

“In This Life One Must Live and Not Survive”: Understanding Day Labourers’ Vulnerability through the Lens of Max-Neef

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Abstract

Day labouring is one of the most visible forms of precarious employment in South Africa as those involved earn low and uncertain levels of income, leaving many of them in a state of deprivation, poverty, and marginalisation. This article aims to contribute to the documentation and analysis of the precarious nature of informal employment and the vulnerabilities workers face in this uncertain work environment. A case study research design involving 66 (45 respondents from quantitative data collection and 21 participants from qualitative data collection) male day labourers from Mbekweni was used. The findings of this study were analysed using Max-Neef’s theory of the nine fundamental human needs. This study found that day labourers from Mbekweni receive little to no income, struggle with access to decent housing, face food insecurity, and often struggle with access to basic services. In addition, while all day labourers face various forms of poverty, only South African day labourers have access to social security benefits, while those who are foreign nationals do not.

Keywords: precarious labour; day labouring; vulnerability; Max-Neef; migration; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



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Introduction

Being a day labourer is very hard and [it] is very difficult to survive, especially for myself. I'm a foreigner, you know, so I come here by the robot specially for work. I can paint, I can be a plumber, I can be a paver, but most cases I can go for any general duty, and the money you know, the income you are getting per day, haa, I can't make ends meet. (Participant 5, Mbekweni)

The United Nations Development Programme (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2015) drafted and instituted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including ending extreme poverty in all forms (SDG 1), ending hunger, and achieving food security (SDG 2) by 2030. In addition, it aims to promote full and productive employment, with decent jobs for all (SDG 3), peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development (SDG 11), and access to justice for all (SDG 16).

Despite the well-intentioned ideals of the SDGs, informal workers such as day labourers are still twice as likely to belong to poor households compared to their counterparts in the formal sector (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]/International Labour Organisation [ILO] 2019). In a 2019 study of 29 countries (using comparable data), the mean proportion of formal sector workers among the working poor was around 20 per cent and as high as 42 per cent for informal workers (OECD/ILO 2019).

Day labour work is a casual job-seeking activity. Workers wait at intersections and street corners and in other public places for possible temporary employment opportunities (Theodore et al. 2015). They work for many different employers and are mostly paid on a daily basis—typically in cash and, therefore, often “off the books.” Smith (2020) further states that day labour work is highly impersonal, consists of hard and heavy work, and is based on informal short-term contracts.

Furthermore, informal economy workers regularly face a bigger array of risks (OECD/ILO 2019). In general, lower levels of education and an over-supply of labour in occupations or economic sectors with lower wages are characteristics of workers in informal employment (OECD/ILO 2019). This also applies to the day labour market. In the case of day labourers, the primary risk is the frightening levels of unemployment that drive people into poverty (Seekings and Nattrass 2017). Day labourers can often go days or even weeks without securing any employment (Smith 2020). Roux (2017) asserts that these lengthy spells of unemployment imply hunger, misery, and a loss of self-esteem for those who are jobless, while Smith (2020) notes that day labourers are consistently vulnerable, confronted with poverty, food insecurity, and social exclusion.

One particularly important driver of vulnerability among informal workers is the lack of access to social protection which leaves informal work as the only option to survive materially (OECD/ILO 2019). For example, day labourers often cannot afford to take the day off, so to speak, in an attempt to access any social or health-related service, as

they simply cannot afford the opportunity cost of not attempting to get a job for the day. In this sense, Rodgers and Rodgers (1989, 5) note that “the concept of precariousness involves instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability. ... It is some combination of these factors which identifies precarious jobs, and the boundaries around the concept are inevitably to some extent arbitrary.” It is virtually impossible to understand the nature of precarious labour without unpacking the human vulnerability caused by precarious labour.

Calls for research that document the precarity of informal employment (Theodore et al. 2015; OECD/ILO 2019) has grown, with the OECD/ILO (2019, 67) stating that “assessing these risks is essential to appreciate the high costs to individuals and society of ignoring them, make the case for investing in protection of informal economy workers, and identify appropriate policy responses.” This article contributes to the documentation and analysis of the precarious nature of informal employment and the vulnerabilities that workers from Mbekweni, South Africa face. The aim of this study, therefore, is to investigate the particular vulnerabilities of informally employed day labourers from Mbekweni.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: the theoretical framework used in the study is presented, followed by the research methodology and a brief description of the research setting. The findings are presented next, followed by conclusions and areas for further study.

Theoretical Framework

Using Manfred Max-Neef’s fundamental human needs (FHNs) as theoretical framework, we investigate and analyse the dimensions of the structural vulnerability and precarious existence of day labourers from Mbekweni, South Africa. The FHN framework allows for a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of the precarious nature of day labourers than achieved by many existing studies, most of which are more general in approach. We argue that analysing human vulnerability through the lens of Max-Neef’s Human Scale Development (HSD), in particular, the nine FHNs, and their roles in decreasing or increasing human vulnerability, provides the necessary structure and context to improve our understanding of the human vulnerability resulting from precarious labour such as day labouring.

Max-Neef (1991) asserts that FHNs are identifiable, as well as being common to all humans, and are non-hierarchical. Max-Neef developed a grid that is used to analyse and understand the FHNs in a community. All needs are a holistic system, equal, and non-hierarchical (Cruz et al. 2009; Nel et al. 2021). Max-Neef’s (1991) theory identifies nine FHNs, namely: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creation, leisure, identity, and freedom (Murray et al. 2005). According to Max-Neef (1991), FHNs can be understood through four aspects: being (qualities), having (things), doing (actors), and interacting (settings). Satisfiers of the needs are defined as social

practices, values, attitudes, actions, forms of organisations, political models, and environmental characteristics (Max-Neef 1991). Needs are interrelated as well as interactive. Hence, a satisfier may satisfy various needs at once—this is referred to as a synergic satisfier—while some needs may require more than one satisfier for it to be satisfied (Murray et al. 2005).

Furthermore, Costanza et al. (2007) note that the ability of humans (in the case of this study, day labourers from Mbekweni) to actualise their FHNs comes primarily from the opportunities available to them, such as employment. People and societies vary in forms of being, having, doing, and interacting. However, whether individual needs are satisfied or not in each case will depend on the right combination and articulation of specific satisfiers, including a person's values, which lead them to relate in individually and socially specific ways to different satisfiers and which are themselves part of the set of satisfiers whereby needs may be satisfied (Cruz et al. 2009).

Subsistence, according to Max-Neef (1991) addresses the need for physical, emotional, and mental health, involving basic essentials such as food, shelter, and work. It includes activities like work, rest, and procreation within appropriate living environments (Max-Neef 1991). *Protection* focuses on care, adaptability, and autonomy, supported by social security, health systems, and family structures (Max-Neef 1991). This need can be met through activities such as planning and caregiving in safe and secure environments. Moreover, *affection* is embedded in respect, tolerance, and generosity, fulfilled through meaningful relationships within family and communities (Max-Neef 1991). Activities to address this need include sharing, expressing emotions, and forming intimate connections. *Understanding* is driven by curiosity, critical thinking, and intuition, supported by educational resources and policies (Max-Neef 1991). It involves studying and investigating in settings like schools and communities. Furthermore, *participation* depends on adaptability and humour, with a focus on responsibilities, rights, and privileges (Max-Neef 1991). This need can be met through expressing opinions, and dissenting in social spaces such as associations, neighbourhoods, and civic groups. *Idleness* encourages imagination and tranquillity, supported by games and free time (Max-Neef 1991). To satisfy this need, activities such as play and relaxation must occur in peaceful spaces. The need of *creation* involves creativity, inventiveness, and autonomy (Max-Neef 1991). It is met through activities like inventing, building, and designing in workshops and cultural groups. Furthermore, *identity* is linked to self-esteem and a sense of belonging, strengthened by symbols, language, and customs. This need is met through self-recognition and personal growth in familiar environments. Lastly, *freedom* refers to autonomy and tolerance, supported by equal rights (Max-Neef 1991). It involves activities such as choosing and expressing individuality in flexible settings.

Within the context of this study, for example, day labourers would need food, shelter, and work to address the need of subsistence. Day labourers enter the day labour market in an attempt to find casual work to satisfy their need for food and shelter. Additionally,

day labourers would also need social security, access to a healthcare system, rights, and family to satisfy the need for protection. Friendships and relationships with nature would have to be added to satisfy their need for affection, and they would need access to literature and teachers, as well as educational and communicational policies to satisfy their need for understanding. In addition, they would need: employment and rights to satisfy their need for participation; games, social gatherings and interaction, clubs, and peace of mind to satisfy their need for idleness; skills, abilities, methods, techniques, besides work, to satisfy their need for creation; and symbols, language, religion, values, customs, norms, habits, historical memory, besides work, to satisfy their need for identity. Finally, equal human rights would be needed to satisfy their need for freedom, as also confirmed by Schenck et al. (2020).

Max-Neef (1991) states that if any fundamental human need is not adequately satisfied it reveals a human poverty—in this case, vulnerability. Trapped in the cycle of precarious labour, day labourers may struggle to improve their quality of life. The conditions and circumstances of this precarious existence of day labourers were investigated using the methodology discussed in the next section.

Methods

To obtain a detailed picture and conduct an in-depth analysis of the structural vulnerabilities of day labourers within the framework of Max-Neef's FHNs, a case study research design was chosen (Yin 2014, 16). Patten and Bruce (2014) provide the rationale for the choice of research design because, in a case study, the emphasis is on obtaining in-depth knowledge of an individual over an extended period of time. Furthermore, the case study is used widely to contribute to knowledge of individuals, groups, organisational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin 2014). Within this approach, our study consisted of two distinct phases. The first phase was the collection of quantitative data to obtain demographic information and a socioeconomic profile of day labourers from Mbekweni. This included factors such as gender, age, marital status, education, and income levels. The second phase consisted of the collection of qualitative data to obtain an in-depth understanding of the structural vulnerabilities that day labourers face on a daily basis. The combination of these two methodologies were used over a nine-month period between August 2015 and April 2016 to achieve the depth of knowledge and understanding required by the objective of the study (Creswell 2015).

The case study in this case focused on the activities of day labourers at two hiring sites in Mbekweni and one in Wellington in the Western Cape province, South Africa. The choice of the Western Cape for the case study was informed by the available literature. Studies on the day labour phenomenon in South Africa often focus on Gauteng and Johannesburg and Pretoria in particular. The Western Cape is a prominent immigrant destination and therefore important from this perspective. Mbekweni, in particular, was chosen after careful reconnaissance revealed that there was a mix of foreign and local day labourers, which constituted an important perspective for the authors. In addition,

Mbekweni had one major visible hiring site, thus making it convenient for data collection. Upon data collection, the first author was informed of two more additional sites (one in Mbekweni and one in Wellington) where more local day labourers were standing.

Interviewing day labourers in any research project is challenging because they are frequently moving around within and between nearby hiring sites and running to vehicles in the middle of an interview, hoping to improve their chances of obtaining a temporary job for the day. As a result, the non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling was used. This was supported by accidental sampling techniques such as the convenience/availability and snowball techniques. The sampling criteria were day labourers who were above the age of 18 years and who were willing to be interviewed for the purpose of the study (Bless et al. 2006).

A structured interview schedule was used to collect the quantitative data at the three hiring sites during the first phase of the research. The quantitative data provided the socioeconomic profile of the day labourers. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis. A total of 45 structured interview schedules were completed in good order for this component of the research project during the period of 2015–2016. Table 1 below provides a detailed description relating to the sample for the quantitative data.

Table 1: Demographic information of day labourers in Mbekweni (2016)

Variable		n	%
Gender	Male	45	100
	Female	0	0
Race	Black	42	92.4
	Coloured	3	6.6
Language	Shona	22	48.9
	IsiXhosa	8	17.8
	IsiNdebele	6	13.3
	English	5	11.1
	Afrikaans	3	6.7
Country of origin	Tshivenda	1	2.2
	Zimbabwe	34	75.6
	South Africa	11	24.4
Age	21 to 30	18	40
	31 to 40	18	40
	40 to 50	9	20
Marital Status	Married	20	44.4
	Single/Never married	18	40
	Separated/Divorced	7	15.6

Source: Quantitative data (2015–2016)

Because the population was all male, all the respondents in this study were also male, with almost a quarter ($n = 11$) originating from South Africa and three-quarters from Zimbabwe ($n = 34$). Those born in South Africa were predominantly from the Western- and Eastern Cape. With regard to the age of day labourers, two-fifths were between the

ages of 21 and 30 years, two-fifths between the ages of 31 and 40 years, and one-fifth between the ages of 41 and 50 years. Twenty respondents (almost half) were married (according to either traditional or Western customs), two-fifths ($n = 18$) were single/never married, and seven were separated/divorced.

In order to obtain the qualitative data in the second phase, 30 semi-structured interviews and an unstructured observations schedule were used. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with day labourers from Mbekweni and service delivery institutions like the Department of Social Development, the South African Social Security Agency, the Department of Labour, and the South African Police Service. The focus here was specifically the structural vulnerabilities of the day labourers, which are not directly influenced by basic demographic data like age. The quantitative data were entered into Excel and then to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The qualitative data were transcribed and then analysed by employing Tesch's eight-step data analysis technique (Creswell 2015).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Science Research Committee (HSSREC) of the University of the Western Cape (Registration No 15/6/36, dated 28 September 2015) as well as from the Department of Social Development, Western Cape Government. All appropriate ethical considerations and protocols such as confidentiality, anonymity, and potential to harm, as suggested by Thomas (2016), were adhered to. The next section provides the necessary background in terms of the residential area used as the case study for this study.

The Research Location

Mbekweni is a township in the Drakenstein Municipal area. It is situated between Wellington and Paarl in the Western Cape Province, as indicated in figure 1. Most of Mbekweni's residents are Black Africans who speak the isiXhosa language (Drakenstein Municipality 2017). Many of the residents are first-generation urban dwellers who moved here from the Eastern Cape province and had come to the area in search of employment opportunities and better education for their children. The reconnaissance phase conducted by the first author for this study also revealed a significant number of economic migrants migrating from Zimbabwe to Mbekweni.

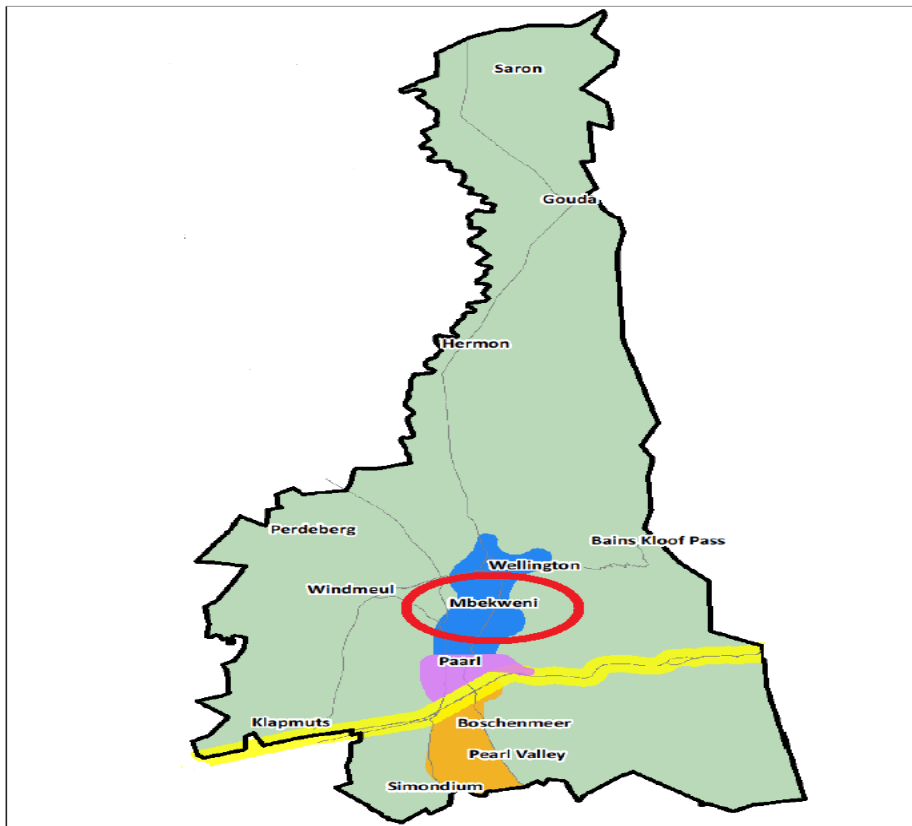


Figure 1: Map of Drakenstein municipal area

Source: Drakenstein Municipality (2017)

The findings and analysis of the research are presented in the next section.

Findings

Although day labourers can be regarded as informal wage earners, in reality they face staggering rates of unemployment within this activity. Previous literature pertaining to day labourers in Pretoria suggests that their unemployment rates are over 80 per cent (Theodore et al. 2017; 2018), meaning that in practice they often only get a job once every two weeks. This statistic paints a sombre picture of the ability of day labourers to meet their basic needs and provides the context and backdrop against which several themes came to the fore in this research. The main themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis are presented below.

The Day Labourers' Acknowledgment and Anxiety Pertaining to Their Economic Responsibilities towards Immediate and Extended Family

As a result of uncertain and insecure employment, day labourers often found it difficult to carry out their acknowledged responsibilities as economic providers (Malinga 2015). This was also confirmed by Schenck et al. (2020) in their study of day labourers in Emalahleni in Mpumalanga. This theme was also prevalent in this study:

It's very difficult, cause I'm also a family man you know. I've got a lot of responsibilities. (Respondent 9, Mbekweni, 39 years¹)

Moreover, this study found that a maximum of 15 people are dependent on the wages of one day labourer from Mbekweni. A third ($n = 13$) of the respondents had between one and 13 dependants under the age of 18 years. Half ($n = 22$) of the respondents indicated that they were the sole breadwinners of these dependants. During the period of data collection, the first author only witnessed a few of them securing employment. These extended spells of not being able to secure any informal employment opportunities bring with them all the negative emotions and effects as described by Watson (2009).

The respondents also indicated that they send money to their families as often as possible. This aspect is especially important for those who have migrated from Zimbabwe and the Eastern Cape. The pressure of having to remit places additional stress on and increases the anxiety of the respondents when informal jobs are not regularly secured. The negativity, anxiety, and subsequent loss of identity described above are therefore often accentuated.

The Need for Subsistence and Creation

Day labourers from Mbekweni struggle to meet their basic subsistence needs due to no, insecure, and/or low wages. The lowest daily wages the respondents received when

1 Some of the quotes used to highlight the various themes were additional comments from the 45 respondents in the quantitative phase of the study. As the focus in the qualitative phase was not on demographics per se, quotes from these 30 participants do not have ages indicated in the text.

hired during the twelve months prior to data collection was between R0 and R50 (n = 10), R51 and R100 (n = 21), and R101 and R150 (n = 10). The average lowest wages received amounted to R44 (rounded off) per day, and the median value in this category was R105 per day. The structured interview schedule data indicated that the average best wage paid during said-period was R113 (rounded off) per day, with a median value of R200 per day.

Two key aspects must be kept in mind when evaluating these averages. Firstly, the days when higher wages are earned are very rare. Secondly, the hiring patterns of day labourers reveal that they sometimes go days and even weeks without getting any jobs. This insecurity and volatility of their income is highlighted by the following statements from the respondents:

Day labouring is, er, day labouring is, er, ai, it's hard because sometimes you are working, sometimes you are not working. (Participant 3, Mbekweni)

Sometimes you have work and sometimes not. (Respondent 16, Mbekweni, 34 years)

The findings regarding the income of day labourers from Mbekweni showed that day labourers on average often earn below the stipulated minimum wage in South Africa at the time of the study. The National Minimum Wage Bill stipulated that the national minimum wage was R20 per hour (amounting to approximately R120 per day or R3,500 per month) for each ordinary working hour in 2017 (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2017). The enforcement of this legislation generally does not reach the informal sector and the informally employed, such as day labourers.

When scrutinising the lowest daily wages received by the respondents, it is evident that three-quarters (n = 33) of the respondents earned below the minimum wage stipulated by law in South Africa at the time of the study. In contrast, when perusing the best daily wages received by the respondents, it is evident that only two respondents earned under the minimum wage, as specified by the National Minimum Wage Bill. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, earning the best daily wage is the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, day labourers struggle to find employment on the street corners and sometimes a whole week or more will pass without a day labourer gaining a single job. This is reflected in the monthly incomes reported by the respondents.

During the structured interviews, the respondents were asked to disclose the amount they earned in wages for the month prior to the interview. The data received indicated that they received an average monthly income of R673. The median monthly income is R1,400. The median monthly income is therefore a mere 40 per cent of the income prescribed by law for full-time employment.

The results further revealed that, during a typically bad month of work, almost half (n = 21) of the respondents received an income of between R0 and R999 per month, a third received an income of between R1,000 and R1,500 (n = 16), and less than one-

fifth ($n = 7$) received an income of between R1,501 and R3,200. In comparison, the most prevalent income category earned during a good month of work was between R3,201 and R4,000 ($n = 19$), followed by between R1,800 and R2,500 ($n = 10$). Additionally, the average income received during a bad month was R468, of which the median was R950, and R1,061 during a good month, with the median of R3,100. The median monthly income of day labourers during both bad and good months is, therefore, under the minimum wage of R3,500 per month. Again, one must consider that because of the infrequent hiring patterns experienced by the day labourers the good months are very rare.

At the time of the study, there were three poverty lines used in South Africa as stated by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2018):

- Food poverty line: R547 per person per month. This refers to the amount of money that an individual will need to afford the minimum required daily energy intake.
- Lower-bound poverty line: R785 per person per month. This refers to the food poverty line, plus the average amount derived from non-food items of the household, whose total expenditure is equal to the food poverty line; and
- Upper-bound poverty line: R1,183 per person per month. This refers to the food poverty line, plus the average amount derived from non-food items of the household, whose food expenditure is equal to the food poverty line.

Evidence emanating from the results indicated that, during a bad month of work, two-thirds ($n = 29$) of the total sample earned less than the upper-bound poverty line, and over half ($n = 26$) of the total sample earned under the lower-bound poverty line, while a third ($n = 15$) of the total sample earned less than the food poverty line. The average income of the respondents during a bad month of work (R468) was also under the food poverty line, and the average income earned during a good month of work (R1,061) was under the upper-bound poverty line.

Therefore, the fact that a significant percentage of day labourers in this study earned under the national poverty lines, and the average income of day labourers in the study (during a bad as well as a good month of work) was under the national poverty lines, makes the income of day labourers a significant contributor to day labourer vulnerability and a precarious existence in Mbekweni. This finding is echoed by Theodore et al. (2015), who conclude that day labourers in South Africa are confronted with an insecure and unstable income, rendering them structurally vulnerable. As a result, they often find themselves living below the poverty line (Schenck et al. 2020).

Despite the low income of day labourers, they are faced with normal living expenses and family responsibilities. For example, regarding their expenses, 80 per cent of day

labourers in this study indicated that they were paying R300 per month or more for rent. The following extract refers to this fact:

'Cause we pay R300, some R400, some R500. (Participant 1, Mbekweni)

The above extract indicates that day labourers from Mbekweni could pay as much as R500 per month for rent. Furthermore, it became evident that day labourers from Mbekweni struggled to access decent housing. The following extract refers to this:

I live in a shack. I do not have a house, but I am waiting for one. The people at the municipality said we must sign for a house, but if they build houses, some will get and others would not get. (Participant 5, Mbekweni)

The above extract reflects the respondent's desire to have a house or a proper shelter. In addition to the above statement, the structured interview schedule data indicated that a little over a quarter ($n = 13$) of the respondents lived in a shack, over a third ($n = 17$) lived in a backyard shack, two lived on the street or in the bush, and almost one-third ($n = 13$) lived in a brick house. Therefore, a significant proportion (almost three-quarters, $n = 32$) of day labourers battled with access to decent housing, rendering the fulfilment of this FHN of Max-Neef an almost impossible task for the day labourers in our study.

The results also showed that due to the insecure and precarious nature of their income, day labourers from Mbekweni often experienced food insecurity. The following interview extract refers to this phenomenon: "I'm struggling for buying food" (Participant 1, Mbekweni).

Moreover, a third ($n = 17$) of the respondents had no food to eat for approximately one to six days in the month before the interview. The structured interview schedule data specifically revealed that two-thirds ($n = 28$) of the respondents indicated that they always had sufficient food to eat; however, a third ($n = 16$) disclosed that in the month prior to the interview they went to bed hungry because there was nothing to eat for at least one day and for a maximum of six days.

The Need for Protection, Participation, and Freedom

Bernabè (2002) postulates that precarious work is strongly associated with social exclusion. Day labourers are not exempted from this darkness of social exclusion. This applies particularly to the undocumented migrant day labourers from Zimbabwe, who form the majority of the respondents, as reported earlier. Theodore et al. (2018) assert that undocumented migrants often find opportunities in the informal economy, as well as the informalising segments of local economies, where workplace violations are prevalent, leading to further manifestations of social and other forms of exclusion. This was also confirmed by the results of this study.

The results revealed that day labourers in Mbekweni were often the victims of crime and violence. These crimes included robbery and discriminative abuse. In response to a question on how they were being treated by the community, less than half ($n = 19$) of the respondents disclosed being victims of crime and violence. Moreover, a quarter ($n = 11$) of the respondents were victims of robbery; six were victims of racial discrimination; and two experienced both the former and latter. The following extract gives further credence to the above reality:

The problem comes when the locals are taking advantage of foreigners. Ja, they are stealing from those guys [day labourers]. ... The criminals are really infested here.
(Participant 8, Mbekweni)

Despite the fact that they are victims of crime, they felt that they were not protected and that they could not lodge a complaint at the local South African Police Service (SAPS) station, exacerbating feelings of exclusion, as suggested by Max-Neef. Although it was not formally asked whether they had legal status in South Africa, many respondents admitted of their own accord to not being in possession of legal documents, and, as a result, faced challenges with access to services. The following extract is in reference to this:

Many people here they don't have their real documents you know. Sometimes they are here but they don't have work permits. ... They don't have some passports, so you cannot go to the police without those things ... otherwise they will arrest you ... they will deport you. (Participant 2, Mbekweni)

However, during the interview with an official from the SAPS Mbekweni, the participant suggested the opposite:

A complaint is a complaint. He is a human being, despite not having a passport, if he is robbed [then] he is robbed. Therefore, if he lays a complaint then he will be helped.
(SAPS official, Mbekweni)

Even though SAPS Mbekweni do not officially require any form of documentation to collect an individual's statement, the following extract reveals that day labourers perceived that they were being treated differently and, to some extent, unfairly; therefore, they often did not attempt to access the service:

I hear from others they [SAPS Mbekweni] don't treat people well. Like us, we are foreigners you know. For an example, ... last month one robbed my phone then I want to go to report to the police station but other people they tell me "Aah, don't go there because their nothing to do with that case." They know them very well. They don't treat people well so we are afraid to go and report. (Participant 2, Mbekweni)

The extract below reflects the difficulty that a day labourer experienced when attempting to access health services in Paarl, near Mbekweni.

So I go to the clinic, so they say “Ah, er, you can come tomorrow.” Then I ask them why, they say “Ja, there is a record of Dunoon.” I was living in Dunoon, I was ... I come from Dunoon to live here in Mbekweni, so they say you gonna go back to Dunoon. I don’t have the money to go there again ... so I say maybe you help me please, they say “Ha ah, you can come tomorrow.” (Participant 7, Wellington, 36 years)

The findings further revealed that day labourers from Mbekweni not only experienced barriers with regard to access to health and police services, but many were also legally excluded from formal social protection as a result of their status as illegal immigrants. The social protection in South Africa relates to the social assistance, more commonly known as social grants (Patel 2015). The following extract from an interview with a South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) official refers to this:

At SASSA, day labourers will not qualify as there is a set criterion. Before they qualify they need to get proof at Department of Home Affairs to show that they are legal in the country. ... If they don’t have these documents then they won’t qualify. (SASSA official, Paarl)

Even though the legality of this approach is not in question, it undoubtedly added to the feelings of exclusion and marginalisation experienced by day labourers, in particular, those who illegally migrated to South Africa as a result of the push factors experienced back home, as postulated by Schenck and Triegaardt (2018).

Furthermore, the results show that day labourers are regularly contracted to perform their labour in substandard working environments. The findings revealed that day labourers often work under dangerous and unconducive working conditions, as per the following extracts:

They don’t tell you the conditions of work. ... There’s no break time at times. (Participant 16, Mbekweni)

Sometimes the hours, you can work for 10 to 12 hours but they didn’t pay up the overtime. (Participant 20, Wellington)

Usually making, making us work for overtime without paying us you see. ... They must also give us safety, safety wear. (Participant 13, Mbekweni, 45 years)

The above statements illustrate the poor and precarious working conditions facing day labourers on a regular basis. The following extract highlights the lack of access to compensation for occupational injuries and diseases. It describes an incident in which a

worker was injured while on duty; however, the employer refused to assist the injured employee:

That work that we were working was very dangerous work, because my friend he fell down from the upwards to downwards and he dislocated his hand but he never be paid. ... The boss was outside, we phone, there's someone who get injury, but he doesn't do anything with that. (Participant 1, Mbekweni)

This finding coincides with those of Meléndez et al. (2013) in the United States, which revealed that day labourers face a higher likelihood of work-related injury and fatality, as employers are less willing to pay for safety training.

Besides the above, day labourers generally have no formal contract or agreement between them and their employers. Everything in the day labour market is informal; therefore, in the absence of a formal contract, the respondents frequently fear the unknown. The following extract demonstrates this:

Also the other thing, they can take me here every day but without putting in a contract you know, we are working every day, every day for six to thirty months, giving you money every day, but without making an agreement. ... We have a fear of unknown. ... Will I have a job, when am I going to have a job. We have fear of unknown, stress and all those things. (Participant 3, Mbekweni)

Additionally, an overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed that they had nowhere to go when their rights were violated; hence, they are excluded from recourse in such cases. Theodore et al. (2017) asserts that unauthorised migrants, active in the informal economy, are often reluctant to contest violations of labour standards for fear of being deported; consequently, they tolerate substandard employment. Day labourers from Mbekweni had no collective voice, such as in the form of an association with a union, to represent them in cases when their vulnerabilities were exploited. In the absence of a union, the last resort for day labourers is to approach the Department of Labour in cases where their economic rights are infringed upon. But this process is not without its own obstacles, as affirmed by our interviews with officials of the Department of Labour in Paarl:

After they work for the day the employer comes to pay them. When they don't pay them, they come to us and we will find out they don't have the details, so unfortunately we can't help them. (Department of Labour, Paarl)

Usually need your green barcoded ID and the documents from the employer that you are working for, so that is the big problem that we got because they don't have those documents and some of them are foreigners, they don't have their valid passports which we can't assist them without those documents. (Department of Labour, Paarl)

Because of the precarious nature of day labour, it is unlikely that day labourers would have the details or documents of their employers. In addition, as many day labourers do not hold a valid ID or passport, they may not be able to access their only hope for justice.

The above discussion provides clear evidence that day labourers are not protected when they are employed, and their need to feel protected is not satisfied, which creates vulnerability. Additionally, their freedom to access basic services is also limited, significantly impacting this fundamental need in terms of Max-Neef's FHN framework.

The Need for Understanding

Within Max-Neef's framework of FHNs, the need for understanding relates to a lack of access to good education and skills development to be able to understand and interact with the world (Max-Neef 1991; Nel et al. 2021). Even though the link between education and unemployment is complex, several studies (e.g., Dias and Posel 2007) have signalled how changes in production methods have led to a shift towards demand for more skilled labour (Fourie 2016).

In this study, the South African respondents presented the lowest education achievements, as only a quarter ($n = 2$) of all the South African respondents ($n = 11$) had completed matric, compared to all but one ($n = 33$) of the Zimbabwean respondents. The data further indicated that only some of the Zimbabwean day labourers had accessed and completed tertiary education. None of the South African respondents had.

The Need for Leisure and Affection

Day labourers from Mbekweni had minimal time and almost no resources to socialise. The first author observed that day labourers from Mbekweni are at the hiring sites for a significant number of hours hoping to secure a job. This study reveals that three-quarters ($n = 34$) of the respondents indicated that they would stand at the hiring site for between five and seven days per week, while one-quarter ($n = 11$) indicated that they would stand at the hiring site for between one and four days a week. This leaves very little time for them to fulfil the need for leisure and affection, even further accentuating the negative effect of their low and uncertain income levels.

Furthermore, day labourers from Mbekweni did not receive a meaningful sense of caring or affection from their employers and community members, due to violence and racial abuse. In addition, three-quarters ($n = 33$) of the respondents indicated that they do not live with their families. The data revealed that the vast majority of the respondents must wait at least six months before they have enough resources to visit their families. This has obvious implications in terms of social isolation and not being able to harness the satisfiers to fulfil this important social need of the Max-Neef framework under discussion.

Limitations

We acknowledge that the findings and themes of the study have some obvious limitations to them. The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes claims on causality. Furthermore, the study's findings cannot be generalised as they pertain specifically to the day labourers from the hiring sites in Mbekweni and Wellington, as described earlier.

Conclusion

This study highlights the dialectic relationship between precarious labour and vulnerability through the lens of Max-Neef's nine FHNs. It also shows how precarious labour hampers those who are trapped in it from leading a decent and quality life, as well as limiting their human dignity. This study significantly contributes to the understanding of day labourers' holistic needs. The findings imply that social service professionals must explore ways to reach the informal sector and render appropriate psychosocial support services to informal workers. The findings, therefore, have important implications for targeted interventions for the informal wage employed in society, such as day labourers. Firstly, in considering social development programmes for day labourers, it seems appropriate to propose projects and improvements that, according to Max-Neef's HSD framework, equally and adequately respond to the multiple FHNs of day labourers. The second implication (flowing from the first) is that any envisaged support for day labourers will need to be developed collaboratively with them, focusing on synergic and sustainable satisfiers instead of piecemeal and single satisfiers. The most important principle on which the HSD framework is built is that people should be protagonists with regard to their futures and at the centre of the development process (Schenck et al. 2023).

The above principle has further implications in the day labour environment. In the South African context, informal sector workers such as waste pickers, domestic workers, farmworkers, and street traders have managed to organise themselves in order to have a voice and bargaining power. This has not been the case for day labourers. Unlike in the United States (Theodore 2009; Theodore et al. 2015), where day labourers formed a network, this is non-existent in the South African context. We argue that the time has come for one or more non-governmental organisations and/or worker movements to be formed that can play a facilitative role for informal workers to be more organised. Such an organisation or organisations can assist with satisfiers such as registration (identity, protection, freedom), training and skills development (understanding, identity, creation), accessing health and social security (protection), and bargaining for better employment conditions (protection, freedom, identity).

A further implication of the study and its findings, therefore, is a call for social workers and community development practitioners to design intervention strategies that focus on skills development to ensure the continued empowerment of knowledge and skills.

One of the key satisfiers for the need for protection for these day labourers, in practical terms, is legal recourse in the event of not being paid for their work or when other abuses of their basic human and worker rights occur. Only if these structural changes are addressed can multiple FHNs be met.

Existing evidence-based research, including this case study, can act as a precursor to foster a social justice research agenda pertaining to informal employment. Further research is therefore needed to provide evidence of the extent of the vulnerability experienced by day labourers to influence evidence-based policy decision-making. An article by Barrera et al. (2022) assessed the impact of Max-Neef's scholarship. We argue that this is a crucial endeavour to ensure that more than mere lip service is paid in order to safeguard the basic human needs and rights of those trapped in various precarious employment activities in pursuit of making an honest living.

Lastly, future research should focus on multiple case studies using the HSD approach to understand day labourers' vulnerabilities. Ideally, these extended case studies must include a panel component allowing to follow the same day labourers over time to reflect on changes in their lives more accurately. Panel data analysis will assist in addressing issues of homogeneity that are often present in cross-sectional data. More importantly, it is recommended that the HSD matrix be used to enable communities, such as the day labour community, to become aware of their well-being and identify the gaps and possibilities for attention. Existing and new synergic satisfiers should be pursued to transform day labourers' socioeconomic circumstances from ill-being to well-being.

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