins, and expenses are high due to payments for supplies. Most vendors source goods from wholesale markets or informal suppliers but often cannot buy in bulk due to limited savings, which raises their costs. Major expenses include supplier payments, security, storage, fines, bribes, and sometimes payments to other workers.

Despite the official multi-currency system, the **US dollar dominates transactions due to distrust in the local currency and the need for a stable medium for daily trade.** Some vendors use both currencies.

On top of this, **many vendors face heavy household financial responsibilities such as rent, school fees, and dependents. Widowed or separated individuals tend to have fewer financial safety nets.** Despite economic hardships, many vendors, particularly women, feel pride and empowerment from supporting their families through their businesses, increasing their independence and social recognition.

Working Conditions and Key Issues

Overall vendors lack decent employment conditions. **Vendors generally work long hours, with those in informal fixed markets tending to work longer days than those on the street or mobile vendors.** Most vendors work six to seven days per week, with over half working every day without proper rest. Daily working hours are frequently irregular for many vendors, especially those in informal settings like street vending or mobile trading. This irregularity is often due to unpredictable customer flow, unstable access to trading spots, and risks of eviction or harassment. Vendors in formal fixed markets experience more consistent working hours. The long and irregular working hours reflect the intense economic pressures vendors face. **Despite extensive hours, income returns are often insufficient, forcing vendors to work continuously without days off. This leads to physical exhaustion and poor work-life balance.**

The sector is **dominated by self-employment, with most vendors working independently.** A smaller number are paid workers, often informally employed to assist with vending, security, or transport. There is minimal use of formal employment contracts; most workers have no agreements or only verbal agreements, which offer little job security or legal protections. Written contracts are rare. Where it exists, market infrastructure is poor, there are inadequate sanitation facilities, and access to functional running water, electricity and storage facilities. Vendors frequently experience violence and harassment without proper protections, particularly from authorities. Access to social protection is limited, and vendors frequently face arrests, evictions and goods confiscations, restricting their access to working spaces.

Vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and migrants experience additional hardships including social and institutional barriers, gender-based violence and harassment, lack of access to capital, inaccessible street and market infrastructure, social stigma and legal invisibility. Women also have to balance work with family responsibilities. There is a lack of targeted support programmes to improve their access to resources, education, and justice, and they remain excluded from policy-making and urban planning.



Informal trader at her workplace during the research process in January 2025



Informal trader being interviewed at his workplace in January 2025

Formalisation

The government is currently developing a **National Formalization Strategy** awaiting approval. There have been some efforts to formalize the sector including agreements on trading spaces, although these are limited and there are few vendors participating in consultations or receiving support from government authorities. **There is a widespread perception that government engagement is often superficial or tokenistic, with vendors' concerns largely ignored.** There remains a gap between policy intentions and practical implementation.

Awareness of government programmes to support vendors is low, and most assistance comes from non-governmental and advocacy organizations rather than official programmes. Major barriers to formalization include the high cost and complexity of regulatory processes, criminalization of vendors, economic constraints, lack of information, and widespread mistrust of authorities. These challenges mean that street vendors largely remain excluded from formal systems, with little opportunity for social dialogue or improved labour protections, despite their significant contributions to the local economy. The policy environment is fragmented, politicized, and unstable, with inconsistent regulations across municipalities and no dedicated oversight for informal economy issues. Frequent regulatory changes tied to political agendas result in little long-term planning, and temporary permissions are sometimes revoked, leading to evictions and harassment.

The National Social Security Authority (NSSA) oversees social protection schemes, although informal economy workers lack access and rarely participate due to mistrust, exclusion, and the perception that benefits are inadequate. **Policies tend to favour the formal sector and sometimes criminalize informal economy workers, creating barriers to inclusion.** To address these challenges, NSSA is working to expand coverage for informal economy workers through inclusive schemes, stakeholder engagement, better information dissemination, and financial support initiatives,⁸ including low-interest revolving funds and partnerships with banks.

Workforce Proposals

Informal economy vendors and their representatives call for urgent improvements:

- **Better market facilities** with shelters, clean gender-separated toilets, running water, storage, security, electricity, and organized zoning by goods/services. **Improved street infrastructure and waste management are also essential.**
- Corruption and extortion from authorities are widespread, requiring **greater transparency, anti-corruption measures, fair and standardized fees, and improved security**—especially for women—to reduce theft, assault, and harassment.
- Vendors face high interest rates and limited credit. The government should **support affordable loans, promote community savings groups like SACCOs and cooperatives**, and provide financial literacy and business management training.
- Existing social safety nets largely exclude informal economy workers. **Access should be simplified, bureaucratic barriers reduced, and digital tools used to improve registration and contributions.** Local, vendor-led protection schemes should be supported.
- **Vendors need legal recognition as legitimate workers with protections under labour law.** Registration systems must be simplified, affordable, and accessible, with support to navigate processes. This should include encouraging cooperative registration.
- There's a need for **unified policies tailored to sectors and regions, with dedicated government structures for the informal economy.** Local authorities require autonomy and resources to develop context-specific solutions. Informal economy workers' organizations should be formally recognized and included in policymaking through permanent consultative forums.
- Accessible programs are needed for **financial literacy, business skills, leadership, negotiation, and digital literacy**, with special focus on vulnerable groups. Rights awareness initiatives and legal support clinics should be expanded.
- **Strengthening vendor organizations and collective bargaining is vital.** Authorities should promote inclusive dialogue and support platforms that amplify informal economy workers' voices. Civil society and international partners play important roles in advocacy, capacity building, and social protection initiatives.

Recommendations

The **ILO's Recommendation 204** urges governments to support the transition from informal to formal economies by protecting workers' rights, ensuring decent work, and preserving livelihoods during the process.

Building on these principles, key recommendations from this study **stress the importance of immediate improvements to vendors' working conditions, such as secure workspaces, infrastructure, protection from harassment and evictions, and expanded social protection.** Access to affordable finance should be enhanced through simplified registration and support for cooperative and community-based financial models. Recognition of vendors as legitimate workers is essential, along with reforming bureaucratic registration systems and consistent allocation of public vending spaces.

Inclusive planning requires that informal economy vendors and vulnerable groups be central to designing policies and urban planning, supported by the establishment of formal forums for consultation and negotiation. **Formalization must be gradual, context-specific, and flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of vendors without compromising their ability to earn a livelihood.** This long-term, just approach aims to build trust between authorities and vendors while fostering sustainable improvements.



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