

Mapping Informal Food Businesses in South Africa: Lessons from the Field



The FoodSAMSA consortium (<https://foodsamsa.samrc.ac.za/>)

Read our accompanying qualitative study here:



Contributors

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Background

- The risk of diet-related diseases is influenced by individuals' food choices, which are shaped by their environmental and socio-economic conditions¹.
- Access to nutritious foods depends largely on the community's geographic location and the available food environment or nutritional landscape^{2,3}.
- In South Africa, many people rely on informal food sources – particularly street vendors and spaza (convenience) shops – to meet their dietary needs^{4,5}.
- Spaza or convenience shops are informal community-based stores, often operated from private homes, that offer a limited range of groceries and typically lack formal registration and basic service infrastructure^{6,8}.
- Spaza shops in South Africa present a paradox.
 - While they are indispensable to many consumers and play a key role in enhancing food security^{1,3}.
 - They also pose notable health risks within township communities^{9,11}.

Aim

This work package aimed to explore the health paradox associated with informal food businesses in South Africa, focusing particularly on spaza/convenience shops in three Cape Town communities: Gugulethu, Nyanga, and Kensington

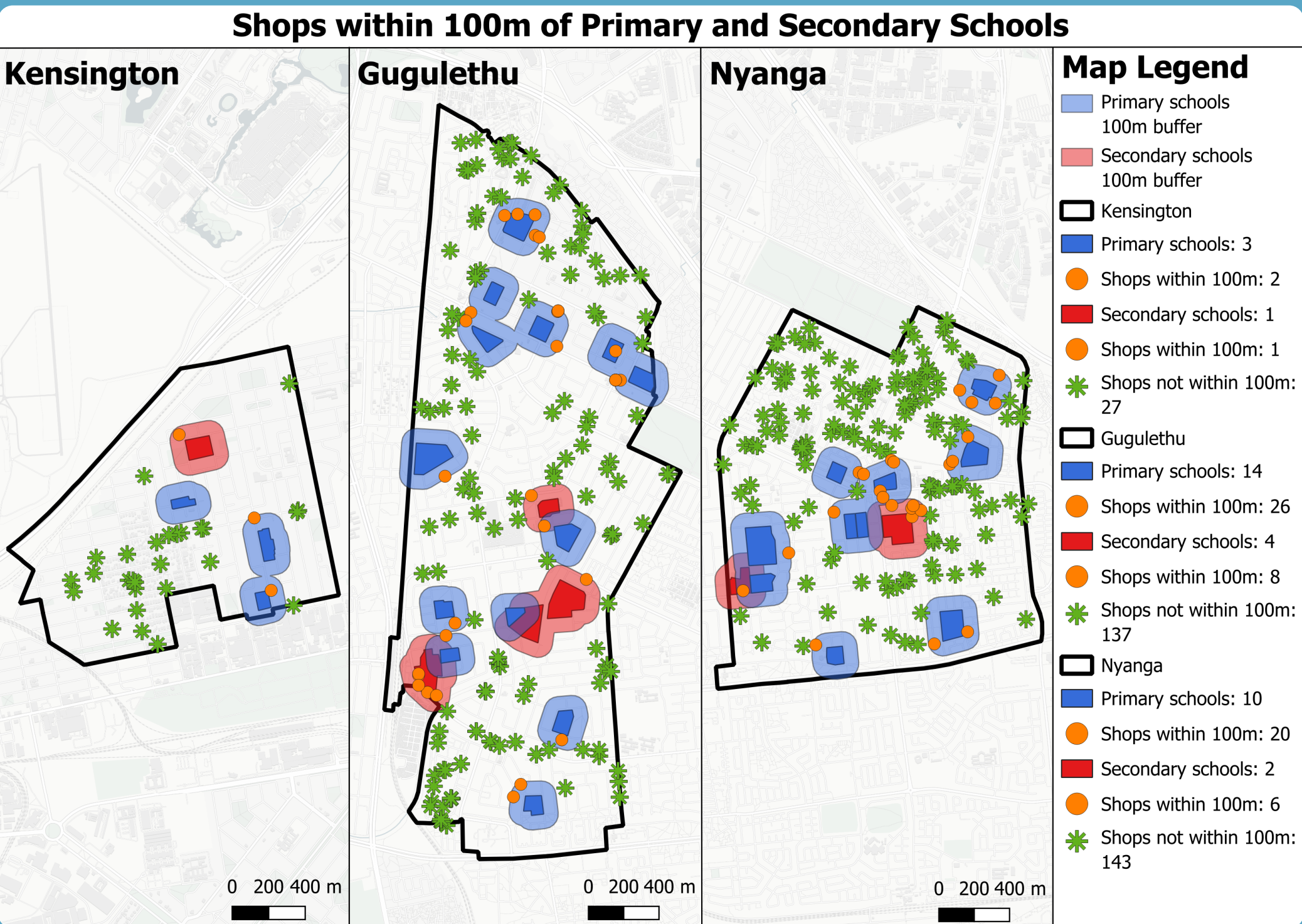
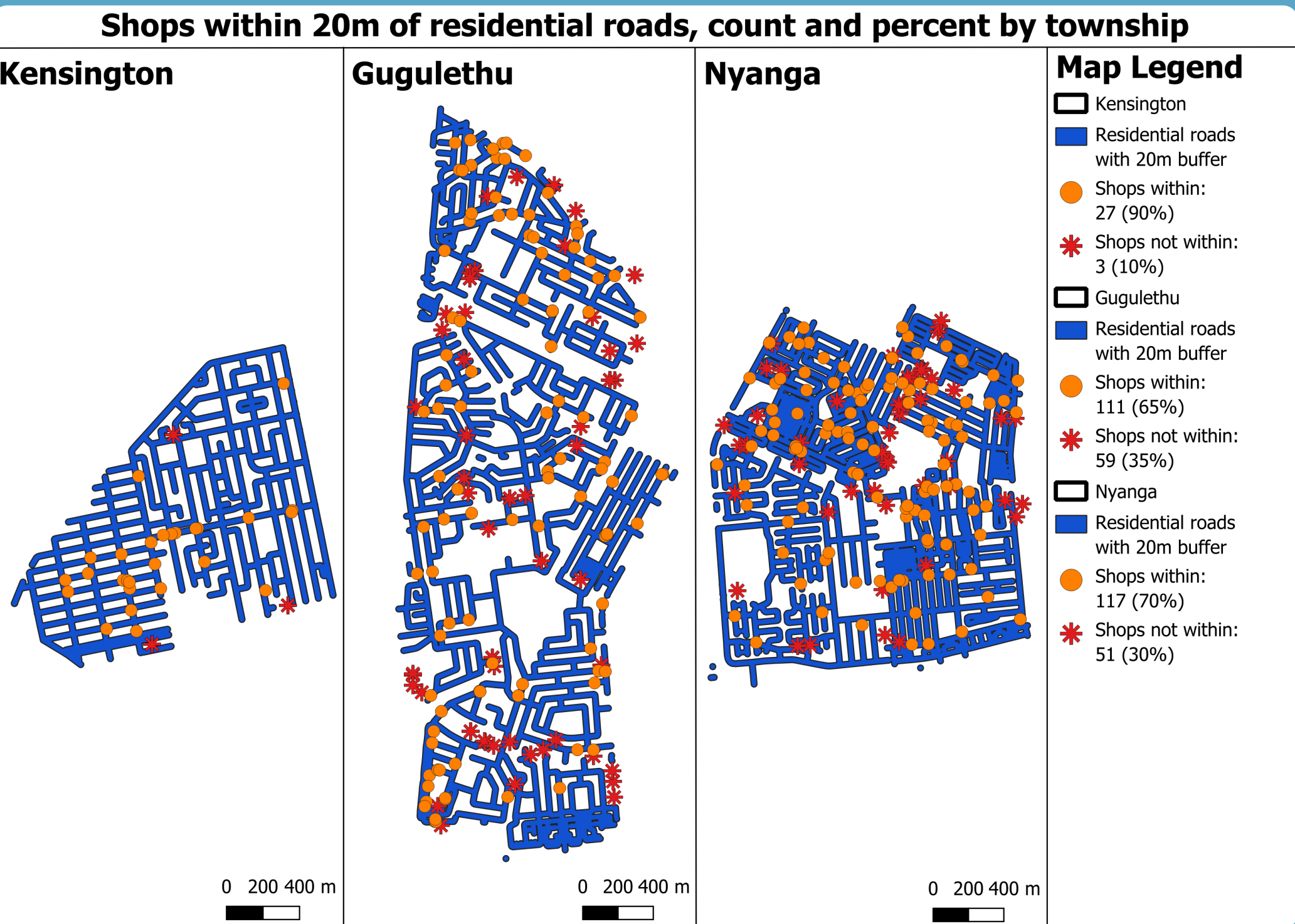
Method

A mixed-methods approach was used to examine the nature of informal food businesses, with a specific focus on spaza shops. This combined:

- geospatial mapping of the location of these shops
- surveys and in-depth interviews with spaza shop owners and consumers
- direct observations of shop layout and day-to-day spaza shop operations
- a review of relevant peer-reviewed and "grey" literature—including academic studies and latest media reports—to capture the broader situation of spaza shops in South Africa

Results

The ground level view!



Spaza Shop Business Operations

- Spaza shop mapping in the three communities resulted into 368 actively operating shops in Gugulethu, Nyanga, and Kensington
- Shop owners/shopkeepers were mostly male (86%)
 - Most shop owners/shopkeepers were non-South Africans (86%) [mostly from Somalia, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan]
 - Shops operated 7 days a week for > 8 hours per day
 - Less than half of shop owners reported having a certificate of acceptability from the Department of Health (43%)
 - More than half had no permits, concession letters, or leases to sell food (57%).
 - None of the shop owners were aware of any policies or by-laws regarding food sales in spaza shops
 - Perceptions of safety varied, with most described the area where they operate as safe most of the time (57%), while others considered it very dangerous (29%) or often dangerous (14%)

Food items sold by shops

- Shops sold a wide range of food items, including **bread** (63%), **fresh produce** (58%), **frozen foods** (chicken, sausage, fish, vegetables etc.) (42%), **grains and cereals** (incl. pasta) (62%), **snacks and sweets** (63%), dairy and alternatives (61%), eggs (61%) **protein sources** (61%), **condiments and spices** (63%), and **beverages** (63%).
- During our visits, we observed that the most frequently sold items were staples like rice, sweets and chocolates, milk, cooking oil, soft drinks, water, energy drinks, and bread
- Shop owners reported that they primarily stocked and sold items most purchased by their customers

Spaza shop media news

Reported poisoning cases and hospitalizations

- In 2024, eight children in Soweto died after consuming snacks purchased from a spaza shop (South African Broadcasting Corporation [SABC] News, 2024).
- Additional reports surfaced of multiple child deaths in other provinces, allegedly linked to snacks bought from spaza shops. These cases sparked official investigations and growing community outrage (YouTube, 2024).
- In 2025, an eight-year-old boy from Soweto was hospitalized in intensive care after consuming snacks from a spaza shop, underscoring that such incidents and investigations are continuing into 2025 (SABC News, 2025; YouTube, 2025).

Official investigations and outcomes

- In 2024, inspections by the National Consumer Commission (NCC) uncovered expired food products in several spaza shops (SABC News, 2024).
- NCC blitz operations further revealed expired and poorly labelled stock in shops across Soweto and Buffalo City (YouTube, 2024).
- In Ekurhuleni, Gauteng Province, health inspectors confiscated non-compliant items, citing issues with licensing and food storage practices (SABC News, 2024; YouTube, 2024).
- Authorities closed a spaza shop in Naledi after discovering that the owner was an undocumented foreign national operating without a license (SABC News, 2024).
- Similar closures were reported in other provinces following suspected food-poisoning deaths, illustrating how enforcement actions were carried out on the ground (YouTube, 2024).
- The South African Police uncovered two unauthorized warehouses in Durban's Bluff area stocked with expired goods (SABC News, 2024). Raids extended further up the food supply chain, where large caches of expired stock were allegedly discovered (YouTube, 2025).
- During raids, authorities also uncovered the sale of counterfeit or fake food products (news features, 2024).
- Investigations highlighted the presence of outdated and counterfeit consumables in some township outlets, sparking a wider debate about the closure of non-compliant shops (YouTube, 2024; SABC News, 2024).
- Large-scale raids at warehouses and spaza shops across South Africa revealed not only expired goods but also counterfeit items, raising further concerns about food safety (SABC News, 2024; YouTube, 2024).

Key Insights for Business Model Development

1 Spaza shops play a crucial role in the local economy, creating employment opportunities within communities, supporting livelihoods, and helping to reduce unemployment.

2 They function as essential convenience stores, serving township and rural consumers who rely on them for daily necessities such as groceries, snacks, and household items – offering accessible and affordable goods.

3 The informal retail sector, particularly spaza shops, is a major economic contributor, estimated to add around R900 billion to the township economy, underscoring their role as key economic drivers at the grassroots level.

4 Consumers value spaza shops for their affordability, accessibility, and trustworthiness, as they provide safe, low-cost products while stimulating local entrepreneurship and economic activity.

5 Despite their importance, concerns have emerged regarding food safety, following reports of food poisoning possibly linked to intentional contamination. This has raised public anxiety, especially since many shop owners are non-South Africans.

6 The government's R500 million Spaza Shop Support Fund demonstrates recognition of their significance, promoting formalization, business growth, and long-term sustainability to empower small-scale entrepreneurs in this sector.

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