

Perceived Solutions to Constraints to Small-scale Food Vending in a Growing Town in Limpopo Province of South Africa

M. A. Mathaulula, Joseph Francis* and Marizvikuru Mwale

*Institute for Rural Development, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050,
Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa*

**Telephone: +27 15 962 8804, *E-mail: jfrancis@univen.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to identify the constraints small-scale food vendors in Thohoyandou town of Thulamela Municipality in South Africa faced. A mixed qualitative and quantitative research approach was used. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in phase 1 of the study. Using the data collected in this phase, a structured questionnaire was developed and administered to 126 food vendors. Small-scale food vendors faced a wide range of challenges that included infrastructure and basic services, legal and policy frameworks. It was suggested that the constraint, could be solved in the following ways: “municipal officials must desist from forcing vendors from stalls,” “provision of sanitation facilities,” “allocating selling stalls,” and “formalising food vending through issuing operator licences.” Furthermore, the need for Thulamela Municipality to consider and adopt various ways of supporting small-scale food vending as part of its overall local economic development strategy was emphasised.

INTRODUCTION

The unemployment rate in South Africa has remained between twenty-four percent and thirty percent for the past 16 years. Presumably, this resulted from the fact that many big businesses that could have employed more people introduced job rationalization measures in order to enhance efficiency and maximise profits. As Mireia et al. (2016) noted, when faced with such a challenge, individuals often sought alternative ways of generating income and thus created their own employment. Therefore, the fact that various types of small-scale businesses continued to be created, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, was not surprising. Residents of rural communities engaged in a wide range of informal activities, aiming to improve their livelihoods (Brown and McGranahan 2016). Mathaulula (2011) argued that informal activities significantly strengthened livelihood strategies for households in rural areas. She further indicated that most poor people who resided in rural areas did not have adequate skills or education required to secure better jobs in the formal sectors of the economy. Haleegoah et al. (2015) also supported this view.

Small-scale food vending is growing widely and is becoming an important component of the informal sector. It involves selling ready-to-eat foods which are prepared on the sides of streets or at home and consumed on the street pave-

ments without any further preparation (Mathaulula 2011; Makelele et al. 2015). Such foods include cooked meals, fresh materials or ingredients, snacks, drinks, fresh fruits and vegetables. According to Mramba (2015), the significant socio-economic influence of the street food in relation to income and as a potential source of work, particularly for those involved, is widely acknowledged.

Small-scale food vending market contributes to the livelihoods of the poor people in Limpopo Province (Mathaulula 2011; Mukhola 2014). Suggesting that the growth of the informal economy can be promoted through implementing pro-small-scale food vending strategies. Small-scale vended foods form an integral part of the cuisine of any society. Bormann et al. (2016) claimed that street foods were increasingly playing a significant role in improving the tourism world. Moreover, a study conducted in South Africa (Mathaulula 2011) and in Haiti (Samampundo et al. 2015) revealed that street foods contributed considerably to the food and nutrition security of those involved.

The foods that small-scale vendors sell might become source of micronutrient. Studies undertaken in some parts of Africa (Vilai et al. 2015; Abeshu and Geleta 2016) support this assertion. Sekar (2016) claimed that street foods supplied almost fifty percent of the total protein, sixty percent vitamin A and sixty-four percent calcium requirements of the human body. Apart from this,

Sekar (2016) reported that street foods supplied more than half (50%) of the vitamins and minerals that human beings required for their bodies to function normally. This means, if they are well-handled, street foods might provide essential nutrients for normal body functioning. Growth and development as well as boosting immune system would also be realised.

Based on the evidence presented above, it can be argued that, if well-developed and supported small-scale food vending might strengthen the South African economy especially in rural and peri-urban areas. This would serve as a key driver of people's livelihoods and economies (Mukhola 2014; Mathaulula et al. 2015). Despite the potential benefits highlighted above, small-scale food vendors in Thulamela Municipality of South Africa face numerous challenges that make them fail to enjoy the benefits.

Currently, information on the constraints to small-scale food vending in Thulamela Municipality is inadequate and unreliable. This seems to be a common feature of the whole of Vhembe District (Mathaulula 2011). Mathaulula (2011) contend that this might explain why the local economic development strategies of Makhado, Musina, Mutale and Thulamela Municipalities, which make up the Vhembe District did not recognise street food vending as a key feature of the local people's livelihoods. Yet, the residents of the villages that surround most towns, including Thohoyandou, relied on informal enterprises. They were self-employed, micro-entrepreneurs and service providers (Mathaulula et al. 2015). This situation justified the current study that sought to identify the perceived solutions to the constraints that small-scale food vendors operating in Thohoyandou town of Thulamela Municipality faced.

METHODOLOGY

As Mathaulula et al. (2015) reported, the study was carried out in Thulamela Municipality (Fig. 1). The Municipality is the largest of the four that constitute Vhembe District. The Kruger National Park lies to the east of the District. To the north-east, south and west are Mutale, Greater Giyani and Makhado Municipalities, respectively. According to Statistics South Africa (2011), there were about 61846 people who resided in Thulamela Municipality. Thohoyandou is the political, administrative and commercial centre

of the Municipality. Street trading among others is the most common type of business and source of locals' livelihoods (Thulamela Municipality 2015).

The current case study was designed to identify the constraints and potential solutions to street food vending. A mixed research methods design was used. Small-scale food vendors operating in Thohoyandou constituted the study population. Out of the 158 informal street food vendors operating in the Thohoyandou business area, 126 were interviewed. Primary data, were collected in two sequentially-integrated phases. During the first phase, the study respondents were purposively sampled. In-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions were carried out. The Thulamela Municipality Local Economic Development manager and an officer were interviewed. Another key informant interview was conducted with a manager working for a parastatal known as Limpopo Economic Development, Environment and Tourism. Focus group discussions were conducted after the key informant interviews had been concluded. One of the focus groups was entirely made up of members of the Thohoyandou Hawkers' Association Committee. Each one of the other two focus groups comprised seven randomly selected small-scale food vendors.

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical clearance (Registration certificate number SHS/11/PH/002) was sought from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee. The Municipal Manager of Thulamela Municipality granted permission to carry out the study. Following the approach used in the Mathaulula et al. (2015) study, written consent of the food vendors was secured, only the volunteered to participate were interviewed. The objectives of the study were explained and privacy during interview was ensured. In addition, the respondents were given the opportunity to ask any relevant questions. Participants were also informed that they were to withdraw from the study at any stage.

The lead researcher supervised the five research assistants who collected the data. All the research assistants were university students pursuing postgraduate degree studies. Prior to embarking on data collection, the research assistants received training in the administration of the tools designed for the purpose. The training orientated the research assistants to the

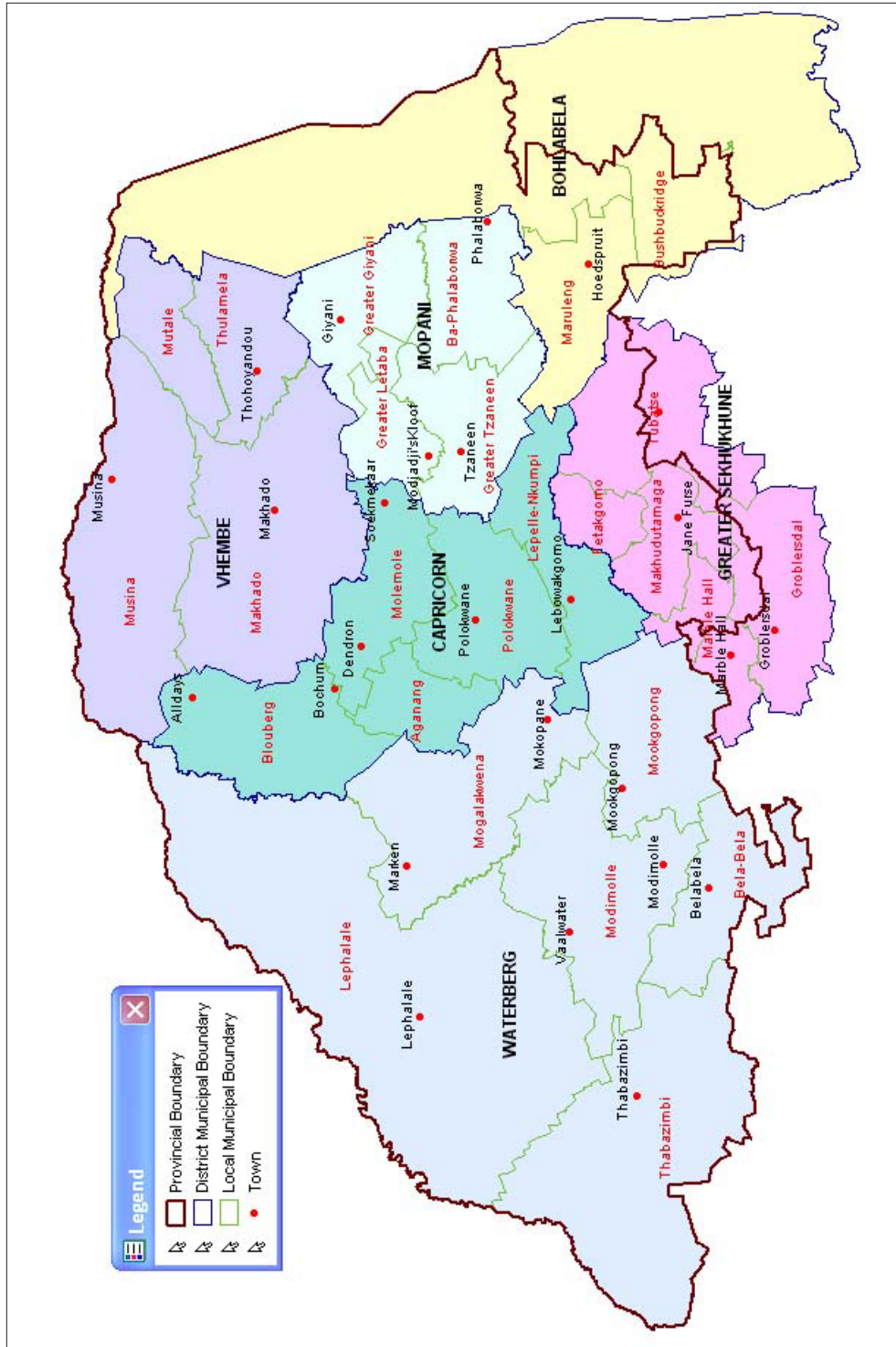


Fig. 1. Map of Thulamela Municipality

objectives and key modalities of the study. During focus group discussions, the respondents recorded their perceptions whenever there was consensus. The major issues were recorded on flipcharts as they emerged.

The results of phase 1 of the study were summarized and organized into sub-themes. Using the consolidated information, feedback was given to the respondents, namely Thohoyandou Hawkers' Association Committee and food vendors who were organized into focus groups. It was necessary to give feedback because it helped to confirm the results. Also, the priority ranking of issues which was achieved through this exercise helped to deepen understanding of the perceived constraints of the small-scale food vendors and associated solutions. The data obtained through the focus group discussions was used to develop a structured questionnaire consisting of entirely closed-ended questions. It was administered to 126 randomly selected small-scale food vendors through face-to-face interviewing in phase 2 of the study. Each question required responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to its use in data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested with 10 randomly selected street food vendors at the Sibasa taxi rank, located about 5 km from Thohoyandou. None of the vendors who participated in the pre-testing was included in the final survey. The results of the pre-test were only used to revise the draft questionnaire. The data on street food vending collected during phase 2 of the study were used to develop this paper. They were coded, cleaned and stored as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. All the data were non-parametric. The data were imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23.0 for Windows, and analysed. The mean scores of the perceived constraints and solutions were calculated and ranked.

RESULTS

Participants in the Study

Most of the small-scale food vendors (92%) were women. Approximately, seventy three percent of them were 21-40 years old, those who were 15-20 years constituted fourteen percent of the total number of respondents with the 40-59 year olds making up twelve percent. The re-

spective proportions of the married, single, divorced and widowed respondents were forty one, thirty eight, eleven and eight percent respectively. Seventy one percent of the respondents had completed secondary school education, while eighteen percent attained primary schooling only. It was also observed that eight percent of the vendors had tertiary qualifications. Three percent of them did not have any formal schooling.

Approximately, forty-four percent of the small-scale food vendors belonged to families with 1-3 members. In contrast, thirty-three percent reported that their families had 4-5 members. Almost a third (28 %) of the vendors stayed alone. For eight percent of the vendors, there were 6-9 members in their families. Two percent belonged to larger families made up of 10-12 members.

Constraints to Small-scale Food Vending

Small-scale food vendors faced many challenges that militated against effective functioning of their businesses. The constraints were classified as follows: physical environment (infrastructure and basic services), working environment, policy and legal frameworks, and food preparation or production. These are explained below:

Physical Environment

Shortage of water was regarded as the major constraint to small-scale food vending (81%). The other constraints were, lack of proper selling stalls (80%), overcrowding or competition from other vendors over limited operational space (71%), lack of storage facilities (68 %), and poor access to sanitation facilities, namely, water and toilets (63%). In Table 1, the mean scores of the perceived 26 constraints to small-scale food vending are presented. The top ranked constraint with respect to the physical environment (infrastructure and basic services) was "absence of proper selling stalls".

Working Environment

Eighty-six percent of the respondents concurred with the view that "food vendors experienced problems associated with harsh weather, especially on rainy and windy days". Slightly

Table 1: Ranked means for challenges small-scale food vendors faced

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
<i>Physical Environment (Infrastructure and Basic Services)</i>			
a) Absence of proper selling stalls	4.56	1.016	1
b) Shortage of water	4.52	1.108	2
c) Overcrowding/competition for limited operational space	4.41	1.119	3
d) Sanitation is difficult to reach (water and toilets)	4.30	1.213	4
e) No storage facilities	4.19	1.349	5
<i>Working Environment</i>			
a) Food vendors experienced problems during harsh weather conditions	4.72	0.786	1
b) Owners of established shops throw refusals on hawkers' selling stalls	4.28	1.354	2
c) Bad smells which results in air pollution	3.90	0.515	3
d) Harassment by drunkards	2.95	1.701	4
e) Hawkers disposes refuses in drainages resulting in blockages	2.87	1.638	5
f) Harassment by municipal officials	2.59	1.808	6
g) Harassed by owners of established shops claiming that food vendors obscure their businesses	2.40	1.725	7
<i>Policy and Legal Frameworks</i>			
a) Municipality does not issue licences for food vendors	4.62	0.982	1
b) Municipality forbids the use of open fire	4.60	1.052	2
c) Forceful removal of food vendors by municipal officials	4.53	1.001	3
d) Lack of recognition by municipality	4.52	1.010	4
e) Conflict between municipality and hawking by-laws	4.42	0.991	5
f) There is no regulatory authority which regulates food vendors business	4.00	1.397	6
<i>Food preparation or Production Related Issues</i>			
a) Price hikes of inputs and ingredients by suppliers	4.43	1.007	1
b) Sometimes the business is very low	4.10	1.12	2
c) Theft of resources (chairs, tables, buckets, etc)	3.08	1.709	3
d) Some customers fail to pay for the services (food consumed)	2.09	1.465	4
e) Sometimes is difficult to pay employees	2.03	1.438	5
f) Poor food preparation skills	1.86	1.384	6
g) Customers complained of poor quality food	1.79	1.163	7
h) Lack of customer care service	1.68	1.2358	8

less than three-quarters of them (73%) complained about being harassed by municipal officials. More than half (56%) confirmed that "bad smell around the selling areas resulted in air pollution". As shown in Table 1, "food vendors experienced problems associated with harsh weather, especially on rainy and windy days" was the top-ranked working constraint.

Policy and Legal Dreamwork

Within category of issues, eighty-four percent of the food vendors were worried "about the Municipality which does not issue and renew food vending licences" (Table 1). Seventy-seven percent of them indicated that municipal officials harassed them as they evicted them from their business stalls.

Preparation of Food or Production Issues

Food vendors complained about food preparation and production constraints. Seventy-

eight percent of the food vendors were worried about the increase in the prices of raw materials and ingredients while fifty-one complained that "sometimes the food vending business was very low".

Suggested Solutions to the Constraints to Street Food Vending

The small-scale food vendors suggested a wide range of solutions they believed could address the challenges they faced (Table 2). About ninety-two percent of the food vendors suggested that "municipal officials must stop forcefully removing food vendors from their selling stalls". Ninety-one percent of them were of the view that "proper sanitation (water and toilets) facilities must be provided." Eighty-four percent of the food vendors also considered the "provision of proper selling stalls with lockable storage facilities" as a possible solution. Knowledge and skills were regarded as central to efforts made

to address the constraints that small-scale food vendors faced. Another view was that “provision of training in areas such as business, and financial management, food preparation as well as health and safety” was necessary.

Seventy-four percent of the food vendors proposed that “hawkers must be assisted with improving their hygiene standards.” Moreover, seventy-one percent of them believed that “Hawkers must be assisted with the registration of their food vending businesses.” A large proportion (82%) of them advised that the “Municipality must issue small-scale food vending licences” and “Municipality must support food vending” (Table 2). Besides this, seventy-six percent of the small-scale food vendors suggested that the “government must intervene in the food vending business both at local and provincial government levels”. Seventy-five percent of the vendors further revealed that “the quality of water that is used by food vendors must be tested.” Suggested solutions to the financial constraints that the food vendors faced were: “Municipality must liaise with companies for donations” and “financial institutions must provide funding to support small-scale food vending”. Among the physical environment constraints, the top ranked solution was that “municipality must stop forcefully removing hawkers from selling stalls”. With respect to knowledge and skills acquisition, “provision of

training in areas such as business and financial management, food preparation skills, health and safety issues” was ranked first. Lastly, the major policy and legal framework suggestion was “issuing and renewal of food vending licenses”.

DISCUSSION

As indicated above, the study was carried out to identify the perceived solutions to the constraints to small-scale food vending in Thohoyandou. The study was also carried out with the primary assumption that women prepared and served food at an early stage (Chauke et al. 2015). Thus, the observed predominance of females operating as street food vendors was not surprising. Studies conducted in Nigeria (Aluko 2014), Tanzania (Mramba 2015) and in Ethiopia (Eliku 2016) revealed that women dominated the street food vending business. Chicho and Ongori (2013) and Eliku (2016) explained that women were involved in street food vending because they depended on it to balance family income especially during harsh economic times. The flexible nature of small-scale food vending offered women the opportunity to balance work and domestic responsibilities.

Most street food vendors were 21-39 years old. The fact that preparation and serving foods are both physically demanding tasks makes it not surprising that younger people, who are of-

Table 2: Ranked means of perceived solutions to the challenges of small-scale food vending

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
<i>Infrastructure and Basic Services</i>			
a) Municipality must stop removing hawkers from the selling stalls	4.87	0.506	1
b) Provision of sanitation (water and toilets)	4.87	0.496	2
c) Provision of proper selling stalls with lockable storage	4.68	0.891	3
d) Keeping the selling stalls clean	4.63	0.809	4
<i>Knowledge and Skills Acquisition</i>			
a) Provision of training in areas such as business management, catering and food preparation skills, financial management, health and safety issues	4.64	0.899	1
b) Assist hawkers with hygienic standard	4.53	0.985	2
c) Hawkerc must assisted to register their businesses	4.43	1.120	3
<i>Legal and Regulatory Framework</i>			
a) Issuing and renewing of food vendors licences	4.64	0.082	1
b) Support of food vendors by municipality	4.60	1.031	2
c) Government must intervene to food vending both locally and at provincial level	4.50	1.056	3
d) Facilitation of the regulatory body by the municipality	4.25	1.331	4
e) Hawkerc must abide by municipality by-laws	4.02	1.323	5
f) Hawkerc must operate in the space provided by municipality	3.86	1.604	6
g) Municipality must remove bottle stores from town	2.18	1.562	7

ten fitter and more energetic persons such as the 21-39 year olds were actively involved in small-scale food vending. Ronquenst-Roso et al. (2016) also revealed that street food vending was popular among the youth and middle-aged women. Participation of such young people in this business can also be partly attributed to the ever-worsening youth unemployment in South Africa. Currently, more than 36 percent of youth in the country are unemployed (Statistics South Africa 2015). Lack of employable skills, inadequate work experience, weak job searching abilities and inadequate financial resources to enable them to look for jobs are some of the reasons often cited for the high youth unemployment rate. For this reason, it is understandable why small-scale food vending should be regarded as a strategy that households relied on to all eviate youth unemployment in Thulamela Municipality.

Most small-scale food vendors were reported to be married. Presumably they resorted to small-scale food vending to augment their limited family financial resources. Similar observations were made in studies conducted in Ethiopia (Eliku 2016) and in Tanzania (Marobhe and Sabai 2016). Predominance of married women in street food vending could also be attributed to worsening economic hardships. Participation in street food vending helped to generate income needed to meet food and financial needs of their families. Moreover, most of the food vendors in the current study had attained secondary education, which confirmed the results of a study undertaken in Nigeria (Andy et al. 2015). In the latter study, almost all the food vendors had completed secondary schooling. However, the observations contrasted those obtained in a study conducted in Ethiopia (Eliku 2016) in which small-scale food vendors (50%) and kitchen assistants (67%) had completed primary education. Low level of education might result in lack of appreciation of safe food handling practices and thus pose serious risks to human health (Abdullahi et al. 2016). Thanh (2015) argued that, people with limited education lacked appropriate skills that would enable them to secure high wage earning jobs or better paid professional positions. This might explain why people with low levels of education resort to informal businesses such as small-scale food vending

The constraints experienced that by food vendors in Thohoyandou related to physical

infrastructure the working environment, policy and legal framework, as well as food preparation. Most physical environment constraints related to infrastructure and basic services. Food vendors complained about poor access to sanitation facilities. It was reported that there were no running water and toilet facilities at vending sites. Studies carried out in Brazil (Cortese et al. 2016) and Ghana (Ababio et al. 2016) also revealed that lack of water and toilet facilities were major issues that constrained street food vending. Lack of toilet facilities raises numerous concerns such as vendors relieving themselves in the vicinity of food selling points or nearby secluded areas (Roever 2014). It is likely that the street food vendors might not properly wash their hands after relieving themselves. In the current study, food vendors confirmed that restricted access to proper sanitation facilities such as toilets and running tap water had the potential to result in contamination, leading to food borne diseases.

A considerably large number of food vendors complained about lack of proper selling stalls in Thohoyandou. Almost all the food vendors operated in stalls that lacked permanent structures and storage facilities. This observation resonates well with the findings of Thanh (2015), who reported that most food vendors in Vietnam did not use any permanent structures. Also, most vending sites were found to be made of either canopy or zinc sheets, blocks of mud as well as wooden structures. Bormann et al. (2016) made similar observations and concluded that the working environments of street traders are precarious. Apart from limited infrastructure, food vendors also endured harsh physical conditions. They operated in open spaces where they were not protected from adverse conditions such as bad weather. During rainy seasons, the vendors had to close their business temporarily and only resume trading when favourable conditions prevailed. This explains why the food vendors suggested that Thulamela Municipality consider allocating protected operational space to them.

The street food vendors in Thohoyandou were worried about overcrowding and competition. This led them to the fight over limited operational space. At times, competition results in considerable reduction of selling prices and ultimately, financial loss. Brown and McGranahan (2016) were of the view that the stiff competi-

tion, in the informal sector could be due to ease of access or entry into the sector associated with affordable start-up capital. Apparently, this is why it was difficult for municipal officials to control street food vending in Thulamela Municipality (Mathaulula et al. 2015). Street food vendors in Thohoyandou complained about the existing legal frameworks that made it difficult to operate freely. They were concerned that the Municipality did not issue or renew food vending licenses. Existing municipal by-laws classified selling cooked food in public as illegal business. In spite of this, food vendors continued to allocate themselves operational spaces. In response, municipal officials and police officers often harassed and forcefully evicted the vendors. In some cases, vendors' equipment and goods are confiscated or destroyed. Classification of street food vending as illegal business made it impossible to secure credit from financial institutions. Khairuzzaman et al. (2014) also expressed the same sentiments. The illegal status of, small-scale food vending also made it difficult for those involved in it to establish viable formal relationships with suppliers.

Increase in prices of inputs or ingredients were the most prominent food preparation or production constraints. FAO (2013) reported that when prices increased, there were limited effective coping strategies due to the general inadequate purchasing power of the customers. Street food vendors could not make major adjustments in the menu or the selling price per plate. In the current study, street food vendors in Thohoyandou, proposed several potential solutions to constraints that curtailed their operations. Most of them were of the view that "municipal officials must stop forcefully removing food vendors from their selling stalls". Formalising street vending might serve as a bridge between their employment conditions and the risks they encountered. However, Mathaulula (2011) was of the view that the conflict that existed between municipal and hawkers by-laws might limit the viability of this possible solution. Presumably, continuous engagement among the parties would help yield amicable solutions.

Almost all small-scale food vendors agreed that "proper sanitation (water and toilets) facilities must be provided". This finding resonates well with the observations of Nwajiuba et al. (2013) in Nigeria. Lack of proper selling stalls with lockable storage facilities was another ma-

ior concern. It was suggested that Thulamela Municipality should build proper selling stalls with lockable storage facilities where the vendors could run their businesses from. Above all, this could help protect the small-scale food vendors from bad weather. Apart from this, it would make it easier for the Municipality to regulate the operations of the street food vendors.

Food vendors believed that acquisition of knowledge and skills related to small-scale food vending was key to addressing the constraints they faced. Providing training in health and food safety, financial and business management, as well as food preparation was deemed crucial. This observation resonates well with the findings of Campos et al. (2015), who claimed that the provision of relevant training to street traders would reduce the adverse effects of the constraints that street food vendors faced. Khairuzzaman et al. (2014) also indicated that food vendors' knowledge on food safety matters might help to maintain high standards of hygiene in small-scale vended foods, which is recognised as a major concern worldwide. Probably, all these measures might build a solid case for formal recognition of street food vending businesses, issuing relevant trading licences. Supportive local, provincial and national legislations might promote the growth and development of the small-scale food business sector.

CONCLUSION

The current study confirmed that small-scale food vending contributed to the livelihoods of those involved in it but was not formally recognised. Because of the latter problem, the street food vendors encountered a wide range of constraints. The constraints related mainly to infrastructure and basic services, working environment, policy and legal frameworks, and food preparation. Poor sanitation was also said to be a challenge because of lack of running water and toilet facilities at vending sites. Overcrowding and competition for limited operational space, harsh weather conditions, lack of vending licenses and forceful removals by municipal officials were the other constraints. Among the solutions that the food vendors suggested to address the constraints they faced, were "municipal officials must stop forceful removal of food vendors from selling stalls", "provision of proper sanitation near the selling points", and

“municipality must consider issuing vending licenses to the small-scale food vendors”. The importance of providing training in business management, financial management and catering was highlighted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the current study, Thulamela Municipality should:

- embrace small-scale food vending as an economic opportunity that has the potential to significantly impact on those involved in it;
- engage the street hawkers’ association committee to develop a multiple stakeholder-owned intervention plan. Among others, the plan should include aspects such as health and food safety management; provision of infrastructure and maintenance; inclusion of policies on street hawking in municipal by-laws as well as education and training;
- engage relevant stakeholders such as the Local Economic Development Department and Limpopo Economic Development Agency with a view to facilitate training and registration of street food businesses; and
- consider partnering with various departments at the University of Venda such as Departments of Tourism, Food Science and Technology, Microbiology, Consumer Sciences, Rural and Urban Planning, Environmental Management, Nutrition and Public Health, among others. Such departments might assist in developing an integrated plan that responds to the constraints that the small-scale food vendors face

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