

**On the role of the informal sector
in the changing socio-economic landscape
of the Cape Town metropolitan area**

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Abstract

Although the informal sector has always been part of the urban economy of South Africa, street trading in urban areas was limited to the black townships during the years of apartheid. However, since the early 1990s, political transformation in the country triggered a number of morphological and structural changes in cities. Black street traders moved into inner city areas and started claiming their fair share of business in parts of the cities where they were not allowed to do business before. This stimulated black entrepreneurship and created business opportunities for the urban poor but at the same time caused the displacement of many formal businesses which formerly catered for the higher income groups. Degeneration caused by these changes prompted city councils to introduce street trading policies and regeneration programmes in an attempt to attract new investments and revitalise parts of inner cities that have deteriorated. Whilst the metro councils of Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban have been facing serious challenges in this regard since the regime change, Cape Town city centre seemed to have largely escaped this fate. In this paper study results of a survey that was done in Cape Town City amongst street traders in the Central Business District (CBD) and formal business inside the CBD, the CBD fringe, suburban business corridors and shopping centres in the suburbs are presented to show what the perceptions of the two sectors are regarding current business conditions in the city. The results show that street traders are generally happy with business conditions there but different sections of the formal business community had mixed reactions.

1. Introduction and background

Political transformation has led to the desegregation of both business and residential space in South African cities over the past fifteen years (Donaldson, Van der Merwe, 1999; Donaldson et al, 2003). In the process significant numbers of the urban poor began moving into parts of inner cities while urban deconcentration and sprawl gained momentum elsewhere in the cities. This caused important locational and structural changes in urban economies throughout the country and changed the character of parts of the cities. This desegregation, followed by the rapid increase in informal business activities in inner city areas in South Africa triggered a range of morphological changes in the urban economic landscape of the country. The appearance of informal businesses in the early 1990s in parts of Central Business Districts (CBDs) where they were absent only a few years before caused some of the formal businesses, especially those that formerly catered for the higher income market, to relocate to suburban areas. In the process many new commercial and industrial land uses moved to the suburbs and ex-urban locations, exploiting market potential there while many businesses in central city areas had to be reoriented to cater for the changing market conditions there. Because of the loss of businesses in central city areas many local authorities responded by devising 'inner-city regeneration' programmes in an attempt to revitalise and lure investment back to the cities. Although some metropolitan city centres lost some of their former vigour and have not managed to turn the tide, others, such as downtown Cape Town which initially showed some signs of urban decay during the late 1990s have now regained their former momentum.

The term *informal sector* was coined in the early 1970s (ILO 1972, Hart 1973). In the developing world differences between the formal and informal sectors tend to be much more pronounced than in developed countries. Businesses in the informal sector are generally regarded as such because they are not officially licensed, enumerated and taxed by government. The sector is easier to access but does not have easy access to credit (Meier 1989). A large proportion of businesses in this category tend to be family owned and operations are often smaller in scale and more labour-intensive

than formal businesses (Timothy, Wall, 1997). Technology used in the sector is often adapted to suit local circumstances and needs. The sector tends to suffer from an over-supply of most product lines resulting in fluctuations in prices between competitors, even by vendors during different times of the month, week or day (Penouil 1981; Meier 1989; Timothy, Wall, 1997).

Although these characteristics generally applied to the largest proportion of informal business activities in urban areas in South Africa before and during the political transition period, and many of them still do today, generalisations about the structure of the informal sector and the general need for a greater awareness of differences in the locational requirements of different kinds of businesses in the sector have been pointed out (Geyer 1989, 2004). From a policy perspective, however, significant changes have taken place in the country since then. While most informal trading remains extralegal in terms of current income tax legislation, even amongst the technologically more sophisticated and the financially more successful components of the sector, regulations in terms of which the sector are being governed at the local government level have been significantly relaxed. Despite this more accommodative policy environment, informal traders operating in the inner-city areas of South Africa are still confronted by a much harsher regulatory regime than those trading in the historically black townships (Rogerson 2008: 230). The greater leniency of the government towards the informal sector has led to a large escalation in street trading in city centres, areas from which they were previously barred. In South Africa it is estimated that by 2003 approximately 10% of potential retail trade, amounting to approximately 38,000,000,000 SAR (38 billion rands), i.e. 3,890,000,000 EUR (3.89 billion euros), was channelled through informal outlets. A substantial proportion of this trading can be attributed to spazas, hawkers and general dealers in townships (Lighthelm 2004: 39). It is further estimated that approximately 1.25 million people in South Africa owe their existence to informal retail business activities (Lighthelm 2004: 45).

A number of new characteristics which had not existed on such a large scale previously have become very pronounced in the informal sector in recent years. Significant numbers of the white population, many of them being people who are find-

ing it difficult to secure permanent employment since the regime change, have entered the informal business sector. The other consists of foreign migrants, almost exclusively people originating from elsewhere in Africa, who have moved to the country in increasing numbers since the end of apartheid. This has added new vitality and variety to the sector.

Not surprisingly, a significant body of research has been undertaken on various aspects of the informal sector in South Africa over the last decade (Rogerson 2000; Ligthelm 2003; Dewar 2005; de Swardt, Theron, 2007; Geyer et al, 2011). One important aspect of the informal retail sector that is still not adequately researched and understood is the interaction patterns between the formal and informal business sectors. Nowhere is this more true than in central city areas where formal and informal businesses often literally coexists on each other's doorsteps. The much more stringent regulatory environment facing informal traders in central city areas may in certain areas also contribute to more strained relations between formal and informal business sectors.

Following on the structural breakdown of business types in the informal sector and their special classification in cities in Southern Africa (Geyer 1989; Geyer et al, 2011), a research programme has been initiated to gain a deeper understanding of the outcome of the locational changes that are visible in the urban economic landscape of South African cities over the past fifteen years. Paramount in this research is the dynamics that drove the process, especially the role of the informal sector in it. It specifically seeks to establish an improved understanding of the interaction between the formal and informal business sectors in the CBDs of South African cities. Questions that the study want to answer are: what are the structural and spatial relationships between the two sectors and what are the policy implications and requirements to improve trading conditions in areas where the two sectors function side-by-side. Four of South Africa's large metropolitan areas and several intermediate-sized cities were studied.

This paper focuses on some of the initial outcomes of this research programme conducted in the metropolitan area of Cape Town. It examines locational changes that have occurred in the formal and informal business sectors and the causes of

these changes in recent years. Specific emphasis was placed on the role and dynamics of the informal sector in these changes in the CBD. It firstly provides an overview of the broad locational changes and patterns that have occurred in the commercial landscape of the city. It then proceeds to examine some of the characteristics of the informal sector in the CBD and the perceptions of informal traders regarding their operating environment and the relationships with the formal business sector. The paper also reports on the results of a survey that was conducted amongst formal business owners inside and outside the CBD to determine their views about the informal sector and the general quality of the business environment in the CBD. This information provides the backdrop for some conclusions on the spatial relationships and linkages between the formal and informal sectors and the spatial and structural impacts of the two sectors on one another in the city. The paper concludes with a reflection on how these trends have been and will be impacted upon by current policy measures.

2. Study area and methodology

The focus of this study is on the informal retail sector in the Cape Town CBD area. The definition of the CBD used in this study comprises a subset of what is generally referred to as the Cape Town central city. It includes parts of four of the central city precincts, i.e. the Convention district, Mid City, Companies gardens and East city (see Fig. 1). For the purpose of this survey, the CBD was defined as the area between the station in the North, the castle in the East, Buiten Street in the south and Buitengracht street in the west. In the part of the study where the informal merchants were investigated the focus was largely on retailers operating from official trading spaces but not exclusively so. Some traders operating from unapproved sites were also approached.

Data was obtained through a questionnaire survey amongst a sample of 20% of informal business owners and operators in the area. Informal trading areas were initially pointed out by municipal officials and subsequently confirmed through field visits. The questionnaire included a range of variables such as the demographic profile, product profile, physical characteristics of the businesses, general business pro-

file, economic profile, opportunities and constraints, and information on perceptions and relationships with other informal and formal businesses in the CBD. A second and parallel component of the study targeted two other categories of formal businesses: those located within the CBD area and those outside of it. Of the latter, three groups of vendors were questioned: those who conducted their business in the CBD fringe, those along main corridors leading away from the city centre, and those in prominent outlying suburban shopping malls. The purpose of this component of the study was to compare the perceptions of formal business vendors inside and outside the CBD on business conditions inside the CBD.

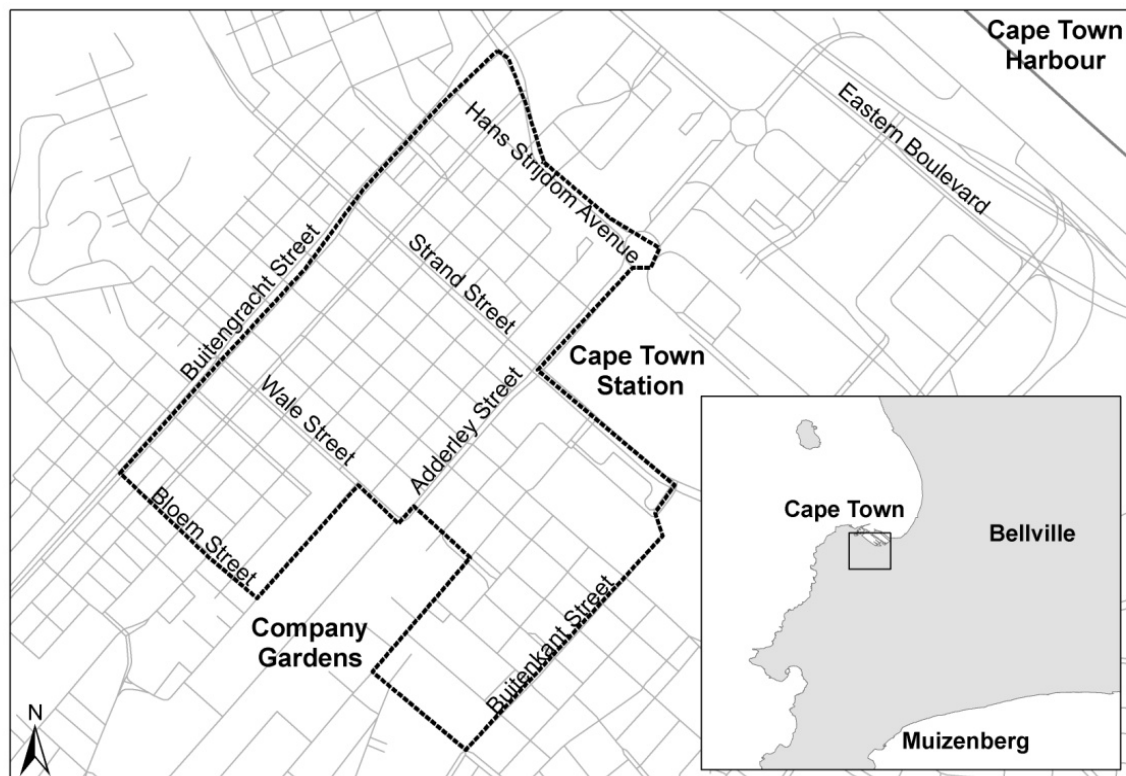


Figure 1. Location of informal business survey

3. Cape Town CBD in context

Although the central city of Cape Town represents less than 1% of the metropolitan area and accommodates a negligible proportion of the metropolitan population, it accounts for 25% of formal business employment (Pirie 2007: 149). It is also responsible for a turnover of 52,000,000,000 SAR (ca 5,300,000,000 EUR) or 40% of busi-

ness turnover in the city (2006 figures), is home to over 800 creative and cultural industries, and contributes 264,200,000 SAR (27,000,000 EUR) in rate income to the City of Cape Town municipality (Cape Town Partnership 2008: 8).

The Cape Town Partnership, a non-profit urban renewal and management agency, was established in mid-1999. Its specific purpose was to secure the city's future by articulating better the interests of the City Council, the Cape Metro council, the South African Property Owners Association, private businesses and their representative organisations, and is funded by a levy on central city properties. It has been reported that Cape Town central city has attracted approximately 14,000,000,000 SAR (1,430,000,000 EUR) in private investment since 1999. This includes the capital value of current leases, new developments, investment purchases, upgrades and renewals (Pirie 2007: 127). A further 30,000,000,000 SAR (3,060,000,000 EUR) has been planned over a five to seven year period from 2007 and public expenditure is expected to increase to 30% of this total investment. One of the most notable successes of this initiative has been the tenfold increase in the municipal values of the Central City over the period 2000 to 2006 (Silimela Development Services 2007: 76) and a significant reduction in serious crime.

Despite these achievements, the Cape Town partnership has not been warmly embraced in all circles. Critics assert that the gentrification of the city improvement district (CID) has pushed the poor to the urban outskirts, leaving residential apartheid entrenched and betraying the integrationist aspiration for a 'compact city'. Although it is recognised that new employment opportunities may be created by new investments in the CID, many informal traders see CIDs criminalising their means of livelihood in order to accommodate global capital, foreign investors and incorporated businesses owners (Miraftab 2007: 612). These criticisms pose a particular challenge to the local government of Cape Town. On the one hand, it has to deal with the need for entrepreneurial governance which is a requirement for CIDs, and on the other hand - for social integration and equity which resists it (Miraftab 2007: 617).

The City of Cape Town Informal Trading Bylaws (Province of Western Cape 2009) is an important policy consideration impacting the informal sector in the CBD of Cape Town. These bylaws have been created in recognition of the need for a bal-

anced spread of formal and informal traders in the city. The preamble of the bylaws acknowledges the need for a developmental approach to informal trading to create an environment that is conducive to the growth of business in the sector. It also recognises the freedom to engage in informal trading in any area within the jurisdiction of the city subject to any trading plans adopted by the city, the provisions of the informal trading bylaws and any other applicable legislation. The bylaws, however, make specific provision for the adoption of so-called trading plans in areas where there is a significant overlap between formal and informal trading (such as may be the case in certain parts of the CBD). One of the key components of such a trading plan is the definition of a geographic boundary of the trading area and the demarcation of informal trading bays and markets where informal trading will be permitted in the area (Province of Western Cape 2009). The trading plan may also describe the conditions of any informal trading taking place within the boundaries of such a trading plan.

4. Characteristics of the informal sector in the Cape Town CBD

Compared to the way in which informal street trading has been allowed to evolve in parts of the inner cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria, informal trading is spatially much more regulated in Cape Town. Areas where informal traders had been allowed to straddle sidewalks and side-street parking bays in the past, such as the railway station, have since become out of bounds to informal traders while areas where it has been allowed to continue in the CID are limited to clearly defined spaces. In a study of the spatial and structural interrelationships between the formal and informal business sectors of Cape Town, 60% of the respondents interviewed were owners.

A total of 48% of the interviewees were foreign, a finding that corresponds with those of other similar studies (Peberdy 2000, Rogerson 2008). However, the majority (53%) of the foreign traders were employees, whilst the majority of South African informal traders (62%) were business owners. The informal traders also tend to be young or middle aged with 37.9% in the 18-30 and 45.6% in the 30-50 year age groups. As could be expected, the majority of the respondents in the older age

groups (72.3% of the 30-50 year olds, and 76.5% of those older than 50) are business owners. Only 38.5% of the younger age group (18 to 30) are owners. As was found in other studies (Ligthelm 2004: 43), there are no discernible differences in the gender profile; 45.6% of respondents were females.

The significance of informal street trading as a means of making a living (Ligthelm 2004, Miraftab 2007) is confirmed by the dependent profile of the survey group. As much as 41% of the survey respondents are supporting four or more dependants, 17% three, and a further 17% two. Even more significant is the fact that 84% of the respondents indicated that the informal sector is their only source of income. This is even higher than the findings of A. A. Ligthelm (2004: 45) a few years ago who reported that around three in every four hawkers only lived off the informal sector. This could be indicative of the impact of the worsening conditions in the formal sector currently.

Because the people in the informal sector are associated with marginality and the struggle for survival, they are often assumed to be poorly educated (Peberdy 2000: 206). The survey results however indicate that informal business owners and employees in the Cape Town CBD are generally well-educated. As much as 35% of the respondents in the survey have completed secondary education and 17.5% have some form of tertiary education, while only a minority (10% and 2.5% respectively) has either a primary education or no education whatsoever. This is again consistent with the findings of A. A. Ligthelm's (2003) study.

5. Relationships between businesses and environmental conditions in the CBD

One of the important objectives of the study was to determine the attitudes and opinions of the informal business vendors towards both other informal businesses (Table 1), as well as surrounding formal businesses in the CBD (Table 2). This component of the survey focused on four main issues, i.e. the general relationship with neighbouring businesses, involvement of different cultures, competition, and business methods. The majority of respondents have a positive opinion about their business relationship with neighbouring informal businesses (83%) and the involvement of other cultures (77%). When it comes to competition, however, the results are

somewhat less favourable. Only approximately 55% do not mind competition in both sectors. Other details about the results in this part of the survey are indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Perceptions of informal traders inside CBD
on other informal businesses in their area

Aspect	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Relationship with neighbouring informal businesses	83.2	12.9	3.9
Other cultures	77.2	17.8	5.0
Competition	55.4	26.7	17.9
Business methods	55.4	35.6	9.0

The opinions of the informal business traders on environmental conditions in the CBD were also obtained. These results reflect a largely positive overall view of the CBD (Fig. 2). Littering, odours, noise, and crime were regarded as the largest contributor to environmental degradation in the CBD.

Table 2. Perceptions of informal traders inside CBD
on formal businesses in their area

Aspect	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Relationship with neighbouring informal businesses	72.5	22.5	5.0
Other cultures	72.5	22.5	5.0
Competition	54.9	34.3	10.8
Business methods	62.7	34.3	3.0

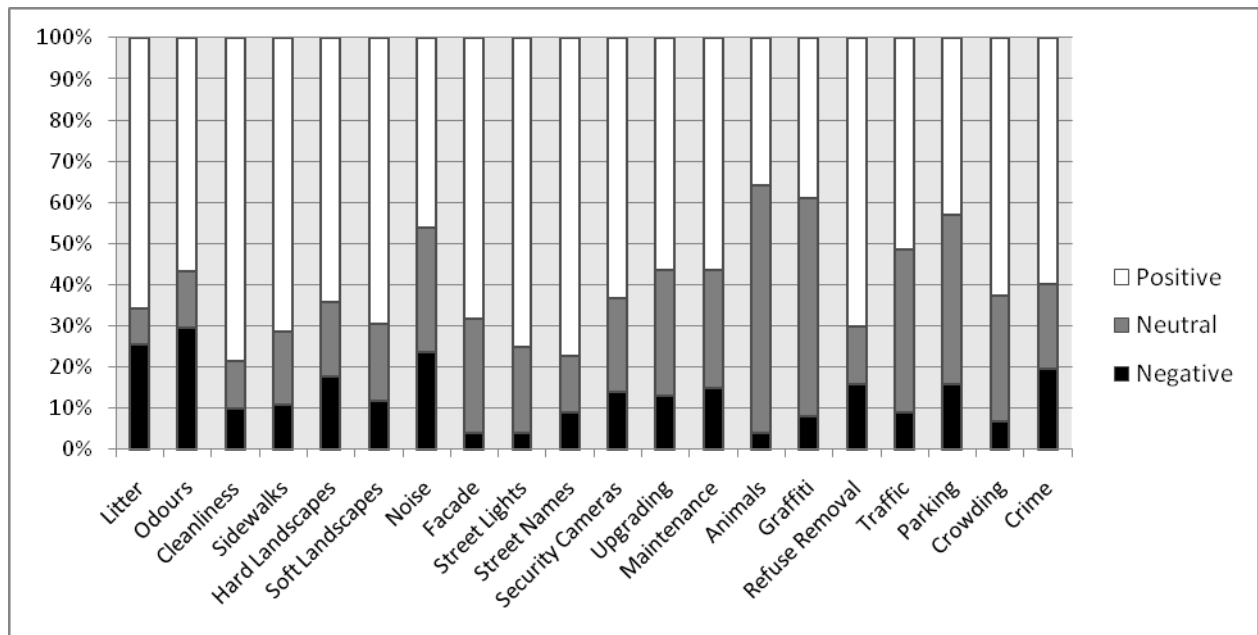


Figure 2. Perceptions of informal traders on their surroundings

6. Perceptions of formal businesses on the informal sector

In a parallel leg of the study the views of people involved in the formal business sector on how they feel about the informal business sector in the CBD were obtained. In this part of the survey a distinction was made between (1) formal businesses operating side-by-side with the informal businesses in the CBD; (2) formal businesses located in the CBD fringe; (3) those along urban corridors leading away from the city centre; and (4) those in shopping centres in the suburbs. The overall aim of this part of the study was to establish the attitude of formal businesses towards the informal sector in terms of the latter's business methods, products, client base, the business environment that they create, and competition between them and the formal sector.

Generally, the most notable difference between the respondents lies in their negativity towards the informal sector in terms of the environment that they create and the quality of the products that they sell. However, the views of the merchants operating outside the CBD were somewhat more negative than those inside the CBD which may be due to the fact that the former group is likely to be less exposed to the informal sector in their immediate and daily operating environments than those operating inside the CBD. Formal traders overwhelmingly do not see the informal trad-

ers as serious competition and are either positive or neutral about the clientele they attract. Overall the perception of the formal sector towards the informal sector, therefore, seems to be either positive or neutral in Cape Town (Tables 3 and 4). The most notable exception is the high proportion of formal sector business respondents, both within (40%) and outside (59%) the CBD, with a negative perception of the environment created by the informal sector.

Table 3. Perceptions of formal sector inside the CBD on the informal sector

Aspect	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
The informal sector (in general)	46.9	32.7	20.4
Their business methods	34.0	36.0	30.0
Their products	34.0	30.0	36.0
Their client base	44.0	34.0	22.0
The environment they create	36.0	24.0	40.0
The informal sector as competition	68.0	14.0	18.0

Table 4. Perceptions of the formal sector outside the CBD on the informal sector

Aspect	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
The informal sector (in general)	38.7	38.0	23.3
Their business methods	32.0	38.7	29.3
Their products	32.7	30.7	36.7
Their client base	38.0	42.0	20.0
The environment they create	17.3	23.3	59.3
The informal sector as competition	74.8	16.3	8.8

7. Perceptions on the CBD

The opinions of formal businesses were also sought on matters such as location preferences, the business climate in the CBD, the safety and security situation,

and the environmental conditions in the CBD. Despite having a less negative view on the informal traders in the city, a surprisingly high proportion of 48% of formal business respondents in the CBD indicated that they would consider relocating elsewhere if they had the opportunity to do so. Of these, 13% indicated that they would prefer moving to another location within the CBD. Comparatively small percentages of formal business respondents outside the CBD indicated that they would consider relocating elsewhere if they had the opportunity to do so (Fig. 3). Of this group, 10% indicated that they would consider relocating to the CBD. These figures suggest that roughly half of formal business respondents within the CBD are unhappy with the location of their businesses and would seriously consider alternative locations. Few formal business respondents outside the CBD are contemplating a change in their business location. Views of different parts of the business community on this issue are shown in Figure 3.

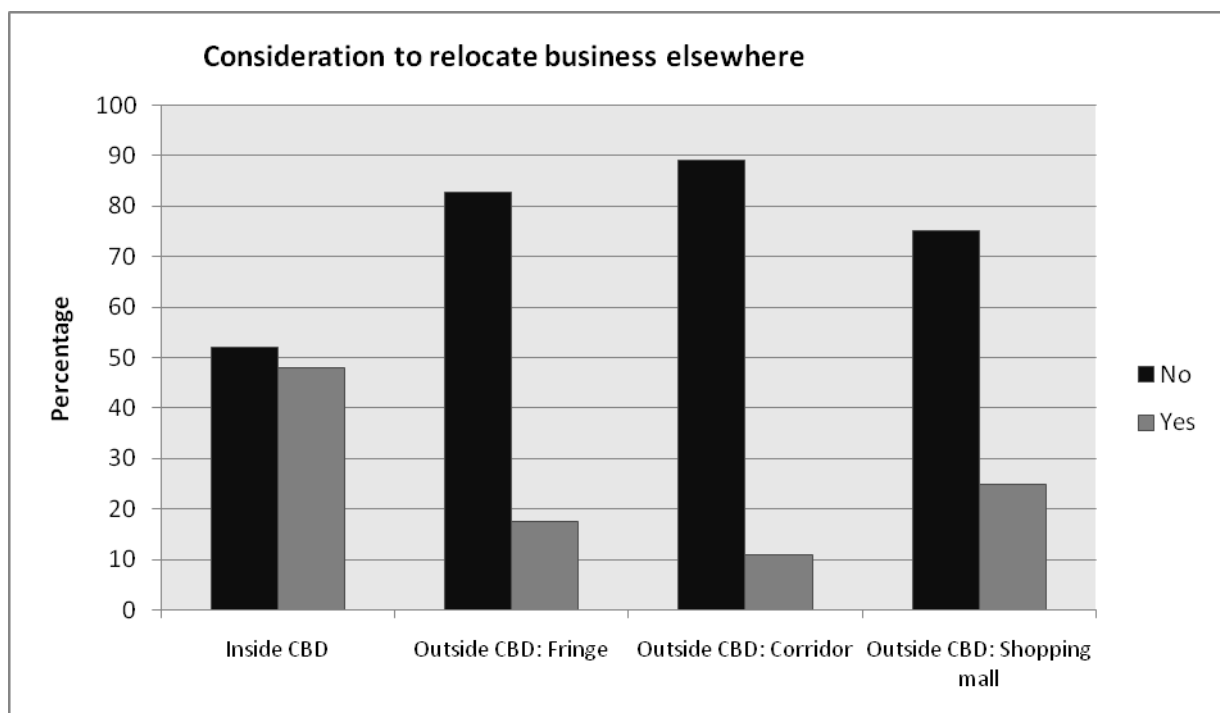


Figure 3. Views of different sections of the formal sector on the possibility of relocation

High levels of crime and insecurity usually lead to strong feelings of negativity. Research on the impact and effectiveness of incentives on urban development in

South Africa confirmed that a high level of safety and security provision is one of the successful incentives in stimulating private investment in central city areas (Silimela Development Services 2007: 23). In the question on the general quality of the surroundings in the CBD, as much as 75% of formal business respondents outside the CBD had a negative view on safety and security conditions there compared to only 24% inside the CBD. Since the degree of violence and insecurity inside the city falls outside the scope of this study the differences in the responses of formal business respondents outside and inside the CBD could be ascribed to either: an overreaction of the former to conditions in the CBD or the former's assessment is correct but the latter may have become used to the conditions there and therefore have become blasé.

Marked differences in responses between formal business entrepreneurs outside and inside the CBD were also observed on other issues. Formal businesses respondents both within and outside the CBD were negatively inclined towards parking (33% and 89% respectively) and traffic (33% and 76%). The aspect most strongly perceived as positive by respondents inside the CBD is the absence of litter (90%) and by businesses outside the CBD, the absence of animals and livestock (91%) and the quality of building façades and signage (77%).

One aspect that stands out in the results shown in Figures 4 and 5 are the high percentages of respondents inside the CBD overall that either held no opinion one way or the other or are neutral, and the general lower unresponsive percentages amongst respondents outside the CBD. This may imply that the respondents outside the CBD are more explicit and unambiguous about their feelings about the issues in the city centre, while those in the CBD have clearly become much more blasé about them.

8. Development and policy implications

Initially, the proliferation of informal trading in the central areas of cities in South Africa was not received with equal amounts of enthusiasm. Especially during the period leading up to the soccer World Cup in 2010 the straddling of sidewalks and side street parking areas in parts of CBDs were regarded as problematic. Steps were widely taken by metropolitan governments to spatially reorganise and control

the location of informal business activities in the cities. The impact of the City of Cape Town Informal Trading Bylaws (Province of Western Cape 2009) – the latter were designed to manage informal activities in the city – can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, limiting informal traders in the city to clearly defined spaces in the central city area was regarded as imperative for the creation of an environment that would lure investments back into the city. Here the intention was to ‘create a balance between formal and informal activities’ in the city centre. From an entrepreneurial point of view this makes sense because Cape Town city centre has attracted 14,000,000,000 SAR (1,430,000,000 EUR) private investment from 1999 to 2007.

However, looking at the steps that were taken by the city to limit informal activities to certain designated areas from a different angle, the positives are not as clear-cut any more. The informal sector clearly serves as the breeding ground for entrepreneurship in any society, developed and developing. Limiting informal business to certain areas in the city obviously holds consequences for the city in this regard within the disadvantaged community of Cape Town. Also from a humanistic point of view, reducing the numbers of informal traders in the city would have an impact on the survival of the disadvantaged community since an overwhelming majority of them in the survey has indicated that the informal sector is the only means of existence for them and their families. Also the fact that such a large percentage of informal traders have a secondary or higher education serves as an indication of the severity of unemployment in the city.

Looking at the issue from a security and environmental point of view the fact that informal trading has become spatially much more regulated in Cape Town should have a positive effect on how the formal business sector views the city centre in the future.

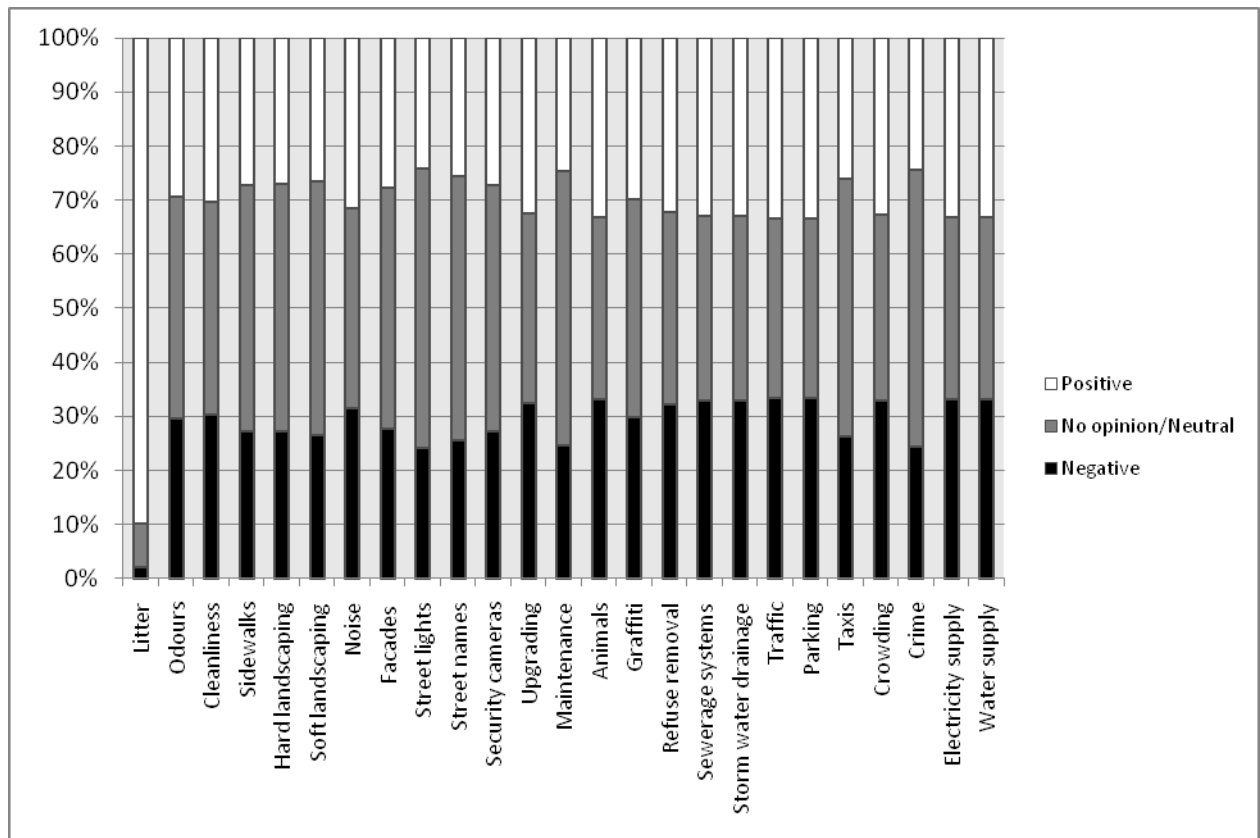


Figure 4. Perceptions of the formal sector inside the CBD on conditions in the CBD

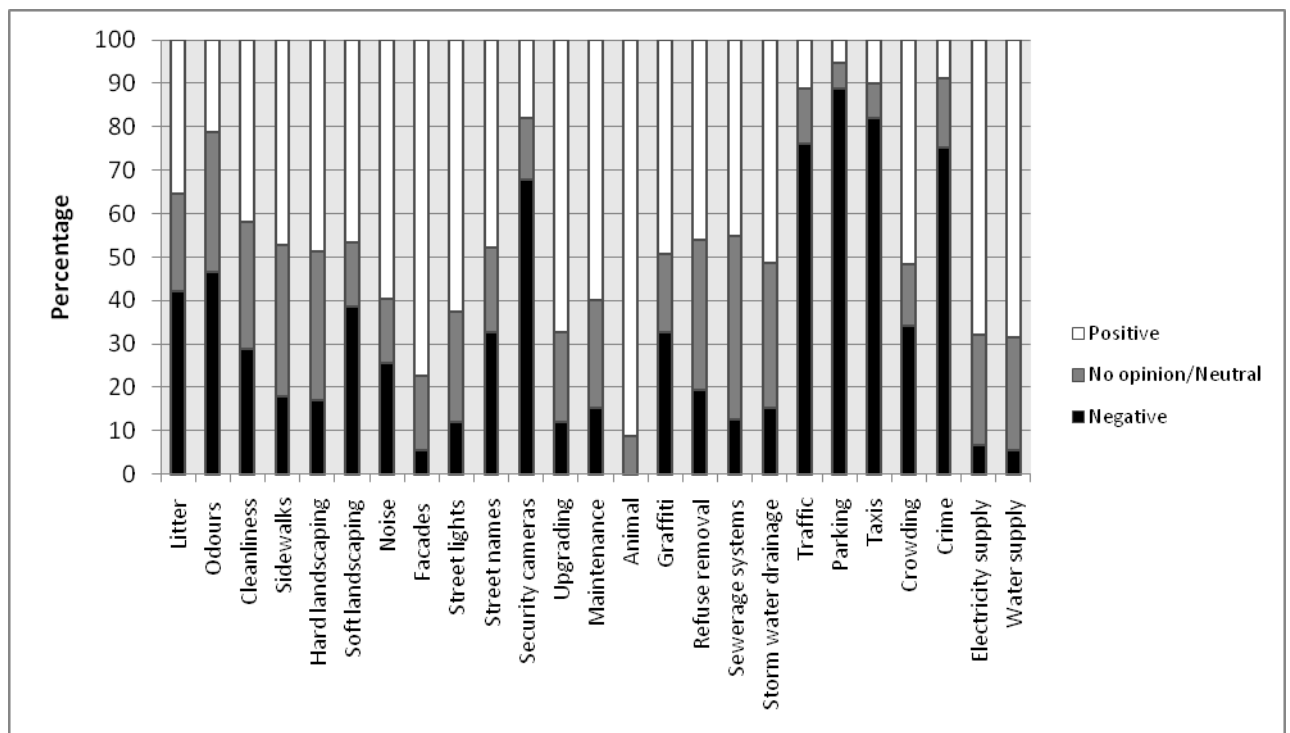


Figure 5. Perceptions of the formal sector outside the CBD on conditions in the CBD

9. Conclusions

The study of the spatial relationship between the formal and informal sector has proven to be useful. It confirmed some long-held and well-known general perceptions amongst parts of the public regarding safety and security and traffic related issues in the city centre but it also revealed some interesting new information. Negativity of formal traders located outside the CBD towards conditions about certain aspects in the city centre was to be expected. Respondents there do not necessarily regularly visit the CBD and may therefore not be as familiar with positive changes in the city. It could also be assumed that traders outside the CBD would more often only find time to visit the inner city after office hours, a time when the inner city would be less safe. However, for those who are familiar with general trading conditions in areas where informal traders are concentrated in Cape Town as compared to such areas in cities of Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban, for instance, the degree of negative perceptions of the formal traders outside the CBD regarding crime was a surprise. The formal traders operating inside the CBD were much more positive about the security situation in the inner city but this is a relatively small consolation. Only approximately 8% of those outside the CBD and 24% of those inside the CBD were unequivocally positive about the crime situation in the city – percentages that are dwarfed by the percentages that were negative, neutral or held no opinion on the matter. This is an issue that needs to be addressed by the local authority and its allies.

On the one hand, special attention should be given to ways in which successes that have been achieved on the improvement of safety and security in the inner city could be effectively communicated to the broader public. On the other hand, ways will have to be found to improve trading conditions for the informal street traders. These people often experience a lack of basic infrastructure and services such as having easy access to water, electricity, sewerage facilities, refuse removal, shelter against the elements and storage facilities. Improvements in these areas should go a long way in addressing the issues that have led to the negative perceptions of formal traders, especially those outside the CBD.

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