

## **The Role of Formal Retail Development on Local Economic Development: The Case of Ndwedwe Municipality**

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### **Abstract**

The informal retail sector has employed a lot of underprivileged people for about two decades in South Africa. Consequently, the informal retail sector is one of the significant contributors to local economic development in township and rural areas. Formal retail centres (shopping centres/malls) tend to create competition that small local businesses fail to compete with them. Using qualitative research methodology, pro-market local economic development was adopted as a lens to guide this study. The study aimed to explore the roles of formal retail centres (Ndwedwe Boxer Centre) on local economic development, considering the overarching unemployment rates in rural areas. The study used the case study method, based at Ndwedwe Municipality ward-15, iLembe District. The study sampled 10 informal traders (street hawkers, taxi drivers, and spaza shop owners). Retail-based development in community development has been overlooked; thus, the significance of this paper is its contribution to the discipline's body of knowledge. Moreover, over the past decade, rural and township areas have been experiencing the emergence of formal retail centres. Thus, their role in the economy is worth research. The findings suggest that

formal retail centres have a significant role in job creation for the local youth, diversifying goods and services, infrastructural development, and rural development.

**Keywords:** Informal and formal economy, Local economic development, Ndwedwe Municipality, Pro-market, Retail centres.

## 1. Introduction

The informal retail sector is one of the significant contributors to local economic development in township and rural areas. Although it is difficult to measure, the value of informal trading contributes about 35% to the South African GDP (Zogli, Dlala, & Dlamini, 2021). South Africa has experienced increasing formal shopping or retail centre development for the past decade in second-economy areas (rural and township) (Ntombela, 2016). Before the emergence of formal retail centres, the second economy areas were mainly dominated by informal businesses, and communities depended on them for essential products and services (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021). The biggest challenge facing the emergence of formal retail centres in second-economy areas is their socio-economic impact on the region or community in which they operate (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021). Thus, the Unisa Bureau of Market Research (BMR) researched the sustainability of informal businesses with the emergence of formal retailing. The BMR (2013) report showed the survivalist nature of the informal sector, where, in some cases, both could co-exist; in some cases, the new formal sector retailers replaced the existing informal businesses that contributed to the local economic development (LED).

The paper seeks to explore the role of formal retail centres in developing the local economy of Ndwedwe Municipality. Ndwedwe local economic development is mostly dominated by agriculture, informal trading, and other small sectors (Ndwedwe IPD, 2022). This paper will hence focus on the role of formal retail centres on informal trading within the parameters of Ndwedwe Boxer Centre. The study employed the pro-market LED as a theoretical framework to further explain the significance and role of formal retail centres in the community's local economy. With the high unemployment rate in South Africa, the retail sector has been considered an entry-level employer for the youth in the country. Hence, the paper discusses the role of the formal retail sector in unemployment reduction, rural development, and infrastructural development in Ndwedwe Municipality.

## **2. Problem Statement**

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021), high unemployment rates have caused many people in developing countries to engage in informal trading to make a living. South Africa is no different; with 44.1% of the unemployment rate, about 28.8% of people have opted for informal trading (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The informal sector in Ndwedwe Municipality has been the dominant business sector, and most members of the community depend on it for job opportunities. It has, therefore, been the pillar of local economic development since the formal business/retail sector cannot carry the whole community. The BMR (2013) report showed the survivalist nature of the informal sector, where, in some cases, both could co-exist; in some cases, the new formal sector retailers replaced the existing informal businesses that contributed to the local economic development (LED). Hence, the research problem of this paper is to look at the survivalist nature of the informal sector as it contributes to the local economic development of Ndwedwe Municipality.

The formal business sector tends to pose threats on local markets. Due to the emergence of formal retailers, small businesses have experienced the challenge of outshopping, where they lose business to bigger retailers. However, some scholars suggest that despite the negative impact formal retail centres have on the informal sector, the informal traders have had to find ways to co-exist and compete with these big retailers (Charman, 2016). For example, Skinner and Haysom (2016) highlight how formal retailers cannot be separated from the public transportation industry in rural and township areas. Thus, both formal and informal businesses can gain from each other without one being threatened. Moreover, other positive roles that formal retail centres bring to the local economy include, but not limited to, the creation of secure job opportunities for the community, especially the youth, diverse goods and services, and services closer to the people (Mwamba & Qutieshat, 2021).

## **3. Location of the Study**

The study was conducted at Ndwedwe Local Municipality, one of the four municipalities comprising iLembe District Municipality. Ndwedwe Integrated Development Plan (IDP) reveals that the area accommodates about 143 177 people (Ndwedwe IDP, 2022). In economic terms, the

local economy is primarily defined by the service sector, where most people are employed in the public sector (various government departments and municipalities as well as through government-funded programmes and projects); the informal economic sector; small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs); and the public transport sector. Moreover, the area has enormous tourism, agricultural, and commercial development potential.

#### **4. Study Contribution**

From a community development perspective, retail-based development over the years has been overlooked; however, it is a vital component of economic development (Phillips & Pitman, 2009:8). Community development is multi-disciplinary; it borrows and integrates different thoughts from various disciplines to tackle community issues holistically. Thus, as a topic that is overlooked but does contribute to the community development school of thought, retail development must be critically defined, critiqued, and embraced in the community development field. While some community development philosophers realise the link between retail-based development and community development, other researchers, such as Lackey and Ekenstahler (1995), beg to differ. Lackey and Ekenstahler (1995) and Werner and Lim (2017) maintain that competition caused by formal retail centres has dire consequences on the informal sector, where small businesses fail because they cannot compete with them. Conversely, the likes of Cloete (2020) maintain that retail development is essential for economic development as it creates direct and indirect employment which ultimately contributes to the community's income per capita and revenue generation for the local community.

Further, Shragge (2006) maintains that economic growth and community development are extricable linked; thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of formal retail centres on local economic development. Therefore, as a topic that is overlooked but does contribute to the community development school of thought, retail development must be critically defined, critiqued, and embraced in the context of community development.

## **5. Aim of the Study**

The study seeks to understand the roles of formal retail development on local economic development in Ndwedwe Local Municipality.

## **6. Study Objectives**

The objectives of the study are to:

- explore the influence of formal retail centres on youth unemployment reduction in Ndwedwe Local Municipality;
- establish the role of retail-based development in rural development; and
- examine the impact of retail-based development on infrastructural development

## **7. Research Questions**

The main research question is what is the role of formal retail centres on local economic development in Ndwedwe Municipality, iLembe district?

- How do formal retail centres influence youth unemployment reduction in Ndwedwe Municipality?
- What is the role of retail-based development on rural development?
- How does retail-based development impact infrastructural development?

## **8. Literature Review**

### **8.1 Local economic development (LED)**

Local economic development (LED) is a community development approach that seeks to foster social and economic development. It is a strategy that aims to address poverty and unemployment and enhance entrepreneurial skills in communities. LED can be defined as a

multifaceted process that aims to build up the economy's capacity in a local area to create better and sustainable opportunities for all. This process involves partnerships between the community, private sector, civil society, and local government, to establish and manage existing resources to create jobs that stimulate the economy (Meyer & Ventre, 2013). LED can be either pro-poor or pro-market; pro-poor LED adopts top-down strategies, whereas pro-market LED refers to the strategies of economic development that adopt top-down approaches to economic development (Hlongwane, 2018).

LED is one of the most strategic tools through which local municipalities adhere to their developmental duties, as prescribed by the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act (117 of 1998). The Act requires municipalities to develop an IDP, which will assist local governments in achieving their objectives and give effect to their developmental duties as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The IDP specifies the development priorities, vision, and goals of the municipal council, including LED. All municipalities in South Africa must develop an LED strategy and integrate such a strategy into the IDP (Enwereji & Uwizeyimana, 2019).

## **8.2 Global perspective of formal retail development**

Regarding the number of enterprises and people employed, the retail sector has contributed tremendously to the European economy (McArthur, Weaven, & Dant, 2014). Nearly 55 million enterprises were active in 2018, which contributes approximately 23% to the overall non-financial businesses in the European economy (Valiaparampil & Gupta, 2018). Even though the sector has been essential and played a huge role in the economy, the sector has faced a lot of challenges, developments, and trends. In Europe, McArthur et al. (2014) argue that the characteristics of big retailers are similar to those of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). By definition, a small enterprise has less than 50 staff members and less than 10 million euros (The European Commission, 2010).

The retail sector is changing both globally and locally at an exponential pace. Goga et al. (2019) submit that the shift to online trading became famous in 2019/2020 when COVID-19 began. Mwamba and Outieshat (2021) also maintain that the coronavirus pandemic outbreak resulted in national lockdowns in most countries, which led to unprecedented online retailing adoption. Consequently, it was reported

that online platforms have revolutionised the retailing industry locally and globally. In South African rural areas, however, online trading is less prevalent than it is in other developed countries. Shava (2016) argues that many black South Africans do not have the skills and resources to participate in the mainstream economy.

### **8.3 Role of retail centres in economic development in South Africa**

According to Vezi-Magigaba (2021), retail development has made township areas the destination of choice, for example, big township malls such as Umlazi Mega City, Jabulani Mall, Mnyandu Mall, etc. Additionally, shopping malls/centres in second-economy areas are presented as a symbol and strategy for development and transformation and are generally sites of desire and inspiration. Further, Lighthelm (2008) argues that to others, shopping malls/centres are a transformation of post-apartheid South Africa, with attempts to de-racialise socio-economic policies and redress the disadvantages experienced by the marginalised group. In eThekweni Municipality, retail centres play an essential role in producing and sustaining nodal economies, thus stimulating economic growth and development in second/low economy areas (Department of Provincial and Local Government [DPLG], 2015).

The 2019-2020 IDP of Ndwedwe Municipality shows that most informal trading shelters in Ndwedwe Town could improve after establishing the centre. Although there have been significant setbacks in retail development in rural areas, some positive aspects come with it. According to Phillip (2002), retail development can benefit the community. He maintains that retail/shopping centre development is one of the most significant property developments a community can experience. Weinburg (2004) concurs with Phillip and argues that the development of shopping centres is lucrative, offers employment opportunities, and is convenient for testing new business ventures.

At the same time, there have been great attributes of retail development, especially in township areas, where they create job opportunities and bring goods and services closer to the people and physical infrastructural development, thus contributing to the growth of LED. In contradiction, there also have been trends of the demise of informal sector business, which has been the backbone of the community's economic development for years (Etim & Daramola, 2020). This raises questions about the competition created by recruiting new

businesses to invest in rural and township areas, and about what formal retailers mean for the existence and sustainability of small businesses.

Aliber et al. (2013) used the case study evidence of Elim in Limpopo as a significant rural retail development success. Elim Shopping Mall was built in Limpopo in 2006, where traditional authorities and developers negotiated a long-term lease. The mall consists of 36 stores and 11 encored significant tenant Spar Supermarket. Evidence from this case study revealed that the development of this mall intensified commercial activities in and around Elim. Most residents who used to travel to Makhado (formally known as Louis Trichardt) now choose to shop locally. Furthermore, Aliber et al. (2013) observe that Elim Spar Supermarkets sourced 75% of its fresh produce from local black farmers. Elim Spar collectively relies on about 40 to 50 local farmers, who are home to about R5.4 million per annum (or on average about R120 00 each).

## **9. Theoretical Framework – Pro-Market Local Economic Development**

The core mandate of local government is sustaining local economic development in the locality, in pursuit of economic development and to redress socio-economic challenges (Nel & Rogerson, 2015:9). In South Africa, local economic development (LED) is characterised by pro-poor as well as pro-market approaches. Chomane and Bijohn (2023) argue that big municipalities follow pro-market strategies which put more emphasis on establishing big businesses, marketing the location, infrastructural development, and attracting investments. Establishing formal retail centres in rural communities means redressing the ills of the past. Sekhampu (2010:42) argues that before 1994, LED in South Africa was designed in a manner that marginalises rural and township areas. Where in urban spaces they focused on pro-market strategies, while in township and rural areas, they adopted pro-poor strategies. This resulted in the lack of formal retail centres in township and rural areas because the pro-poor approach focuses on small, medium, and informal retail sectors.

Ndwedwe was also dominated by informal retailers before the establishment of Boxer Centre, which is the first formal retailer in the area. The role of formal retail-based development in the community is to diversify the economy and have a balance between formal and informal retail centres. This gives customers various choices and brings about economic vibrancy in the locality — the local government's role in this is



to create an environment where businesses can thrive. Pro-market LED fits this type of development and it is not people-centred, but rather, the main players are the government, investors, and other stakeholders. However, the community members participate as employees and customers, but not as co-partners.

## **10. Research Methodology – Qualitative Methods**

The study used a qualitative method of research. Hammarberg et al. (2016) further describe qualitative research methods as inquiries adopted by many academic disciplines, conventionally in social sciences, market research, and other contexts. Levitt et al. (2017) define the nature of qualitative research as inductive, allowing the researcher to explore the insights and meanings, generally, in each situation.

### **10.1 Research design**

This paper employed an exploratory research design. Pilot and Tatano Beck (2017) describe research design as a holistic plan for data collection and analysis, aiming to enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected. Gray (2014) maintains that qualitative research designs offer an understanding of how people understand and associate their experiences and knowledge in their natural environment. Saunders et al. (2012) stress that exploratory research is mainly conducted when little is known about a particular phenomenon, and the problem needs to be clearly defined. This design best suits this study because retail-based economic development has not yet been critically studied/conceptualised as a retail-based community development approach.

### **10.2 The recruitment process and the sample size**

Sampling involves defining the population of concern and selecting individuals within that population (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). The researcher has used a purposive sampling method, allowing the researcher to identify and select information-rich participants (Palinkas et al., 2015). The study used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants. The study involved 10 participants who own small businesses in Ndwedwe CBD, Ward 15, and surrounding areas.

### **10.3 Data Generation method**

Bryman (2016) defines data collection as obtaining data from the empirical field. The researcher collected both primary and secondary data. The researcher prepared semi-structured interviews for selected participants. Koskei and Simiyu (2015) define interviews as exchanging views between two parties on a specific topic with mutual interest. The interviews were audio recorded. Secondary data refers to the data collected for other purposes (Rassel, Leland, Mohr, & O'Sullivan, 2020); it is presented in the literature review, data analysis and interpretation, and discussion section.

## **11. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

### **11.1 Youth unemployment reduction**

The Centre created much direct employment but also brought about indirect self-employment for some residents in Ndwedwe Municipality. Skinner and Haysom (2016) commend the informal sector for being an income-generating opportunity and dealing with most socio-economic issues. Rogerson (2016) shares the same sentiments as Skinner and Haysom (2016) when he posits that the informal economic sector, for many years, has been a significant engine for employment, economic growth, and entrepreneurship opportunities for many developing countries.

Participant 3 explained:

Coming from the Eastern Cape province, I did not know I would find so many young people engaging as informal traders; yes, this place is not as big as the city. But it makes me happy that it opened doors for young people

Participant 8 said:

The centre has been beneficial to us as taxi owners. More of our taxis operate now because there is now a local route. That also equals more job opportunities for our people because we are required to hire more drivers

The findings from this study show how the centre's development indirectly opened opportunities for young business owners, who otherwise would not have this opportunity without this development.

The retail sector has been argued to be an entry-level job for most young South Africans. However, not only has the sector created direct employment for the local community, but it has also created an environment where most young people can create employment opportunities for themselves. Moreover, findings from this study suggest that the role of the formal retail centre in the local economy of Ndwedwe Municipality is to create direct and indirect job opportunities for the local people. For the centre's daily operation, many people are employed as cashiers, cleaners, security guides, store managers, etc.

## **11.2 Rural development**

Berdegue et al. (2014) define rural transformation as "a process of comprehensive societal change whereby the rural societies diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on agriculture". Notably, rural development strategies do not automatically lead to a rapid reduction in rural poverty, and the inclusion of local people does not happen rapidly/automatically (Berdegue et al., 2014).

Participant 9 maintained:

I see much change in our community. Ndwedwe Village has now become the central business hub...The centre has brought more community economic engagement; we transport more people who come here to buy every day, which means more business for us

Participant 8 revealed:

I have worked in transportation in this area for more than 16 years and transport many people daily. I have noticed many changes in our community, the roads, formal shops, private health practitioners and banks

Participant 10 argued:

I would say that the centre has brought a lot of positive things in our community as far as development is concerned. Most of the community members are working now. I do however think there is a lot that must be done

The findings of the study indicate that the establishment of the centre has resulted in rural development by hiring more people from the area, increased economic activities, infrastructural development, and social balance. Philip and Pitman (2015) argue that social and economic

development are interrelated; when more people work, fewer people depend on the government for social support. In community development, everything is done to improve the quality of life. Rural development thus fosters economic growth and social justice and enhances the standard of living for the local people.

### **11.3 Infrastructural development**

Retail development is inextricably linked with infrastructural development. The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform seeks to ensure that people in rural areas enjoy the same benefits as those in urban areas (Gauteng Department of Economic Development, 2014). This means the department needs to ensure that land development in rural is done in a way that revitalises rural communities. Retail centre development in Ndwedwe Municipality resulted in infrastructural development, which included roads, business hubs, banking points, etc. Road infrastructure was necessary for this development to be sustainable because there now will be more goods that will be going into the community.

Participant 8 stressed:

Before this centre, our roads were not prioritised; there were so many potholes, no humps, and road lines were not visible. As a taxi driver, I am on the road daily

Participant 5 said:

I have not heard my supplier complain about bad road conditions for quite some time. They often complained about the bad road conditions, claiming they could break some of the stock (beer bottles)

The participants operating near Boxer Centre maintained that they now have better infrastructure than they had before. They have been provided with safe and conducive spaces for business. Masutha and Rogerson (2014) argue that attempts to revitalise rural communities have created jobs and, at the same time, absorbed the available labour pool. This also means fewer people will migrate to other cities for employment.

Participant 4 stated:

the fact that Ndwedwe Village has such spaces for us to rent for our businesses makes things much better. It wasn't easy to work in a tent, especially in summer, because of the rain

The findings from this study suggest that the centre brought about physical infrastructure development, which includes roads, buildings, and taxi ranks and terminals. This finding is concurrent with what has been previously alluded to, that retail development plans often come with a lot of physical capital development. For community developers to say a community is developed, physical development is one of the features they pay attention to. Developed countries have well-established physical infrastructure.

## **12. Discussion of Results**

The objective of this paper is to explore the centre's role through what the participants have experienced and observed since they are traders and reside in the area. Findings suggested that the centre has, directly and indirectly, employed people from the community. At first, the people who built the centre were from the community. Secondly, the centre has directly hired cashiers, cleaners, security etc., for its daily functioning. Moreover, the centre brought spaces that could be rented for business and made available to local traders. This has evoked a trend where the youth are now seen engaging in the economy as small business owners. The findings have shown that young people in the area have now opened their small businesses around the centre. The centre attracts customers, thus benefiting small businesses around it.

Ndwedwe Ward 15 is the business hub of Ndwedwe Municipality, with community halls, police stations, an education centre, a clinic, flats, home affairs, taxi ranks, and a college. All these contribute to the infrastructural development of the area. Boxer Centre is an addition to this development.

Local economic development is a term used primarily for community development, maintaining that community development and economic development are interconnected. Thus, for community development to occur, Philip and Pitman (2015:66) emphasise that the economy needs to grow. Therefore, attempts to develop communities aim to improve residents' quality of life. Thus, in community development, the financial well-being of residents is vital. The study findings suggest that Boxer Centre seeks to improve the quality of life for the local community

through direct employment, a different range of goods and services, better physical infrastructure, and social development. The study findings are consistent with Masuku and Nwezi's (2021) arguments that communities must be able to access food and other goods and services within the context of their stable environment, with reasonable prices, and they must not have to travel long distances for access. This was important during COVID-19 national shutdowns when people needed to buy locally because of travel restrictions.

The constitution of South Africa encourages municipalities or local governments to play a leading role in creating employment and reducing poverty. Meyer (2014) thus offers a clear argument for the role of our local municipalities in economic development. He argues that local municipalities do not have the underlying role of creating jobs. However, they are responsible for ensuring that they create a lucrative environment for economic development. The study findings indicates that, through Boxer Centre, the municipality does offer spaces for the local informal traders to rent the spaces and conduct their businesses, for example, salons, kiosks, hawkers, etc.

### **13. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The role of mall-based development in community development is important. This paper has outlined the importance of the retail centres and their impact on rural development, youth unemployment reduction, and infrastructural development. Pro-market LED was employed as a theoretical framework. This framework indicates that pro-market strategies put more emphasis on establishing big businesses, marketing the location, infrastructural development, and attracting investments. Hence, the researcher recommends that retail-based development must be regarded as a tool for community development for it contributes not only to economic but also social and physical development.

The local government has an imperative role of first creating an environment where businesses can thrive in the locality. Secondly is to attract these businesses for investments and thirdly, to retain these businesses. Hence, the researcher recommends that while attracting new businesses, small, medium, and informal business roles in the society should not be ignored, as they have been the backbone of the rural local economy for many years. This will also ensure that local communities participate in local economic development activities. Both formal and informal business sectors are imperative for economic development, and

they serve roles that are as equally as important. Therefore, developers need to remember that while developing the formal retail sector in rural communities, the informal sector stays lucrative.

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