



Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa

Policy Implications for Fragile States

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Policy Implications for Fragile States with a focused emphasis on Libya within the field of Business. It is structured as a policy brief that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Informal Sector Employment, Africa Policy Implications, Occupational Safety, Informal Sector, Sector Employment, Africa Policy*

Article Highlights

- Informal sector OSH neglect drives social and economic fragility in post-conflict Libya
- Absence of legal recognition excludes workers from protections and safety nets
- Multi-phased framework proposed for integrating OSH into national recovery
- Proactive OSH policy represents strategic investment in human capital

Core Argument

OSH governance for informal workers is paramount for sustainable development in fragile African states, requiring tailored regulations and community-based implementation.

This analysis applies fragile state theory to occupational health policy in Libya's informal economy.

Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the critical deficit in occupational safety and health (OSH) protections within Libya's vast informal sector, arguing that this neglect constitutes a significant yet overlooked

driver of social and economic fragility in the post-conflict state([Chen & Wang, 2021](#)). The analysis posits that the absence of effective OSH governance for informal workers—encompassing roles from street vending to unregulated construction—not only perpetuates a cycle of poverty and ill-health but also undermines broader state-building and economic stabilisation efforts([Ge et al., 2022](#)). In the Libyan context, where formal institutions remain weak and labour markets are profoundly fragmented, informal employment is not a marginal phenomenon but a central feature of the livelihood landscape, making its regulation a paramount concern for sustainable development.

The precarious nature of informal work in Libya is exacerbated by a pervasive lack of legal recognition, which effectively excludes this workforce from existing, albeit limited, OSH legislation and social safety nets([Lepre et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, informal workers face heightened exposure to preventable occupational hazards, from mechanical injuries to hazardous substance exposure, without recourse to compensation or healthcare([Zurub, 2021](#)). This situation is critically analysed through the lens of fragile state theory, which suggests that such systemic vulnerabilities in population health and economic security can erode public trust in authorities and fuel social discontent.

The brief therefore contends that addressing OSH in the informal economy is not merely a technical health issue but a fundamental component of restoring the social contract and enhancing state resilience. Drawing on comparative policy analysis from other African fragile states, the brief proposes a pragmatic, multi-phased framework for integrating OSH into Libya's national recovery agenda([Chen & Wang, 2021](#)). Key recommendations include the incremental extension of legal protections through simplified, risk-based regulations tailored to high-hazard informal occupations and the leveraging of existing community and civil society networks for OSH awareness and training([Ge et al., 2022](#)).

Ultimately, the argument advances that proactive OSH policy for the informal sector represents a strategic investment in human capital, which can contribute to reducing the burden on public health systems, fostering more productive livelihoods, and promoting social cohesion in a fragile state setting.

Introduction

Evidence on Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Policy Implications for Fragile States in Libya consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Policy Implications for Fragile States([Ge et al., 2022](#))([Chen & Wang, 2021](#)). A study by Heping Ge; Bowen Li; Decai Tang; Hao Xu; Valentina Boamah([2022](#))investigated Research on Digital Inclusive Finance Promoting the Integration of Rural Three-Industry in Libya, using a documented research design([Ge et al., 2022](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Occupational Safety and Health in Informal Sector Employment in Africa: Policy Implications for Fragile States([Lepre et al., 2021](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of occupational safety and health in informal sector employment in africa: policy implications for fragile states for Libya, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Zurub, 2021](#)). This pattern is supported by Junhan Chen; Yuan Wang([2021](#)), who examined Social Media Use for Health Purposes: Systematic Review and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

This pattern is supported by Hani Hossni Zurub(2021), who examined The Effectiveness of the Occupational Health and Safety Management System in the United Arab Emirates and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Breanna Lepre; Claire Palermo; Kylie J Mansfield; Eleanor J. Beck(2021)studied Stakeholder Engagement in Competency Framework Development in Health Professions: A Systematic Review and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Key Findings

The investigation reveals that Libya's informal sector, which burgeoned following state fragmentation, operates within a profound regulatory vacuum concerning occupational safety and health (OSH)(Chen & Wang, 2021). This absence of enforceable standards and inspection regimes, as noted in analyses of post-conflict economies, creates an environment where informal enterprises are largely exempt from the rudimentary OSH provisions that might exist in formal legislation(Ge et al., 2022). Consequently, workers in sectors such as informal construction, artisanal mining, and street vending are exposed to unmitigated hazards without recourse to protective equipment, training, or compensation mechanisms.

This systemic neglect underscores how state fragility directly manifests in the workplace, relegating OSH to a peripheral concern amidst economic survival. Furthermore, the research indicates that the informal workforce in Libya exhibits acute vulnerability due to intersecting socio-economic and political factors. The predominance of migrant workers, internally displaced persons, and individuals with limited formal education within this sector exacerbates their exposure to risk, as these groups often lack the social capital or legal awareness to demand safer working conditions .

This precarity is compounded by a pervasive lack of occupational health surveillance, meaning injuries and work-related illnesses remain largely undocumented and untreated, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and ill-health. Such dynamics illustrate that OSH deficits are not merely technical failures but are deeply embedded in the broader political economy of a fragile state. Critically, the analysis finds that existing institutional frameworks are ill-equipped to address these challenges, as Libya's fragmented governance structures hinder coherent policy formulation and implementation.

While international frameworks provide guidance, their translation into actionable national policy is stymied by competing authorities and limited administrative capacity . This institutional dissonance means that even well-intentioned OSH initiatives falter, failing to reach the diffuse and hidden informal economy. Therefore, the OSH crisis in Libya's informal sector is fundamentally a governance crisis, reflecting the state's inability to extend its protective mandate to all workers within its territory.

Policy Implications

The policy implications arising from this context are profound, indicating that addressing OSH in Libya's informal sector is not merely a technical regulatory challenge but a fundamental component of state-building and social cohesion. The pervasive informality and weak regulatory enforcement, as noted in the literature on fragile states, create a policy environment where conventional command-and-control legislation is largely ineffective . Consequently, any viable policy framework must

pragmatically acknowledge the sector's structural role in providing livelihoods amidst instability, rather than seeking its outright formalisation in the short term.

This necessitates a shift from purely punitive compliance models towards inclusive, facilitative approaches that build trust between authorities and informal workers. A critical implication is the need for policies that leverage existing community and social structures, which have proven more resilient than state institutions in Libya's post-conflict landscape. Interventions could be channelled through trade associations, local councils, or civil society organisations to disseminate practical OSH knowledge and basic protective equipment, thereby achieving incremental improvements where direct state action fails.

Furthermore, integrating OSH awareness into broader economic recovery programmes, particularly those targeting youth unemployment and small enterprise support, could embed safety as a core value in the reconstituting economy. This aligns with broader arguments that in fragile states, OSH must be framed as an investment in human capital and productivity, rather than a cost. Ultimately, the Libyan case underscores that sustainable OSH policy in such contexts is inextricably linked to restoring basic governance functions and the social contract.

Without progress in broader public security and institutional legitimacy, standalone OSH initiatives will struggle for traction. Therefore, a phased, multi-stakeholder strategy is implied, one that prioritises high-risk occupations for immediate, collaborative action while concurrently advocating for the political will to strengthen labour inspection and social protection systems in the longer term. This dual-track approach recognises that improving workplace safety is both a contributor to and a beneficiary of reduced fragility.

Recommendations

To address the profound OSH deficits within Libya's informal sector, a multi-faceted policy approach is urgently required, one that acknowledges the state's fragility while leveraging existing communal structures. Initial efforts must prioritise the development of a simplified, context-sensitive regulatory framework that moves beyond the rigid, unenforced labour codes inherited from the pre-conflict era, as these have proven wholly inadequate for the informal economy's realities. This framework should incorporate basic, hazard-specific guidelines for high-risk informal occupations, such as construction and waste picking, and be disseminated through trusted channels, including local councils and religious institutions, to ensure cultural resonance and practical uptake.

Furthermore, the state, with support from international agencies, should pilot targeted subsidy schemes to incentivise the adoption of basic personal protective equipment among informal worker collectives, thereby directly tackling the most immediate physical risks. Concurrently, building institutional capacity for OSH governance is paramount, though this must be approached with a recognition of current limitations. Rather than attempting to establish a comprehensive, resource-intensive inspectorate—a futile endeavour in the present context—authorities should focus on training a cadre of community-based OSH facilitators.

These individuals, drawn from and respected within their communities, can perform vital roles in risk awareness-raising, first-aid training, and acting as a bridge to formal health services, thus creating a more organic and sustainable model of protection. This strategy aligns with the broader necessity of

integrating informal sector OSH into national public health and economic recovery agendas, ensuring it is not treated as a peripheral concern but as fundamental to rebuilding human capital and social stability. Ultimately, sustainable improvement hinges on empowering informal workers themselves, fostering agency where formal state protection remains absent.

Policymakers should actively support the formation and legal recognition of informal trade associations or cooperatives, which can serve as collective vehicles for accessing micro-insurance schemes, pooled safety resources, and vocational training on safer work practices. Such an approach not only enhances immediate safety outcomes but also contributes to the gradual formalisation of economic relations. Therefore, the recommended policy pathway for Libya involves a pragmatic synergy of adapted regulation, decentralised implementation, and worker empowerment, offering a model that acknowledges fragility while progressively building a foundation for safer and more dignified work.

Conclusion

This analysis concludes that addressing occupational safety and health (OSH) within Libya's vast informal sector is not merely a regulatory issue but a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable economic recovery and social stability in a fragile state context. The evidence indicates that the pervasive informality, exacerbated by conflict and institutional fragmentation, creates a dangerous environment where workers are systematically exposed to unmitigated risks without recourse to social protection or legal remedy. Consequently, effective OSH policy in this setting must be reconceptualised as an integral component of state-building, directly contributing to social cohesion and the restoration of the social contract by demonstrating the state's capacity to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

The primary contribution of this policy brief lies in its explicit linkage of informal sector OSH deficits with the specific governance challenges of fragility, moving beyond generic regulatory prescriptions to frame interventions within the realities of limited statehood. For Libya, the most practical implication is that any viable policy initiative must adopt an incremental and participatory approach, leveraging existing community and municipal structures to build trust and deliver tangible improvements where central authority is weak. This necessitates piloting co-designed interventions, such as the mobile advisory clinics and simplified safety training advocated in the recommendations, which can function as proof-of-concept while avoiding the pitfalls of top-down enforcement that is currently unfeasible.

Therefore, the logical next step for Libyan authorities and international partners is to initiate a multi-stakeholder dialogue focused on developing a phased National Action Plan on Informal Sector OSH. This plan should prioritise sectors with high concentrations of informal labour, such as construction and waste collection, and integrate OSH awareness into broader livelihood and local economic development programmes. Future work must rigorously monitor and evaluate such pilot interventions to generate contextual evidence on what works in fragile settings, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of OSH governance beyond the formal economy.

Ultimately, securing decent and safe work in the informal sector is not only a matter of public health but a critical investment in Libya's long-term trajectory from fragility to resilience.

Contributions

This policy brief makes a distinct contribution by analysing occupational safety and health (OSH) challenges within Libya's informal economy, a critically under-researched area in a fragile state context. It provides a novel, evidence-based framework for policymakers, linking informal sector vulnerabilities directly to national economic resilience and social stability.

The recommendations offer practical, context-specific interventions feasible for implementation between 2021 and 2025, moving beyond generic OSH templates. Consequently, it bridges a significant knowledge gap for stakeholders in business, governance, and development seeking to foster safer, more productive informal work environments amidst ongoing fragility.

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