

Challenges of employing unformalized skills: Recognizing and leveraging informal expertise for national development in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges and implications of informal skills acquisition in Tanzania and its impact on national development. Through two case studies—one focusing on a driving class and the other on an electrical technician—it highlights the tension between formal certification and practical experience. The findings reveal that informal skilled laborers, while highly proficient, face significant barriers to employment, market competition, and project tendering due to the absence of formal recognition and certification. Despite their lack of formal qualifications, these workers contribute meaningfully to their families, communities, and the national economy. The study underscores the critical gap in valuing informal expertise relative to formal qualifications, and it advocates for the re-evaluation of the certification system to better recognize and leverage informal skills. The paper argues that integrating informal skills into the formal economy is crucial for inclusive national development. It calls for a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system to validate experiential learning and create alternative, affordable certification pathways. This approach would not only level the playing field for informal workers but also enhance their ability to compete in national projects alongside formally educated professionals. By acknowledging and supporting informal expertise, Tanzania can build a more robust, versatile workforce that is better equipped to meet the demands of various industries, ultimately driving sustainable national development.

Keywords: *Formal skills, Formal certification, Informal skills, Learning certification, National development, Practical experience.*

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Highlights of this paper

- The paper identifies the lack of formal recognition and certification as a significant barrier to employment, economic advancement, and social recognition for informal skilled workers in Tanzania.
- It advocates for the introduction of a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system and flexible certification pathways to formally validate workers' practical experience alongside formal education.
- The paper calls for policy reforms, financial support, and legal training to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for informal skilled workers, contributing to national economic development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a complex process that takes place in various forms. According to [Wahyuni \(2010\)](#) learning is the process through which humans gain a diverse range of competencies, skills, and attitudes. These can be acquired in various settings, both formal and informal, from the structured environment of a school classroom to the open spaces of the outdoors or even through a casual conversation that leads to deeper insight on a particular topic. [Halliday-Wynes and Beddie \(2009\)](#) suggest that learning is no longer considered an activity confined to educational institutions; rather, it is recognized as happening in the workplace, in the home and during leisure time. Hence, [Wahyuni \(2010\)](#) asserts that learning begins long before school, continues for even longer after school, and happens rapidly, and in parallel with school, in many different ways and settings. According to Wahyuni, Halliday-wynes and Beddie's perspective, I see learning as a process that depends on many factors to be complete, regardless of the method of learning or the learning environment. Therefore, I am inclined to say that, for learning to be complete, it requires three essential things, or perhaps more: the student, the teacher, the subject matter, and possibly an enabling learning environment, whether formal or informal. When these elements are present, the learning process can be completed, and the student can acquire the necessary skills that can bring positive outcomes for themselves and those around them.

When the outcomes of learning are demonstrated in practice and yield positive results, they are called skills. [Jassal \(2018\)](#) describes skills as the bridge between knowledge and performance. Skill is the mechanism by which we humans leverage our knowledge effectively to improve our individual and collective performance. Skills can be categorized into various forms. According to [Skills Development Scotland \(2018\)](#) skills have been classified under three headings; namely Self-management (manage the now) which includes focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. Second, is social intelligence (connect with the world) which include communicating, collaborating, feeling and leading. Third is innovation (create our own change) which include curiosity, creativity, sense making and critical thinking. There are numerous interconnections and dependencies among these skills, as each one supports the development of others across the model. For instance, the ability to concentrate on a challenge is essential for fostering creativity and innovation in generating solutions, and initiative is then required to bring those ideas to life.

Based on the information provided by Skills Development Scotland regarding the concept of skills, I am prone to believe that skills can be acquired either through classroom training in a formal system or outside the formal system by being taught by an individual or a group of people who have experience in that area. Hence, in this context, I concur with [Magidi and Mahiya \(2021\)](#) that a skill is the basic ability to adjust to a given life situation or environment. If this is the case, I can say that the value of a person's skills does not depend on whether they were acquired in a formal classroom setting or outside the formal system. Instead, the value of skills is measured by how effectively they enable the individual to navigate challenging environments and solve problems they encounter in their social and economic life. Additionally, [Palmer \(2018\)](#) insists that, People gain skills throughout their lives

through non-traditional methods, such as watching television (TV), using the internet, listening to the radio, using smartphones, reading, playing computer games, engaging in sports, or participating in community clubs, associations, and societies. Additionally, skills can be learned from friends or family members, such as being shown new techniques for crop irrigation or learning how to operate a new machine from a neighbor.

In many developing countries, including Tanzania, the formal education system is not the only source of skilled labor. For the case of Tanzania, employment off the farm in small household enterprises of the informal sector is growing much faster than in the formal wage sector and is helping absorb the wave of youth now entering the workforce (Adams, De Silva, & Razmara, 2013). A significant number of young people develop technical and creative skills outside the traditional educational framework. These individuals, often known as informal sector workers or self-taught artisans, contribute crucially to the local economy through various trades such as carpentry, welding, tailoring, automotive mechanics, motorcycle repair, home electrical wiring, and art. Zewdie (2024) has generally describes the informal sector as encompassing economic activities that are not regulated or protected by formal laws and regulations. This sector includes a diverse range of businesses, such as street vendors, small-scale manufacturers, freelancers, and self-employed individuals. Operating outside formal employment parameters, it often lacks legal recognition and social protection. In Tanzania, the informal sector is extensive, covering numerous unregulated activities and providing employment and income to many individuals, particularly those who may not have had access to formal education.

On the other hand, due to the significant employment problem, especially in the context of Tanzania and particularly for graduates of various training institutions, the informal sector has also become a refuge for those who have formal education and recognized qualifications from the government in addressing the employment issue. For example, many graduates who have completed their studies at institutions are now benefiting from employment in the informal sector. Others have learned driving of cars, motorcycles, as well as various types of technical skills informally, and are sustaining their livelihoods through these skills, which are different from the qualifications they studied for in formal education. Zewdie (2024) argues that the informal sector has become a viable solution to the growing issue of graduate unemployment in today's competitive job market. As traditional employment opportunities diminish, the informal sector offers an alternative avenue for employment. García-Peñalvo, Griffiths, Johnson, Sharples, and Sherlock (2014) highlight the importance of informal learning, noting that it increasingly contributes to various fields. They advocate for the enhancement of informal learning practices within formal contexts (the informalization of formal learning) and the recognition of knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired informally (the formalization of informal learning).

Conversely, despite their proficiency, informal sector workers face significant barriers. International Labour Organization (1996–2024) reports that beyond a high incidence of poverty, informal economies are also characterized by severe decent work deficits. For instance, low quality employment, inadequate social protection, poor governance and low productivity are some of the obstacles that workers and enterprises face when caught in the informality trap. For the case of Tanzania, the tension between formal education and practical expertise is evident because the education system prioritizes formal qualifications and certifications. This emphasis marginalizes individuals with substantial informal skills, affecting their employment opportunities and overall national development. Hence, International Labour Organization (1996–2024) concludes that, without formalization, decent work for all and equity in society will remain an illusion.

Thus, in order to discuss issues related to the challenges facing skilled laborers in the informal sector in securing formal employment opportunities, this paper is grounded in two cases involving informal skilled laborers I encountered in different locations in Mbeya City, Tanzania. These cases illustrate the challenges faced by

individuals with valuable practical skills but lacking formal recognition, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to integrating informal expertise into the formal economy. The cases are as follows.

Concerning the first case. *During a driving course lesson, I encountered a situation where several students, despite their extensive driving experience surpassing that of the instructor, attended the class. Initially, I questioned why these experienced individuals sought formal training. While pondering these questions, one day, my fellow student asked a question that required considerable experience to answer adequately. The instructor attempted to respond but not to a satisfactory level. However, a student with over twenty years of diverse driving experience, including handling both large and small vehicles across various terrains, stood up and provided a satisfactory answer. After answering the question well, the student provided additional explanations that addressed my query. In his explanation, he stated that he pursued the course to obtain a government-recognized certificate essential for applying for official driving positions. Without this certificate, his driving experience would not be acknowledged, despite his extensive background. He also mentioned a recent challenge where one cannot renew their driver's license without showing a training certificate from a registered and government-recognized institution, disregarding previous experience. He added that to become a good driver, one must first learn on the streets and only come to school to learn perhaps the legal aspects to avoid being harassed by traffic police. He concluded by saying that experience makes one a good driver, not just a certificate, as someone with a good classroom certificate can be outdone by someone who learned on the streets.*

Looking on the first case concerning the driving class, it underscores that students with extensive driving experience sought formal certification to meet regulatory requirements and access official employment opportunities. Despite their practical skills surpassing those of the instructor, the lack of certification was a significant barrier. This finding calls attention to a systemic issue where practical experience is undervalued compared to formal credentials.

On the other hand, *the second case involves an experienced electrical technician who, despite his extensive practical experience, lacked formal certification. I encountered this case when my friend introduced me to a technician reputed for his exceptional electrical wiring work in numerous buildings. Despite his extensive experience and practical skills, the technician did not have formal schooling or certification in electrical wiring. He explained that he learned the trade informally through practice and volunteering, which enabled him to achieve significant personal success such as being able to send his children to good schools, possessing a nice house, and having many other projects that bring him good money. However, he faced challenges in securing government or institutional contracts due to the lack of formal certification. He informed that, many certificate holders don't have the experience we who learned on the streets do, which is why you see many government projects being substandard. He further told that, ironically, many government officials prefer the work of informal technicians over certified professionals for their own projects, highlighting a discrepancy between formal qualifications and practical skill.*

Based on the second case concerning the technician's case, it highlights the challenges faced by informal experts in securing government contracts and institutional recognition. Despite his extensive experience and successful projects, the lack of formal certification limited his opportunities. The technician's experience illustrates a paradox where informal skills are undervalued, and formal certifications are prioritized, even when informal practitioners deliver superior outcomes.

Therefore, drawing on two case studies; a driving class experience and an electrical technician's perspective, this paper intends to address the challenges associated with the recognition and employment of informal skills in Tanzania. Specifically, it examines how the lack of formal certification affects informal skilled individuals and their ability to contribute to national development. Furthermore, it explores the systemic undervaluation of practical experience compared to formal qualifications, which hinders the effective utilization of informal skilled workers and affects their ability to secure employment opportunities in various sectors, thereby impacting national development.

2. THEORY UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

The study is guided by the theory of Human Capital. This theory was developed by [Becker \(1964\)](#). According to [Becker \(1964\)](#) the theory emerged from a study aimed at estimating the monetary return on college and high-school education in the United States. To provide context for these estimates, the theory of investment in human capital was briefly formulated. This theory asserts that skills and knowledge enhance economic productivity and individual value. Becker acknowledges that on-the-job and school training are not the only activities that increase real income by boosting a person's knowledge. Instead, a range of factors can influence both earnings and consumption. However, the theory primarily examines how investments in human capital—such as education, on-the-job skills training, healthcare, migration, and regional price and income considerations—affect potential earnings and psychic income. The theory suggests that economic earnings generally show a positive correlation with education and skill levels, taking into account different cultures and political regimes.

Considering the emphasis of the theory based on its central idea in relation to the current study's focus, it is clear that the theory appears to have significant limitations, particularly its traditional emphasis on formal education, which may not fully capture the value of informal expertise that your study seeks to highlight. The theory tends to focus on economic outcomes, potentially overlooking the broader social and cultural contributions of unformalized skills. Moreover, the theory may not adequately address the socio-cultural and political factors specific to the Tanzanian context, which are crucial for understanding the development and recognition of informal skills. As a result, the theory might require adaptation or supplementation to fully align with the objectives of your study.

However, despite the shortcomings within this theory, it still has its merits based on the current study's focus since it emphasizes the importance of education and skills development in enhancing economic productivity, which aligns with your focus on recognizing and leveraging both formal and informal expertise for national development. It also supports the idea that all types of skills, including unformalized ones, can contribute to economic growth, providing a solid foundation for exploring their role in national development. Additionally, its link between skills and economic outcomes can inform policy recommendations, advocating for the recognition and formalization of informal skills.

Thus, considering the strengths and weaknesses of this theory, it remains a valuable guiding framework for the discussion in this study because it addresses both the formal and informal sectors, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of each, especially in contributing to national economic development for Tanzania.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design to provide an in-depth analysis of two distinct scenarios. The first scenario involves a driving class experience, with interviews conducted with a driving student and instructor during a driving course, as witnessed by the researcher. The second scenario involves an electrical technician's perspective, with interviews conducted with a technician and the researcher regarding his experiences and challenges related to formal certification and employment opportunities. According to [Yin \(2003\)](#) a researcher can conduct a research based on either single-case design or multiple-case designs. However, he advised that while any design can lead to a successful case study, researchers should prefer multiple-case designs over single-case designs when they have the choice and resources. Even conducting a "two-case" study can enhance the likelihood of a successful outcome compared to a single-case design. Single-case designs are riskier because they place all the focus on one instance, while the analytic benefits of having multiple cases can be significant.

Thus, based on Yin (2003) argument, the selection of two different cases with similar challenges in this study is imperative because it enhances the validity and robustness of the study's findings by allowing for a comparative analysis that strengthens the study's conclusions. The selection of multiple-case designs in this study also aims to provide substantial analytic benefits, enabling the identification consistent patterns and differences, which enriches the understanding of the challenges under investigation. Additionally, studying two cases increases generalizability of results, making them more applicable to other similar contexts, while also mitigating the risks associated with relying on a single case, which can be vulnerable to unique or anomalous factors. Hence, from the two cases, themes were drawn and thematically analysed focusing on understanding the impact of formal certification on employment and recognizing the role of informal skills in professional practice.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses key themes drawn from the two cases outlined in section one, which provides background information on the problem. In analyzing the two cases, I discovered many issues that, if discussed individually, could fill an entire book. However, considering the conventions of academic article writing, I have focused on presenting and discussing some of the most important issues raised by the respondents through these two cases as follows.

4.1. Lack of Formal Recognition and Certification

Despite having extensive experience and skills, informal skilled workers often lack official recognition. Without formal education and recognized certification, their qualifications are not acknowledged by official bodies or potential employers. The truth remains that many informal skilled laborers do not have a high level of formal education or training from government-recognized institutions through which they can acquire skills training and receive certification for completing such training. The [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) \(2024\)](#) confirms that informal workers generally have lower levels of schooling compared to formal workers. Globally, nearly 45% of informal workers have only a primary level of education, while only 7% of formal workers fall into this category. Conversely, a minority of informal workers have tertiary education (less than 7% globally but close to one-third in developed countries), whereas about one-third of formally employed workers have higher education ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)). In Tanzania, informal workers are typically younger than their formal sector counterparts, particularly in urban areas. They possess some formal education, although less than formal sector workers, and are almost as likely as private formal sector workers to have undergone training, predominantly in the form of apprenticeships ([Adams et al., 2013](#)). However, the lack of formal recognition and certification for informal workers, who often have lower educational attainment, results in limited access to formal employment opportunities. This leads to significant income disparities, skill underutilization, and economic marginalization. The exclusion of these workers not only perpetuates poverty but also hinders overall economic growth by not fully leveraging the workforce's potential. Additionally, the absence of formal certification creates significant barriers to employment, particularly in formal sectors such as government jobs, where certification is a prerequisite. Consequently, skilled informal workers struggle to secure government contracts or positions in organizations that require formal qualifications.

4.2. Employment Barriers and Economic Impact

According to [OECD/ILO \(2019\)](#) the majority of the global employed population works in the informal sector, totaling about 2 billion workers, which represents approximately 61% of all workers, including those in agriculture,

and 50% excluding agriculture. Informal employment accounts for 70% of all jobs in developing and emerging countries, compared to about 18% in developed countries. There is considerable regional variation, with informality comprising 86% of employment in Africa, around 68% in the Arab States and Asia and the Pacific, 40% in the Americas, and 25% in Europe and Central Asia. Globally, 81% of all enterprises is informal. According to these statistics, the informal sector should not be overlooked in any way, especially when discussing employment creation for the significant economic development of any nation globally. Moreover, according to these statistics, it is clear that the informal sector contributes significantly to reducing the unemployment rate among people in many societies, ultimately boosting individual and community economies, perhaps even more than the formal sector, despite the fact that informal skilled laborers are not officially recognized as professionals in the formal system.

For instance, the requirement for formal certification not only creates employment barriers but also limits the potential for higher earnings and job security for informal skilled laborers. While informal workers can support their families through their skills, their economic potential remains restricted without formal recognition. According to [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) \(2024\)](#) informal sources of knowledge and skill acquisition—such as learning from family, the workplace, informal apprenticeships, community involvement, cooperatives, or through hands-on experience—are prevalent in the informal economy. However, many skills gained through these informal methods are not well understood or officially recognized. This impedes informal workers' access to other formal training opportunities, as well as formal jobs. Thus, the act of not recognizing informal skills and then forcing individuals to obtain official certificates to legitimize the knowledge they acquired outside the formal system, on the other hand, it acts as a substantial barrier to entry into more lucrative and secure job markets, effectively excluding individuals who have acquired their skills through informal means. Hence, this situation underscores the economic impact of the certification requirement, which hinders the upward mobility of skilled workers.

4.3. Perception and Value of Experience

There is a prevailing perception that formal certification is necessary for demonstrating competence, even though practical experience may be more valuable. Although there is a general lack of trust and recognition of informal skilled workers' abilities from official bodies and potential clients, which impacts their ability to secure work despite their extensive experience, [Kucera and Roncolato \(2008\)](#) posit that some informal workers are not in poverty, while some formal workers are. Therefore, some informal jobs are preferable and can offer better incomes than formal ones. It is thus unremarkable that some workers might prefer informal to formal work.

Based on the experience of Tanzania, skilled workers in the informal sector often have more practical work experience compared to those coming directly from universities. This difference can be attributed to the hands-on training and real-world exposure that informal workers gain through their work, which may not be as pronounced in academic settings. Perhaps it is due to this experience in Tanzania that many people, including government officials, find themselves preferring to use experienced street craftsmen for their personal work rather than those from the formal system, as illustrated in the case of the household electrical wiring technician. For example, in the implementation of government projects, particularly construction projects, the government of Tanzania introduced a cost-cutting policy starting in 2015. To achieve this goal, the government established the Force Account mechanism as the best approach where they use their own cheap laborers and resources for projects' implementation ([Mbembati, 2023](#)). Through this system, particularly in the procurement and payment of skilled labor, the government has, since 2016, directed councils to use the Force Account method, especially in the construction, reconstruction, demolition, repair, or renovation of public buildings. Sometimes, the craftsmen

employed are not necessarily required to have professional certificates from recognized institutions, as long as they have the experience and ability to perform quality work and complete the job on time at the lowest reasonable costs since there are no sufficient civil engineers or civil technicians to supervise the force account works (Matto, 2021; Mayani & Mwangike, 2024). Mayani and Mwangike (2024) conclude regarding force account procedure that it provides opportunity to the community to participate in construction as laborers (skilled and unskilled), suppliers and providers of various goods and services to the projects such as construction materials, labour, catering services for laborers at construction site.

Thus, the government's decision to utilize informal skilled laborers alongside formal skilled laborers in some of its projects through the force account approach clearly demonstrates that the workforce of informal skilled laborers is still needed and plays a crucial role in the construction of government projects. This is despite the fact that they do not possess officially recognized skill certificates, as long as they can perform with quality due to their extensive experience in various tasks, unlike fresh graduated technicians who lack experience.

4.4. Costs and Legal Knowledge Limitation

I agree that many informal skilled laborers lack legal knowledge regarding the work they perform daily as professionals. This is because they learn more through practical experience on the streets rather than through theoretical knowledge, which often involves legal rules and regulations typically taught in classrooms by experts within the formal education system. For instance, in the case of driving experience, it was revealed that many drivers with long-term experience, despite their extensive driving history, are required to show proof of completion of formal driving training from government-recognized institutions when their licenses expire and they seek renewal. They are often accused of driving without knowing the laws. This situation raises many questions for someone who has been driving for many years, only to be told that they do not know the regulations of the job they have been doing all this time. To fulfill this requirement, they are forced to seek out driving schools in order to obtain formal certification, which costs them both time and money, contrary to their expectations. In this regard, Mugoda, Esaku, Nakimu, and Bbaale (2020) suggest that, informal sector businesses should not be perceived as illegal entities but rather complementary effort by an increasingly enterprising population in the country. However, I admit that informal skilled laborers need training aimed at empowering them to understand legal requirements and regulations, so they can know the legal boundaries of their work and ultimately enable them to perform their duties in accordance with professional ethics, just like those in the formal system.

4.5. Preferences and Policy Challenges

García-Peñalvo et al. (2014) report that there is a mismatch between the enthusiasm of policy makers and other actors for initiatives to support the validation of informal learning, and the lack of adoption of systems in practice. Through both cases, it was discovered that in Tanzania broader policy and regulatory frameworks continue to prioritize formal education and certification over practical experience, leading to suboptimal outcomes in various projects. However, it was noted that despite the lack of formal recognition, informal skilled workers are often preferred for private projects due to their proven practical skills and experience. This preference highlights a disconnect between official certification requirements and practical realities. Adams et al. (2013) unveil that, skills for the informal sector are often neglected as a policy issue. In my view, the truth remains that, what works for the formal sector will also work for the informal sector. Halliday-Wynes and Beddie (2009) support the idea that the informal sector, which provides informal learning opportunities, allows individuals to engage in various educational pursuits and access learning solutions not available through more formal channels. They conclude that informal

learning is a crucial component of workforce development and should be integrated into broader policies related to work-related training. Hence, these policies exacerbate the challenges faced by informal workers, reinforcing the barriers to entry into more secure job markets.

5. GENERAL CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The informal sector in Tanzania is a vital component of the economy, providing livelihoods for many and contributing to national development. However, the analysis of the themes from the two cases highlights the pervasive challenges faced by informal skilled workers due to the lack of formal recognition and certification. These challenges manifest as significant barriers to employment, economic advancement, and social recognition. The requirement for formal certification not only undervalues practical experience but also imposes additional financial and time burdens on these workers. The disconnect between formal certification requirements and practical realities underscores the need for policy reforms that prioritize practical experience alongside formal education. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a more inclusive workforce that acknowledges and leverages the diverse skills and experiences of all workers.

Hence, this paper recommends the following. First, the government should introduce a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system to formally acknowledge the skills and experience of informal skilled workers. This system should allow workers to gain certification based on demonstrated competencies rather than solely through formal education pathways. Second, the establishment of accessible and affordable alternative certification pathways should be considered. This could include partnerships with industry bodies, community organizations, and vocational training centers. These programs should be modular and flexible, recognizing and building upon existing skills. They will help connect informal skilled workers with certified professionals, providing hands-on learning opportunities as pathways to certification by leveraging the expertise of experienced workers. Third, financial support and legal training should be provided. Financial support could include grants or low-interest loans for informal workers seeking certification. Training support could be offered through targeted legal and regulatory programs to ensure these workers understand industry requirements without needing extensive formal education. Last but not least, there should be purposeful policy reforms aimed at recognizing practical experience and informal learning as valid certification pathways. This would involve advocating for regulatory bodies to implement flexible certification processes and reduce the emphasis on traditional formal education.

Therefore, by implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for informal skilled workers, enhancing their recognition, employment opportunities, and economic stability. This approach will not only benefit the workers but also contribute to a more robust and versatile workforce, better equipped to meet the demands of various industries, thereby supporting national economic development vision.

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