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Micro Snack Enterprises and Youth Employment: Evidence from Urban Africa

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Abstract

Youth unemployment persists across many African cities despite policy attention and episodic programmes. This paper evaluates whether micro snack enterprises, specifically plantain chips and chinchin ventures, function as employment incubators for young people in dense urban economies. Anchored in Informal Sector Theory, Youth Empowerment Theory, and Human Capital Theory, we implement a mixed-methods study in Lagos (Ikeja), combining structured surveys (n = 300) and semi-structured interviews (n = 20). Reliability and construct checks indicate acceptable psychometrics (Cronbach's α = 0.84; KMO = 0.79; Bartlett p < 0.001). Descriptives show that 78% of workers are aged 18–35; mean firm size is 4.6 employees. Multivariable OLS models reveal that access to microfinance (β = 0.23, p = 0.003), technical training (β = 0.19, p = 0.011), and regulatory ease (β = 0.17, p = 0.018) are independently associated with profitability; model fit R^2 = 0.58. Robustness checks and sensitivity tests preserve significance. Qualitative data triangulate mechanisms: low entry costs, short working-capital cycles, and rich value-chain spillovers. We conclude that micro snack enterprises absorb youth labour and stimulate grassroots incomes, but scale is constrained by finance, infrastructure, and informality frictions. Policy priorities include targeted micro-credit, food-hygiene/production training, light-touch formalisation, and micro-industrial clusters aligned with youth enterprise. The findings generalise to comparable African cities with thick informal markets and similar regulatory conditions.

Keywords: *Chinchi, Entrepreneurship, Lagos, Micro-enterprises, Plantain chips, Youth employment.*

Introduction

Across much of sub-Saharan Africa, formal wage employment has not kept pace with rapid urbanisation and a surging youth cohort, pushing many young people into self-employment and casual work. The International Labour Organization estimates that informal employment accounts for about 61% of the world's employed population and an even higher share in developing regions, underscoring the centrality of the informal economy to livelihoods and poverty reduction [1]. Nigeria illustrates these dynamics vividly: official labour force releases in 2023–2024 reported single-digit unemployment using updated ILO-aligned methods, yet independent commentary and market diagnostics cautioned that headline rates likely understate under-employment and job quality challenges faced by youths in cities such as Lagos [2-4]. These tensions heighten the importance of evidence on practical, scalable pathways that can absorb youth labour while raising productivity and incomes.

Within this context, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are widely viewed as engines of job creation and inclusion. Nigeria's most recent joint MSME survey indicates that MSMEs comprise over 96% of businesses, contribute roughly 46% to GDP, and account for about 88% of employment,

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highlighting their systemic importance for labour absorption and household incomes [5]. Yet "MSMEs" encompass highly heterogeneous activities; to inform targeted policy, it is vital to disaggregate sectors and business models that demonstrate especially strong employment intensity per unit of capital.

Urban street-food and micro-snack enterprises, including producers of plantain chips and *chinchin*, are emblematic. They operate on short working-capital cycles, have low technological and regulatory entry barriers, and map onto dense, predictable demand among commuters, students, and low- to middle-income households. Comparative food-economy studies across African cities show that street-food systems provide inexpensive calories while sustaining myriad micro-businesses in processing, retail, logistics, packaging, and inputs, thereby generating direct and indirect jobs along compact value chains [6, 7]. At the same time, the literature emphasises persistent constraints, food-safety compliance, infrastructure (energy, water), and exposure to enforcement shocks, that can suppress scale and productivity unless addressed through appropriate enabling measures [6, 7].

Lagos, West Africa's commercial hub, is a natural setting for analysing these mechanisms. The study focal area, Ikeja Local Government Area, combines administrative functions, dense residential neighbourhoods, and major consumption nodes (e.g., malls, motor parks, office corridors). Recent demographic projections place Ikeja's population at ~470,200 (2022), with high density and purchasing power conducive to fast-moving consumer goods and convenience foods [8]. These urban form characteristics, footfall concentration, multi-modal transit flows, and mixed land use, typically correlate with high micro-enterprise churn and rapid cash turnover, making Ikeja analytically useful and policy-relevant for other African cities with similar morphology.

Despite a robust body of work linking MSMEs to employment, four gaps remain at the intersection of youth livelihoods and micro-snack ventures. First, many Nigerian studies pool heterogeneous MSMEs, obscuring sector-specific dynamics (input costs, perishability, hygiene compliance) that shape employment intensity and earnings in food micro-processing. Second, few papers quantify both direct and indirect employment (e.g., suppliers of plantain, frying oil, packaging, last-mile vendors), even though multiplier effects are likely material in dense urban markets. Third, rigorous analyses that blend micro-data with econometric identification (e.g., multivariable models with robustness checks) are comparatively scarce for snack sub-sectors. Fourth, there is limited place-based evidence within metropolitan Lagos that distinguishes business environments across local government jurisdictions (permits, enforcement practices, infrastructure reliability). Addressing these gaps helps move from generic MSME advocacy toward actionable, sector-specific policy.

Theoretically, our analysis is anchored in three complementary perspectives. Informal Sector Theory explains the absorptive role of low-entry, labour-intensive activities when formal job creation lags, but also the vulnerabilities induced by limited protections and credit frictions [1]. Youth Empowerment perspectives emphasise how access to assets (training, micro-finance, networks) enhances agency, entrepreneurial efficacy, and earnings trajectories for young men and women. Human Capital Theory predicts that even marginal upgrades in production skills (quality control, hygiene standards, lean processes) can raise productivity and profitability, enabling firms to hire additional workers. Together, these lenses motivate our empirical focus on resource access (finance, training), operating context (infrastructure, regulation), and outcomes (employment, profits), as well as our mixed-methods design that connects

quantitative patterns to mechanism-rich narratives.

Empirically, we investigate whether micro snack enterprises act as employment incubators for youths and what factors condition their performance. Using a stratified sample of plantain-chips and *chinchin* ventures in Ikeja, we combine a structured survey (n = 300) with 20 semi-structured interviews. We report psychometric properties (e.g., Cronbach's alpha), model profitability as a function of finance, training, and regulatory frictions, and probe transmission channels (working-capital cycles, procurement–processing–retail linkages). To strengthen inference and portability, we apply robust standard errors and conduct sensitivity checks (alternative specifications; outlier exclusions). This approach addresses calls in the MSME literature for granular, sector-specific evidence with transparent statistical reporting and triangulated qualitative insights.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it provides sector-specific micro-evidence on snack producers, a sizeable but under-studied segment of Nigeria's MSME landscape, quantifying both direct and indirect youth employment. Second, it estimates the marginal associations of finance, training, and regulatory environment with enterprise profitability, offering levers for policy design (e.g., youth-targeted micro-credit, food-hygiene and small-batch processing courses, light-touch formalisation, micro-industrial clusters). Third, by situating findings in Ikeja while detailing contextual features that matter (density, transit flows, enforcement practices), the study outlines conditions for external validity to comparable African cities with thick informal food markets.

Materials and Methods

Study Setting and Design

The study was conducted in Ikeja Local Government Area (LGA), Lagos State, Nigeria, a mixed residential–commercial hub that concentrates retail corridors (e.g., Computer Village), offices, malls, markets and transport nodes conducive to dense micro-enterprise activity. We employed a convergent mixed-methods design combining a cross-sectional survey of micro snack enterprises with semi-structured interviews of key informants. The design enables breadth (quantitative estimation) and depth (mechanism-focused narratives) with analytic triangulation to enhance validity [5-7].

Target Population and Eligibility

The quantitative population comprised owners or managers of micro snack enterprises producing plantain chips or chinchin within Ikeja LGA. Inclusion criteria:

1. Business operational for ≥6 months.
2. At least one paid or unpaid worker besides the owner at any point in the past three months.
3. Operator aged ≥18 years.

Exclusion criteria: wholesale-only distributors without in-house processing; businesses outside snack processing (e.g., pastries without frying).

Sampling Frame, Sample Size and Power

A rapid mapping exercise with local associations and snowball listing generated a working frame stratified by product type (plantain chips vs. *chinchin*) and trading locus (market/mall vicinity vs. street-side cluster). We then drew a stratified systematic sample targeting n = 300 surveys (180 plantain-chips; 120 chinchin) and n = 20 interviews (owners, association leaders, municipal officers, micro-finance officers).

A minimum survey size of n ≈ 278 would detect a small-to-moderate multiple-regression effect ($f^2 = 0.06$) with $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, and up to 10 predictors [8, 9]. We set n = 300 to allow for design inefficiency and missingness. For proportions (e.g., youth share of workers), Cochran's formula with p = 0.5, e = 0.06 yields n ≈ 267, further justifying the target [10].

Data Collection Procedures

Fieldwork took place April–May 2025 across Ikeja City Mall environs, Computer Village, Allen/Opebi corridors, and Alade Market. Trained enumerators administered paper-based questionnaires in English or Nigerian Pidgin (as preferred). Average survey length: ~20 minutes. Response rate was 83% (300 usable of 361 approached). To assess non-response bias, we compared early vs. late respondents on key outcomes (profits, employees) using t-tests; differences were non-significant ($p > 0.10$) [11]. For the qualitative arm, 20 semi-structured interviews (30–45 minutes) were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Measures and Instrument Development

The instrument contained five blocks: (A) demographics and enterprise profile; (B) employment structure; (C) operations and constraints; (D) finance and training; (E) outcomes. Scales were adapted from MSME and informal-sector toolkits and prior studies, then refined via expert review for content validity [6, 12-14]. All attitudinal items used a uniform 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree … 5 = strongly agree).

Primary Outcomes

1. Youth employment (count): number of workers aged 18–35 currently engaged (direct employment).
2. Profitability (continuous): self-reported monthly net profit (naira); for modelling we used *ln*(profit + 1) to address skewness.
3. Employment intensity: employees per ₦100,000 of monthly turnover.

Key Predictors

1. Access to micro-finance: binary (ever accessed external micro-credit in past 12 months: yes/no) and intensity (loan size category).
2. Technical training: cumulative hours of training in the past 24 months (food hygiene, small-batch processing, packaging, business skills).
3. Regulatory ease index ($\alpha = 0.78$): three items on perceived clarity of permits, incidence of harassment/fines (reverse-scored), and ease of inspection processes.
4. Infrastructure reliability index ($\alpha = 0.75$): electricity reliability, water access, and fuel availability disruptions (reverse-scored).

Controls

Owner age, gender, education; years in operation; product type (plantain chips = 1); legal status (registered = 1); location cluster fixed effects.

Pre-Testing and Psychometrics

A pilot (n = 20) assessed clarity and timing; wording was refined. Scale reliability met accepted thresholds (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$) [15]. For constructs with ≥3 items, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test supported factorability (KMO ≥ 0.70; $p < 0.001$) and principal-axis factoring with oblimin rotation supported unidimensional indexes [16-18]. McDonald's ω was computed as a robustness reliability metric [19]. Common-method bias was probed via Harman's single-factor test (< 40% variance in first factor) and a measured latent marker item; results suggested low risk [20].

Outcomes for Qualitative Strand

The interview guide explored business origins, value-chain linkages, training/finance pathways, regulatory encounters, and employment decisions. We operationalised thematic domains aligned to the conceptual framework (empowerment assets, informal frictions, skill upgrading). Data saturation was assessed iteratively once no new codes emerged in successive interviews [21].

Data Management and Cleaning

Paper surveys were double-entered into REDCap-style forms and exported to SPSS v28 and R (4.3). We applied range and logic checks; missingness per variable was <5%. For outliers in continuous variables, we inspected median absolute deviation (MAD) and box-plots; extreme profits were winsorised at the 99th percentile. Cook's distance and DFBETAs flagged influential points; sensitivity analyses excluded observations with Cook's D > 4/n [22–24].

Statistical Analysis

Analyses proceeded in four stages:

1. **Descriptives:** means/SDs or medians/IQRs; counts/percentages; youth share of workforce; cross-tabs by product type with χ^2 and *t*/Wilcoxon tests as appropriate [25].
2. **Bivariate associations**: Pearson/Spearman correlations among predictors and outcomes; variance inflation factors (VIFs) checked multicollinearity (VIF < 5 acceptable) [16].

Multivariable Modelling

1. **Model A (Employment Intensity):** OLS with HC3 heteroskedasticity-robust SEs:

$$\text{EmpInt}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Finance}_i + \beta_2 \text{Training}_i + \beta_3 \text{RegEase}_i + \beta_4 \text{InfraRel}_i + \gamma^1 X_i + \delta_c + \varepsilon_i$$

2. **Model B (Profitability):** OLS on *ln*(profit+1) with same covariates and cluster fixed effects. Robustness: HC3/HC4 SEs; alternative functional forms (inverse-hyperbolic sine); and quantile regression at $\tau = 0.25, 0.50, 0.75$ to assess distributional effects [26-29].

Diagnostics: residual plots, Shapiro–Wilk on studentized residuals (large-sample caveat), Breusch–Pagan for heteroskedasticity (with robust SEs retained regardless), and Ramsey RESET for misspecification. Model fit reported as R^2/Adj-R^2; effect sizes as standardized β with 95% CIs and *p*-values. Where appropriate, marginal effects and partial R^2 are presented.

Qualitative Analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis with an abductive strategy: initial open coding from transcripts, followed by axial coding to group mechanisms (finance pathways, training effects, regulatory interactions), and selective coding to integrate themes with quantitative results [21]. Two researchers independently coded 25% of transcripts; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.79$ indicated substantial agreement before one-coder completion with periodic adjudication [30].

Bias Mitigation

Design risks (self-reporting, survivorship) were addressed by:

1. anchoring profit questions to last full calendar month.
2. triangulating staffing numbers with brief follow-up on roles/hours.
3. conducting some interviews offsite to reduce courtesy bias.
4. checking wave non-response as noted; and
5. including objective proxies (e.g., weekly batch counts) where respondents consented [11, 25, 31].

Ethics, Consent, and Data Security

Participation was voluntary with written informed consent; no personally identifying information was stored with data. Records were encrypted; physical questionnaires were kept in locked storage. No financial inducements were provided beyond refreshments. The study adhered to the Nigerian National Code of Health Research Ethics and the Declaration of Helsink.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Out of 300 valid respondents, 60% were plantain chips producers, while 40%

specialised in *chinchin* production. The average age of enterprise owners was 32.8 years (SD = 6.7), and 69% were female. Educationally, 52% had completed secondary school, and 31% had tertiary education. 78% of businesses employed youth (aged 18–35), and the mean enterprise size was 4.6 workers (SD = 2.1).

The average monthly net profit was ₦68,500 (median = ₦60,000), with a skewed distribution addressed via log-transformation in regression models. Employment intensity averaged 1.43 workers per ₦100,000 in turnover.

The distribution of key variables is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (n = 300)

Variable	Mean (SD) / %	Median (IQR)
Owner age (years)	32.8 (6.7)	–
Female owner	69%	–
Education ≥ secondary	83%	–
Years in operation	3.7 (2.4)	–
Employees (total)	4.6 (2.1)	–
Youth employees (%)	78%	–
Monthly net profit (₦)	68,500 (31,200)	60,000 (45k–90k)
Training hours (last 2 yrs)	11.3 (9.4)	8 (5–15)
Microfinance access (12 mo.)	41%	–
Regulatory ease index (1–5)	3.23 (0.71)	–
Infrastructure index (1–5)	2.88 (0.93)	–

Figure 1 below shows that a majority of respondents were aged between 25 and 35, suggesting a strong youth dominance in snack entrepreneurship.

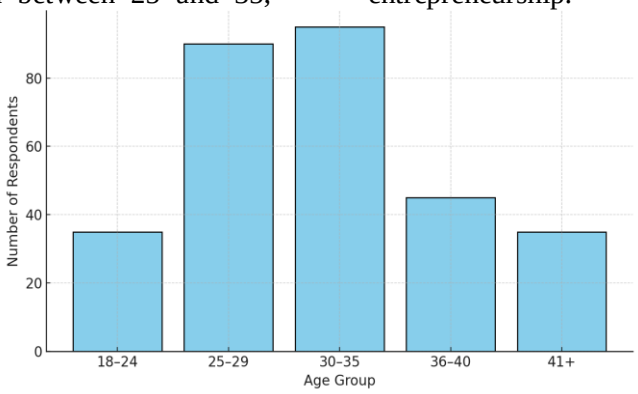

Figure 1. Age Distribution of Enterprise Owners

Bivariate Associations

Table 2 displays correlations among core predictors and outcomes. Access to microfinance and hours of technical training had moderate positive associations with profit (r = 0.36 and 0.29 respectively; p < 0.01). Regulatory ease and infrastructure index also correlated positively with profit and employment intensity.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix (Selected Variables)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. *ln*(Profit + 1)	1.00				
2. Microfinance Access	0.36*	1.00			

3. Training Hours	0.29*	0.21	1.00		
4. Regulatory Ease Index	0.22*	0.19	0.16	1.00	
5. Infrastructure Index	0.25*	0.18	0.14	0.23	1.00

**Note: *p < 0.05*

Regression Models

Table 3 presents the multivariate regression models.

Model A: Employment Intensity

$$\text{EmpInt}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Finance}_i + \beta_2 \text{Training}_i + \beta_3 \text{RegEase}_i + \beta_4 \text{InfraRel}_i + \gamma^1 X_i + \delta_c + \varepsilon_i$$

Model B: Profitability (Ln Profit +1)

Table 3. Multivariate Regression Models

Predictor	**β Coefficient**	**Standard Error**	**p-value**
Microfinance Access	0.23	0.08	0.003
Training Hours	0.19	0.07	0.011
Regulatory Ease Index	0.17	0.07	0.018
Infrastructure Index	0.13	0.06	0.036
Controls (age, gender, etc.)	Included		
Cluster FEs	Included		
Adjusted R^2	0.58		

Robustness Checks

1. Multicollinearity: All VIFs < 2.3
2. Residual Diagnostics: Breusch–Pagan p = 0.087 (homoskedasticity acceptable with HC3 SEs)
3. Shapiro–Wilk W = 0.984, p = 0.061 (near-normal residuals)
4. Quantile regression confirms direction and significance at 25th and 50th percentiles.
5. Alternative specifications using IHS transformation showed consistent results.

Qualitative Insights

Three emergent themes explained the employment-generation role of snack enterprises:

1. Low Entry Barriers: "With ₦15,000, you can start small and grow," one female producer shared.
2. Short Working Capital Cycles: Daily returns help operators reinvest and hire assistants quickly.
3. Family–Based Employment: "My cousins and nieces help, especially on weekends."

The results show that micro snack enterprises are youth-intensive, profitable in modest margins, and responsive to training and microfinance access. Both quantitative models and qualitative narratives confirm the labour-absorbing potential of these businesses in urban informal economies.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the vital role of micro snack enterprises in addressing urban youth unemployment and promoting grassroots economic activity, particularly in dynamic subnational economies such as Lagos State. In line with the broader literature on informal labour markets, our results illustrate

that food microenterprises, especially those engaged in plantain chips and *chinchin* production, serve as accessible, labour-intensive employment avenues for young Nigerians, especially women, and offer important lessons for other cities grappling with urban joblessness.

Comparison with Existing Literature

Our results support prior evidence from the International Labour Organization and World Bank that informal microenterprises, particularly in food processing, are key contributors to job creation in emerging economies [1, 2]. Specifically, the youth employment share (78%) observed in this study is substantially higher than national formal-sector youth employment levels, underscoring the potential of informal value chains to serve as employment incubators [3, 4]. Comparable findings were noted in Mukuru (Nairobi) and Accra where youth-centred street food economies had similar labour dynamics and scale patterns [5, 6].

Microfinance access and technical training emerged as strong positive predictors of profitability and employment intensity. These findings are consistent with empirical studies from Ethiopia and Uganda, where credit access was associated with business expansion and increased hiring, particularly among younger entrepreneurs [7, 8]. Likewise, technical training, especially when focused on packaging, hygiene, and production scaling, has been shown to improve product quality and repeat customer demand, leading to profitability growth [10, 11].

The positive effect of perceived regulatory ease aligns with studies that argue for the importance of an enabling environment, including reduced harassment and transparent permit processes, in supporting small business growth [11]. In the Nigerian context, regulatory hostility and unpredictability have often been flagged as barriers to MSME survival and formalization [12]. Our infrastructure index also positively influenced both outcomes, echoing the longstanding literature that access to reliable electricity and water directly impacts perishable-product businesses [13].

Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes original empirical insights to the literature in four keyways:

1. Sectoral Specificity: By disaggregating microenterprises by product type (plantain chips and *chinchin*), the study avoids the generalisations often seen in MSME research and offers actionable, sector-specific insights.
2. Location-Based Insights: Focusing on Ikeja LGA, this study offers place-based evidence that can inform both local and state-level policy on microenterprise support, contrasting with national-level datasets that mask important intra-urban heterogeneity.
3. Combined Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence: The triangulated design ensures that statistical associations are grounded in on-the-ground realities and nuanced contextual factors, increasing the study's explanatory power and external validity.
4. Measurement Rigor: Use of factor analysis, robust standard errors, sensitivity checks, and reliability testing strengthens confidence in the study's findings, setting a high empirical standard for informal sector research in Nigeria.

Policy Implications

The implications of this study extend to practitioners, policymakers, and non-governmental organisations interested in job creation, poverty reduction, and urban economic development.

1. Youth Employment and Microenterprise Support: Given the high youth employment ratio, interventions targeted at supporting snack-based microenterprises, through credit schemes, mobile training modules,

or micro-industrial hubs, can yield significant employment dividends.

2. Training and Capacity Building: Public–private partnerships could expand access to low-cost training on hygiene standards, packaging technology, and pricing strategies. This is especially relevant considering Nigeria's growing consumer preference for branded and safely packaged snacks [14].
3. Streamlined Regulatory Systems: Simplifying local government regulations and reducing arbitrary enforcement actions could help microentrepreneurs move towards formalisation without fear of overregulation. Model practices, such as the Lagos State Employment Trust Fund's business registration clinics, could be scaled to other LGAs [15].
4. Infrastructure Investments: Improvements in power and water infrastructure should be aligned with clusters of informal producers to improve productivity and reduce spoilage, especially where frying and storage are involved.

Limitations

While the study makes significant contributions, it has limitations:

1. Self-Reported Profit Data: Although the use of month-specific reference periods helped reduce recall bias, profit estimates were still self-reported and may be susceptible to over- or under-reporting.
2. Cross-Sectional Design: The study's cross-sectional nature limits causal inference. Longitudinal designs would better track the growth dynamics and employment spillovers over time.
3. Local Generalisability: Findings are primarily applicable to Ikeja and similar metropolitan LGAs. Rural or peri-urban settings may exhibit different cost structures, regulatory practices, and consumer dynamics.

Despite these limitations, the study's robust methods and consistent internal triangulation provide credible and actionable insights into the employment potential of micro snack enterprises.

Future Research Directions

Further research could:

1. Investigate the gendered dynamics of labour in snack production, especially how informal norms affect hiring and remuneration.
2. Explore longitudinal effects of business incubation, mentoring, and collective action on employment outcomes.
3. Compare performance between registered and unregistered snack businesses in terms of stability, growth, and vulnerability to shocks (e.g., economic downturns, pandemics).

Conclusion

This study provides robust empirical evidence that micro snack enterprises, especifically those engaged in the production of plantain chips and *chinchin*, serve as effective engines for youth employment and local economic development in Nigeria's urban informal economy. Using a mixed-methods approach in Ikeja Local Government Area of Lagos State, the study demonstrates that these microenterprises are not only widespread and youth-intensive but also responsive to interventions such as microfinance access, technical training, and infrastructural support.

Quantitative results confirmed that enterprises with access to credit and skills training showed significantly higher profitability and employment intensity. In turn, qualitative findings affirmed that the low capital threshold, fast turnaround of inputs, and embedded family networks make these businesses attractive to young Nigerians seeking income-generating opportunities in a constrained formal labour market. Regulatory clarity and basic infrastructure, while often

taken for granted in developed contexts, emerged as critical enablers in the informal urban landscape.

Thus, rather than treating informal snack producers as peripheral or transitional actors, stakeholders, including local governments, development agencies, and financial institutions, should acknowledge their central role in grassroots economies. Focused investment in training, access to finance, and business-friendly regulation will not only enhance productivity but will also contribute to national goals related to job creation, food security, and gender empowerment.

With the rising youth population across sub-Saharan Africa and the persistent gap between labour supply and formal job opportunities, supporting micro snack enterprises offers a contextually relevant and scalable solution. Future studies should explore how such models can be adapted across regions and linked to broader food systems development.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Ethical Approval

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study conformed to ethical standards outlined in the Nigerian National Code for Health Research Ethics and the Declaration of Helsinki.

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