

Information Use, Flow and Ethics in the Informal Sector: Towards an Innovative Model

AGNES CHIKONZO, NANCY KWANGWA AND MASIMBA MUZIRINGA¹

Abstract

This article interrogates how information is used and how it flows in the informal sector to develop an innovative model to satisfy the information it needs. A miscellany of information is available on how informal businesses are managed in Harare. However, some of this information is in the custody of a few and not readily available in the mainstream media. Some of it is also misinformation. Innovative ways of processing and disseminating information generated from the informal sector are critical. Qualitative methodology was adopted and semi-structured interviews were held with representatives from selected informal sectors in Harare. The study revealed that in the informal sector, information is used to guide decision making regarding what products to order and how to price such products, where to get affordable stock and raw material, and markets for products. The main sources of information cited were social media and word of mouth from peers. Mainstream media was seldom used and other online databases of information. The study showed that there are often ethical issues on how information circulates in the informal sector, such as the authenticity of the information and some players withheld information. Findings from the study have implications on the design and delivery of information services in the informal sector. An integrated model on information generation and use in the informal sector was developed to advance the use and dissemination of information towards the development of the informal sector.

¹ University of Zimbabwe Library, University of Zimbabwe, Harare

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INTRODUCTION

The informal sector in Zimbabwe is one of the largest in the world, as a share of total economic activity (Medina & Schneider, 2018). The informal economy has been propelled by rapid urbanisation, changes in the socio-economic and political landscape in the country, particularly the rise of indigenisation and economic empowerment programmes adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe since the year 2000 (Mbiriri, 2010). The informal sector contributed 10% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at independence in 1980. In 2018, the contribution was estimated at 48% of GDP. Consequently, Zimbabwe's informal workforce now comprises approximately 85% of the country's workforce (Medina and Schneider, 2018). Given the immense contribution of the informal sector to the mainstream economy, the study investigated how information generation, use and flow can be leveraged to boost the operations of the informal sector.

The study objectives were to find out the information needs of the informal sector; establish ethical behaviour required in information use in the informal sector, ascertain how the available information is used for the advancement of the sector and establish an ideal model of disseminating useful information towards its development. Harare, being the centre of the informal economy, was found to be an ideal place to conduct this research. For this reason, six locations in Harare were selected for the study. Since time immemorial, information has been regarded as 'power'. The generation and flow of information have a key role in advancing or destroying the informal sector. Due to the inherent power that information holds, people often withhold or use the information to perpetrate resistance to the desired course that creates challenges in the information landscape. Advances in technology and the widespread use of mobile technologies have created opportunities to generate and disseminate information.

According to Ikoja-Odongo (2009), despite the informal sector's role in employment-creation and as an expanding source of income to many households in Africa, little research has been done on information use,

flow and utilisation in the sector in Southern Africa. The development of effective systems that ensure access and utilisation of credible information is a key enabler to any successful business enterprise, including the informal sector economy (*ibid.*). The capital city, Harare, is the heartbeat of the informal sector in the country that manifests in the form of flea markets, agricultural products, vending stalls and manufacturing home industries. These are spread over the city with major markets being the Magaba, Mupedzanhamo and Siyaso in Mbare being the major markets. These informal markets are equally spread across the city with the major trading places found in Highfields (Gazaland Market), Glen View Area 8 Complex, Kuwadzana Home Industry and backyard informal activities in nearly every neighbourhood in Harare. Njaya (2015) noted that, despite the unstructured nature of the informal sector, it accounts for 58% of employment in Harare, just as in many primal cities in the developing world.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Information Seeking Behaviour Models in the general field of information behaviour are statements, often in the form of diagrams that attempt to describe an information-seeking activity, the causes and consequences of that activity, or the relationships among stages in information-seeking behaviour (Garg, 2016). The study adopted the revised model of Information Behaviour founded by Wilson (1999) (Figure 1). The model suggests that information-seeking behaviour occurs as a result of a perceived need by an information user. In the context of the current study, the user is the informal sector workers who, to fulfil their business information need on operations, markets, customers and competitors, consult both formal and informal sources and services that may lead to success or failure to find the relevant information (Wilson, 1999). If the information-seeking process is successful, an individual then uses the information to either fully or partially satisfy the information need. If the information need is not satisfied, the search process is repeated. The model also shows that part of the information-seeking behaviour may involve other people in the sector through information exchange and that information perceived as useful may be passed to other people.

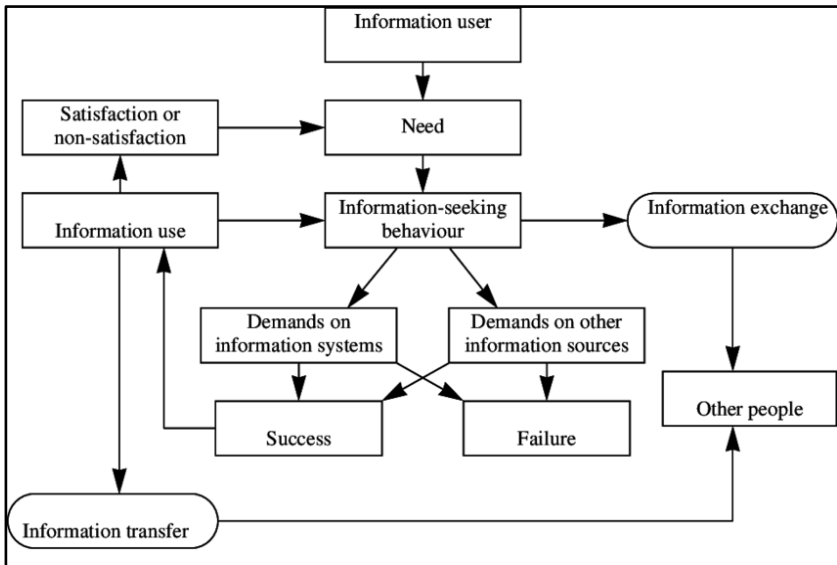


Figure 1: *Information Seeking Behaviour Model* (Wilson, 1999: 251)

The information-seeking behaviour model highlights that in the information age, there is an exchange of information players in the informal sector. There is information asymmetry as in some instances people withhold information which leads to failure in accessing the required information from other information sources (Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis Unit, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The informal sector in Zimbabwe is regarded as the ‘unregulated’ market that is not subject to formal contracts, taxation and licensing (Chirisa, 2009). The informal business sector relies on indigenous resources and non-formal approaches to skills acquisition and development. This sector is traced back to the late 1980s into the decade long 1990-2000 (Mhone, 1995). This was a period characterised by economic structural adjustments that resulted in retrenchments, downsizing, lay-offs in the public sector an increasing number of students dropping out of school, resulting in rural-urban migration. Since then, the sector has grown exponentially and now is estimated to account for 85% of the workforce in the country (Njaya, 2015)

The informal sector requires access to business information linked to small-scale informal sector operations, markets, customers and the ability to gain a competitive advantage in business (Ikoja-Odongo, 2009). However, there is little empirical knowledge on the business information needs of the small-scale informal sector and on how the information is acquired, disseminated and utilised in support of operational efficiency and increased productivity (*ibid.*). In the absence of a clear framework on access and utilisation of business information on markets, operations, customers and competitors, the growth of the small-scale family-owned informal sector will remain subdued.

Additionally, it is not clear to information intermediaries where the small-scale informal sector gets its information on business operations, how it uses it, in what form and for what purposes. This lacuna means that the growth and development of the small-scale family-owned informal sector in Harare cannot be adequately measured nor can the sector's information needs be adequately and systematically addressed. This incomplete puzzle results in uncertainty concerning how government and developmental agencies can best support the growth and development of the small-scale informal sector. Ethical behaviour and integrity are essential for long-term entrepreneurial success, whether from the macro-, meso- or micro-perspective. Unethical behaviour distorts the mechanics of the market system that leads to an inefficient allocation of resources (Minkes, Small & Chatterjee, 1999).

The ethical behaviour for business information use, access and flow in areas such as markets, commodities, customers, competitors and regulatory frameworks, provides the hallmark of increased productivity, business growth, profitability and increased economic development for the country. The small-scale informal sector entrepreneurs are faced with information ethical challenges every day as they make decisions for their enterprises. The ethical considerations on information privacy, accuracy and accessibility are at the core of informal business operations in Africa (Botha, 2012). An appropriate model for disseminating useful, relevant and reputable information is a critical enabler for business development, long-term sustainability and profitability. The dissemination and use of information have evolved from the industrial revolution in the late 18th

and 19 centuries. According to Ogunsola (2005), the 20th century saw rapid industrialisation through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs). The 21st century has been characterised by a knowledge-driven economy with accrual benefits of knowledge-creation, distribution, diffusion, access, use for sustainable growth and development. The unregulated nature of the small-scale informal sector requires a structured way in which information and knowledge can be harnessed to support productivity and growth (Jiyane, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study adopted a qualitative research methodology where semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Qualitative research involves a naturalistic inquiry, studying real-world settings inductively to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2005). The use, flow and generation of information in the informal sector is a real-world setting, thus it is ideal to apply a constructivist approach to understand how the informal sector operators interact with information. The inductive analysis across cases yielded patterns and themes that are pertinent in building the innovative model for information use, flow and ethics in the informal sector. Convenience sampling was used to select study participants from six informal markets in Harare, namely Mupedzanhamo, Siyaso, Gazaland, Kuwadzana, Greendale and Mabvuku. These areas were selected based on having a high concentration of informal sector business. Frey (2018) defined convenience sampling as a method where the selection of participants is based on their ready availability. Interviews were held with twenty-four (24) people who were drawn from the informal markets specialising in manufacturing and construction, agricultural produce, beauty and therapy, textile and clothing, and vending by selling merchandise and trinkets. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the conveniently selected sample. An interview guide was developed based on the adopted theory of the Information Seeking Behaviour Model to explain the key processes involved in information use and flow in the informal sector.

RESULTS

This section presents study findings on information use, flow and ethics in the informal sector. A total of 24 informal traders were interviewed, of whom 20% were from Mupedzanhamo, 30% from Siyaso, 10% from Gazaland, 10% from Kuwadzana, 10% from Greendale and 20% from Mabvuku. These areas were selected on the basis of having a high concentration of informal sector business. Participants were drawn from the following sectors: manufacturing and construction, agricultural produce, beauty and therapy, textile and clothing and vending by selling merchandise and trinkets.

INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Findings from the study show an array of uses of information by the informal sector. The findings indicate that players in the informal sector need information about suppliers of their products or where to acquire cheaper raw materials, information on access to markets/customers, how to run their businesses, including marketing and securing loans. Additionally, it was found that the informal sector requires information about the macro-economic situation of the country, including the regulatory environment and exchange rates. Furthermore, information on local authority or central government operations and programmes, for example Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Zimbabwe Republic Police and City Council Police, was cited as essential in the operations of the informal sector. Access to information plays an essential role in the viability of business operations in the informal sector. Information is needed in all aspects of business activities (Mchombu, 2000). Ikoja-Odongo (2002) explicated that as a consequence of information use, the informal sector actors see their businesses expanding, more income being realised, more markets explored, and they are becoming creditworthy since creditors see them buying in bulk and also paying on time for goods taken on credit.

Equally important was how informal sector entrepreneurs located the needed information. A question was posed on strategies used to locate the needed information. Findings revealed that generally people search for information from their networks, either in person or via online platforms. One respondent expressed that, “If I need information about where to

find affordable stock, I ask my colleagues and ‘runners’ who always provide us with up-to-date information.” Meetings organised by mainstream political parties and groupings controlling the market spaces were pointed to as some of the sources of information on how to run businesses in the informal sector.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

A variety of perspectives were expressed regarding sources of information. It was noted that informal traders get information from diverse sources. One prominent source cited by 90% of the interviewees from all the study sites was social media platforms that include Facebook and WhatsApp. One respondent indicated that, “I am in several WhatsApp groups of suppliers and customers. That is where I get most of the information that I need”. Zimbabwe has followed the global trend of embracing social media as a key communication platform (Mugari, 2020). The bulk of Internet usage is on social media and WhatsApp is widely used on mobile networks, accounting for 47% of mobile data purchases in 2017 (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2018). The increasing rate of social media uptake in the country requires that responsible authorities should make use of such platforms to disseminate credible information to the informal sector.

Another source of information that was cited was the mainstream media that includes radio, newspapers, and television. Surprisingly, findings from the study showed that 40% of interviewees from Siyaso and Gazaland markets seldom use the mainstream media as a source of information. Respondents who cited the use of mainstream media raised concern that the mainstream media provide general information that, in most cases, people fail to interpret and understand. One response was, “We hear information about government policies, such as statutory instruments (SIs) but we do not understand what is contained in such documents.” This results in misinterpretation of information from the mainstream media, leading to misinformation.

A common view among the respondents from Mbare, Mabvuku and Gazaland was that societies or community groups were regarded as key sources of information. One interviewee reported that, "I belong to a number of clubs where we meet periodically to exchange information and knowledge about our businesses." Another source that was cited by 65% of the respondents was word of mouth from the leadership of the informal trader associations, such as the National Vendors Association of Zimbabwe and Vendors Initiative for Social and Economic Transformation. The operations of these communities of practice in the informal sector should be well publicised such that everyone is aware of their existence and access information from them.

A follow-up question was asked on how respondents prefer to receive information required in their business. Diverse preferences were raised. The majority of the respondents (90%) indicated that they prefer WhatsApp as it is fast and easy to use and it has a facility for two-way communication. Another significant number of respondents (70%) reported that they prefer short message service (SMS) as it is cheaper. A unique preference was raised by one respondent from Greendale market who preferred online database where people can access and share information. There are different reasons why online databases were not preferred by many informal traders. Firstly, they are costly as they require one to have Internet access and a device to access. Secondly, people need to acquire the requisite skills to effectively search the databases. The other reason is that information in these databases is technically written by experts that cannot be understood by an ordinary person. Posters and flyers were preferred by 25% of respondents from Kuwadzana and Mabvuku markets as they are not costly for the information user. However, these should be written in a language that is clear and easy to understand as there is no room for immediate feedback. Posters must not be a stand-alone source of information; they should complement other sources of information and, where possible, be distributed electronically to reach a wider audience too.

Findings from the study showed that the informal sector prefers informal sources of information, such as social media platforms and word of mouth from peers. These findings are congruent with those by Ikoja-Odongo (2009), who reported that the majority seek information from the people they know such as friends, relatives and business partners. Similarly, a study by Mazongonda and Chirisa (2017) showed that information flow in the informal sector follows a three-tier consultative process that includes seeking advice, seeking a hand and delegating the job to another person with more experience and skills. Social media is also used to access and share business information. McCann and Barlow (2015) recommend that for effective use of social media in business, there is a need to understand the area of business and the target market before deciding that social media platform to use.

ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR IN INFORMATION USE IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Access to correct and reliable information is critical to the success of the informal sector. Concerns were expressed about the quality of the information received from some of the sources of information identified. Findings from the study revealed that 80% of people who use social media to access and share information reported that the information should be treated with caution as some of it is misleading and false.

In accordance with the present results, a previous study by Ikoja-Odongo (2001) has demonstrated that some of the information shared through social media and word of mouth is unreliable and filtered. One must verify the information since some false information can be created and disseminated by rivals. One interviewee at Greendale market reported that at some point, they lost all their savings to scammers who claimed that they support small businesses in the informal sector. The respondent indicated that they received the flyer about the 'loan shark' from a WhatsApp group. Findings from the study showed that 50% of the interviewees usually confirm the reliability of the information when it is reported in the newspapers, especially the *Herald* and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation news platforms and, in some instances, consult

authorities. Keshavarz (2020) recommends there is a need to train individuals on functional skills in evaluating information.

Information ethics are important in accessing and using the information in the informal sector. On this theme, two divergent and often conflicting discourses emerged regarding ethical behaviour in information use in the informal sector. On one hand, some respondents were of the view that once one has the information, they should share it as widely as possible for the benefit of the informal sector. On another hand, there were opinions that the informal sector is a competitive terrain and if one has useful information, they should keep it to themselves. This agrees with findings by Ikoja-Odongo (2001) who reported that sometimes, information is distorted as it passes from one individual to another, and frequently people with information conceal it. This is often regarded as a natural consequence of competition and the perceived need to use the information to one's strategic advantage. Spreading misinformation about operations in the informal sector was regarded as unethical by Botha (2012). Additionally, Botha (*ibid.*) reported that using privileged information to sell counterfeit products, in the use of copyrighted material without permission or price gouging and collusion is regarded as unethical. Regarding sharing information with the responsible authorities to improve the viability of the informal sector, it emerged that 70% of the informal traders were reluctant to share information because there are often clashes with the authorities. One interviewee reported that "the information that comes from council officials is often not favourable to our businesses and people ignore and are sometimes at loggerheads with the officials". The other 30% of the interviewees reported that they do not know the reporting channels even if they have the information they want to share with responsible authorities. To ensure that informal traders take heed of information from local authorities, it is prudent that the information is unpacked and shared through representatives of the informal traders. Furthermore, clear-cut communication channels should be shared with the informal sector.

Findings from the study showed that information often flows unethically in the informal sector because in the majority of circumstances, information shared and forwarded breaches personal privacy, decency and copyright as some of the information is shared without the permission of the originator. Surprisingly, only a minority of respondents (25%) were aware of the ethical use of information in the informal sector. There are several possible explanations for this result. Firstly, people often unknowingly breach privacy due to a lack of skills. Additionally, copyright is a foreign area for most people that require education and awareness. Furthermore, in some instances, people are free to share information anytime without verifying the facts. The design of online platforms, such as social media and websites, is that it allows anyone to post both verified and unverified information.

INFORMATION USE TO ENHANCE BUSINESS VIABILITY

Three perspectives were prominent regarding how information is used to enhance business viability. Firstly, 80% of interviewees reported that information is used to guide decision-making regarding what products to order and how to price such products. Secondly, information is used by 90% of the respondents to secure new markets for their products. Lastly, 60% of the respondents reported that information is used to locate sources of raw materials and supplies at a cheaper price. A minority of the interviewees (30%) reported that they require information on credit facilities. These respondents were mainly from Siyaso market as they are into manufacturing industries that are capital intensive. The findings are consistent with that of Ikoja-Odongo (2001) who found that the value of information cannot be overemphasised as it leads to winning contracts, increased access to markets, more profits and cheaper sources of materials or supplies. However, a note of caution is due as there are other factors that affect the success of the business besides access to information. These include, *inter alia* the general macro-economic environment, such as the cost of living, inflation, access to loans, financial literacy and business management skills.

There are a number of factors that affect information use and access in the informal sector. Findings from the study showed that 75% pointed out that skills on how to evaluate the trustworthiness of the information are one factor that affects the use of available information. Another factor that was raised by 60% of the respondents was the lack of information regarding informal suppliers and markets. One respondent indicated that,

“Information about vegetable prices from the farmers who are our main suppliers is not readily available. I rely on my contacts to always ask about prices of vegetables.”

Additionally, the cost of accessing information, especially from online sources, was cited as an obstacle in accessing information. It was also raised that information from the government that often comes through the mass media, such as radio and television, lacks permanency.

One interviewee reported that, “I often hear about government pronouncements in the streets because I do not have time to listen to the main news bulletins because I am always occupied at my market stall.” Relevance of the information was cited by 40% of the respondents as another factor that affects information used in the informal sector. It was intriguing to find out that the information that is often sent out through the mainstream media was perceived as being for the ‘ideal’ situation, but it is not applicable on the ground. For example, one interviewee from Mabvuku market said, “We often hear about the official foreign currency exchange rate from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, the exchange rate is not applicable to some of us as it is not sustainable to our businesses. Even if we want to buy the foreign currency at that rate, we do not know the processes of accessing the foreign currency exchange auction.” These results reflect those of Ikoja-Odongo (*ibid.*) who also found that factors that affect access and use of information include cost, unreliability of some of the information, language, illiteracy, poor absorption and adoption rates, high mobility among entrepreneurs, poor timing of information delivery, inaccessibility of many information sources, and problems in transmittal methods.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study set out to investigate information use, flow and ethics in the informal sector with the aim of developing an innovative model for information use and access. Results from the six study sites: (Mupedzanhamo, Siyaso, Gazaland, Kuwadzana, Greendale and Mabvuku) were not different regarding information use, flow and ethics. The informal sector requires information for different purposes that include access to markets and suppliers, information about the general macro-economic environment of the country and information about credit facilities. The study revealed that generally, people in the informal sector have access to information that they need but more needs to be done in providing a coordinated and systematic approach in ensuring that quality information is readily available to the actors. The study further investigated the main sources of information in the informal sector. The findings clearly indicate that the main source of information is through word of mouth from peers and social media. The mainstream media, usually used to disseminate official information from the government was seldom used. Ethical issues raised regarding information use and access in the informal sector include accuracy of information, privacy and copyright issues. Factors that affect access and use of information for business viability in the informal sector include language, information literacy skills, unavailability of the information and cost of accessing the information. Findings from the current study suggest several courses of action to ensure sustainable information flow in the sector. These include training on information literacy, providing timely information in local languages, developing an information hub that is well-publicised to the informal sector. Players in the informal sector should be involved in the development of content that will boost business viability. These findings resonate well with the constructs of the Information Seeking Behaviour Model by Wilson (1999). However, further research is required to establish a local model that addresses the information needs and access to information by the informal sector in Zimbabwe.

Recommendations were developed guided by insights from the study findings and extant literature. Recommendations are summarised in Figure 2 that illustrates the proposed model for ethical information use in the informal sector. Information that is pertinent to the operations of the informal sector should be made available without hindrances, such as language and cost. Social media was identified as the most used source of information. It is imperative that key stakeholders in the informal sector adopt and manage reputable social media platforms that contain reliable information.

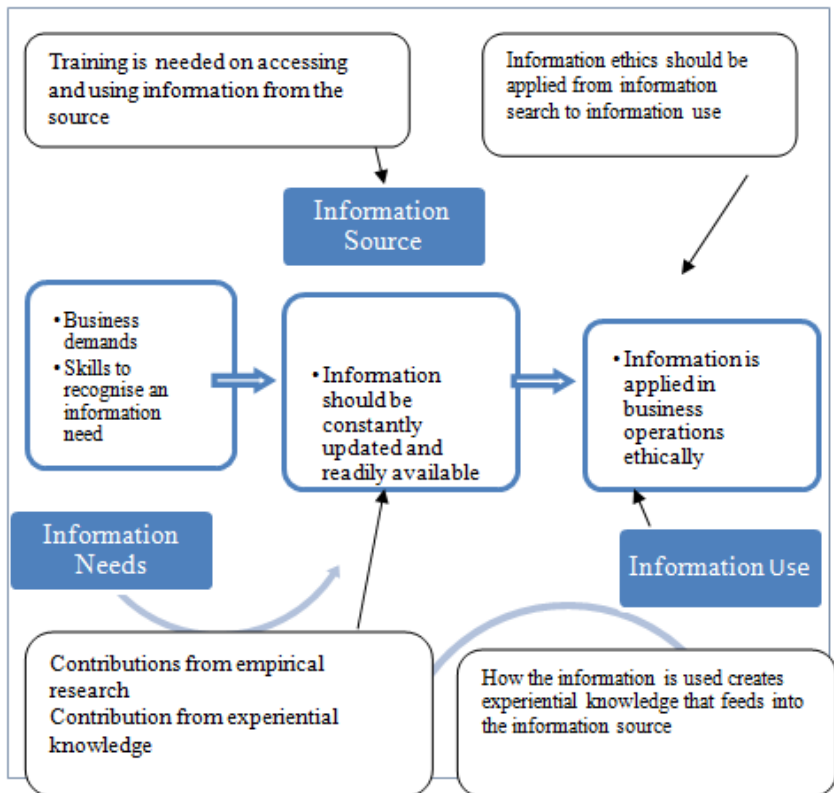


Figure 2: *Model for ethical information use in the informal sector*

One of the factors that was apparent from the study was a lack of skills on how to navigate the information environment. It is recommended that there should be training programmes on information and digital literacy

that are bespoke for the informal sector. This should be delivered through different platforms, based on individual preferences. An information hub tailored for the informal sector should be developed. It is recommended that players in the informal sector should actively contribute to the creation of knowledge. Experiential knowledge, coupled with findings from empirical studies, provide a rich base of information relevant to the informal sector.

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