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Investigating the Earnings of Migrant and Local Day Labourers in Johannesburg, South Africa—A Post-Covid-19 Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the already challenging conditions prevailing among the day labourers in South Africa. We investigated the labour market outcomes (especially income) of day labourers after the Covid-19 pandemic by focusing on day labourers, both local and foreign, in Johannesburg, South Africa. The methodology for our investigation was based on protocols used in other international and South African studies on various aspects pertaining to day labouring in the Global North and Global South. The fieldwork was carried out in the second half of 2021—completing 241 structured interviews. Regression results indicate that, in general, day labourers' experience and ability to negotiate their wages before accepting a job are the main determinants of their income. Site size matters more for migrants compared to locals, while performing a highly skilled job matters more for local South Africans. Since the bargaining position of workers in the informal economy continues to be eroded in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, day labourers may be especially affected, and their structural vulnerability may worsen—and even more so for the migrants.

JEL Classification: J61, J64

1 | Introduction

Siruno and Siegel (2023) voice the accepted view in literature that the combination of health, socio-economic and protection challenges emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic have been the harshest for those who can be deemed vulnerable—even before the advent of the pandemic. Migrants fit perfectly into the category of being vulnerable as they are generally more at risk given that in many countries they perform important frontline duties—with the pandemic increasing these risks and structural vulnerabilities (McAuliffe et al. 2022; Siruno and Siegel 2023). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, migrants generally were among the most vulnerable groups in any country—and more so in developing countries like South Africa.

The vulnerabilities facing migrants are a function of a range of interdependent factors. These include inter alia obstructive immigration policies, severe instances of racism and xenophobia,[1] systemic levels of harassment and discrimination from officials as well as being prevented from accessing essential public goods for example, healthcare, education and social security measures (Deumert et al. 2005; Blaauw et al. 2012; Crush et al. 2015; Crush and Sithole 2024; Sithole et al. 2025). They do not have access to possible social support structures and traditional safety nets (if in existence) in their home

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country (Deumert et al. 2005; Schenck and Blaauw 2018). The negative impact of this state of affairs may be even more severe for irregular migrants (Guadagno 2020; Siruno and Siegel 2023).

The literature on migrants and the impact of Covid-19 presents a clear message in terms of the additional vulnerabilities of migrant workers and the additional socio-economic hardships inflicted on these communities as a result of the fallout of the pandemic (Newbold et al. 2022; Siruno and Siegel 2023). In the cities acting as new immigrant destinations (NIDs) in the Global South, such as Johannesburg in South Africa, many migrants have focused on the informal economy and the myriad of activities within it as a way of securing their livelihoods (Crush et al. 2015; Theodore et al. 2017). Within South Africa's informal economy, migrant workers compete for opportunities with their South African counterparts who also seek income-generating opportunities in the informal sector (Theodore et al. 2015, 2017, 2018).

The impact of the pandemic in the case of South Africa's informal sector must be viewed against the backdrop of persistently high and rising levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality. The fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already challenging conditions prevailing in South Africa's informal sector—especially among the informal-wage employed and self-employed people in survivalist informal activities (Rakabe 2020; Ranchhod and Daniels 2021). For example, the various levels of national lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus disproportionately affected already vulnerable individuals working in the informal sector (Rakabe 2020; Ranchhod and Daniels 2021).

Our study contributes to the literature on two fronts. Although there is an apparent explosion of literature on the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, especially at the macro-level, research focusing on the socio-economic circumstances of the most vulnerable informal sector participants (especially in the Global South) is much more challenging to find. This paper addresses some of this paucity. By focusing on the tens of thousands of men and women congregating on South African street corners and in front of hardware stores—hoping to find temporary employment from passing motorists or customers frequenting the shops,[2] we investigate the different experiences of migrant and locals in the informal sector. Second, we add to the literature on the impact of the pandemic on South Africa's informal sector through an analysis of the labour market outcomes of migrant and local day labourers against the background of a differentiated policy response by government - excluding undocumented migrants from the social relief provided.

With the informal sector almost non-operational, especially during the initial lockdown phases imposed by the South African government in reaction to the advent of the pandemic, individuals seeking work in the informal sector had to rely on a meagre monthly Covid-19 relief of distress grant (SRD)[3] for income—if indeed they qualified for it and could access it. Day labourers experienced increased financial and emotional deprivation during this time as it became ever more difficult to support their families and other dependants. For foreign migrants in South Africa this situation was even worse as the SRD grant was not available to foreign migrants living in South Africa. Furthermore, many of their families in their countries of origin rely on the remittances they are able to send back—which became more difficult if not impossible at the time of the pandemic.

We were particularly interested in the labour market outcomes of both migrant and locally born day labourers in the aftermath of the pandemic to investigate to what degree migrant workers were also paying a higher socio-economic price (as suggested in the literature) in the context of high and persistent unemployment and inequality in an NID in the Global South. Johannesburg was used a case study given its status as the economic heart of South Africa.

A sample of 241 respondents was interviewed, of whom almost half were migrants from the surrounding Southern African Development Community (SADC). The focus was on income levels of migrant and local day labourers, when they did find employment, and the factors potentially influencing these outcomes. To our knowledge, no other study has investigated the labour market outcomes of the informal-wage employed day labourers in the South African economy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: The next section briefly reviews migration, informality and the day labour market in South Africa. This is followed by the identification of possible control variables from the available literature, and then the methodology. The empirical results, discussion and conclusions complete the paper.

2 | Regional Migration, Informality and the Day Labour Market in South Africa

2.1 | Regional Migration Into South Africa

Southern Africa has a rich migration history—although intrinsically linked to the migrant labour system in operation on South African mines in the previous century. Regional migration in sub-Saharan Africa received significant coverage in the popular press as well as in academia at the turn of the millennium, primarily due to the economic meltdown and political instability in Zimbabwe in 2000 (Makina 2012). South Africa has become a magnet for regional immigration from SADC countries in recent decades as a result of its economic standing and perceived favourable economic opportunities (Souza and Flippen 2021) with Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban considered to offer better job opportunities as well as relative safety and stability (Wentzel et al. 2022; Sithole et al. 2025)

The informal economy is emerging as an increasingly important source of economic opportunity and earnings for unauthorised migrants (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018). These activities range from informal self-employment such as collecting and selling recyclables, to operating as car guards for tips from motorists or, as in the case of this paper's focus, searching for informal employment as day labourers. Day labouring is a classic example of ‘informally employed’ workers who (when they are able to find temporary employment) work in the formal sector but on a ‘casual’

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basis (Davies and Thurlow 2010; Blaauw et al. 2012). Day labourers endure systemic instability in their employment arrangements: employment contracts are mostly verbal and unsecured, demand for their labour is variable and restrictive immigration policies pose an additional threat (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018). These hardships may be more pronounced during an economic shock such as Covid-19 and the resultant economic downswing and growing unemployment in migrant-receiving countries.

2.2 | The Day Labour Market in South Africa

In a developing country like South Africa, the day labour market is often a permanent destination for many migrant as well as native day labourers who cannot secure formal employment (Theodore et al. 2015). The first and only representative available countrywide study of the day labour market to date (in 2007/2008) revealed that there were approximately 1000 places in South Africa where a minimum of 45,000 men, primarily African, stood waiting to be picked up for day labour employment daily (Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw 2010).

The literature suggests that different geographic locations have different outcomes—not only concerning the rural–urban divide but also within different suburbs in the same city (Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw et al. 2012). One of the factors that determines the labour market outcomes of day labourers is the current level of economic development of different regions, cities and suburbs (Harmse et al. 2009; Blaauw et al. 2012). Generally, it can be concluded that day labourers face infrequent employment and generally low levels of income (Blaauw et al. 2006, 2012; Theodore et al. 2015).

Both academic and popular literature regards day labourers in South Africa as among the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in the broader informal economy (Theodore et al. 2015; Smith 2020; Magidi 2022). Day labourers congregate at, what the literature calls, hiring sites for 6 or 7 days per week without any guarantee of being hired at all. Recent pre-Covid-19 studies have estimated the unemployment rate among day labourers to be as high as 80%–90%, with many going for weeks without employment (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018). This results in low and uncertain income levels—leaving the majority of day labourers in a permanent state of structural poverty and even deprivation (Smith 2020; Magidi 2022). Furthermore, day labour work is uncertain—many who do find work often do so in sub-standard conditions and are vulnerable to exploitation (Theodore et al. 2009; Smith 2020; Magidi 2022). Day labourers are therefore regarded as structurally vulnerable, with very little to fall back on in the event of exogenous shocks (e.g., in the form of savings or other reserve funds) (Theodore et al. 2017, 2018; Schenck and Blaauw 2018; Blaauw et al. 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be such a shock to the economic system worldwide, including South Africa (Abella 2020).

To compare the labour market outcomes of migrant and South African born day labourers in Johannesburg in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, we followed the methodology described below.

3 | Methodology

The methodology for our investigation was based on well-established protocols used in other international and South African studies on various aspects of day labouring in both the Global North and the Global South (Valenzuela et al. 2006; Blaauw et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2017, 2018). In line with the studies mentioned earlier, a mixed-method design was used, with a survey-based instrument containing a mixture of quantitative items and some open-ended qualitative questions to facilitate a more in-depth discussion of some key elements. The metro chosen as the case study was Johannesburg, South Africa. As mentioned earlier, this study location was chosen because it is the financial and economic hub of South Africa; consequently, the impact of the pandemic on day labourers would be keenly felt there.

We used the same definition for the research population as was used by Valenzuela et al. (2006), Blaauw et al. (2006), Blaauw (2010) and Theodore et al. (2017, 2018). The day labour research population in Johannesburg was deemed to be people who congregate at informal hiring sites, such as street corners, next to traffic lights or in front of job-related businesses such as hardware stores, hoping to obtain temporary employment for the day or a number of days. In line with Van Wyk et al. (2020), people standing at the hiring sites and/or already employed and only waiting for transport were excluded from the research population.

In defining the research population, the sampling technique and procedure were also based on the principles and practices used by Blaauw et al. (2006), Valenzuela et al. (2006), Blaauw (2010) and Theodore et al. (2017, 2018). All the hiring sites in Johannesburg recorded as part of the countrywide study by Blaauw (2010) were visited in a reconnaissance phase to ensure that they still exist. New sites were recorded. The aim was to interview a minimum of 10% of the day labourers present at each of these sites—based on the voluntary participation of the day labourers. We are confident that the sampling methods used were consistent with previous studies and covered the research population successfully.

The research instrument itself was in the form of a structured questionnaire based on studies by Valenzuela et al. (2006) in the United States and Theodore et al. (2017, 2018) in South Africa. Several questions from the surveys of these studies were adjusted, and new questions were added to focus specifically on the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of migrant day labourers in Johannesburg.

Fieldworkers for the study were recruited among social work students who had completed their studies but were not yet able to secure permanent employment at the time of the research. Given the existing Covid-19 limitations, training for the fieldwork was carried out via Zoom meetings. Fieldworkers were instructed to identify themselves to possible respondents and explain the details of the study to the participants. They would also explain that participation was entirely voluntary.

Fieldwork had to be conducted early in the morning when the day labourers were waiting for possible employment

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(Blaauw et al. 2012; Van Wyk et al. 2020). The fieldwork to collect the data was carried out over 2 weeks in the second half of 2021. A project coordinator was present throughout and was on standby to assist with any difficulties the fieldworkers may have encountered. This enhanced the quality of the fieldwork.

Completed questionnaires were monitored to ensure that the responses were legible and that all the questions had been completed. Questionnaires that were incomplete or not legible were discarded to provide an accurate representation of the research population. This left 241 completed surveys in good order. The data from the completed surveys were captured and verified by the Statistical Consultation Service at the North-West University. Subsequent empirical analysis was performed in EViews.

The study adhered strictly to all accepted ethical principles and protocols. The questionnaire received feedback and clearance from the applicable ethics committee of the University of the Western Cape. Respondents had the right to refuse to be interviewed. If they chose to participate, their identities were kept anonymous. Informed consent was obtained before every interview. Furthermore, the fieldworkers explained to the day labourers that they would not derive any direct financial benefit for participating in the study. The following section presents the descriptive statistics and the results of the empirical analysis, as well as a discussion thereof.

4 | Descriptive Statistics

The data for the empirical analysis was sourced from the methodology described in the previous section. The fieldwork yielded 119 respondents who indicated that they were migrants from other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the 119 respondents, 73 were from Zimbabwe, the main contributor to the migrant day labour population in Johannesburg. The remaining 122 respondents were local South Africans.

Table 1 summarises some characteristics of the labourers from the survey. It is notable that there is not much difference between the profiles of the foreigners and the locals.

Table 1 confirms that in 2021 day labourers in Johannesburg were almost exclusively male. The average age was 36.9 for the migrants and, at 37.8, slightly more for the locals. The oldest was a 64 year old South African, while the oldest migrant in the sample was 57. Another important characteristic is the average of 4.2 dependants requiring financial support from the migrants and 3.6 for the locals. The maximum was 15 among the migrants and 11 for the locals. Earlier, Makina (2012) also reported that over 90% of Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa had dependants back home to support.

The data indicate a notable shift in the levels of schooling of migrant day labourers in South Africa. Previous studies indicated the relatively high levels of schooling of specifically Zimbabwean migrants in general (see, e.g., Bloch 2008; Mosala 2008). Blaauw et al. (2012) found that in 2008 most Zimbabwean day labourers across South Africa had completed their secondary schooling (51%). In 2021 this category for Johannesburg-based migrant day labourers (of whom Zimbabweans comprised the majority) dropped to 18.42%.—which was even lower than the 24.41% of the locals. This may reflect Zimbabwe's worsening socio-economic conditions or it is possible that better trained migrants do not end up on South African street corners to the same extent as before. More research is needed to confirm these hypotheses. Altogether

TABLE 1 | Profile of day labourers in Johannesburg, South Africa, 2021 ($n = 241$).

	Migrants	South Africans
Country of origin (number)	Zimbabwe: 73; Malawi: 21; Lesotho: 19; Mozambique: 6	South Africa: 122
Gender		
Male	118	120
Female	1	2
Age		
Average	36.9 years	37.8 years
Youngest	19 years	18 years
Oldest	57 years	64 years
Education		
Average years schooling	9.4 years	9.8
Some secondary	54.38%	55.74%
Completed secondary	18.42%	24.41%
Vocational training	41.18% some form	38.52% some form
Dependants		
Average	4.2 per day labourer	3.6 per day labourer
Minimum	0	0
Maximum	15	11
Years of day labour experience		
Average	8.08 years	6.84
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	33	34
Number of workers at site		
Average	23.2	25.9
Minimum	2	2
Maximum	50	50
Work through lockdown	31.36%	28.10%
Received Covid-19 grant	0.01%	40.16%

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41.18% of migrants indicated that they had received some form of vocational training, compared to 38.52% of locals.

These workers congregate on specific chosen sites waiting for a potential employer to pick them up. For instance, certain sites are close to a hardware shop selling paint—with most of the day labourers advertising their skills as painters. These sites vary in size. The average number of workers at sites where migrant workers stood, was 23.2 compared to 25.9 for the locals. The respective minimum and maximum values did not differ.

Calculating the number of years active as day labourer in South Africa indicates an average of 8.08 for migrants and 6.84 for locals. Again, a comparison with the results of Blaauw et al. (2012) revealed an interesting observation. At the time of their study on Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa (2008), the average number of years working as a day labourer was only 1.52. Hence, foreign day labourers in Johannesburg in 2021 were day labourers for an average of four times longer than in 2008. This provides credence to the argument of Theodore et al. (2017, 2018) that migration to South Africa is now much more permanent in nature—to such an extent that it is evidenced in the day labour market.

The South African cohort includes more newcomers with larger numbers reporting activity for 2, 3 and 4 years. Further investigation of the years of experience rendered the distribution presented in Figure 1 below.

The maximum years for both groups exceed 30, but the migrants had a larger share reporting activity for between 10 and 16 years.

Before focusing on income levels, it is necessary to summarise the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employment-searching strategy of migrant day labourers in Johannesburg. Only 37 of the 119 migrants could work as day labourers during the hard lockdown[4] from April to June 2020—as indicated by

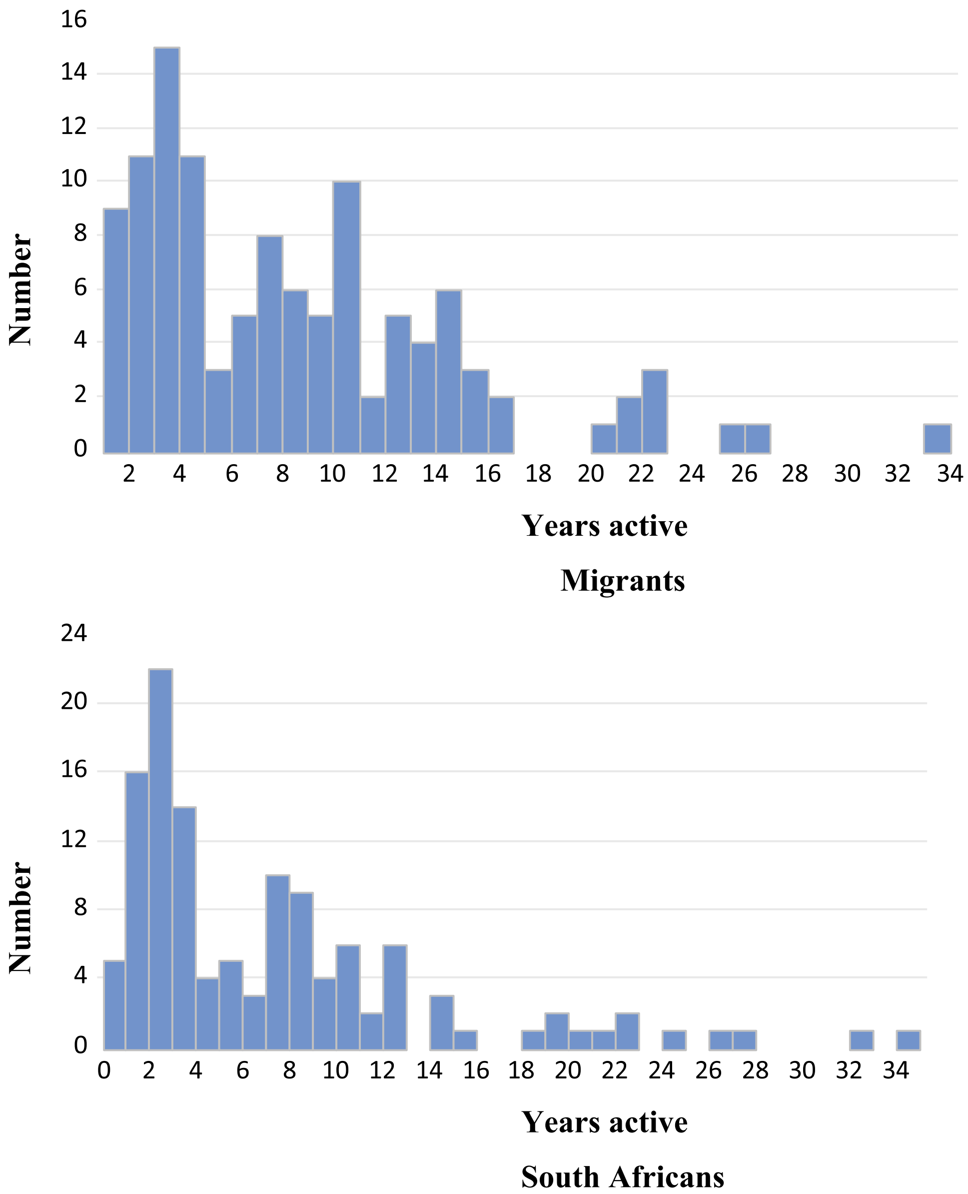

FIGURE 1 | Years of experience as day labourer in South Africa. *Source:* Survey data.

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the 31.36% in Table 1. It was apparent that 28.1% of the locals were active during this period. One potential reason may be that just more than 40% of the locals indicated that they received some kind of Covid-19 relief in the form of a government grant—which was not available to the migrants.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they were now being hired the same number of times, less, or more than before the advent of the pandemic. No fewer than 95.8% of the migrants indicated that they were being hired less than before Covid-19 compared to the 91.8% of the locals. This implies a definite decline in their frequency of finding a job as a day labourer. This must be viewed against the context of already infrequent hiring rates before the pandemic. The work of Theodore et al. (2017, 2018) on day labourers in Tshwane revealed that for most day labourers unemployment rates of more than 80% was the norm. Sometimes weeks passed before a causal job was secured despite standing at the street corner for 6 or 7 days per week. Day labourers were structurally vulnerable before the pandemic and this situation was exacerbated in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact on income earned was no surprise.

All the locals and almost all foreigners indicated that they were earning less than before the pandemic. Surprisingly three of the migrants were actually earning more than before. The aftermath of the pandemic was clearly affecting the world of the informally employed day labourers and the economy as a whole. Their incomes became even lower and more unstable than before the pandemic.

Due to the nature of their economic activity, day labourers do not receive a fixed monthly or daily wage. The questionnaire contained a few questions about income received, amongst others the best wage received for a day's work, the lowest wage for a day's work, earnings in a bad month, earnings in a good month, and earnings in the month preceding the survey. Table 2 compares the various income measures reported in the survey of the migrant day labourers in Johannesburg at the time of the survey. For almost all of the indicators, migrants received more compared to their local counterparts.

At the time of the survey the minimum daily wage in South Africa was R120. It is therefore not surprising that the minimum amount received by locals was R120. Migrants did not have the same experience. Their lowest daily earnings were more—R150. To put the above amounts into perspective it is necessary to account for the number of dependants. During a good month migrants earn enough to spend R1 109.79 per person compared to R1 064.63 available per person for the locals. However, in reality most months cannot be described as good months. The same calculations show an amount of R498.56 per migrant and dependants compared to R397.07 per local and dependants.

The chosen dependent variable for the empirical study asked the day labourer how much (s)he earned during a good month of day labouring. During bad days and months, all day labourers are in dire straits and sometimes they receive no income. Therefore, income received during a bad month is not regarded as a good indicator of the worker's worth. A good month of day labouring would involve more frequent jobs and is therefore judged to be the best available indicator of day labour wages/income when employment is obtained during a longer period under consideration. The various wage estimates form the basis of the empirical analysis and results of the following section.

5 | Empirical Analysis

5.1 | Specification

The dependent variable GOODMONTH enters the wage equation in levels (Rand format). Although GOODMONTH was chosen as the dependent variable, all potential measures in Table 2 were tested, along with GOODMONTH in logarithmic format. The other variables that were included in the regression analysis are subsequently discussed. Table 3 presents the possible explanatory variables for the empirical analysis.

EXPERIENCE measured the number of years that the respondent had been involved in day labouring. The expectation is that more experienced workers will be in higher demand and receive higher wages. The opposite can also be true when older workers are considered highly experienced and receive lower wages because their physical strength is deteriorating. To test for this potential effect, EXPERIENCE-squared was included in the regressions. Respondents also reported their age in years. This was not included since there was a high correlation between age and years involved in day labouring. Another factor that could

TABLE 2 | Comparing income indicators, day labourers 2021.

	Migrants			Locals		
	Best wage received for a day's work	**Earnings during a good month**	**Earnings month preceding survey**	**Best wage received for a day's work**	**Earnings during a good month**	**Earnings month preceding survey**
Mean	689.5	5770.9	2592.5	627.2	4897.3	1826.5
Median	400.0	4000.0	1700.0	425.0	3800.0	1000.0
Maximum	10,000.0	60,000.0	35,000.0	7000.0	30,000.0	10,000.0
Minimum	150.0	500.0	0.0	120.0	400.0	0.0

Note: Reported values are in South African Rand, nominal values as reported by respondents. The average exchange rate in 2021 between one Rand and the USD was 0.0677 USD.

Source: Survey data.

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TABLE 3 | Explanatory variables.

EXPERIENCE	Number of years involved in day labouring
NEGOTIATE	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent negotiated the wage before starting the job; zero otherwise
VOCATRAIN	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent received any form of vocational training; zero otherwise
DUMSEC	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent completed secondary school (12 years at school); zero otherwise
DUMSOMESEC	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent completed some secondary schooling; zero otherwise
SITESIZE	Number of day labourers standing at this specific site
WORKLD	Dummy with value of 1 if the respondent worked during the Covid-19 lockdown period; zero otherwise
ENGWELL	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent indicated that (s)he could understand English well; zero otherwise
DAYSHUNGRY	Number of days in the preceding month that the respondent did not have enough to eat
DAYSSTAND	Number of days per week that the respondent stood waiting for a job
DIFFERENTJOBS	Number of different kind of jobs performed during the preceding month
ELECTRIC	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent performed task similar to an electrician during the preceding month; zero otherwise
TILING	Dummy with value of 1 if respondent did some tiling during the preceding month; zero otherwise

explain wages is work experience in previous full-time employment. The expectation is that those with experience as full-time employees would be more skilled and experienced and, therefore, paid more. This was tested but found to be not significant.

Several variables representing training levels/levels of school education were tested. The years of formal schooling, ranging from 0 to 13, were insignificant. Several dummy variables were created to indicate primary school completion, some secondary school education, and secondary school completion. In the end, only completion of secondary school (DUMSEC) and some secondary school education (DUMSOMESEC) were included.

The dummy variable VOCATRAIN distinguished between respondents with and without any vocational training. A value of 1 indicates that vocational training did indeed take place. In earlier studies, the specific number of fields in which training was completed was also included. However, these respondents' vocational training level could be higher; therefore, the specific number was not considered to provide significant results. Those who said that they had completed some training did so in activities like bricklaying, plumbing, tiling and painting—mostly construction-related.

The nature of the day labouring activity implies that employers generally decide unilaterally on the wage for the day's work. This leaves day labourers vulnerable—and often with no recourse. Cases have been reported where they received no pay at the end of the day's work. Some respondents, however, indicated that they do negotiate the wage before starting to work. The variable NEGOTIATE accounted for this action.

Respondents were required to indicate the number of job seekers standing with them on the same site. A bigger site could be beneficial. If more day labourers are visible on one site, potential employers are more likely to seek employees at those sites. On the other hand, if fewer job seekers are present, it could be easier for one specific day labourer to be chosen. To test for this, SITESIZE, as well as SITESIZE-squared, were included in the model.

The survey was conducted when most Covid-19 lockdown restrictions had been lifted. During specific stages of lockdown, no person from outside the family was permitted in and around one's home, not even domestic workers. One of the questions in the survey asked if the respondent could work during these lockdown periods. The dummy variable WORKLD accounted for those day labourers who did manage to work. It was included as a potential measure of innovativeness and/or entrepreneurial spirit, which could lead to higher earnings.

As explained in the literature (see, e.g., Blaauw et al. 2012), fluency in the language of the employer improves understanding of instructions and could lead to higher earnings. The dummy variable ENGWELL tested whether this was indeed the case and experience of the respondents.

The respondents had to indicate how many days in the past month they went to bed without having something to eat for the day—reflected in DAYSHUNGRY. This is included as proxy for their health and physical condition. There is a potential bi-directional relationship between income and food consumption where food consumption could also be a function of income and not only in the way it is specified here.

If day labourers are hired every day, the number of days that they stand (DAYSSTAND) at the hiring site should have a positive relationship with their income. However, it is also possible that individuals that are not hired at the beginning of the week are forced to report for duty every day.

Respondents were required to indicate how many different jobs (DIFFERENTJOBS) they had to perform during the past month. It was expected that specialising and focusing on one kind of activity could increase earnings.

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Previous studies (see, e.g., Theodore et al. 2018), found that day labourers performing highly skilled duties earn more. To test this hypothesis two dummies were included. ELECTRIC had a value of 1 if the responded performed duties similar to those of an electrician while TILING did the same for individuals who engaged in tiling during the preceding month.

It would be possible to distinguish between the two groups of day labourers by including a dummy variable testing for a change in intercept. However, to establish if or how certain explanatory variables had a different effect on wages for the two groups, it would be necessary to include interactive dummies to test for differences in slopes. Therefore, the regressions were run across two different sub-samples: one including the South African day labourers and one including all the migrants. Four different models were estimated—each including different combinations of the explanatory variables discussed above.

5.2 | Method and Results

Several international studies estimating migrant wages employed instrumental variables in Mincer earnings functions to account for possible endogeneity and bias in the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimators (see Gao and Smyth 2011). They utilised the mother's years of schooling as an instrument for years of schooling and the number of children living in the host city as an instrument for language proficiency. These instrumental variables are usually obtained from official datasets like labour surveys from the relevant country's statistical agency. The data set employed in this empirical study needed to be more extensive to provide instrumental variables.

Without signs of endogeneity and useful instrumental variables, wage equations were estimated using OLS. None of the available tests could rule out the presence of heteroskedasticity. Thus, the regressions were estimated with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors and covariance. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.

6 | Discussion of Results

GOODMONTH entered the regression models both in levels and in logarithmic format. The results do not differ much, with the same explanatory variables being statistically significant in both estimated equations. Since the research aimed to identify potential explanatory variables and not necessarily specific marginal effects, the discussion focuses on estimated signs of coefficients and the statistical significance, or not, of estimates.

Only two of the explanatory variables were statistically significant in all four specifications and for both groups—experience working as a day labourer and whether a wage for the day's work was negotiated upfront. The estimated coefficient of the variable indicating whether the day labourer negotiated the wage before accepting the last job was positive, as expected. EXPERIENCE, the variable representing the years of being a day labourer displayed a statistically significant quadratic relationship with income earned in a good month. The results indicate that up to a certain point, around 17 years for migrants and 15 years for locals, experience as a day labourer can positively influence earnings in a good month.

Theoretically, day labour experience can influence income earned directly and/or indirectly (through the ability to negotiate wages). Experience affords the day labourer knowledge of the market value of various skilled and unskilled jobs—allowing for the possibility to undercut the fee for the same job that would have been charged in the formal sector—securing a wage below the formal sector wage, but still acceptable (Valenzuela 2003). In the South African scenario, this may however be negated by the oversupply of day labour at big hiring sites. Another channel of influence is identified by Theodore (2007), suggesting that day labourers with more experience may be able to 'walk away from the negotiations' in the event of the terms such as wages or other conditions are found to be unacceptable. The ability to walk away from a job in such circumstances should not be underestimated (Valenzuela 2003)—improving their ability to negotiate their wage. Again, the oversupply of day labour at South African hiring sites may limit this potential advantage.

However, South African literature does indicate that (experienced) day labourers, being hired repeatedly by the same employer, enjoy a statistically significant wage premium in a 'good week' above day labourers without these established links (Blaauw et al. 2012). After the turning point is reached, the relationship turns negative. This is in all probability related to an age where more experience also implies being older and unable to do the hard physical work expected of day labourers.

Among the variables found to be statistically insignificant for both groups were indicators of education levels, the number of days turning up at the various sites, how many kinds of jobs were performed and the indicator of nutrition. The variable WORKLD, representing potentially higher levels of entrepreneurial skills, was also not statistically significant.

Blaauw et al. (2012) studied the activities and wages of migrant Zimbabwean day labourers in South Africa in 2008. They found that day labourers who specialise in a specific activity earn more than those who do not. They further found a highly statistically significant relationship between the income variable (wages in a good week) used and vocational training. In our study, the VOCATRAIN variable was insignificant in all regressions on best monthly income. It is possible that the expected returns to vocational training, and higher earnings through specialisation, fall away to a large degree when times are bad—as they were under the heavy lockdowns associated with the pandemic—when opportunities are scarce. Recall that 95% of migrants and 92% of locals indicated that they were hired less after the Covid-19 lockdowns than before.

The variable representing schooling levels was not statistically significant in any of the models. In contrast to some of the Blaauw et al. (2012) findings, normal human capital traits such as the level of schooling do not offer the expected returns during economic downturns such as Covid-19. The issue of deskilling and the wastage of existing skills, as reported by Mosala (2008), is a definite issue of concern in the day labour market. In the

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TABLE 4 | Results of OLS regression analysis.

	Migrants				Local South Africans			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
CONSTANT	−5288.9 (4104.4)	−3862.9 (5669.2)	−2838.4 (2618.8)	−4052.2 (3341.6)	46.9 (1395.3)	749.9 (3518.5)	−1524.4 (1392.8)	−338.5 (1137.1)
EXPERIENCE	589.7 (249.73)**	719.3 (355.69)**	577.8 (259.39)**	588.0 (250.15)**	427.7 (179.95)**	436.3 (201.49)**	391.0 (178.70)**	301.3 (182.57)*
$EXPERIENCE^2$	−17.4 (7.8234)**	−22.3 (11.680)*	−17.2 (8.2371)**	−16.9 (7.5998)**	−14.4 (5.1476)***	−15.3 (6.0681)**	−12.5 (5.1909)**	−10.1 (5.2416)*
NEGOTIATE	4280.5 (1968.0)**	4783.8 (2267.6)**	2482.5 (1270.1)*	2227.2 (1261.5)*	2750.6 (1062.0)**	4423.3 (1134.6)***	2845.4 (1093.9)**	2157.9 (941.33)**
DUMSEC	3422.3 (2873.1)				−321.6 (874.94)			
DUMSOMESEC		−846.3 (1213.2)				−1023.6 (1021.5)		
VOCATRAIN		2166.5 (2307.6)				1246.4 (1145.9)		
SITESIZE	444.7 (222.35)**	490.5 (243.71)**	397.9 (192.12)**	426.9 (239.06)*	138.9 (153.84)	111.7 (168.98)	125.1 (154.11)	153.6 (135.22)
$SITESIZE^2$	−7.5 (3.9496)*	−8.3 (4.3793)*	−6.5 (3.3493)*	−7.0 (4.2519)*	−0.4 (2.6636)	−2.1 (2.8930)	−2.1 (2.6668)	−2.5 (2.3280)
WORKLD			2296.7 (1853.1)	2761.5 (0.1028)			1593.2 (1126.9)	1900.3 (1075.6)*
ENGWELL			−1189.3 (1170.9)				2244.4 (994.04)**	
DAYSHUNGRY		34.8 (100.24)				−40.4 (112.17)		
DAYSSTAND		−126.0 (743.95)				−207.2 (446.33)		
DIFFERENTJOBS		−787.1 (884.04)				−179.4 (191.39)		
ELECTRIC				5455.6 (3743.1)				1565.9 (1124.8)
TILING				−813.8 (1353.0)				3661.4 (1049.3)***
Observations	106	97	106	106	105	97	104	104
Adjusted R^2	0.1119	0.0762	0.0905	0.1153	0.0228	0.0283	0.1071	0.0966

Note: Regressions estimated with Huber-White-Hinkley (HC1) heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors and covariance. Values in brackets indicate the estimated standard errors.
Statistically significant at *10%; **5%; ***1%.

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Blaauw et al. (2012) study, Zimbabwean day labourers who had completed secondary school and/or some formal post-school qualification earned on average R81 or 18% more than those whose highest qualification in 2008 was some secondary schooling in South Africa. One could hypothesise that the migrant day labourers who can successfully negotiate their wage and enforce their reservation wage before accepting job offers may be the ones with better vocational training and other human capital traits. This would explain why NEGOTIATE was found to be significant, while education and training levels are not. However, there was no meaningful correlation between education levels and the practice to negotiate upfront—for either locals or migrants.

The one explanatory variable that was statistically significant, at levels between 5% and 10%, for the migrant labourers but not for the locals, is SITESIZE. The positive coefficient of the variable in levels and negative coefficient of the squared variable confirmed a quadratic relationship with earnings in a good month. Up to a point, bigger sites relate to areas where migrant day labourers know the chances of obtaining a job are bigger. However, bigger sites may represent an oversupply of day labour after a certain point—which negatively affects income levels of migrants. All respondents, locals and migrants alike, reported site sizes with a maximum of 50 job seekers and a minimum of two. The estimated turning point is around 23—indicating that wages will probably be lower if the migrant jobseeker is part of a group of more than 23 waiting for a job opportunity at the same location.

In times of economic hardship such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for labour is lower with fewer employment opportunities for all. However, it is striking that migrant workers particularly bear the brunt of oversupply while standing on larger sites. Theodore et al. (2015, 816) pointed out that the oversupply of day labour at hiring sites allows prospective employers to effectively act as wage setters who can search for workers until they find enough workers willing to work for the wage rate set by the employer. This scenario can reasonably be expected to apply even more in the case of larger sites where the supply of labour is even bigger—impacting negatively on day labourers' ability to negotiate their wages. Furthermore, the impact on (often) undocumented/illegal migrants may possibly be even more pronounced. The following qualitative comments from two respondents in our study provide further credence to the argument: 'There's conflict amongst us, sometimes we fight for cars that stops looking for people. We as South Africans are competing with foreign nations here as well' and 'We fight amongst each other when a car stops looking for a worker and gives the employer advantage to pay us less money as he or she can see that we are desperate for the job'.

In the same way that SITESIZE was only significant in the migrant models, two different variables were significant only in the models run on the sub-sample for South Africans: the one testing for fluency in English and the other an indicator of specialisation in tiling. Around 47% of locals and 54% of migrants reported that they understand English well. This ability added positively to the earnings of locals (statistically significant at 5%), while the coefficient for migrants was negative and not significant at all. While 5% of migrants had performed some tiling duties in the month before the interviews, 6.5% of locals had done so. However, this skill added to the earnings of only the locals—and was statistically significant at 1%.

7 | Conclusion

Day labourers experience structural vulnerability as informally wage-employed workers—a direct function of the dynamics of the informal labour market in which they operate. From a labour and economic rights point of view, they have de facto very little, if any, realistic recourse to any form of rights as employees. The possibility of being underpaid or not paid at all after a day's hard work is a clear and present danger for the day labourer. In addition, migrant day labourers may find it even more difficult to exercise their rights due to their immigration status and possible fear of deportation. A key policy consideration stemming from the results, is the pressing need to establish some form of an organised representative forum or coalition that can take up the issue of social justice for this form of precarious labour. In the United States, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) has taken up this role and plays an active role in promoting worker rights of day labourers. No such organisation exists for day labourers in South Africa—a situation that warrants obvious and urgent attention.

Furthermore, apart from the obvious disastrous economic effects, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed some of the weaknesses and shortcomings of economic and social policies as well as a number of gaps in existing migration governance systems followed by many countries (Abella 2020; Triandafyllidou and Yeoh 2023). In South Africa, there is no evidence of any focus on migrant groupings in terms of government policies to deal with these structural vulnerabilities in general or specifically in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Smith (2020) found for example that migrant day labourers in his study struggled to access health services and experienced difficulty in reporting crimes against them to the police—again highlighting the absence of a forum or organisation that engages with authorities and other stakeholders in the interest of social justice.

Day labourers also experienced significant levels of uncertainty regarding the frequency of finding temporary employment and the resultant income—often very low. Consequently, they often found it challenging to support their dependants with the income earned, which had a further impact on their economic and emotional well-being. This background renders the results of our study particularly noteworthy.

Despite these challenges the migrant respondents in our survey reported higher earnings than their South African counterparts when employment is secured. The labour market outcomes of migrant day labourers in Johannesburg in the aftermath of the pandemic seems to be better than that of the locally born day labourers—at least as far as income is concerned. We argue that the accepted view in the literature that migrants were universally worse off as a result of the pandemic should be subjected to a more nuanced interpretation as far as NIDs in the Global South—such as Johannesburg—is concerned.

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However, the empirical results of this study did show that standard human capital factors do not play a significant role in determining Johannesburg day labourers' income levels—not for the locals nor for the migrants. The study highlighted that the main contributors, both in absolute Rand value and percentage-wise, proved to be years of experience as day labourer as well as the strategy to negotiate their wages before accepting a job.

The empirical results of our study confirm the underlying dynamics and nuances within the informal day labour market undetected by standard macro-economic analysis. Two pertinent issues come to the fore. First, the quadratic relationship between the size of the hiring site and the income of the migrant day labourers provides insight into the possible mitigation strategies employed by migrant day labourers. For example, migrant day labourers tend to congregate in groups where they share a country of origin and other characteristics such as home language. Within these groups, migrant day labourers often find a support system where friends would recommend a compatriot for a piece job, share food and provide loans to one another (Blaauw 2010). The following quotation from a day labourer from (Blaauw et al. 2012) serves as an example: 'If these labourers are your friends, then they can recommend you when there is extra work to be done'.

Being part of a hiring site with more people present may also help to counteract the possibility of xenophobia and other pressures brought to bear on migrant day labourers. By forming a unified position, and with the support mentioned above, they are able to negotiate more effectively and it gives credence to their reservation wage—initially. However, if the site grows bigger than around 23 people, this positive advantage is outmuscled by the negative impacts of an oversupply of labour for the limited opportunities and hence causes a decrease in earnings because of the inability to enforce any form of a reservation wage. This reduction in earnings, because the migrant day labourers must accept any job and abandon their reservation wages, is related to the second point to be noted.

Second, it is noticeable that for a specialised skill such as tiling, the foreign day labourers earn less compared to the South Africans—despite expressing higher initial reservation wages. South African day labourers who specialise in tiling earn more than their migrant counterparts. We argue that this may well reflect the impact of the SRD grant introduced in May 2020 by the South African government. This grant of R350 per month was not available to foreigners. South Africans who accessed the grant were therefore able to use this non-labour income to supplement for example their transport cost to the hiring site, as was found by Venter et al. (2024) in their study on the impact of the SRD grant on the lives of day labourers in Tshwane (less than 80 kilometres from Johannesburg). This non-labour income may have adjusted the labour supply curve of individual South African day labourers to enable them to hold out slightly longer if a job offer had a wage attached to it that was lower than their reservation wage. Migrant day labourers did not have this luxury and were forced to make concessions to their reservation wages much earlier.

The implications of the abovementioned results for migrant and local day labourers are real and cognisance should be taken of this fact. With low and variable levels of income as well as few alternatives other than informal-wage work, the bargaining position of workers in the informal economy erodes in the aftermath of an exogenous shock such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The existing labour market instability they experience is further exacerbated as a result.

Under these conditions, entire segments of local economies may become distorted. Labour market outcomes such as wages will be a function of workers' vulnerabilities rather than their human capital attributes such as training, skills and productivity. The results indicate that Johannesburg's day labour market exhibits such distortions. Migrant day labourers may be especially affected—and their structural vulnerability may indeed worsen.

The key long-run policy consideration flowing from this, is the need to establish mechanisms to verify and acknowledge day labourers' marketable skills. Private sector involvement, for example, paint suppliers in providing the opportunity to get their painting skills verified can play an important practical role. A few such examples in the early 2000s did exist and must be revitalised. Existing Sector and Education Training Authorities (SETAs) can play an important role in additional skills development to enhance the long term earning potential of day labourers.

Our results furthermore resonate with the findings of both Abella (2020) and Triandafyllidou and Yeoh (2023) that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed several flaws of economic and social policies as well as several gaps in existing migration governance systems followed by many countries. While the extension of the social assistance from the South African government in the form of the SRD grant to foreigners can be an issue for debate, we argue that there is clear evidence to support the view that policymakers can at the very least ensure that formal institutions such as the police and health services are not beyond the reach of migrants in precarious labour markets in South Africa. In the absence of this policy shift or the improved execution of the government's constitutional responsibility, the effect of future exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives, livelihoods and families of local and migrant day labourers may be even more calamitous.

Author Contributions

All listed authors have contributed to the manuscript substantially and have agreed to the final submitted version.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study may be made available upon reasonable request directed to the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

[1] Many South Africans for example use derogatory terms such as 'amakwerre-kwerre' (derived from isiXhosa to refer to all nationals of other African states) to describe unwanted immigrants (Blaauw et al. 2012).

[2] This informal-wage employment search strategy is called 'day labouring' in literature in both the Global North and the Global South (Valenzuela et al. 2006; Theodore et al. 2017, 2018).

[3] The value of the monthly SRD grant in South Africa is ZAR 350 which equated to around US$ 18 on 4 October 2023.

[4] South Africans were required to stay at home and could only leave their places of residence to buy essentials or seek medical care.

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