Revista Română de Geografie Politică Year **XXVIII**, no. 2, **2026**, pp. **89-107**
ISSN 1582-7763, E-ISSN 2065-1619 DOI 10.30892/rrgp.282102-403

SMALL TOWN INFORMAL ENTREPRENEURS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH: INSIGHTS FROM INFORMAL BUSINESS TOURISM IN ZIMBABWE

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Citation : Makoni, L., Rogerson, C.M. (2026). Small Town Informal Entrepreneurs of the Global South : Insights From Informal Business Tourism in Zimbabwe. *Revista Română de Geografie Politică*, 28(2), 89-107. https://doi.org/10.30892/rrgp.282102-403

Abstract: Existing research on the informal entrepreneurship in tourism is dominated by participation in leisure tourism. A knowledge gap surrounds informal entrepreneurship in business tourism and the phenomenon of informal business tourism. The aim is to contribute to scholarship on the mobilities of informal business tourists in the study setting of Zimbabwe. The specific focus is on informal business tourists who are residents of the nation's small towns. A key finding is that most domestic informal business tourists visiting Harare originate from small towns or surrounding rural settlements. Significant contributions are made by these informal business tourists towards food provisioning and food security of Harare citizens. The shopping undertaken by these tourists in the markets of Harare provides a range of goods which otherwise would not be readily available for sale to residents of Zimbabwe's 'left-behind' small town economic spaces. Nevertheless, small town informal entrepreneurs function in a precarious business environment dominated by anti-informal economy regulations from Harare authorities and the constant threat of police harassment, loss of stock and reduced business income.

Key words: informal economy; small towns; informal business tourism; domestic tourism; Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic tourism is defined as tourism undertaken by residents of one country who travel nationally and do not cross any international borders (Choo, 2025). According to Christou and Pericleous (2023, p. 659) domestic tourism

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represents “a crucial socioeconomic factor for destinations, regions and local communities”. Agyeiwaah and McKercher (2025) assert the importance of nurturing a thriving sector of domestic tourism in the Global South as a means of moving towards a more sustainable tourism economy and achieving the goals of the UNWTO 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Research conducted within Global South destinations discloses evidence of domestic tourism’s significant contributions for poverty reduction (Scheyvens, 2007; Sánchez-Dávila & Garcia, 2026; Shah et al., 2026). Nevertheless, domestic tourism essentially has been ‘the poor relation’ in African tourism studies. One recent bibliometric review of international research scholarship on domestic tourism identified that the topic remains “still underdeveloped in comparison to international tourism” (Dragičević, 2024, p. 139).

Arguably, the concept of domestic tourism is relatively of recent origin as in pre-colonial times discretionary travel in Africa lacked the formal borders that function as the definitions of modern states. Indeed, the notion of domestic tourism was instituted only in a ‘modern world’ with formally constituted borders to distinguish ‘local’ from ‘foreign’ travellers (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). The term is a slippery concept encompassing an often-seamless mix of diverse forms of discretionary travel some associated with everyday leisure activities, much comprised of visits to friends and relatives (VFR) travel, and others of mobilities more akin to work. Timothy (2020, p. 67) views domestic tourism as “not a type of tourism but rather a measure of geography, determined by the inseparability of space and time”. Across sub-Saharan Africa the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for an expanded understanding of domestic tourism because of its central role in the recovery of African tourism economies (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). However, alongside the Middle East and Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa is considered an under-represented region in writings concerning domestic tourism (Dragičević, 2024).

Against this backdrop the task in this paper is to contribute to the limited literature on domestic tourism in Africa with insights drawn from Zimbabwe. Our focus is novel as it examines the underpinnings, complexion and challenges of small town entrepreneurs who are participants in a part of the informal tourism economy of Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital city. As Magidi (2023) laments, small towns and their residents have not been major research foci in Zimbabwean scholarship. The existing sparse base of research on small town Zimbabwe reflects disparate themes. These encompass migration and the changing role of small towns in the settlement system (Pederson, 2019), the impacts of deindustrialization (Magidi, 2019, 2024; Magidi & Jimu, 2023), small towns as ‘left-behind’ economic and social spaces (Magidi & Bhanye, 2025), COVID-19 lockdown implications (Mukodzo et al., 2026), the effects of land reform (Scoons & Murimbarimba, 2021) and, explorations of tourism’s impacts on women’s livelihoods (Sibanda & Cheer, 2021). Importantly, the rich works of Magidi (2019, 2022, 2023, 2025) pinpoint that in the absence of a functioning formal economy, residents of small town Zimbabwe necessarily construct an array of different livelihood strategies to sustain their households through operating in various niches of the informal economy. In the case of the small town of Norton where the closure or downsizing of factories negatively impacted local livelihoods, Magidi (2022, 2024) shows the critical role assumed by the informal economy in promoting economic, social and environmental sustainability. Among informal livelihood strategies are the establishment of home-based enterprises, the

occupation of urban open space for cultivation, and running businesses as informal vendors or street traders. A segment of these traders are participants in the economy of domestic informal business tourism when choosing to travel away from their small town residences on a regular basis to pursue income-earning opportunities in larger urban centres.

This paper is situated therefore as a contribution to the literature on 'informal tourism' which, as shown in recent review by Makoni and Mearns (2025), assumes a vital role in the livelihoods of many African communities. Within recent international scholarship the topic of informal entrepreneurship in tourism is explored mainly in the context of leisure tourism, usually concentrated on the activities of unofficial tour guides, street vendors, informal transport providers, tourism markets, homestays, craft vendors or beach sellers (Çakmak et al., 2019; Makoni & Mearns, 2025; Monterrubio, 2021; Sibanda & Cheer, 2021). In its focus, this paper is differentiated from these studies as it pivots to examine informal entrepreneurs engaged in business tourism. Three sections of material are presented. The context is set with a literature review which surveys the phenomenon of informal business tourism and the existing state of research. Following a brief discussion of methodology, the results are presented of research findings from detailed interviews conducted with informal business tourism entrepreneurs originating in small towns of Zimbabwe and seeking to support household livelihoods by travelling to practice their trade in Harare, the country's largest city and major focus of both formal and informal business tourism (Makoni & Rogerson, 2023, 2026). Issues of concern are the drivers of these mobilities, the geography of these informal business travellers, their impacts and business challenges. The central focus upon informal domestic tourism is justified by the finding of Kifworo and Dube (2023) that research concerning informal business travel is one of the outstanding knowledge voids in African scholarship on domestic tourism.

LITERATURE CONTEXT

The first conceptualization of the term 'informal economy' was contained in the classic work of Keith Hart (1973) and derived from his field research undertaken on the livelihoods of poor dwellers in Accra, Ghana. Although a contested concept, Bromley and Wilson (2018, p. 4) aver that, in terms of definition, one of the most widely cited concerning the informal economy is that it constitutes "a process of income generation characterized by one central feature: it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in the legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated". Informal livelihoods are those unaccountable or unregistered economic activities that people carry out beyond the formal economy in order to sustain life (Grant, 2024). The majority of these alternative livelihoods are invented by the poor and would include in the context of sub-Saharan Africa garbage picking, waste recycling, backyard manufactures, home-based enterprises, open space cultivation, and most important of all, a myriad of different forms of petty trading (Magidi, 2025; Magidi & Jimu, 2023). As observed by Baum and Giddy (2021, p. 223) whilst the informal economy was long perceived to be a shrinking legacy of pre-industrialised societies "such views have been open to increasing criticism as a result of the persistence of informal economic activity" and not least in the Global South.

Since the concept's 'discovery' in the 1970s, Finn (2025, p. 56) goes so far as to maintain that research on urban informality "has exploded". Across urban centres of the Global South "informality has become a dominant feature and mode of urbanization" (Bandauko, 2025, p. 1). For the region of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, informality is a critical element for understanding the growth and complexion of most of the continent's mushrooming cities (Grant, 2024). Simply put, for Cobbinah (2023, p. 298) "informality is a defining feature of African urbanization" and is "integral to African urbanism". Likewise, Dube and Brown (2025, p. 3319) observe the informal economy "is the lifeblood of many towns and cities throughout Africa". Overall, informality transcends and modifies all aspects of urban livelihoods (Carmody et al., 2024). The transition of tourism scholars to studying the informal economy was somewhat later than occurred in other academic disciplines (Makoni & Mearns, 2025). Nevertheless, by the 1990s a small flow of research scholarship was evident in literature about informality and leisure tourism in (mainly urban) destinations of the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a).

The origins of the concept of 'informal business tourism' must be attributed to work by Timothy and Teye (2005) who were researching the activities of cross-border traders in the borderlands of West Africa. These informal traders were conceptualized by Timothy and Teye (2005) as participants in a distinctive form of business tourism in the Global South as they were crossing borders in the same manner as formal international business tourists, spending money outside their home country, and often staying overnight. For many scholars of business tourism, mostly concentrating their attention on well-heeled business travellers in the Global North, the activities of these less privileged informal cross-border traders remained outside of the scope of mainstream tourism research. It was argued by Timothy and Teye (2005) the inclusion of business travel within the ambit of global tourism scholarship was in essence a 'Northern concept' and centred mainly on affluent business people travelling either between countries in the Global North or between them and the Global South. This Northern conception of business tourism overlooks a vast number of informal business travellers who are a critical component of business tourism in Africa (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013).

Cross-border trading operations are extensive across sub-Saharan Africa, and their operations have been mapped out and dissected in multiple investigations conducted over recent years (Dzawanda et al., 2026; Little, 2026; World Bank, 2020). In particular, the sub-region of Southern Africa has experienced a major growth of such cross-border trading which is a common phenomenon between South Africa and other countries in sub-continent, most importantly Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi (Peberdy, 2000; Peberdy & Rogerson, 2000; Peberdy et al., 2015). The research undertaken by the Southern African Migration Project (subsequently renamed Southern African Migration Programme) conducted by Peberdy and her colleagues documents that informal sector cross-border trade constitutes "a significant feature of regional trade flows in Southern Africa" (Peberdy et al., 2015: 207). The acceleration of this activity of informal business tourism, albeit not always designated as such, has been manifest and widespread across the sub-continent (Ama et al., 2014; Bamu, 2017; Dzawanda & Matsa, 2021; Moyo, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2021b). The practices of these informal business tourists are shaping and reconstituting new economic spaces across the region (Moyo, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b, 2025).

Belated recognition from tourism scholars occurred during the 2010s decade. Work followed on Timothy and Teye's (2005, p. 83) recognition that cross-border traders represented a "form of business traveller that is unique to the developing world". An upturn in research interest was stimulated by the appearance of writings building upon the mobilities approach to tourism and facilitated a wider acknowledgement that the concept of informal business tourism was a distinctive Southern contribution to theoretical frameworks around business tourism (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Rogerson, 2015). Scholarship on informal business tourism was extended by studies which revealed that in many countries, informal business tourism reflected a domestic as well as an international component (Rogerson, 2015). Although the cohort of domestic informal business tourists was shown as constituted by different kinds of informal business entrepreneurs travelling and spending time away from their normal place of domestic residence, the population of these tourists once again was dominated by traders and shoppers (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013). Over the past decade several investigations have been published which document the patterns, characteristics and challenges of informal business tourists operating in the largest cities of South Africa (Rogerson, 2018), Zimbabwe (Makoni et al., 2023a, 2023b; Makoni & Rogerson, 2024, 2026), Cameroon (Tichaawa, 2017, 2021) and Lesotho (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013). The city of Johannesburg, South Africa's commercial heart, is identified as the pivot or central axis for the international informal business tourism activities of shoppers and traders across sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson, 2018; Zack & Landau, 2022). Other city destinations that have come under scrutiny are Douala, Gaborone, Harare, Maseru, and Yaoundé.

In a recent innovative contribution Timothy (2025) reiterated the imperative for tourism scholars to expand their vision and look more broadly at issues around human mobilities and address elements of the existence of many types of 'non-traditional forms of tourism'. These incorporate mobilities "some of which might not be seen as 'tourism' but should be seen as such" (Timothy et al., 2023, p. 1). What are styled as 'unconventional tourism mobilities' often are unaccounted and fall outside the scope of official tourism statistics. A critical dimension of these unconventional mobilities is those undertaken by informal business travellers. These informal business tourists – international and domestic - represent a cohort of 'unconventional business travellers' which only recently have begun to be explored by tourism scholars (Makoni & Rogerson, 2026). Undoubtedly, women informal traders represent the largest constituent of these informal business tourists at least in the environment of sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). Timothy (2025) stresses that whilst informal traders are not usually counted as tourists by government agencies, tourism scholars need to acknowledge that these individuals assume critical roles both as merchandise providers and shopper tourists. This observation is highly relevant as will be demonstrated in the Harare investigation.

METHODS AND CASE STUDY

The study setting of Zimbabwe is appropriate for research on informal entrepreneurs as the country represents "one of the world's most highly informalized economies" (Magidi, 2025, p. 5092). The country was granted formal independence from Britain, the colonial power, in 1980 and inherited a buoyant economy that within Africa ranked second only to South Africa. The first decade

of independence is viewed as a period of relative growth which was linked to economic as well as political stability. During this phase of relative prosperity of the national economy, only a minor role was played by the informal economy especially in cities where household livelihoods were anchored on the formal livelihoods (Magidi, 2019). Arguably, however, by 1990 the national economy was showing distress signals exemplified by unemployment levels escalating from 8 percent at independence to 26 percent a decade later (Tawodzera & Chikanda, 2017). The adoption and implementation between 1990 and 1995 of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank-financed Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) was a critical stimulus for furthering growth of the informal economy. The austerity measures implemented in these adjustment programmes occasioned major job losses in the private sector as well as in public sector employment forcing households to search for alternative income strategies (Bamu, 2017). Factory closures, deindustrialization and resultant spiralling unemployment galvanized rampant poverty and compelled the take-up of informal economic opportunities for livelihood strategies after ESAP failed to reignite the national economy. Aptly, Dzawanda and Matsa (2021) styled Zimbabwe as a 'suffocating national economy'.

At one level, therefore, the rise of informal entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe was catalysed by alarmingly high levels of unemployment and the lack of structures for social security, a situation typical for many parts of the Global South and most especially across sub-Saharan Africa (Carmody et al., 2024). The question of informality in Zimbabwe was spotlighted, however, by the economic meltdown which the country experienced at the turn of the 21st century. According to Bhanye (2026) several 'episodes' contributed to Zimbabwe's economic crisis and disruptions that wrecked lives and livelihoods. Of central significance was the radical contraction of the economy occasioned by the implementation of the 'fast-track land reform' programme enacted by President Mugabe (Makoni et al., 2024). This chaotic programme seen as reworking property relations and agrarian production in ways entangled with coercion, patronage and violence underpinned economic contraction and Zimbabwe's international isolation with economic sanctions imposed on the nation. Levels of inflation accelerated and reached a peak of 213 million percent, a hyperinflation episode in the late 2000s which constituted a spectacular macro-economic catastrophe undermining the capacity of households for everyday survival (Bhanye, 2026; Little, 2026). The dramatic loss of conventional livelihoods because of economic collapse. monetary chaos and deindustrialization were a trigger for households to construct alternative unconventional livelihoods (Magidi, 2023). Indeed, with unemployment rates as much as 84 percent in the early 2010s decade most of the populace were surviving in the informal economy. Zimbabwe has "endured severe economic deterioration that eroded the livelihood capacities of both the urban and rural populations" (Magidi, 2019, p. 7).

Finn and Bandauko (2024, p. 1) draw attention to the fact that "Zimbabwe's economy has continued to massively deteriorate coupled with a currency crisis, skyrocketing inflation, and dwindling foreign direct investment". Alongside the plummeting economy and most especially the collapse of manufacturing, jobs in the formal economy were difficult to obtain and in correspondence the informal economy became the major source of employment and income for most urban households. In contemporary Zimbabwe informality is not the exception but the norm, the dominant economic condition such that the country sits alongside

Bolivia and Georgia with the globally highest levels of recorded informal employment (Munemo, 2026). What is styled by Magidi (2019, p. 64) as the post-deindustrialisation era in Zimbabwe is when "petty trading became the order of the day". The proliferating take-up of informal livelihoods to sustain life extended outside the leading cities of Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare and Gweru into lower-order centres in the Zimbabwe settlement system. This included the 'left-behind' spaces of small towns where local populations were pushed into inventing alternative livelihood strategies, among which was that of becoming an informal business tourist in Harare. Nonetheless, Magidi (2025) writes of the transformation of Zimbabwe's informal economy from merely a survivalist and low productivity sector to a sector that has become resilient and vibrant over time, growing in creative ways as it fights for a place in an economy still crippled by crises.

The research location was Harare, the political and administrative capital of Zimbabwe, the nation's largest settlement and central urban hub with a rapidly growing population estimated by 2022 at 1.49 million (Matamanda et al., 2025). It is the country's leading commercial centre and main international airport gateway. As capital city Harare enjoys several advantages for formal business tourism in terms of government events and trade fairs which underpins its cluster of accommodation services for business travellers regarding hotels and conference facilities (Makoni & Rogerson, 2023). In addition to status as premier destination for formal business tourism in Zimbabwe, Harare occupies also a vital role in the regional networks of cross-border informal trading that stretch across the region of Southern Africa (Makoni et al., 2023a; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2025). These cross-border traders constitute the international element of the informal business tourism economy of Harare and assume a vital role in provisioning the city with goods that are unavailable, expensive or in limited supply in the city's formal retail outlets (Makoni et al., 2023a, 2023b).

As minimal information and understanding surrounds informal domestic tourism, exploratory studies are valuable. This is most especially relevant in the resource-constrained environments of sub-Saharan Africa. The research applied semi-structured interviews to gather both quantitative data and qualitative information from 400 informal domestic business tourists in Harare. Research data collection was undertaken between December 2021-November 2022. A multiple sampling technique was applied. Convenience sampling was used for the known, identified, targeted population. Since these individuals travel to Harare from other areas in Zimbabwe for engaging in informal business tourism, the population was selected in terms of the convenience of participants being in Harare during the period when research interviews were in process. Because of the challenges in drawing a representative population of informal traders and their businesses in the city, snowball sampling also was pursued. Identified traders who were business tourists were requested to recommend others known to be visiting Harare for similar purposes. The researcher subsequently approached recommended traders. The Mbare bus terminal, the local arrival and departure point in the city for most domestic informal traders, was a vital location for conducting the interviews. For participation in the study, a requirement was that the domestic informal business tourists should not be residents of Harare city but instead travelling from any location in the ten provinces of Zimbabwe or even from the peri-urban areas of Harare. However, only those traders visiting Harare for more than 24 hours (and thus staying at least one night which qualifies them as

tourists), were selected to participate; day visitors thus were not included. The age requirement for the sample was 18 years and above, with the participants' main purpose of traveling into Harare either to buy or sell goods.

Throughout the research the collection of extensive personal narratives was undertaken of the mobilities and daily experiences of traders. Use was made of thematic analysis for analyzing interview material. This qualitative research approach seeks to isolate and elucidate common themes and recurring patterns within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As argued by Seyfi et al. (2024: 4) such a qualitative research approach "aims to uncover and describe the content and emerging patterns within text" and further "offers a deeper understanding within an interpretivist paradigm". Thematic analysis provides insight into the everyday lived experiences of domestic informal business tourists coming to Harare from Zimbabwe's lower-order settlements. In the results below the 'voices' are reported extensively of interview respondents from informal business tourists coming to Harare from outside the cities. These are extracted from the collected set of interviews.

RESULTS

The findings are structured in terms of three sub-sections of material. The first situates the importance of small towns as source areas for domestic informal business tourism in Zimbabwe's capital city. The second unpacks the drivers of these mobilities, the factors which are triggering the take-up of informal business tourism by residents of small towns. The final section examines the impacts and challenges of these informal tourism entrepreneurs.

The Role of Small Towns in Harare's Informal Business Economy

The significant role of small towns as source locations for informal business tourism in Zimbabwe can be understood in terms of unpacking the geography of domestic informal tourists in terms of the national urban settlement hierarchy. Munzwa and Wellington (2010) give details of the historical evolution of Zimbabwe's urban settlement system and that the country has a distinctive settlement distribution pattern that derives from the colonial epoch. Moreover, they observe that the current settlement distribution of Zimbabwe is centralized around urbanization in the country that followed upon independence and with urban growth escalating in the post-independence period. The argument is forwarded that urbanization and patterns of urban growth in Zimbabwe fundamentally "are products of colonial development policies" because at the time of colonial intrusion "there were no functioning indigenous towns and the society was largely agrarian" (Wekwete, 1992, p. 56). In contemporary Zimbabwe a settlement is designated as 'urban' if it has a population of 2500 people or more. The boundaries between definitions of 'urban' and 'rural' are blurred and it is observed therefore that urban centres "can be separated from rural settlements/areas largely by population size, density, settlement size, spatial coherence and social heterogeneity and ecological diversity" (Munzwa & Wellington, 2010, p. 127).

Table 1. Origins of Informal Business Tourists in the Settlement Hierarchy of Zimbabwe Type of Settlement Description and Examples Total Informal Business Tourists (N=400) Proportionate Share (%)

Type of Settlement	Description and Examples	Total Informal Business Tourists (N=400)	Proportionate Share (%)
Main cities	These are the major urban centres of Zimbabwe. Beyond Harare these include Bulawayo, Gweru and Mutare. All currently serve as major administration cities on both a provincial and national level.	35	8.75
Main towns	These include the main towns that are smaller than the main cities. They serve (or used to) as either industrial/manufacturing centres or leisure tourist nodes. Examples are Masvingo, Marondera, Kariba, Victoria Falls and Chinhoyi.	69	17.25
Towns and small towns	These have some basic urban infrastructure developed proportionally to meet the requirements of the inhabitants and those from surrounding or nearby rural areas. Examples include Ruwa, Norton, Mount Hampden, Murewa, Mazoe, Gokwe, Mutoko and Honde Valley.	167	41.75
Peri-urban Harare	Outskirts of Harare. Historically established to manage the rising population in the city. Epworth and Chitungwiza are important.	29	7.25
Rural Areas	These are non-developed settlement areas of Zimbabwe with usually limited or no infrastructural development. Important rural source areas for informal business tourists are Binga, Headlands, Muzarabani, Triangle and Zhombe.	100	25.00

Given this definitional fuzziness, for this analysis of the origins of Harare's domestic informal business tourists, the study adopted a categorization of settlements into five types, viz. (1) cities, (2) main towns, (3) smaller towns, (4) the peri-urban area around Harare, and (5) rural settlements. Descriptions of these different types of settlement and examples are provided in Table 1. In addition, Table 1 shows the proportional share of each category of settlement to the population of informal business tourists in Harare. Several points must be noted. First, is that only a small proportion (8.75%) of the population of informal business tourists derive from Zimbabwe's other major cities such as Gweru, Bulawayo and Mutare. Second, the next tier of main towns in the urban settlement hierarchy furnish 17.25%; often these spaces are manufacturing centres but some such as Victoria Falls and Kariba are notable leisure tourism destinations. Three, the areas defined as peri-urban zones falling within the district of Harare supply a further 7.25% of the informal business tourists. Taken together, these three categories supply only one-third of the population of informal business tourists. The majority – 267 respondents - derive from the lowest tiers of the settlement hierarchy, namely small towns or rural areas which collectively account for

66.75% of travellers to Harare. Figure 1 provides a more fine-grained picture of the origins of these small town informal business tourists. It demonstrates that Harare is a magnet for informal business tourists drawn from all parts of the country. In particular, the city experiences flows of informal business tourists from the group of towns and small towns within a 100 km radius or approximately a 90-minute drive from the capital.

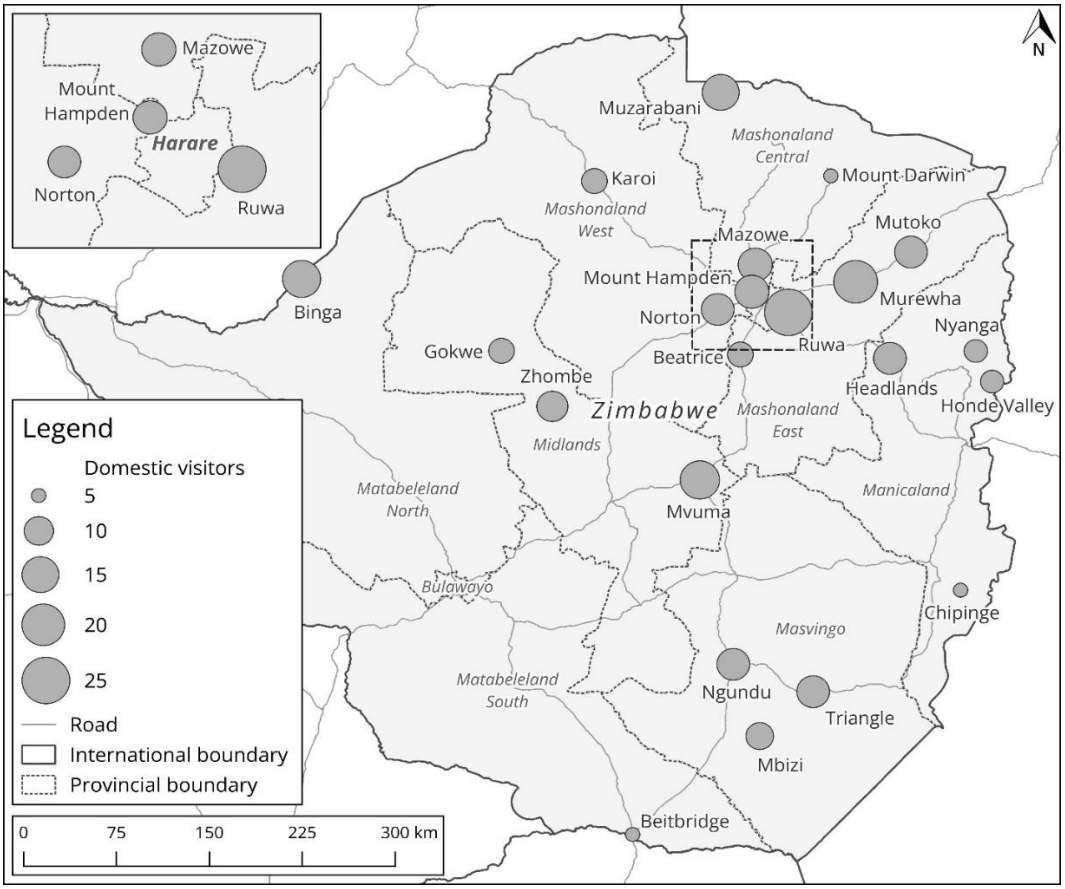


Figure 1. The Geographical Origins of Small Town Informal Business Tourists in Harare (Source: Authors).

Drivers of Small Town Informal Business Tourism

The research revealed the primary drivers for individuals to travel to Harare from their home small towns as linked to poverty, lack of formal employment opportunities, job losses and the need to furnish support to household dependents or supplement inadequate household incomes even under circumstances when a household member had a formal job. Indeed, the qualitative responses confirm the decline of the Zimbabwean economy as a whole and of the corresponding challenges of household survival in small towns. In some cases the travel to Harare was to trade goods in short supply in the markets of Harare, most significantly of local food products, such as agricultural goods, fish or game meat from hunting. But, for many traders the business was driven also by the need to purchase other goods in Harare which were unavailable in small towns. and functioning as

distribution channels for sale of those goods outside of Harare. For some entrepreneurs the flexibility of work as an informal entrepreneur was highlighted as another reason for start-up as informal business tourist.

The personal narratives collected from respondents give insight into the drivers of these informal tourism mobilities. Lack of formal employment opportunities was a theme constantly reinforced in the interviews. From the perspective of one male trader from the small town of Mutoko: "I am not sure if it makes sense now to look for a job in Zimbabwe. It really doesn't. Everyone you meet in the morning going to work you must know that the person is not getting any good money. Our reality here is that money is made in the streets not in offices anymore, unless of course you are a politician or you are connected somehow to the political giants of this country". University graduates and the youth are severely impacted by Zimbabwe's employment crisis (Bhanye, 2026; Munemo, 2026). Typically, a 28 year old male trader interviewed in 2021 stated as follows: "I graduated at the University of Chinhoyi in 2019, I have not found a job since then and I am trying to raise money to at least go to Australia or other countries where I can find greener pastures. Until I get that opportunity, I will continue travelling to Harare for this business". The problems are also of 'poverty-in-employment' as indicated by this response: "After completing my attachment training in Information Technology, I got a job immediately. But with my job alone I am not different from my jobless friends because the money is not visible. That's why I have to do this business because it pays me" (Male IT specialist/vendor [Karoyi] 27yrs). In many small towns usually only casual work opportunities are available. As stressed by one women trader: "I normally do maricho [piece jobs] in people's fields and gardens. I use my income from those jobs to travel to Harare to buy stuff" (Female shopper [Ruwa] 27yrs).

On the demand-side, the markets of Harare were a key attraction for producers of foodstuffs and increasingly significant as food shortages in cities worsened since the agricultural sector collapsed in the late 1990s. The informal business tourists from small towns across Zimbabwe are vital suppliers of fresh produce goods as the major supermarkets are often out of stock of basic staple foods, making the domestic informal business tourism economy critical for food supply and distribution. Typically, a women farmer/trader from Nyanga stated: "Basic items like these crops and vegetables I sell are either very expensive or not available in supermarkets, and worse those shops prefer card payments. Us Zimbabweans, we are struggling to afford those and many of us do not even have bank accounts. My business and those who are like me are making sure that the poor people can have a better plan to get these items". Many suppliers of food products indicated that whilst in Harare they shop for other goods for re-sale back in their small towns. This is illustrated by the following responses: "I come from Norton, I survive on this business. When the dams are dry it is not easy to survive because the fish will not be there. I do fishing and travel to Harare to sell. I sell both the dried and fish depending on what the customers want. I sell my fish at the flea markets in Harare (Male fisherman [Norton] 26yrs). Likewise, from a Gokwe-based hunter: "I hunt small animals in the forests. I then make chimukuyu [smoked venison] and travel to sell it in Harare. Even the rich people in Harare want them, I take their numbers and call them every time I am in Harare. When I get my money, I buy a lot of things like herbs, tools, kitchen things and clothes. I make a good money from these things when I sell them in my village".

A segment of the small town informal business tourists visit Harare for purposes of purchasing goods which are unavailable in small towns or rural areas and selling those goods in the home area. Several interviewees stressed that the scarcity of goods and major shortages of vital commodities was driving the circulation of informal business tourists from home areas into Harare and return with a range of different commodities. A 31 year-old trader from Mazoe stressed that: "Food is the main stuff needed here. There is a big shortage of food everywhere, and where you can find it in the shops it is expensive. I'm talking about the cooking oil, eggs, rice and other dry ingredients. You can only find these cheap in the flea markets or Chinese shops. Many people are coming here to buy those because they make good money when they resale back where they come from (Male vendor [Mazoe] 31yrs). The linkages between the 'urban' and the 'rural' in Zimbabwe were demonstrated in several of the interviews: "I come to Harare with my neighbours' gas cylinders to fill them. They give me money for petrol and for my services, plus the money to fill the gas. When I fill the gas, I can also buy solar panels which I will go and sell to them. Because of no electricity, gas and solar are always wanted especially in rural areas (Male trader vendor [Chinhoyi] 34yrs). Other participants argued that their business was assisting to address the water and other shortages in small town and rural areas: "I buy plastic tins and containers from traders in Harare then go sell them to my area. There are no water taps there and people always need them to store water from boreholes and wells. The big problem is that many families have no wells and boreholes and they go and fetch water far from home, so these tins help them to contain the water for a long time" (Female shopper [Zhombe] 33yrs).

The purchasing behaviour of informal business tourists is thus influenced by shortages of particular goods and thereby making available products that cannot be accessed by people living in small towns, remote or rural areas. One respondent indicated that she travels to Harare to buy outdoor and hardware in the city for resale: "Because in rural areas there are not available. People in the villages walk for many kilometres to fetch water or go to the mill. So, I make their lives easier by buying wheel barrows, water containers and sacks" (Female shopper [Zhombe] 30yrs). Finally, improving the supply and distribution of health and medicine products is another critical contribution made by the activities of small town entrepreneurs as domestic informal business tourists. The important role assumed by small town shoppers for pharmaceutical products was stressed by interviewees: "People die in hospital queues everywhere in Zimbabwe. You are told that the doctor is not around to see you or sometimes you are told that they are waiting for medicines or an X-ray is not working. There are just many stories you are told at clinics and hospitals and that time you are very sick. That is why I just decide to come here and buy different medicines they sell here which cure a lot of diseases. Here in Harare they sell African medicines and pharmacy medicines in the flea market. It's better to do that than taking our sick to the hospital, it will be just like we are sending them to their graves" (Male shopper [Triangle] 34yrs).

It was disclosed that gender differences are manifest in the buying of particular categories of goods in Harare by the domestic informal business tourists Women dominated in the category of accessories and food products, whereas for building and materials products men were overwhelmingly the most important business actors. Women were also the most significant purchasers of traditional medicines and of personal care products especially relating to beauty and hair. By

contrast, males were more involved in buying carpentry, metalwork and outdoor equipment. The gendered character of trading and purchase behaviour was highlighted by several of the small town entrepreneurs. One 35 year-old male shopper from Murewa stated: "I buy building material and other tools here in Harare that I can easily sell back home. I can get customers easy when I sell those because I am a man and it's very rare for someone to come to me looking for pads and hairs and hair medicine. The thing is not about being too sexist, but honestly who will trust me at home when I go around advertising pads for women, it won't make sense even though there is high demand for them" (Male shopper [Murewa] 35yrs). Likewise, a 26 year-old female shopper from Chimanimani observed: "I have noticed that back in the village things like tyres and bicycle parts sell and also hoes during the farming seasons. Sometimes I want to buy them here. But who will come in their common sense to buy a bicycle part or a toolbox from a women?".

Overall, the findings from the interviews concerning reasons for small town entrepreneurs starting up a business as domestic informal business tourist align to those reported in previous investigations about the drivers of 'informalization' of the Zimbabwe economy. However, what is original and distinctive in our findings is to add a further layer, namely the phenomenon of informal business tourism, to debates on the nature and complexion of different informal livelihoods which are pursued by residents in contemporary small town settlements of Zimbabwe (Magidi, 2019, 2022, 2023; Magidi & Jimu, 2023).

Impacts and Challenges

The limited extant literature on domestic informal business tourism stresses the significance of this economy for the livelihoods of many citizens in cities as well as lower-order urban centres in sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson & Letsie, 2013; Tichaawa, 2017, 2021). The specific findings from Harare confirm its pro-poor impacts for entrepreneurs from across Zimbabwe. The perceived benefits were for participants to provide a relief from poverty, provision of employment livelihoods, enabling monthly household expenses, and assistance towards children's education. A typical response from a 33 year old male trader from Beit Bridge (the border town with South Africa) was that "because employment is a big challenge, this business is very beneficial for me because it gives me a job and that needed income to survive". Similarly, the view expressed by a 30 year old women trader was simply "We are living in poor conditions here in Zimbabwe, and that is not a secret. Many Zimbabweans have left the country to greener pastures somewhere because they are escaping poverty. For many like us who are left here because we have families here and cannot just pack and leave, we have to find ways to survive. Because of this business, I have managed to send my children to school and build a house for my family". Beyond the ramifications of domestic informal business tourism for households it is essential to reiterate that positive pro-poor impacts extend to addressing shortages of goods in various parts of the country and for Harare in particular by provisioning food and thereby contributing towards food security. The role of small town farmers, hunters and fisherfolk travelling to Harare selling their produce in the informal economy was demonstrated as contributing towards closing the supply gap of the scarcity of fresh produce in the city's formal retail economy.

Despite these benefits, the research revealed that domestic informal business tourists confront a number of challenges on an everyday basis in operating as informal entrepreneurs in Harare. In common with the multiple difficulties that confront communities of cross-border traders, the international side of informal business tourism, operating in Harare (Makoni et al., 2023a, 2023b) the major challenges faced by small town domestic informal business tourists were revealed to concern regulatory issues and the implementation of government policies. The historical record of Harare authorities confirms the observation made by Tanyanyiwa et al. (2023) that city governments across Africa have generally acted harshly towards the informal economy. In particular "informal traders are considered a nuisance and unworthy of government support and are subjected to severe regulations and police harassment" (Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023, p. 5931). Street traders in Harare survive on a daily basis in a hostile and repressive policy environment in which they are targets for authoritarian displacement initiatives aimed at 'purifying public spaces' and 'maintaining public order' (Bandauko, 2026; Bandauko & Arku, 2025a). It has been observed that in its planning and development visions, Harare is a city shaped by elite-led visions of urban modernity aligned to world-class aspirations but shackled by the everyday issues of urban informality (Bandauko & Arku, 2025b). The informal business tourists visiting Harare exacerbate the authorities' policy dilemma of managing the everyday realities of marginalized groups who struggle to survive (Bandauko, 2026; Finn & Bandauko, 2024; Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023).

The interview findings from entrepreneurs originating in small towns of Zimbabwe confirmed that over 90 percent of respondents were impacted by issues of police harassment, corrupt law enforcement officials and the strict regulatory environment that conditioned their business operations and, in turn, exacerbating their poverty through laggard sales, loss of stock and minimal business development. The cluster of difficulties faced by these informal domestic business tourists in operating their businesses in Harare were explained in detail in the qualitative responses. Police raids were a frequent source of concern. For a male farmer from Honde Valley: "Just last week I lost my fruits and vegetables which was equivalent to US$ 1000 from the raids. When the police are raiding, there is chaos because there are many of us and there is commotion. When we are running away, we leave our stuff for them to just come and collect. If you are found there with your stuff you can be arrested on top of losing your stuff". A similar response was furnished by a trader from Ruwa: "Our businesses are good in the city until the police come to raid. It is even worse for us who are not staying here in Harare because we have nowhere to go and hide our goods. We just leave them there and carry much of what we can. But we always lose a lot of money and customers when the police raid us" (Male vendor [Ruwa] 30yrs). A 28 year old women trader from Mvuma stated: "Police raids are very serious because to go around the city with trucks to collect our goods. There is no warning, you just see them there and you have to run away to avoid being arrested or searched for your money. They take our things for themselves".

Police corruption and bribery of officials was widely reported:

Sometimes you see police coming just four or five of them and tell you that what you are doing is illegal, we are taking your things. So, you have to negotiate with them and give them money so they leave you alone and go to the next trader. Every time you must always have extra money for that. All they want is money, and do not take your things, sometimes they even tell you to go look for money to

pay them if you don't have it (Female vendor [Zhombe] 38yrs). The police are everywhere, even at the rank they see you arriving. Then they follow you and harass you until you pay them (Female vendor [Binga] 34yrs). The police are killing us. They know we are surviving from this. We are all poor, even them they are poor but they don't care about our hunger because they just take our goods like that. I am sure they share our goods amongst themselves to feed their own families (Female vendor [Lupane] 30yrs).

The unclear and often confusing regulatory environment that frames the everyday operations of participants was highlighted as a major business challenge. Harare city management laws and policies were paradoxical especially about the treatment of the informal economy and its participants. The respondents in this research expressed concern that there are no clearly defined city management laws which govern their activities, and that they are always victims of harsh treatment from police raids with no clarity regarding rules to observe and abide to in the business. Although at certain times national government signalled its support for informal trading at other times it undertook repressive actions designed to clear out Harare streets 'flooded' by informal traders (Tanyanyiwa et al., 2023). This pattern has repeated with sometimes government officials expressing support for the activities of informality but at other times, traders viewed as nuisance. This contradiction was captured by one respondent as follows: "What surprises me is that one day I am treated as a needed entrepreneur and job creator in our poor economy, and tomorrow I am a criminal whose goods must be confiscated and must be kicked out of the streets or arrested (Male vendor 30yrs).

CONCLUSION

This study must be positioned as a contribution to scholarship concerning informal entrepreneurship in tourism. Arguably, the research is novel in its analysis of informal entrepreneurship in business tourism as compared to the weight of existing literature which is concentrated upon the informal economy of leisure tourism. A further original aspect of this study is that it is situated within the context of the mobilities of entrepreneurs from small towns.

Within the setting of the highly informalized economy of Zimbabwe and of its capital city, a key finding is that the majority of informal business tourists visiting Harare are residents of small towns or surrounding rural settlements. Evidence provided of the mobilities of these informal business tourists constitutes a broadening of the knowledge base both about informal business tourism and the complexion of the informal livelihoods in small town Zimbabwe. The shopping undertaken by these tourists in the markets of Harare provides a range of goods which otherwise would not be readily available to residents of Zimbabwe's 'left-behind' economic spaces. In addition, the findings underline the significant contributions which are made by these informal business tourists towards food provisioning and food security of Harare residents. Notwithstanding these impacts it is pinpointed that these informal entrepreneurs function in a precarious business environment which is dominated by anti-informal economy regulations from local authorities and accompanied by the constant threat of police harassment, loss of stock and reduced business income. Overall, this exploratory study reveals new insights into the 'hidden' lives and livelihoods of these small town entrepreneurs and serve as catalyst for further studies into the organization, impacts and challenges of domestic informal business tourists from small town Africa.

Acknowledgements: Arno Booyzen prepared the map. Valued inputs to the paper were made by Robbie Norfolk, L. Gladys Champagne and Betty White.

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Submitted: July 20, 2026 | Revised: September 15, 2026 | Accepted and published online: October 27, 2026