



Sources and channels of information access and use in the information and knowledge society: a case study of informal sector women entrepreneurs of Hlabisa Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract:

The basis of the information and knowledge society revolves around technology's increased assimilation and diffusion in human society, particularly information and communication technologies and their rapid growth and use in the exchange of information and knowledge. This society offers many opportunities and benefits to people in terms of the facilitation of, among others, information access and use for growth and development in various spheres of life. Information and communication technologies are thus regarded as tools for the advancement and development of communities, and this includes the female entrepreneurs in the informal sector in the

rural parts of Africa. The aim of this study is to establish the sources and channels of information used by the informal sector women entrepreneurs of South Africa focusing on the province of KwaZulu-Natal, the most densely populated in the country. The province also presents typical rural and semi-urban settlements that are largely common in South Africa and which come with its unique challenges. Focus group discussions, observation and content analysis were used to collect data from 118 women entrepreneurs from the informal sector at the Hlabisa Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal. The study found that although informal sector women entrepreneurs possessed some information and communication technologies, their location, demographic composition, poor education, low economic status and occupation, negatively affect their ability to benefit fully from the existing opportunities emanating from the information and knowledge society. The absence of proper infrastructure that supports ICT access and use adversely affects the meaningful exploitation of these technologies in their businesses. Ultimately, development, global business participation and exposure, connectedness, and speedy access to and use of relevant business information and markets are unattainable. Among its recommendations, the study suggests that South Africa should speed up working towards achieving and meeting the criteria of the information and knowledge society that we briefly outlined in the paper. Doing so would enable informal sector women entrepreneurs to reap the opportunities presented by the information and knowledge society.

Keywords: *information and knowledge society; informal sector; women entrepreneurs, information sources; information channels; South Africa*

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is heralding both exciting and challenging times ahead as we come to terms with the information and knowledge society. While most developed economies are enjoying the numerous benefits of this era, it is posing new and serious challenges to many in the developing world such as South Africa. This society revolves around the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

ICTs have been received positively by many countries and communities that regard them as tools for development and advancement. They facilitate the creation, distribution, diffusion, use, integration and manipulation of information at a rapid speed, making it easier than ever before to choose from different sources and

channels presented by this era, to ensure better interaction and exchange of information and knowledge. However, for many developing countries, there are many barriers to this interaction with technologies, so much so that it is not always possible for these countries to harness potential benefits such as accelerated growth, empowerment and sustained development brought about by ICTs, regardless of the initiatives of structures such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and African Telecommunication Union (ATU) [International Telecommunication Union 2010]. Therefore opportunities are missed out.

Opportunities brought about by the information and knowledge society present possible convenient contexts, among other things, within which communities and individuals - such as female entrepreneurs in the informal sector - can envisage options and choices to help their growth. In this way, they would gain economic empowerment. In many instances, lack of opportunity creates barriers to developing communities and individuals because it prevents them from leveraging the benefits brought about by the information and knowledge society, such as mass information and ICTs to access this information from local, regional and global information and knowledge systems.

In line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2015, South Africa as a country has committed itself to obliterating poverty. This on its own suggests that the roots of poverty can be removed, especially to those struggling communities and people such as rural marginalized and informal sector women entrepreneurs (ISWEs). Poverty can be alleviated by providing relevant resources such as information, knowledge and skills that are applicable to people's day-to-day activities in their social, economic and political lives. These resources would empower them with the expertise necessary to economically survive in this information and technological era.

2. Background information on informal sector women entrepreneurs

According to the Small Enterprise Development Agency (2009), an entrepreneur is a person who takes an idea and an opportunity and turns them into a profitable enterprise by harnessing the necessary skills and resources to manage the risks involved.

Thus if an entrepreneur needs to start from nothing and create something, be in control of business actions, and have access to the necessary skills and resources, then an entrepreneur who is a woman in the informal sector faces twice the challenges.

Entrepreneurs are the main actors in the informal sector and make up a substantial percentage of the South African population. However, employment in these enterprises is generally very low and irregular. In the current post industrial era where there are endless advancements in technology and where businesses that lift the economic sector are run through information and knowledge and relevant skills and technological devices, it is unlikely to see the informal sector, in its current state of poor infrastructure, prospering and being the solution to job losses in the downturn and economic decline worldwide. The informal sector is a sector that, despite all the latest exciting technological and information developments, is still marginalized and informal. According to Ikoja-Odongo (2002:41), the informal sector is a sector of unregulated economy that consists of different micro and macro enterprises that operate outside or irrespective of technological advancement.

Motivation and statement of the problem

The information and knowledge society of today is characterized by the developments and opportunities that ICTs present. However, in the midst of this advanced developmental stage in mankind's history, there is still an informal sector which operates without technologies and outside regulatory structures, policies and procedures. Women entrepreneurs in the informal sector conduct the activities of their businesses with little or no regard for technology, which limits their growth. While global business interaction and exchange could increase their visibility, connectivity and advancement, the question is whether or not these women are reaping these benefits. The aim of the study therefore was to establish the sources and channels of information used by ISWEs at Hlabisa Local Municipality. It was guided by the following objectives:

- The establish the role of the information and knowledge society on poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of ISWEs

- To determine the preferred sources and channels of information of ISWEs at Hlabisa Local Municipality
- To explore factors affecting information flow in the informal sector and its exploitation by ISWEs
- To determine the ways to improve information flow by ISWEs

3. Research Methodology

Although the study employed mixed methods, to facilitate triangulation, it was more qualitative in approach because it sought to gain an understanding of the phenomena, behavior and plight of women entrepreneurs in the informal sector. A combined approach proved to be valuable for this study, as underscored by Ngulube, Mokwatlo and Ndwandwe (2009:105) that says that mixing research methods can add insights and understanding that might be missed when a mono-method (qualitative or quantitative) strategy is used. Therefore for this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used simultaneously, although, as has been mentioned, the bulk of the study was predominantly more qualitative than quantitative.

4.1 Content analysis

Content analysis is a technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text (Neuman 2006:322). Both qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used in this study. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze documents and text of interest, while quantitative content analysis was used to develop charts and tables to analyze the information. This kind of triangulation offered advantages as reiterated by Neuman (2006) that content analysis lets a researcher unravel the content (i.e. messages, meaning, etc.) in a source of communication and enables him/her to compare content across many texts and analyze the content using quantitative techniques (e.g. charts and tables) if necessary (2006:323).

4.2 Survey

The survey method was used in this study. According to Neuman (2006), in a survey, a researcher asks people questions in a questionnaire or interview where

answers are recorded. Neuman explains that in survey research, the study uses a sample or smaller group of selected people but generalizes the results onto a larger group. The author further states that surveys can be conducted over the telephone, by mail or in person.

This study interviewed women leaders and discussed issues in focus group discussions with informal sector women. This method of collecting data helped the researcher observe the situation on the ground, and record the attitudes and behaviors of the sampled population.

Population and sampling

Population

The study covered informal sector trade performed by women in only two categories, namely small-scale traders and artisans. Carr and Chen (2002:5) observe that statistics on the contribution of subsectors of the informal economy, that is home-based workers and street vendors, are still weak. This view of the 'scanty' data on the informal sector is supported by Muller (2002:3), who states that in South Africa, some informal sector work may not be picked up at all by the National Household Surveys, in particular illegal work and children's work. Muller (2002) also found that some respondents did not view what they did as work. She identified those who work for a few hours per week, those involved in illegal activities, and those in low-paying, survivalist outfits, as people who may provide inaccurate information.

Carr and Chen (2002:4) also point out that artisans and small-scale businesses dominate the informal sector. According to the authors, while men in the informal sector tend to have larger scale operations and to trade in non-perishable items, women traders tend to have small scale operations and to deal with food items (2002:4). For example in Chile, fruit vending, which is mainly practiced by women, expanded by 258 percent from 340,000 tons in 1982 to 1.2 million tons in 1994 (Barrientos et al. 1999). Other examples include the large number of women working with tomatoes from the fields of Mexico, women working in fast food chains in Canada (Bamdt 1999), and the women who left tea factories to join garment factories in Sri Lanka around the mid 80s (Fontana, Joeke and Masika 1998). This goes to show how massive these two subsectors are in the informal sector.

Arguably, many women use their hands better than men, and can thus be found in large numbers in salons, garment and textiles industries, and craft and beadwork organizations. In Asia, an estimated 80% of the women work with garments or in factories (Carr and Chen 2002:13). The ease of entry (Ikoja-Odongo 2002) into the informal sector could be the general cause of this dominant trend among small scale businesses and artisans in the informal sector, especially in the case of women, since there are no applications and procedures to submit and follow in order for one to operate from under the tree or in an open space. Another reason behind why these subsectors dominate the informal sector, is that it is in people's nature to be 'copycats', i.e. "what is being done by the neighbour can be done by me", which may explain the redundancy and non-diversity of the products and services that are on offer.

The above reasons explain why the study focused only on these two subsectors of informal trade (small scale and artisans), which can be found virtually everywhere - bus and taxi ranks, under buildings and trees, in tents along the streets, near the roads, outside homes or churches, under half-roofed shelters, etc. The choice of informal sector women entrepreneurs in the small scale and artisan subsectors does not imply that they use ICTs less than their counterparts in other subsectors of the informal sector.

The informal sector businesses that were sampled included sellers of fruit and vegetables and other miscellaneous products such as airtime, padlocks, etc., while the artisans consisted of weavers, sewers, crafters, hairstylists, tailors and dressmakers.

Sample size and sample frame

According to Patton (2002:244), there are no rules for a sample size in qualitative studies. The size of the sample differs from researcher to researcher, especially because one researcher's population's characteristics may differ from the next, and thus the size depends on the purpose of the study, design, data collection and type of population available for the research problem (Adams and Schavaneveldt 1991"181). The ideal sample size for this study could not be determined because there were no figures for the actual population size. However the researcher stopped

when realizing that a saturation point had been reached at 118 informal sector women traders. For this study, the sampling frame consisted of a list of informal sector business categories by their nature (i.e. whether they were legal or illegal) and their types (i.e. what is actually for sale or their characteristics, such as where they operate). The idea of a list of informal sector trading activities was obtained from the work of Devey, Skinner and Valodia (2006:10), the Draft Policy on Informal Economy for KwaZulu-Natal (2009), and the Draft Informal Trading Policy and Management Framework (2004) of Sol Plaatje Municipality.

5.3 Sampling

This study employed multistage sampling to provide more manageable and meaningful data. Since there was no comprehensive list of informal businesses in KwaZulu-Natal, it was not easy to obtain a complete, certain frame for the ISWEs. The fact that they are widely dispersed made it impossible to ascertain their exact numbers.

The lack of statistics on this sector has been echoed by Devey, Skinner and Valodia (2006:13). The authors highlight the fact that the Government's 1995 White Paper on SMMEs, which was one of the first policy documents of the new government, distinguished between four categories of SMMEs, and while this Paper outlines a concrete proposal for the SMMEs category, it is mute on support strategies for the survivalist category. According to the authors, this omission has continued in policy implementation (2006:13). Thus for this study, it was not feasible to consider the use of probability sampling, leaving non-probability sampling as the only option. The fact that the researcher could not obtain a reliable and complete list of all the ISWEs or an exact size of the informal sector in South Africa and/or in the province informed this decision. The only information available about the ISWEs consisted of estimations that had been made in previous studies, such as Henley, Arabsheibani and Carneiro (2009); Altman (2007).

The sampling procedure that was followed to select the units of the study (ISWEs) is discussed below.

5.3.1 Purposive sampling

According to Barbour (2008:52), in purposive sampling, the researcher selects interviewees or focus group participants by virtue of characteristics that are thought by the researcher to be likely to have some bearing on their perceptions and experiences. Because of lack of statistics on the population size, purposive sampling was considered to be the most appropriate sampling method to use to select the province (KwaZulu-Natal) and district and local municipalities for this study within the province.

It was not possible to study the informal sector in all the South African provinces. The researcher opted to focus only on KwaZulu-Natal, even though each province in South Africa has diverse ethnic groups, resources, etc. However, it was concluded that some of the findings in KwaZulu-Natal could be generalized onto other provinces. The choice of KwaZulu-Natal was also informed by its position in the country. Its coastal location attracts visitors to its warm ocean, which in turn opens up opportunities for many businesses.

Only the UMkhanyakude District Municipality was included in the study. UMkhanyakude District Municipality is divided into five local municipalities, i.e. Hlabisa, Umhlabuyalingana, Jozini, Big 5 False Bay, and Mtubatuba. There is also a district management area (DMA) which is run by the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority. Participants were only sampled from the Hlabisa Local Municipality.

The choice of the UMkhanyakude District Municipality and Hlabisa Local Municipality was mainly informed by the fact that they are in prime locations and have a large density of informal businesses because of the nearby attractions of the St Lucia and Isimangaliso Wetlands.

5.3.2 Snowball sampling

This technique was used to sample informal sector women entrepreneurs within the Hlabisa Local Municipality. Snowball sampling, which is also known as chain referral or reputational sampling, is a method for sampling the cases in a network, and it is a multi-stage technique that begins with one or a few people or cases and spreads out on the basis of links to the initial cases (Neuman 2006:223). Neuman explains that snowball sampling is based on the interconnectivity of people or organizations and an analogy to a snowball, which begins small but grows larger as it rolls and picks up

snow. The researcher felt that the main aim was to select unique cases that were particularly informative. However, as Neuman (2006:223) puts it, the crucial feature of snowball sampling is that each unit or person is connected with another through direct or indirect linkages.

The researcher's starting point was the taxi and bus rank at Hlabisa. This was informed by the literature as discussed in section 2, which indicates where the informal sector entrepreneurs normally operate. Other informal sector women entrepreneurs were thereafter reached through the referrals of these women.

5.3.3 Convenient sampling

A convenient sample is when the researcher gets cases or subjects in any manner that is convenient (Neuman 2006:220) and it was used because there is no comprehensive database documenting ISWEs' businesses. This made it impossible for the researcher to identify exactly where to find all the ISWEs prior to the study. This sample, with its convenient nature, was therefore appropriate on the field.

5.4 Data collection instruments

A research instrument is a tool that is used to collect primary data. Primary data was collected through focus group discussions, interviews and observations. Secondary data was collected through a literature review and content analysis.

5.4.1 Focus group discussions

The focus group (FG) discussion was considered to be the most appropriate instrument for ISWEs because the FG setting facilitates an in-depth and probing discussion on any given issue. The researcher was able to glean the opinions of many women on the issues discussed. This also saved time and the costs that would have been incurred in conducting face-to-face interviews with many people. Focus groups were chosen because they provide a quick and cost effective way to obtain a large amount of information (Oberg and Easton 1995:119), and they are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns (Kitzinger 1995; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999:5). Participants can also relate to one another, which means that they are less inhibited than in a one-to-one interview (Kerlake and Goulding 1996:231).

The present study adopted a more structured focus group approach

The researcher put the women into groups of 6 to 12 and found a conducive place for discussions that was convenient to the participants themselves, that is, their shelters where they carry their trading businesses. An effort was made to ensure that each group member participated fully in the discussion. Field notes were also taken.

However, there are also limitations to focus groups. For example, Neuman (2006:412) observes that a moderator may unknowingly limit the open and free expression of group members. In this study, the researcher was conscious of this shortcoming and endeavored to create an atmosphere of openness for group members to voice their opinions without fear or prejudice. The atmosphere was positive, accepting and relaxed in all the focus group discussions because prior contact had been facilitated by the women leaders whom the researcher had contacted and met beforehand. These women then introduced the researcher to the groups.

There was a time when face-to-face interviews had to be used with ISWEs, but they could not be employed for the entire sessions with ISWEs because of the number of ISWEs who were supposed to have been interviewed. Another reason was that since most of them had limited levels of education, clarifying some concepts and issues was easy with the group discussions and some opinions were easily remembered in a group. The only time interviews were used was when personal/ demographic information from the ISWEs was sought. In the structured interview schedule, characteristics such as age, level of education, etc., were covered based on the objectives of the study.

5.4.2 Face-to-face interviews

An interview is a data collection technique delivered in an oral question-and-answer format, which usually employs the same questions in a systematic and structured way with all the participants (Payne and Payne 2004:129). Face-to-face interviews were employed with women leaders. This was a small, manageable group of people who were interviewed at different times. This gave the researcher time to better understand the mood and background of the participants because they were free to provide their opinions without any fear of intimidation by nearby persons. Their

opinions and responses were not influenced or picked over by any person, they were just genuine and honest perceptions of the individual. The face-to-face interviews benefited the research in this way.

Overall, a semi-structured interview approach was used in this study. The interview schedules that were developed and employed with women leaders contained both structured and semi-structured questions.

5.4.3 Observation

Observation gave the researcher genuine first-hand experience and explained some issues and opinions that were raised by the ISWEs and in the interviews so that there was a better understanding of why things were as they were, rather than depending only on what the ISWEs were saying. This is something that could not be done through face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions.

The observations were done on site. An observation schedule was developed with a precisely articulated focus. Participation observation was employed in this study. When defining participation observation, Payne and Payne (2004:166) explain that it is data collection over a sustained period of time by watching, listening, and asking questions as people go about their day-to-day activities while the researcher adopts a role from the setting and becomes a partial member of the group in question. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:396), participant observation enables the researcher to understand the context of his/her subjects and be open-ended and inductive so that he/she can see things that might be unconsciously missed, and discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations. Notes were taken and observations made about behavior, gestures, attitudes, emotions and events. The schedule outlined the following sections that needed to be observed on the field relating to this study:

- * Availability of technological devices in the workplace;
- * The relationship between the informal sector and the community;
- * Communication systems used by the women entrepreneurs in the work environment; and
- * Problems in the work places.

5.4.4 Literature review

The literature review was important as it provided the researcher with background information on the topic at hand. It covered numerous documents that contained related information about the information and knowledge society and informal sector entrepreneurs.

The researcher also accessed documented literature relating to the information and knowledge society, the informal sector, poverty alleviation, and economic empowerment. These documents included books, journals, conference papers, government publications such as reports and speeches, grey literature, and other valuable information searched from the internet and different databases.

5.5 Data collection procedures

Gaining access to the study area was highly essential. According to Neuman (2006:387), a gatekeeper is someone with formal or informal authority who controls access to a site. The mayor, councilors and other municipal officials were gatekeepers of the Hlabisa Local Municipality, while Izinduna and Amakhosi as well councilors and women leaders were gatekeepers of the traditional areas, the wards, and the places where informal sector women entrepreneurs were operating. They could easily deny access to the sites if the necessary procedures were not followed.

Therefore telephonic communication and visits were done to request access to the study area and to secure appointments for interviews and discussions with women leaders, traditional leaders and the women themselves. Data was collected between March 2009 and September 2010.

5.6 Data analysis

The aim of data analysis is to discover patterns in data that point to theoretical understandings of social life (Babbie 2004:376). According to Neuman (2006:460), qualitative data is coded when the researcher organizes the raw data into conceptual categories and creates themes or concepts. The advantage of coding data is that it makes data manageable (Neuman 2006:460).

Because the study was more qualitative than quantitative in nature, the collected data was tabulated under related themes, concepts and subheadings and presented

and interpreted by means of descriptions, comparison, interpretations, tables, graphs, frequencies and percentiles using Microsoft Excel.

Responses from interviews and focus group discussions with ISWEs

6.1 Characteristics of the participants

Although identifying the characteristics of the participants was not mentioned in the objectives of the study, it was necessary to collect and present this data for the reader to understand the background of the participants. Characteristics of the participants provided a snapshot of their appropriateness and suitability for inclusion. The characteristics also provided information on the demographic of informal sector women entrepreneurs at Hlabisa Local municipality.

It was also important to understand the background of the participants because it shed some light on their information needs, information seeking behaviour, the sources and channels they used, and their information skills, access, and utilization. It was hoped that the backgrounds would also expose information regarding problems encountered by participants when accessing information.

The characteristics of the participants includes their age, level of education, economic status, occupation and household, types of informal business activities, and reasons for participation.

6.1.1 Age

Informal sector trading was practised by participants of all ages and particularly popular with young women in Hlabisa - 12%, 11%, 15% and 12% in Mission, Mahunjini, Hlabisa CBD and Mapheleni respectively. Middle aged informal sector women in Hlabisa were also active informal traders. Both age brackets (30-39 and 40-49) were significantly represented in informal trading - 40-49 by 50% in Mapheleni and 28% in Mahunjini, and 30-39 by 33% in Hlabisa CBD. Older women also participated in informal trading. Their presence was observed in three of the areas, the exception being Mahunjini.

6.1.2 Level of education

The participants were asked if they had received formal education. The educational levels were investigated in order to justify the information seeking patterns, sources

and channels used by ISWEs. The results show that informal sector women entrepreneurs at Hlabisa local municipality had attained different levels of education. However, some did not have any formal education. For example in Mission, Mahunjini, Hlabisa CBD and Mapheleni, 9 (26%), 8 (42%), 3 (8%) and 7 (27%) participants respectively - 23% of the participants from the Hlabisa Local Municipality - had no formal education.

In Mission, Mahunjini, Hlabisa CBD and Mapheleni, a total of 19 (56%), 9 (47%), 23 (59%) and 16 (62%) of the participants had attained primary education consecutively, while 6 (18%), 2 (11%), 12 (31%) and 3 (11%) participants had secondary education. Only 1 (2%) respondent had post-secondary education. The woman with the post-secondary qualification in Hlabisa CBD was asked to indicate her qualifications. She had a certificate in adult basic education.

A total of 67 (57%) of the ISWEs had primary education while 23 (19%) had secondary education. Quite a significant number (27; 23%) had therefore not had any formal education.

6.1.3 Economic status, household data and occupation of the participants

Economic status refers to information on the principal source of income for the entire household and the household quality and its characteristics. Respondents were asked about land, livestock and the ownership of other assets such as television sets, sophisticated radios, mobile phones, different appliances such as kettles, stoves, microwaves, etc.

Respondents were also asked about the number of people living in the household who were working and could assist the ISWEs with family responsibilities such as food, children's education, family health, etc., and the extent to which the household relied on the income of the participants. The number of people in the household was crucial in order to establish the level of dependence on the ISWEs informal income by the household members.

Information on the occupation of the participants was also very crucial. Here participants had to state their occupation or the economic activities that they

engaged in to earn a living. Responses were grouped according to categories for decoding purposes. The categories included small-scale businesses and artisans.

6.1.4 Types of informal business activities

It was important to find out exactly what types of business activities women informal traders in Hlabisa Local Municipality were involved in. Informal trading activities performed by women were divided into two categories: small-scale businesses and artisans. The category of artisans performed activities such as dress-making, i.e. sewing and tailoring traditional gear, dresses, bags, earrings, bangles, open shoes, etc.; crafting traditional utensils such as bowls, calabashes, spoons and forks, mats, basins, and animals such as giraffes, hippos, etc.; weaving baskets, mats and bags; and hairdressing, a popular enterprising choice among women which involves plaiting or 'planting' human hair on clients' heads. It was noticed that the latter was dominated by foreign nationals; however local hairstylists were assisting them and learning to be perfectionists in international styles. Hairstyling was performed in temporary tents and in the verandas of buildings.

It was observed that styling using human hair does not need water, which is why this business prospers when compared to hair relaxing or straightening and hair perms that require a fixed place and a decent supply of water and electricity.

The results show that more women (94; 80%) were engaged in small-scale businesses than working as artisans (24; 20%). Reasons for this could be that it is easy, requires less skills, and does not require the finances and effort necessary to start an artisan trade on a small-scale. For example, the business of selling vegetables could be established by starting a vegetable garden and selling the vegetables. With the profit, bigger products could then be purchased from a retailer. However, artisans need skills and capital to buy equipment and products. For example, hair specialists need to interact with the sellers of various hair products, such as synthetic or human hair, in order to start plaiting hair, and women who tailor and sew need money for fabrics and machines. The same applies to weavers.

6.1.5 Reasons for participation in the informal sector

The participants were asked to provide their reasons for engaging in informal trade. Many (71; 60%) cited family responsibilities, such as taking care of younger siblings

and ill parents, caring for the aged in the family, getting married, and starting a family. This confirms the results in Table 1 that generally, women in the informal sector between the ages of 30 and 49 who are still young, active and healthy, are likely to be caregivers.

Limited skills and knowledge to venture into other businesses or formal employment was mentioned by 35 (35%) of the women. Being an orphan or widow was also a significant reason (32; 27%). This follows the trend of all the diseases and social-ills that afflict many poor communities and leave children and adults destitute, effectively forcing them into the informal sector.

The number of those who dropped out of school is also noticeable (16; 14%). School drop-outs leave school because of pregnancy or to start a family, or give up because of more fails than passes, thinking that they will pursue other avenues that end with them working in the informal sector.

Quite a number of the women realised that they had ended up in the informal sector instead of the jobs that they would have aspired to do, such as teaching, nursing or joining the police force, because they were not schooled enough and did not possess the skills necessary to work in the preferred areas.

Sickness was cited by 14 (12%) women as a reason for working in the informal sector. They elaborated that they needed to be near their homes because of their poor health, and the close proximity of their homes made it easier to take medication, take a nap when necessary, and get checked on by their family members from time to time.

6.2 Information needs, seeking and modes of information used by ISWEs

An information need is defined, in this context, as a gap in knowledge or the lack of information necessary to perform a task, answer a question, or make a crucial decision in a particular situation. This section's aim was to establish the information needs that ISWEs experience and to establish how they acquire their information. Their information needs and information seeking patterns, sources and channels were identified using the critical incident technique. The critical incident technique is a qualitative, open-ended and retrospective method that examines how people or

communities seek information. Through this technique, the information systems and services that were used by the participants were identified as well. Observations and focus group discussions were also referred to in this section. The ISWEs about information related to their businesses and to indicate why they needed information and also to narrate instances where they had needed information. Some women needed information to answer general questions, while others wished to learn about something or to improve their understanding. In some instances the situations were not business or work-related; they mentioned personal problems, health problems, school problems, legal problems, and even entertainment queries. The related instances were then grouped into categories for easier decoding. The following table shows categories.

Categories of participants' information needs

Categories	Explanations
The need for business information (102; 86%)	This included participants who needed information on how to expand their businesses, new business ideas to venture into a different business type, and information on how to manage and grow their businesses.
The need for Government related information (106; 90%)	This included participants who needed information on rent, government support such as free training opportunities, and secure work environments.
The need for marketing and exhibition information (76; 64%)	This included participants who needed information on where they could market their products and put them into exhibitions and all related marketing and exhibition information. This category's needs were popular among women who were weavers, crafters and tailors.
The need for information on loans and micro finance (118; 100%)	This included participants who needed information on loans and other forms of micro-credit to expand their businesses.
The need for information on development (88; 75%)	This included the participants who needed to learn new skills, employment opportunities, business management and techniques, profit making, and high income generation.

6.3 Information seeking patterns

This question sought to find out from ISWEs how or from where they obtained the information they need. The aim was to establish the sources of information used by ISWEs. Most of the women indicated their immediate sources such as fellow traders, workmates, relatives and friends. The second most popular source was the radio. Table 9 indicates that radio was owned by 31 (91%) women in Mission, 17 (89%) in Mahunjini, 37 (95%) women in Hlabisa CBD, and 20 (77%) in Mapheleni. The radio is portable, and although sophisticated and advanced radios are available in many shops, most people opt for simple, battery operated radios due to lack of electricity. Traditionally the radio has been used by many people in many households for generations, and it is still popular during this day and age.

6.4 Commonly used information sources

Other sources that were commonly used by the participants include the television, which was cited by some 90 respondents (76%) as sources of information. Mobile phones were also highly popular (102; 86%). All the mobile networks - MTN, Vodacom and Cell C - were supported by ISWEs in Hlabisa. 30 women (88%) used mobile phones for information in Mission, 16 (84%) in Mahunjini, 35 (90%) in Hlabisa, and 21 (81%) in Mapheleni. Although only one respondent (3%) had a landline in her home, a significant number (84; 71%) used telephones. This is because ticky boxes and Mr Phones are provided by many companies, such as Telkom, Vodacom, MTN and Cell C, and when available, they are cheaper to use than making a call from a mobile phone. One can successfully make a call with 90c instead of installing a landline at home and making calls without considering later bills. Children and other family members also cannot be controlled in terms of how and when they make calls. To the participants, making a call using Mr Phone or a ticky box was fairly affordable.

Mobile phones were owned by a significant number of the participants. However a fairly significant number of women (11; 9%) use mobile phones even though they did not own them. They did this by borrowing mobile phones from fellow women, friends and relatives. Borrowing was the second means, after ownership, of accessing and using mobile phone services, and it was commonly practiced in all four areas. Like sharing information, sharing handsets was commonly practiced without any profit.

Among respondents, there were those who only owned SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards which are affordable because they cost only R6.00 in many shops and outlets such as PEP stores, Shoprite, Spar and restaurants, cafés and phone repair shops.

A person with a SIM card simply places it in a friend's phone in order to make or receive a call or send an SMS, and remove it when done. Thus costs are not borne by the owner of the SIM handset but by the owner of the SIM card. In so doing, the cost of buying mobile phones is eliminated or at the very least minimised.

Another way of accessing and using mobile phones by those who did not own them was by simply buying airtime and loading it into a friend's phone and thereafter making a call or sending an SMS. In this way, a mobile phone is shared and there are no additional or hidden costs to the owner of the handset. This method of accessing and using mobile phones helps those who do not have the skills to use this technology; the owner assists them by loading airtime, typing an SMS, or making a call.

The use of mobile phones by ISWEs is, however, steeped with challenges. Poor, weak or non-existing power supplies meant that the women had to travel long distances to places where there was electricity to charge. This travelling increased the cost of using the mobile phone. Alternatively, they charged their phones using car batteries. This alternative was offered by one family that owned a taxi that had fixed a tent nearby for this particular service. Charging like this also has its challenges. There was always a queue of mobile phones waiting to be charged at a cost of R5.00 each.

Internet cafés were not mentioned by any of the women as a source of information access, use or transfer.

Face-to-face communication and social visits were mentioned as sources of information transfer and sharing. These modes of information transfer are still popular and convenient among many informal women traders in Hlabisa Municipality. In Mission, 70% of the women preferred social visits while 79% preferred face-to-face communication in their search for information. In Mahunjini, 100% of the women preferred the use of face-to-face communication, and 90% and

73% of the women preferred this source of information in Hlabisa CBD and Mapheleni respectively.

6.5 Information flow and use

Information flow refers to the transfer of information from a variable x to a variable y in a due process (Wikipedia 2007), while information use is the information seeking behaviour that leads to the use of information (Savolainen 2009:38-45). Hlabisa Local Municipality has women's organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community leaders and governmental departments at provincial and local levels. There are a few banks such as ABSA, Ithala and Standard Bank. There is one library but no telecentres. The library is situated in town next to the local municipality offices. There are a handful of primary and high schools. The women's group organizations found in this area include the Sisonke women's club, Lindokuhle Sewing, Siyafufusa Catering, Siyathuthuka Crafting, and a few others. These organizations provide support for women doing craftwork, beadwork, sewing and cooking. All these institutions represent information flow systems that ensure that some information is transferred from them to the community, especially ISWEs.

The Hlabisa municipality has main roads which are well connected to other big roads that link the municipality to the outside world as well as the National road (N2). However the feeder roads within the municipality, from villages to town, are not in good shape. They are gravelled, dusty, muddy and slippery, especially during the rainy season.

In the findings one woman (3%) indicated that she has a fixed landline and many (102; 86%) relied on mobile phones. There is one Telkom telephone tower that supports telecommunications and landlines situated near the municipality office in town. Telephone towers are necessary to retain telephone or cellular networks.

However, there were no telephone towers in or near the three other villages where focus group discussions with women were held. Additionally, the mobile networks supported by many women through subscription, do not have telephone towers to strengthen them. Thus there was an outcry during the focus group discussions of poor and absent signals in the four areas where discussions took place. The problems with the networks are also as a result of no electricity in some areas of Hlabisa, particularly in the three villages outside the Hlabisa CBD.

There is no community radio in Hlabisa. Community radios focus on the information needs of their listeners in a particular area. The programmes that are aired are mostly directly related to the community and its needs.

There is one internet café in Hlabisa town. However this internet café is approximately 85 km away from the other three areas. Although the internet is not used by ISWEs, there are services that are available which are used by other residents or town visitors who are better skilled. The services provided by this internet café to the residents include emails, internet access, fax, ticky box, scanning, and printing. It opens at 8.00 am and closes at 16.00 pm from Monday to Saturday, but is closed on Sundays and holidays.

From observation and conversations with the people around town, it was garnered that the internet café was sometimes not operational because of problems that required technicians to be called in.

6.6 Factors affecting information access, flow and use

The participants were asked to state the factors that they felt limited their access to and use of information that they need. This question sought to establish the factors that impact on the smooth flow of information to ISWEs. The question yielded many different answers which were grouped into categories as indicated below.

6.6.1 Education and illiteracy

Twenty seven (23%) participants had not had any formal education at all and 67 (57%) had primary education in Hlabisa Municipality as a whole. When responding to question 10, many (87; 74%), indicated that they did not use or rely on printed information sources because they might not be able to read and understand what is written.

The same question was posed during interviews with women group leaders. They observed that business information in certain formats may not be successfully distributed to ISWEs because of their low levels of literacy. The inability to read text ties in to education, literacy and language. The language of communication used in ICTs, e.g. mobile phones, television, and DVDs, is mainly English. The ISWEs mentioned that in many instances they could not understand some of the instructions or messages they needed to read or follow in order to utilize some of the ICTs.

Time was also cited as a problem by women leaders. They indicated that even with assistance such as training or adult practical sessions, many women were reluctant to leave their stalls or tables/stands unattended for any given amount of time, because they fear losing money while they are away, and do not understand the potential benefits of attending these sessions.

6.6.2 Lack of skills

Participants indicated that they lacked the skills necessary to use some of the information sources, especially technological and printed sources, and this delayed and sometimes prevented their access to urgent and up to date information. It was also noted that they depended on oral, face-to-face and mobile communication for information. Lack of skills, however, forced them to wait for their relatives, friends or children to have time to assist them, especially with technological sources such as mobile phones.

6.6.3 Distance and information centres

As mentioned already, there is only one library situated within Hlabisa, the municipality offices are in town, and there is no telecentre that the community could use to access ICTs such as computers for information. Thus the three participating villages outside town have to contend with distance in addition these problems.

Community out-reach programs or extension services, where librarians or telecentre representatives go out to people in order to provide them with the services they need, was not practiced because of lack of resources. Thus when ISWEs wanted to fax, print something or make a call, they had to travel long distances to reach town to use the internet café's services, although these services were not frequently used. Distance has an impact on cost, time and the motivation to get something done. The availability of ICTs near the ISWEs' could thus enhance their interest in using ICTs.

6.6.4 Language

The participants' mother tongue was IsiZulu, and this was the language they mainly used to communicate. English was used to a certain extent by a few who could speak and understand it. Problems with understanding another language such as English, which is the language used to explain or interact with most new technology

and by many owners and suppliers, is a barrier to the access and use of information that could help women improve their businesses in the informal sector.

6.6.5 Roads and transport

Poor road conditions in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, including Hlabisa Local Municipality, are a detriment and hindrance to access to basic amenities by the communities. The most common mode of transport is on foot, although there are taxis and a few bakkies that service the area. The informal women traders in Hlabisa CBD and Mission were nearly better off than those in Mahunjini and Mapheleni because they were near town, and the road around them was tarred right through to Hlabisa hospital. However, Mahunjini and Mapheleni women did not benefit from such roads. The participants indicated that the roads within their areas were gravelled and narrow and easily washed away by heavy rainfall. Very few taxis, buses and other means of transport were willing to travel on such roads as they were a threat to their transport and therefore livelihoods. Thus the few taxis and bakkies that traversed the areas were very expensive and did not travel as frequently as the community would want them to. This in turn delayed the delivery of goods and products in the area.

The findings revealed that Hlabisa municipality, like many others in KwaZulu-Natal and in the district in particular, was in the process of upgrading and improving roads and transportation. Temporary workers in many villages were being employed to construct and expand the roads by hand due to lack of funds and equipment for modern equipment. On the flipside, this equips local residents with skills that they can use for future freelance work and wages to support their families. However, according to ISWEs, these conditions unfortunately do not result in proper roads which could last longer.

6.6.6 Time

In order to access and use information, the user must have time set aside to do just that. Lack of time was cited as a problem by the respondents. The respondents started their days very early in the morning, around 6.00 in most cases, and ended their days very late, around 18.00 and even 19.00 for some. Upon returning to their homes, they still had to do house chores, especially those ISWEs who still had young children to take care of. Their days often passed without access to up to date

information. They said that they relied heavily on word of mouth information from their children, family members or relatives, which was sometimes distorted or out dated.

ICTs cut down on the time that is lost when having to walk to work or to suppliers or clients to access information. ISWEs are kept connected and reachable by their clients, suppliers and family and also fellow informal traders. This would be enhanced if ICTs were used for business information exchange and transfer.

6.6.7 Support from the municipality

It was observed that the agricultural sector was well equipped with extension services, with farming advisors who assist farmers by disseminating relevant and timeous agricultural information. The radios are also commonly used to air programmes or disseminate urgent information to the farmers, such as the threat of floods or fires. With the ISWEs, there was no similar service. There was no institution or central office, even from the municipality, that could be used to provide this kind of a service to the women.

From observation the suggestion is that support for ISWEs is being planned. According to the findings, the office was planning to relocate the women to a place where the necessary infrastructure would be supplied. However, the ISWEs were not in support of this idea saying, “We have been told these stories again and again, but nothing is done!”

One woman said: “Relocating us to another place will not help us because we will be operating away from our clients. We want improved services, infrastructure and better conditions right where we are.”

6.6.8 Electricity and poor networks

Hlabisa’s CBD has electricity, but many of the informal businesses that operate around it are not connected to electricity. The women who were cooking food and supplying it to the businessmen in town, especially the taxi operators, were using gas or paraffin stoves for these services. The three other villages that participated in the study did not have electricity at all. While there was one tower near the municipal’s office in the Hlabisa CBD area, it did not help much in the plight of informal sector in the Hlabisa CBD and also the three places of research which are

outside town. “Our phones always lose networks”, was one of the many problems voiced by the participants when commenting about the poor networks in the area.

It was observed that a few residents who could afford them used generators to meet their needs in the absence of electricity. All this is evidence that the infrastructure is weak and inadequate and in many instances does not reach the places where most informal businesses are operational. The lack of a well-developed and stable electricity supply and telecommunications infrastructure in Hlabisa Local Municipality also negates the option of running businesses using various ICTs, especially when there is a strong wind or the weather is unstable.

6.6.9 Cost

Buying some ICTs, even mobile phones, is expensive to ISWEs. The participants opted for cheaper handsets and accessories because they do not earn much money. However, these handsets generally do not last long and are great loss to many ISWEs. The cost of buying and maintaining mobile phones digs deep into the women’s pockets. Therefore the findings show that the costs associated with the use of specific ICTs is a challenge that prevents women in the informal sector from acquiring the types or versions that would provide them with access to more services.

6.6.10 Work conditions

A conducive work environment with enabling resources such as ICTs helps people perform their duties and activities easier and quicker. The ISWEs in Hlabisa Municipality performed their businesses in different conditions. Weavers, sewers/tailors and crafters worked in roof-covered buildings. Some of these buildings were half-walled or not walled at all. Describing their conditions, they said that while they were protected from direct sunshine in summer, in winter they experienced extreme cold. In rainy seasons, some were exposed to rain which leaks from the sides. They were unable to lock away their equipment, tools and garments because of the nature of the buildings, and had to pack everything away at the end of each working day.

Other participants were in the cooking business, which is a business that is commonly conducted near taxi and bus ranks. They cooked for rank managers and

taxi owners and drivers, in particular those working within the Somkhele, Nkodibe and Mpembeni taxi ranks. However, enough food was cooked to provide for the passerby and other informal traders (male and female) who are not in the cooking business. Most of them, especially those who could afford them, used caravans for their catering business. Others used temporal tents. Paraffin and gas stoves were used to cook because electricity is not connected to their caravans or tents. Even those businesses operating from town, where electricity is available in other formal businesses near and around them, they used paraffin or gas. Thus preparation is delayed and slow. Water facilities are generally poor since local residents use boreholes or rivers to meet their water needs. ISWEs said that they carried water in 20 litre bottle containers (izigubhu) or buckets to cook and wash their utensils, because there was no proper pipe system to supply them with water.

Fruits and vegetable hawkers generally display their products on the ground on top of cardboard boxes or on mats along the pavements. Others have learnt to build their own wooden stands on which to put their products. Most of them normally operate in open spaces and under trees. Some use temporal tents made of a few tree poles and torn mielie meal sacks or old materials. Only a few of the respondents had secured their places in the verandas of buildings.

7 Suggestions for effective information access, flow and use

The last objective was set to determine ways of improvement. The ISWEs responses were meant to determine the best way ICTs could be used to transfer business information to the ISWEs. The question also aimed to support the development of a suitable model for information access, use and flow could benefit ISWEs. The themes below show their responses, which are categorised into groups.

7.1 Cost of ICTs

The cost of ICTs was mentioned as a challenge by many ISWEs. Reduced costs would make ICTs affordable to most of the ISWEs, and this would afford them opportunities to learn to perform advanced and sophisticated activities on ICTs that they owned and maintained.

7.2 Dissemination of business information and training facilitation

It was indicated in their information needs that ISWEs need information on how they can access finance as this could help them expand their activities. ISWEs start their businesses without or with limited business know-how and finance. They expressed the need to identify financial institutions that would understand them and their needs. According to the women, they did not meet the requirements of many financial providers because they were not registered or because they did not have a financial record that could prove their self-employment and financial balance to the providers, and consequently failed to receive support.

They thus fell into the hands of micro lenders who scoop a high percentage of interest with their loans. This slowed their businesses' progress and growth.

Training needs were also expressed by the participants. The women were aware that low education bars opportunities for better employment. Due to low literacy and educational levels, they lacked the skills and knowledge necessary to improve their businesses by adopting ICTs.

Training on business management was specifically expressed. Some women showed an interest in the improved use of technology for their businesses, but lacked the necessary skills. Interest in internet use, advanced mobile phone use and computer skills was demonstrated, and equally the training required for their use was expressed.

With respect to ICTs such as computers and the internet, the respondents felt that were expressed. the training provider should be aware of their skills levels and provide appropriate training sessions tailored to suit them, particularly with skills for business-related matters. It was indicated by the ISWEs that a needs analysis should be performed before training is provided. This would determine what they needed to empower themselves and expand their businesses.

The women leaders also indicated that in order to meet their needs regarding training, ISWEs should be given a choice by the providers on which ICTs they required training, so that the training is tailor-made to suit them. According to the women, training should be done where they work in order to make it more convenient.

7.3 Time

The time factor was also identified by women as an obstacle to engaging in businesses information sessions which could also equip them with skills. The fact that they ran their businesses from early morning until late in the day left them with no time to leave their sites to attend training sessions.

7.4 Support from the municipality

The participating ISWEs believed that the local municipality could assist them with many things. They mentioned shelter or a better work environment, subsidised product costs, and exhibition support. All these could help them improve their businesses and get exposure to reel in other potential clients. The women who rented caravans indicated that they paid the owner between R300.00 and R700.00 per month. Whereas they could only afford to pay as from R50.00 a week, they did not have any alternative.

The informal sector generally does not have proper sanitation, which does not promote hygiene around their businesses. The Local Municipality could consider providing a temporal sanitation solution to meet this need.

The local municipality was regarded by ISWEs as their closest link to government, and believed to have a lot of resources. Suggestions for the support from this office regarding ICTs included electrical cables and infrastructure in their stalls so that they could charge their mobile phones and stay connected all the time and invest in new radios that do not need a constant supply of new batteries.

7.5 Strong infrastructure

Many of the participating ISWEs carried their water from home or had to pay other people to provide them with water. Electricity is not installed in many Hlabisa villages. Businesses that can do better with electricity cannot function properly without it, and products cannot last long.

It was also suggested that the municipal office should build a resource centre suitable for both the old and the young, literate and semi-literate people in the community, so that the entire community could have a central but conducive place to meet, receive training, and learn to access the internet and use computers and other ICTs.

The absence of infrastructure such as electricity, water and proper roads leads to poor networks and signals, which interferes with communication.

The ISWEs believed that if they were provided with strong infrastructure in their villages, they could focus on other things that they needed in their businesses. They indicated that they may venture into other businesses that operate with technology rather than focusing on being artisans or small-scale businesses. The examples given by some women were phone shops, which would not only allow women to keep in touch with relatives and friends all the time, but improve their economical standards as women.

Response from both the municipal officers and women leaders regarding a central resource centre were positive. The findings indicated that the was municipal aware of the need for a centre that would be equipped with the necessary ICTs and space that could meet the needs of local people. However, while they stated that financial resources for proper infrastructure and the site were being discussed for this purpose, they didn't provide any dates or further details.

The women leaders confirmed that the municipality had promised to relocate informal traders to an identified place with all the infrastructural resources.

7.6 Proactive women leaders

Women leaders among the ISWEs are not appointed by anyone, but take on the role as a result of a mutual understanding between the women. Their role is to communicate information that is needed to women. Usually these women leaders are better equipped and empowered than others in terms of education, ICT skills, and exposure to and relationships with several people in the municipality office, taxi industry and tourism office. Thus they also act as the ISWEs' representatives. However, because they are also informal traders, they do not become as proactive as other women expect them to be. According to them, their assistance and role is limited. Yet ISWEs expect their leaders to disseminate information or make them aware of media resources and new technologies or even related meetings and training sessions on ICTs that can be applied in their businesses.

Responses from structured interviews with women leaders

Personal data was sought from 17 women leaders in the four areas under study in Hlabisa. This was done to determine the level of their experience in working with ISWEs and other stakeholders and their effectiveness in improving ICT access and use in the informal businesses of the ISWEs. Data was also collected to determine the suitability of the women as leaders of ISWEs. The aim of the interview was explained to the women leaders prior to the interview. Agreements about time and place were also reached beforehand. The women leaders were interviewed in their work places, near their tables, stands and stalls, but a few meters away from other women.

8.1 Characteristics of the interviewees

The women leaders were working among and with other ISWEs in various informal trading activities. No pre-determined strategy was used to identify women leaders. Among those women who took part in the interviews as women leaders, were either self-volunteered or referred to by the first woman trader encountered in the trading place. Such women were not officially selected, but they represented ISWEs because they were able to command respect from other women, they were personable and confident, self-styled, and good organizers. Additionally some had higher educational levels than other ISWEs while others owned many items, which suggested a higher living standard than other ISWEs. Some women leaders had been participating in informal trading for a longer period of time than the rest of the women. All these characteristics helped to make them more vocal and active than other ISWEs in terms of communicating with suppliers, clients, local and foreign tourists, and in communicating information to ISWEs.

Four (24%) women leaders were between 30 and 39, while 1 (6%) woman leader was 50+. The majority (12; 70%) of the women leaders were between 40 and 49. No woman leader was between 18 & 29.

With respect to education, 16 (94%) women leaders had primary education and 1 (6%) had attained secondary education. None of them had attained tertiary education.

All 17 (100%) of the respondents were informal traders.

8.2 Ownership and usage of technology

Women leaders were asked if they had observed ISWEs with any technologies in their homes or in their workplaces. They were further asked to indicate if they had seen ISWEs using the technologies for business-related purposes.

The majority (17; 100%) of the women leaders had seen ISWEs with mobile phones, in ownership, and in use at work, while only 2 (12%) had seen them using radios at work. No woman leader had noticed ISWEs with a landline telephone or a computer.

Seventeen (100%) women had observed ISWEs receiving or making calls with their mobile phones, while three (18%) had seen them sending text messages (SMS).

8.3 Information needs and provision

Women leaders were asked to indicate the information sources they themselves used for information to be able to provide for information needs of ISWEs. This question was asked to establish if there is any relationship between the high ownership and usage of mobile phones with using mobile phones as sources of business information.

All (17; 100%) the women leaders indicated that ISWEs had come to them to ask for information. However, they also said that they used other sources such as friends, which was indicated by 17 (100%) women leaders, and fellow women, indicated by 15 (88%) women leaders.

This confirms the ISWEs' responses to this question, that sharing information orally with friends and fellow women is still practiced by many ISWEs. Women leaders were further requested to indicate what sort of information ISWEs requested when they came to them. This was asked to establish whether the information need was business related or whether it was a general information request.

Most (15; 88%) women leaders stated having received information requests related to women concerns regarding their businesses, such as "When and where are the exhibitions?", "What is the municipality saying about the relocation to a better environment?", "When will the meeting with a councillor be?", "Are we going to get electricity soon?", "When is the next delivery date of the suppliers?", etc. Two (12%) women leaders received general information requests or requests related to other

fields from the ISWEs, such as dates for children's immunization, meetings about land, and death in the community.

Women leaders were further asked to indicate how they supplied the requested information. The aim of this question was to find out whether any ICTs were used by the women leaders to disseminate information to the ISWEs or what other sources the women leaders used to provide information to the ISWEs. Seventeen (100%) women leaders orally communicated the information to ISWEs, while 3 (18) referred them to the municipal office. The women leaders made no reference to the library, telecentres, books, or internet cafes.

8.4 Suggestions for information provision using ICTs

The women leaders were asked to indicate what prevented ISWEs from using ICTs to access information. They were further asked to suggest how these problems could be overcome in order to ensure that ISWEs gain access to information that addresses their business concerns or needs and that they use ICTs in their businesses or to obtain business information.

All the women leaders (17; 100%) indicated lack of resources as an obstacle to ISWEs' use of ICTs for their business information. 14 (82%) women leaders indicated that lack of skills and knowledge forced ISWEs to use friends and relatives and not ICTs when they needed information.

The ISWEs stated that education and skills were barriers to their use of ICTs. Thus the observations by women leaders relate to the responses by ISWEs. Although ISWEs were talking about poor infrastructure as factors that hinder ICT usage, women leaders spoke of lack of resources, which could indicate infrastructure as well. This shows that women leaders are in the vicinity of ISWEs and their observations and experiences about inadequate resources and infrastructure are similar. However, for the sake of this study, infrastructure refers to the physical properties that enhance resources, such as libraries, roads, or anything that can be used for any support or help.

The women leaders' suggestions were that the municipality should take care of the ISWEs' needs by supplying them with suitable, relevant and necessary resources (17; 100%). Training that focused on business and ICTs was suggested by 12 (71%)

of the women leaders as necessary to ensure that the businesses of the women in the informal sector could improve.

Data from structured observation

Structured observation results were obtained by following an observation guide. The observation sessions consisted of 30 minute sessions between and around the focus group discussions with ISWEs and the interviews with women leaders and municipal officials. Observation was done in order to view the situation on the ground - the conditions of the work environment, and the availability of structures that support the information and knowledge society in the four areas that were covered in Hlabisa. The events and structures observed were then categorised according to the issues raised in the research objectives of the study.

By using a checklist of the practices and structures that the researcher understood to mean or to portray the information and knowledge society, such as availability and access to electricity, extent of telephone service coverage, conditions of roads, the availability of other infrastructure available in the community such as information centres, libraries and tele centres, etc., it was possible to record and assess the availability, accessibility and use of these structures in the community and by ISWEs.

In this section, data is presented in the context of the information and knowledge society on the aspects mentioned above and the general operational processes and conditions in the library that was visited, the municipal office, and ISWEs' workplaces; roads, transportation and electricity; working days and hours; infrastructure; and the information and communication technologies present and used in Hlabisa Local Municipality. The following table outlines the observable structures and sources of the information and knowledge society in Hlabisa Local Municipality.

Results from structured observation

	Items observed	Detailed notes reflecting availability
1.	Access to electricity in the community	Except for Hlabisa CBD, ISWEs from Mission, Mahunjini and Mapheleni did not have electricity access at work
2.	Level of telephone service coverage in the community, i.e. mobile phones and fixed telephone lines	Fixed telephone lines were very scarce in Hlabisa town and their presence in the other three places was zero. The overall ownership of and access to mobile phones was fairly good
3.	Other ICT services available in the community such as internet cafés, telecentres, libraries, public cellular phones (known as Mr Phones)	One library was observed in Hlabisa CBD near the municipality office, and this is the only library in Hlabisa. In Hlabisa CBD, a few public cellular phones (known as Mr Phones) and internet café were observed, but not in Mission, Mahunjini and Mapheleni. These Mr Phones operate in big containers
4.	Conditions of the roads in the community	The roads in Hlabisa in general are poor. Hlabisa CBD is better because there is a tarred road that runs through and proceeds to Nongoma or other places North of Hlabisa. In Mission, the road up to the hospital was tarred, although not well. Other places were observed to have very poor road conditions. These roads were gravelled, narrow and slippery with mud on rainy days
5.	ICT infrastructure in the community such as mobile towers (Vodacom tower), phone towers (Telkom tower), satellite dishes, etc.	One tower was observed on the grounds of the local municipality office. There were not many network towers and satellite dishes observed in Hlabisa, except that one near the Municipality offices.
6.	Network availability and all time connectivity in the area	The network is available but not all the time. There were spots where it is totally lost. Poor connectivity. This shows that some ICTs cannot be used by ISWEs during certain times for their businesses
7.	Business days and hours	Every day, seven days a week, ISWEs' stands, stalls and tables are operational. In some places, such as Hlabisa CBD, weekdays and weekends are business as usual. In others, such as Mapheleni, there are fewer ISWEs over the weekend compared to weekdays. The presence of children in the stands and tables on weekends was observed. What was interesting was that the children were using mobile phones frequently as groups of two or individually, sometimes with their earphones on and in most

		instances while at their parents or relatives' stalls or tables. This shows that the young women were using ICTs more than their older relatives. However, this observation of having some kind of ICTs all the time could be used to determine if business information was accessed.
8.	Conditions in the work place, e.g. use of portable radios, availability of electrical plugs, presence of gathering space	Two portable small radios were found in two different ISWEs' groups. There were no electricity plugs where they were working. No gathering place was observed. If they want to meet, they come together at one woman's plot/table
9.	Frequency of the transport in the area and the prompt product delivery system used by ISWEs	Transport flow is not frequent. Although there are taxis and bakkies, public transport such as buses was not frequently spotted. Some of the buses observed at the rank were proceeding to Nongoma or Mtubatuba. Poor infrastructure impacts on the smooth flow of public transport and thus the delivery of media which could inform women in their businesses
10.	Involvement of the municipal office, women leaders and financial institutions	It was observed that women leaders were engaging with other women to an extent because they are also in the business and had to be there all the time. The women leaders were often seen on their mobile phones, taking seemingly endless incoming calls. This could indicate that they are the principal link between the ISWEs and product suppliers, clients, officials, etc. The municipal office is very near the Hlabisa CBD. However during the duration of the observation, no official from the municipal office was seen communicating or interacting with ISWEs. The banks, during the period of data collection, did not engage with ISWEs in any of the areas. Mobile bank stands or tables with ICTs to perform or demonstrate demo transactions, or train ISWEs on the use of mobile phones for business management, or any other related service from the banks, were not spotted during the data collection period.

This table indicates that Mapheleni, Mahunjini and Mission had no electricity, while Hlabisa CBD had electricity. Thus the informal trading areas where ISWEs conduct their daily businesses were not connected to electricity.

As indicated, not many ICT resources were utilized for business information access and use in their sites besides a few portable radios that used batteries. This is because there are no electricity plugs in their temporal tables and stands.

The scarcity of fixed telephone lines in Hlabisa hampers communication between people in the local municipality and for ISWEs as business owners in particular. Although a few public cellular phones were observed in Hlabisa CBD, Mapheleni, Mahunjini and Mission had none. The use of the containers that house the public cellular phones depends on the availability of electricity to operate. Without electricity, communication via mobile technology becomes impossible because they need to charge.

Libraries are places that allow people to search through various information resources and use these resources for decision-making purposes. The small library found near the municipal's office in Hlabisa, cannot meet the needs of the entire community in Hlabisa. The limited number of staff as well slows the process of disseminating information to the ISWEs. Women in the informal sector did not visit the library, and community outreach sessions and ICT training to suit ISWEs business information needs were absent. It was observed that there was a computer on the front desk which was used by a librarian, but not by patrons or library users. The presence of a telecentre could make a difference, but there was no telecentre in Hlabisa to teach ISWEs how to access information using today's technologies.

The condition of the roads, especially feeder roads that get into many places in Hlabisa, was poor. This is highly frustrating for women who have to travel long distances to access resources.

There were no network towers observed in Hlabisa. This means that connectivity is not guaranteed at all times. Business information access and transfer using ICTs is therefore not always possible. The availability of the Telkom tower, however, promotes connection around the Hlabisa CBD.

Summary of the findings

The section is summarized according to the respective research objectives.

10.1 The role of the information and knowledge society in the empowerment of informal sector women

The information age boasts that information technologies are the drivers of transformation in information access, use and dissemination. Advances in ICTs demand that the socio-economic sector restructures for growth and advancement. Inter-connectivity, accelerated information access, and the use and flow of information enable communities to leapfrog forward and harness new opportunities for their development. Therefore, knowledge and skills' sharing are of paramount importance. ICTs make it easier to surmount borders and partner with global business communities because space and time factors are no longer an issue. Information can be brought directly into the hands of the people who need it. Improved and relevant services in other sectors are prominent, such as in the health, political and educational sectors.

Informal sector women entrepreneurs' information needs and information seeking behaviour and the sources and channels they use for information

The findings indicated that ISWEs experience business information needs. Overall, the majority of the participants demonstrated a strong need for business-related information, citing information on the expansion of their businesses, the management of business, new business ideas, business training opportunities, secure business environments, government business support (e.g. subsidizing renting), and information on credit facilities.

However, this information need was not adequately addressed by any information provider in the area.

With respect to information seeking patterns, oral, face-to-face communication and visits were the main modes of seeking information. The findings indicate that there were various information providers in the research area, such as schools, churches, traditional systems such as Amakhosi and Izinduna, banks, local government offices and other government departments, and one library. With relevant systems in place, these information providers could improve the level of information access and use and the smooth flow of information to ISWEs. Information providers in close proximity were used by the participants.

Internet cafés and telecentres are normally centrally positioned and equipped with various ICTs such as computers, fax machines, telephones, etc., to support information exchange. These could help the community in general and ISWEs in particular with skills training and the use of these ICTs to improve their informal activities. However there were no telecentres that the participants could use to access these services, and the only library in Hlabisa did not offer them either.

The radio was the second most popular information source (105; 89%), followed by the television. The radios they used were battery-operated because of the limited supply of electricity and lack of proper electrified working areas with plugs that would allow the ISWEs to bring radios that operate with electricity to their places of work during the day. The radio is cheap and broadcasts local content in the local language of the community, which explains its popularity. The nature of the radio (oral communication) also allowed it to be shared with women who didn't own radios.

However, the most commonly used ICT was mobile phones (107; 91%). These ICTs were either owned or borrowed and were mainly used for social communication. They also cut costs and the time that would have been spent travelling to relatives, friends and even business partners.

10.3 Factors affecting information flow and exploitation by informal sector women entrepreneurs

Although the findings indicate that ICTs such as mobile phones were owned by the majority of the ISWEs and commonly used by these women to communicate, older women's access to and use of this information source was significantly low.

The findings also indicate that, even though education and literacy levels were generally low among ISWEs in the study areas, there were a bit higher among in the younger and middle-aged group of ISWEs. Low education and literacy levels do not encourage ISWEs to be active users and exploiters of ICTs for information purposes. Only younger ISWEs with better levels of education and literacy were found to be frequent and keen users of the ICTs.

The majority of the participants generally lacked the ability to use technological devices such as mobile phones or computers for business purposes. For instance, even though SMS is considered to be one of the cheapest services of mobile

phones, it was not used often by the participants due to lack of skills and the literacy required to use them.

As mentioned previously, there were no tele centres in any of the areas that were covered in Hlabisa. Their absence fails the ISWEs and poor and disadvantaged communities in terms of providing ICT services such as typing, photocopying, designing of business cards, and internet and telephone access. The observation that information centres such as tele centres can act as local hubs and provide services and connections to other important institutions such as schools, government offices, hospitals, NGOs, is also not applicable.

There was one library available in one study area (Hlabisa CBD) next to the city. This library was next to the Local Municipality office. However its services were not benefiting ISWEs who did not see its importance or use.

The study's findings indicate that many participants struggled with the language used in ICTs. Many ICTs are still using the English language in all their transactions or in communication. The majority of ISWEs shy away from such ICTs.

The road and transport system plays an important role in information flow. Three out of the areas covered in the study area had roads that were in a pathetic state. This made it difficult for ISWEs to transport themselves and their products to their places of work or to markets and exhibition places when there were such events. Many people, including ISWEs, used wheelbarrows or travelled on foot when moving their goods from one area to another. From observation, although the municipality had a few better roads connecting Hlabisa to outside places and other municipalities, it had a very bad feeder road system to connect places within it, and thus the movement, transport and delivery of goods, were severely hampered. The flow and use of information either orally by local people or through printed media or sophisticated ICTs was also curtailed by bad roads.

ISWEs spent most of their time selling their wares at their work stations, but they also had house chores to perform before they left or when they arrived back home. This left them with no time to learn about how to use any new ICTs or listen to or watch business-related programs about different ICTs that could boost their businesses.

There was little support from the local municipality office that could benefit ISWEs. The interviewed officials did not know how big the informal trading sector in the municipality was and what recent and workable plans were there to support them. Plans to relocate all the informal traders to a better trading place, which had been there for a long time, could not materialize because of limited resources (according to the municipal office).

The majority of the ISWEs did not have access to electricity in their homes and at their trading places. Generally, a very low percentage of people had access to electricity in the areas. The absence of electricity is a virtually insurmountable barrier to the use of ICTs for information.

As mentioned previously, many participants owned or had access to mobile phones. The beneficial impact of these ICTs and their ability to help with emergencies was acknowledged by the participants. However, the ISWEs complained about the quality of services. The findings indicated that in certain locations, the network was patchy or totally unavailable.

Furthermore, television and radio signals were reportedly generally weak or unavailable. In this instance, the community radio and its programs could not be transmitted to report important local news and updates.

The costs that accompany buying and maintaining ICTs such as radios, mobile phones and the television, for example, are transferred to customers. This makes these ICTs and their services unaffordable to the majority of ISWEs.

The ISWEs operated their businesses in very bad conditions. Their trading places were open, on the ground, on pavements or in tents, under trees or buildings, and a few were in old containers. None of these areas had electrical infrastructure that could facilitate the use of ICTs. These conditions did not inspire pride in their places of work and impacted negatively on their sales and profits.

Generally, ICT use in rural areas is still faced with a lot of barriers, ranging from low levels of education and literacy, to affordability, language and lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity. Low literacy and education, for example, do not equip a person with the necessary skills and competencies to manipulate and take advantage of better self expression, and thus information cannot be properly utilised

and transferred. This is exacerbated when it is embedded in new technologies that require a sound education and literacy standing.

Language was found to be a barrier to the effective use and application of ICTs. Most ICTs in most instances used English as their primary language of communication to reach the wide variety of users of their products and goods. The ISWEs were poor English speakers and said that they struggled with the language of these products and services.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study has shown the indicators of the information and knowledge society that need to be addressed to empower informal sector women entrepreneurs in South Africa. The information and knowledge society offers opportunities for improved infrastructure and telecommunications and increased and fully equipped and resourced information centres such as tele centres and libraries that support easy and speedy access to and the smooth flow of information and knowledge. This access, use and flow of information and knowledge facilitates informed decision making, improved productivity in business, and improved service delivery between clients and suppliers, and opportunities for global participation and recognition. Business processes are easy to follow because ICTs facilitate the storage and retrieval of information and documents, thus making business activities more transparent.

Even though there are many challenges in the access and use of ICTs in the informal sector, ISWEs are seemingly keen to try a wide variety of sources, including sophisticated technologies, if they had access and knew how. This has been demonstrated in their possession and use of mobile phones in particular. With the right support, ICTs really could benefit women entrepreneurs in the informal sector and help them leapfrog into the information and knowledge society.

ICTs are the enablers' basis of the information and knowledge society contributing to an environment for improved information access, use and dissemination by informal sector women entrepreneurs. In that way their socio-economic environment is transformed. This study has pointed out that infrastructure and relevant ICTs are in place to accelerate information access and use and flow in general. This

infrastructure can support connectivity of informal sector women entrepreneurs to their counterparts in other places of the world, therefore allowing information to be shared among themselves. Skills and knowledge to harness such opportunities of ICTs manipulation for development, empowerment and growth are also vital. It is recommended that informal sector women entrepreneurs should be equipped with such skills that will help them to survive in the current information and knowledge economy.

In order for informal sector women entrepreneurs to expand their businesses, their business information needs should be catered for. The local government, women leaders, traditional leaders, libraries and telecentres will ensure that their information needs, particularly business information needs are catered for. Continuous visits, training and the provision of knowledge and skills regarding their business, centrally in the telecentres and other ICTs supporting services such as libraries and internet cafes, will empower them with business management knowledge and skills that are conducive for a business environment. Therefore it is recommended that all the possible stakeholders who have constant contact with the informal sector women entrepreneurs, and those who can arrange for other stakeholders to support these women, should always be available and be equipped with information business and skills. Telecentres should be in place and a library should be more proactive for these ISWEs to utilize for their information needs and as centres for business skills and knowledge acquirement.

The findings indicate that various information providers such as schools, churches traditional leadership, banks, local government offices and the library exist in Hlabisa local municipality. These information services should be used to disseminate information to the informal sector women entrepreneurs and also to provide them with skills and knowledge on various aspects of managing businesses, particularly the informal sector that they are engaged in. Although the study revealed that informal sector women entrepreneurs in Hlabisa prefer to consult people in their vicinity, such as friends and relatives, first they should be encouraged to have a good working environment with all the information services in their localities mentioned above.

The findings reveal that there are factors which affect information flow and exploitation of this information by the informal sector women entrepreneurs. Factors such as inadequate formal education and literacy levels deter them in manipulating ICTs for information. However radio was identified as a means that could contribute positively to development in the area. It is recommended that radios, which are highly used by the informal sector women entrepreneurs in Hlabisa, should broadcast programmes that are relevant. These programmes should be in the local language, which is isiZulu. Experts can be invited to participate in these programmes. It is also recommended that the government and broadcasting authority consider to fully supporting community radios which could encourage informal sector women entrepreneurs.

The use of television could also help. The need for community television is also vital. Although SA is a country that is still developing and one that may not have enough resources to support community television for all its communities, the establishment of community television stations could awaken the interest from local viewers. Like radio, it could broadcast programmes in the local language and further demonstrate where necessary, for instance banking procedures, communication and marketing skills and other aspects which could make informal sector women entrepreneurs feel the relevance and need to watch television for reasons other than entertainment.

The road and transport system in Hlabisa was not of good standards at the time of this study. Infrastructure such as proper road networks is important for the business of informal sector women entrepreneurs. The study therefore recommends that the roads in this area be given attention. This will enable the flow of goods and products.

The provision of electricity was found to be problematic in Hlabisa at the time of this study. Weak electric infrastructure results in weak electricity which then disturbs the use of devices such as mobile phones, which were found to be possessed by a good number of the informal sector women entrepreneurs in Hlabisa Local Municipality, and use of other devices such as radio, television, library and some telephone and cellular containers. Therefore, it is recommended that towers are installed by the government. Both electricity and telephone/cellular towers could improve patchy receptivity and network, weak connectivity.