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From Hand to Paper: How Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Shapes Social Livelihoods of Informal construction Workers in Mwanza City, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined how RPL reconfigures the social dimensions of livelihoods amongst informal construction workers in Mwanza, Tanzania. Adopting an interpretive qualitative design, the study employed purposive sampling to select 42 participants, including 37 certified workers and 5 key informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) and subjected to thematic analysis informed by the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF). The findings indicate that RPL acts as a transformative force by reshaping the internal social reality of the workers, transitioning them from marginalised “street artisans” to recognized technicians with increased psychological agency. While RPL fostered linking social capital through formal associations and access to government tenders, it simultaneously introduced a stratified livelihood landscape that threatened traditional bonding social capital through introducing intra-communal stratification and envy. Furthermore, certification serves as

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an institutional social shield for women, neutralizing the influence of gendered gatekeepers and facilitating shifts into leadership roles. Nevertheless, a fragmented market response reveals a mismatch between institutional human capital and the functionalist logic of private contractors. The study concludes that while RPL successfully converts human capital (tacit mastery) into linking social capital (institutional recognition), it fails to trigger financial capital (wages) due to market resistance. Practical recommendations include implementing peer-to-peer mentorship to preserve communal bonding and establishing digital portfolios to bridge the valuation disconnect between certified workers and contractors.

Keywords: *Recognition of Prior Learning, Sustainable Livelihood Framework, Social Capital, Professional Identity, Gender mainstreaming, Tanzania.*

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Introduction

Around the world, two billion people work in the informal economy facing risks and uncertainties because their jobs are not protected (Medina et al., 2017). This group represents 60 % of world's workers (ILO, 2018), posing a massive challenge for governments in the developing countries, where most people rely for these jobs for livelihoods (OCED/ILO, 2019). Within this global landscape, the informal construction sector as emerged as a vital livelihood source for vulnerable population, functioning as a pillar of economic activity while leaving workers in precarious condition (Celik & Budanyan, 2016). Presently, many formal jobs have been replaced by decentralised, flexible units and corporations seek to reduce costs (ILO, 2012; Moreno-Monroy et al., 2014). At the regional and local levels, this shift is particularly evident in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the informal sector contributes up

to 60% of the national GDP in countries like Tanzania (Bhuzohera, 2025). Working informally is costly; for workers, for instance, the absence of registration and formal recognition leaves these workers outside the protection of labour laws and social security frameworks. This systemic invisibility prevents them from defending their fundamental rights and result in lack of collective representation when engaging with employers of public authorities (ILO, 2014). Locally, Tanzanian scholars widely acknowledge that the cumulative effect of all these challenges is that construction workers are subjected into unsustainable livelihood conditions (Eliufoo et al., 2018; Wells & Jason, 2010)

To break the cycle of vulnerable livelihoods, scholars and policy makers propose recognising informal skills through RPL within a vocational training framework as a strategic intervention. (Maurer, 2021; Rothboeck et al., 2018). In Tanzania, this institutional landscape for vocational skills training was formally established through Vocational Education and Training Policy Act of 1994, which created the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA). Originally, VETA mandate was to coordinate and provide a legal framework for artisanal training, leading to the adoption of RPL in 1995 (VETA, 1995). This was envisioned not just as a secondary option, but a primary tool for National workforce formalisation towards achieving sustainable livelihoods (World Bank, 2015). Despite these early frameworks, Tanzanian studies shows that traditional apprenticeship continued to operate outside the legal lens (Mkenda & Aikaeli, 2014; Mwemezi, 2018), creating professional invisibility (Mramba et al., 2016; Ruhumbika, 2015). Local evidence further suggests that VETA's bridge courses have historically served as a remedy for those entering through formal qualifications. As Mbitila, Masika and Mwase (2017) argue, these pathways have been ineffective in supporting RPL-certified workers, who regardless of their high skills levels face barriers due to of their limited formal education. Furthermore, in the absence of inclusive institutional progressive routes, RPL uptake is subject to low up take (Cooper et al., 2017)

A significant turning point occurred with the revised edition of the education and training policy. This policy represents a departure from the traditional academic model towards a more inclusive, competency-based national strategy (URT, 2023). By establishing a dual-track system, the 2023 policy grants vocational skills equal status to academic pathways, explicitly calling for the integration of vocational skills into formal hierarchies. This evolution act as a transforming structure attempting to bridge the gap between their survival activities as a recognised professional identity. However, global evidence suggest that RPL uptake remain below 1 percent in many regions (Bolingher, 2017; PwC, 2019), mainly due to providers resisting adoption (Chirkoot, 2013; Kilgore, 2020; Roy & Elmarsafway, 2021).

Theoretically, this study is rooted in the Sustainable Livelihood Frameworks (SLF), which moves beyond a narrow definition of poverty to account for the complex capabilities and assets that enable individuals to survive and thrive (Ashley & Carney, 1999). While traditionally, the SLF visualises assets through a five pointed pentagon including natural, physical and financial capital (Ellis & Freeman, 2005). This study purposely delimits its scope to human and social asset dimensions. This focus is dictated by the from “Hand to Paper” phenomenon which is fundamentally a transition from tacit human mastery to institutional social recognition. For informal construction workers, the transition from hand to paper represents a critical intersection between individual assets and institutional structures. While the workers’ “hand” signifies the tacit human capital; the mastery and skills acquired through years of informal apprenticeship, the certificate (“the paper”) functions as a regulatory mechanism. This acts as the rules of the game determining how assets are valued and exchanged. By formalising the informal skills, RPL certificate becomes a bridge that validates the existing human capital, thereby transforming it into a recognised institutional asset. This institutional validation is potential for activating linking social capital, granting

workers a legitimised professional identity and “paper-based” status required to navigate formal labour, access to government contracts and disrupt the cycle of livelihood vulnerability.

Global research on RPL has undergone a significant paradigm shift, transitioning from early conceptual debates to empirical measurement of impacts. While foundational argument focused on market matching and social inclusion (Anderson, 2013), recent evidence suggest that the success of these initiatives is not universal but contingent upon mutual trust (Sharma, 2025; Singh & Ehlers, 2019). The successful conversion of this asset depends on the type of tool used. While some propose visual evidence of informal mastery (Werquin, 2020), others caution that employer-centred assessment limits mobility (Kaul & Tandon, 2020). This is a critical concern for Tanzania, where labour mobility is hindered by skill gaps and mismatches (URT, 2019, 2021). Furthermore, structural and psychological barriers persists; while Sharma (2025) identifies workers assessment anxiety, Prinsloo and Papier (2025) finds that barriers emanates from institution themselves, where rigid and traditional notions of competency prevent the recognition of deep-level artisan skills. This suggest a systemic mismatch, as Maurer (2025) observe that global policy standards often fail to align with artisans’ local tradition. Despite these tensions, substantial evidence confirm the economic advantage of RPL in accelerating formalisation (Branka, 2016; Nakata et al., 2021; Rohman, 2024). These benefits translates into long-term livelihood security and professional mobility (Bandyopadhyay & Dake, 2025; Tadesse, 2024). Consequently, certification acts more than a credential; it provides the professional legitimacy required to improve earning potential (Bhandari, 2024; Sharma, 2026)

In Tanzania, the literature reflects a polarising tension between institutional stagnation and labour potential. Early scholarship presented a static view of the worker, where bureaucratic complexities rendered certification non- transformative (Ruhumbika, 2015). While

current research challenges this by frame RPL as a vehicle for vertical mobility (Bwire & Mbughi, 2025; Lelo, 2025), the optimistic outlook is often hindered by implementation burdens and trust gaps (Mbunda et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Tesha (2025) argues, Tanzania possesses a well-defined framework that frequently fails at the execution level. Critically, the existing Tanzanian scholarship remains heavily focused on professional visibility and economic transitions, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how RPL reconfigures the social dimensions of livelihoods and the worker internal social reality. While the “Hand” (skill) is documented, the social consequences of the “Paper” (the certificate), including its power to bridge to new networks or create friction within the existing ones remain under explored. This study addresses this oversight by examining the social-professional identity shifts amongst informal construction workers in Mwanza city following RPL certification. Specifically, the study is guided by three objectives: (i) To examine the interplay between professional identity and psychological agency amongst informal construction workers following RPL certification; (ii) To analyse how RPL reconfigures social capital and professional networks within the construction labour market; and (iii) To evaluate how RPL in certification mediates gendered gatekeepers and facilitates the social economic empowerment of women in Mwanza’s construction sector.

Methodology

Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically, an interpretive explanatory case study to examine how validation of skills through RPL reconfigures social dimensions of livelihoods amongst construction workers in Mwanza. Mwanza city was selected because it is Tanzania’s second-largest urban centre characterised by a rapidly expanding population, which is directly linked to a booming construction and infrastructure sector (NBS, 2022), thereby allowing for a detailed examination of the formative processes such as increased agency and institutional trust

through which RPL reconfigures the social dimensions of livelihoods. Administrative and ethical rigor was established by obtaining clearance from the Regional and City administrations following an introductory letter from the Institute of Adult Education.

The study used purposive, maximum variation sampling to identify primary participants through a Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) registry. Selection criteria included: (i) successful completion of RPL assessment, (ii) at least five years of involvement in the sector, and (iii) representation across five key trades: masonry, plumbing, welding, electrical works and roofing. To capture gendered-social dimensions, targeted sampling of female respondents within the masonry and electrical installation sectors was employed, reflecting the actual participation of women within these specific trades. A total of forty-two (42) participants were recruited, consisting of thirty-seven (37) primary respondents (artisans) and five (5) key informants (constrictors and association leaders).

Primary respondents were recruited via mobile phone and physical visits based on the VETA registry. Key informants were selected through purposive professional networking and official consultations. Ethical integrity was maintained at the participant level by obtaining informed verbal consent prior to data collection, ensuring a culturally appropriate rapport within the construction site environment.

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) served as the primary data collection method. Permission to audio records was secured verbally from participants to ensure accurate data capture. Data was analysed through manual thematic analysis. Following verbatim transcription, the study employed a hybrid coding approach: it remained deductively anchored in the SLF categories of human and social capital, while staying inductively open to the emerging social realities of the artisans. These codes were then physically synthesised into analytical themes aligned with the SLF. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were masked using alphanumeric codes throughout data management and analysis phases. For trustworthiness, the study established

dependability and confirmability through aligning the research question, conceptual framework and analysis. A manual audit trail was developed to provide potential replication, while rigorous member-checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts. For the purposes of clarity, the Gemini Flash AI tool was utilised to refine the grammar and syntax of the Swahili to English interview transcripts. Finally, a reflexive approach was applied throughout the analytical process to ensure findings remained grounded in the lived realities of the participants.

Results and Discussion

The Interplay between Professional Identity and Agency

RPL acts as a transformative catalyst in reshaping the social identity of informal construction workers, facilitating a profound shift from the perception of being “street artisans” to that of “formal technicians”. As a certified electrician (SSI-M-EL-01) described this shift:

For quite long, I worked under the shadow of formal artisans. I could see that I could review the electrical blueprint and fix conduits and back boxes just like a graduate, but I felt inferior just because I had no permit. Now with RPL certification, I feel like a true soldier. I am no longer just building houses; I hold a stake in building my city (SSI-M-EL-01)

This conversion of tacit experience into recognised human capital (skills) implies that RPL reconfigures the worker’s self-positioning within the labour market hierarchy (Anderson & Fajes, 2010), enabling them to align themselves with professional identity. This finding is similar to Scheur et al. (2017)’ study, which proposed that RPL improved self-esteem and self-confidence for the disadvantaged groups within the professional landscape. Furthermore, findings suggest that RPL can dismantle the long-standing inferiority complexes; RPL provides the psychological agency (Etelapelto et al., 2013), allowing the worker with what they needs to be confidence of their skills. As welder (SSI-WD-03) reflected:

I used to feel very small whenever I meet foremen and engineers, when I work with big construction sites. I thought my knowledge couldn't matter to them. RPL reassured me that though I was local, I hold the required standards. RPL assessment proved that my knowledge was a school. Now I am an expert, not just a labourer (SSI-WD-03).

This shift goes beyond mere confidence; it invokes the internal sense of capability that enable the transition from possessing skills to actively deploying it in high value environments. This supports Anderson and Fajes (2012), who argued that individuals whose skills are formally recognised feels better about themselves and their work; because they feel valued, adopt professional attitude and perform their work with confidence. Eventually, this psychological conversion translates into tangible economic agency (Chipfupfa & Wale, 2018), facilitating a pathway for increased asset accumulation through high value projects (Chatterjee et al., 2011); there by enhancing long-term livelihood sustainability (Oladipo, 2009). Beyond internal perception, certification serves as an institutional proxy for competence that enhances bargaining power. By leveraging “the paper”, workers transition from survival-based compliance to professional self-advocacy. The shift from begging for work to bargaining for value marks increased individual agency within the sustainable livelihood framework (Spence, 1973), no longer a passive price-taker; the worker is empowered to define their worthy. This dynamic is exemplified by a certified plumber (SSI-PL-05), who noted:

Before RPL certificate, I begged for every piece of work, and I was ready to accept any wage offered by the contractor just because I had no papers to recognise my skills. Now things have changed, I show the contractor my papers and bargain for the best and avoid exploitation. While certification-based wages are still less common amongst smaller residential home builders, having my papers has fundamentally the power dynamic in my favour (SSI-PL-05).

This finding aligns with Carr (2023), who found that RPL results in workers' career management evidenced through self-advocate with employers. However, findings indicate that the reach of this institutional proxy is not universal. Its influence diminishes in

negotiations with smaller, unregistered residential, where social capital outweighs more formal institutional contexts. The impact is not merely economic but deeply rooted in the workers' self-perception and that of the institutional hierarchy (Billett et al., 2026); a relationship further explored through the interplay between their emerging professional identity and functional agency.

Reconfiguration of Professional Networks and Institutional Trust

RPL has transformed social capital through fostering a collective professional identity. Workers have begun to move from individualistic competition towards formal associations capable of securing government and municipal sub-contracts. RPL facilitates the development of linking social capital through formal certification, which bridges the gap between collective workers and the government. A certified Plumber (SSI-PL -04) noted:

We formed the organisation of the certified informal workers. Because we are in the same trade. We trust each other's knowledge, skills and integrity because we passed the same test. When I have multiple sites to handle, I just call a fellow certified plumber because I know they understand what is expected from a plumber with papers. Through this same organisation, we can access government tenders which as individuals we couldn't access (SSI-PL -04).

This evidence demonstrates that certification act as a social glue that facilitates professional trust and provides formal eligibility to engage with formal state apparatus. This finding mirrors Raciti et al. (2024), who established that involvement in RPL initiates the process of building professional networks, particularly for engaging with authorities often facilitated through institutional and workplace connections. Furthermore, findings indicate that RPL certificate is not merely a means of enhancing human capital (individual skills) but a tool to transforming social capital (networks) into institutional assets. A leader forms an informal construction workers' association (KII-AL-01) explained:

Our members used to be scattered and exploited because they lacked a collective identity recognised by any government department. Now RPL

allows informal construction workers to register as formal groups. We are no longer just informal labourers; we are recognised body of certified technicians. This paper gives the association the legal standing to walk into the Municipal office and bid for sub-contracts that were previously reserved for large firms (KII-AL-01).

This finding is consistent with Canni (2018), who observed that formalization of skills in the informal sectors enables workers to formally join associations and trade unions, which they believe will improve their situations. However, the current study reveals that this transition is not smooth. Instead, it creates what (Woolcock, 2001) describe as a tension between different social capital. While artisans successfully builds linking social capital to access government tenders, this pursuit simultaneously fractures their existing bonding social capital. The result is a unique form of negative social capital where certification creates social stratification, distancing certified artisans from their uncertified peers. This tension is captured by a certified Mason (SSI-MS-05) observed:

I am glad I got certified, but it comes with envy. Some of my colleagues who did not get RPL papers say I disrespect them. Whenever we have a different opinion, they often say. “You were just certified lately, and now you think you know everything.” It has created a social split in our conversations. When certified masons discuss government tenders, the uncertified feel left behind and dismiss us boastfully (SSI-MS-05).

From a sustainable livelihood perspective, this reveals a critical trade-off: the gains in the formal linking capital comes at the expense of bonding social capital; the traditional neighbourhood safety net. The asset pentagon reconfigures in a complex way: trust shifts from reputation-based to credential-based. This transition is further illustrated by shifting hiring norms as a certified Roofer (SSI-RF-01) explained:

In the past, I found work easily in my neighbourhood. But with modern architecture and expensive materials, things have changed. No one wants to risk their investment in the hands of an uncertified worker. To avoid the risk of shoddy work, clients now always ask for formal recognition. Knowing I am certified gives them peace of mind. RPL shift their trust from my face to my qualifications (SSI-RF-01).

Despite this institutional gain, findings show a significant friction remains regarding the economic value of a certified labour. A private contractor (KII-RC-01) argued:

The nature of our work is primarily manual and skill based. It is a disadvantage to us when a worker demands higher pay simply because they have been certified. We are already familiar with their experience and expertise; obtaining a certificate does not automatically increase their productivity. They still possess the same level of skill. In my view, for manual labour, the basis for a pay increase should be productivity rather than just a formal certification (KII-RC-01).

These findings reveal a fragmented market response: while certificate is a non-negotiable entry requirement for formal sub-contractors, segments of the private sector remain rooted in a functionalist logic, viewing certificate as an administrative formality rather than a driver of value. This further highlights a limitation in the current RPL framework. It addresses labour supply side (certification) but fails to incentivise employers to recognise the reduced risk and professional oversight that professional labour provides. This is in line with Assigner's (2024), who found that employers hold conflicting opinion whether RPL-certified works deserve compensation and how such compensation should be provided.

Dismantling Gendered Gatekeepers

RPL serves as social shield for women in Mwanza's construction sector, dismantles systematic gender systemic biases and bypassing traditional gate keepers. By providing an objective institutional guarantee, certification enables female workers to neutralize gendered assumptions regarding their technical aptitude. As a certified mason (SSI-F-MS 03) illustrated:

As a woman, the construction sector always felt unwelcoming. Men would constantly ask me, who did you leave the kitchen to? or tell me I couldn't lift the blocks. But RPL certification has changed the power balance. When I show my certificate, even the site foremen who use to ignore me treat me with respect. I finally have a voice amongst the male masons. The

paper doesn't boost my physical strength, but it has strengthened my social standing (SSI-F-MS 03).

This finding mirrors Nookathoti and Nayak (2024), who found that formalization of skills serves as a protective gear for women seeking employment in non-traditional fields. By establishing legitimacy where it was previously denied, paper-based status allows women to bypass gender assumptions and navigate exclusionary social-cultural norms typically held by employers. As a Registered Construction (KII-RC-02) explained:

In the past, we hesitated to hire women for construction sites due to perceived physical and technical risks. Today, a candidate presenting an RPL certificate offers a formal guarantee of her competency. This institutional validation directly refutes the gendered bias regarding human capital that once shaped our hiring. We can no longer justify denying employment when this institutional validation directly refutes the gender biases that once shaped our hiring. To be clear, their skills and value are equal to my other artisans; they are not lesser in any capacity (KII-RC-02).

This institutional validation illustrates what DFD (1999) described as transforming process, wherein recognition of human capital serves as a mark of social legitimacy, that bypasses the perceived gatekeepers excluding women from the construction sector (Ayalew et al., 2018). This echoes Ayalew et al. (2018), who observed that when a woman's skills are objectively recognised employers shift from stereotype-based hiring to credential based-hiring, adopting a more gender neutral-approach. Beyond mere entry into the sector, RPL facilitates a pathway to leadership roles traditionally reserved for men. This transition from "labourer" to "supervisor" signifies a fundamental shift in the construction sector's power dynamics. One contractor (RCT, 02) highlighted this evolution:

I have, a woman who come through RPL process as a foreman of one of my sites. I chose her because of the mastery of complex circuitry and her ability to lead. She just doesn't do the technical work alone; she manages the entire workflow. The rest of her crew is used to her leadership and they respect her authority, directing all their site related questions to her (RCT, 02).

By entrusting a woman with site wide authority, it means that the contractor validates her human capital (technical expertise) while simultaneously activating her social capital (worker respect and institutional status). Moreover, the synergy between these two assets significantly enhances the livelihoods (Ashley & Carney, 1999). Similar observations were made by Alan et al. (2025), who concludes once women are promoted to leadership positions, they improve livelihoods through transforming the work place into a conducive environment, making it less gender- divisive and cultivating strong professional ties built on mutual respect.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that RPL acts as a transformative force reshaping the social identity of informal construction workers by transitioning them from “street artisans” to formal technicians. This shift fundamentally reconfigures their internal social reality, fostering professional belonging and achieving cognitive justice by validating informal experience as legitimate knowledge. Beyond identity shifts, RPL reinforces worker agency and bargaining power, enabling a transition from price-takers to active negotiators capable of managing their wages and forming formal associations. Furthermore, RPL serves as a critical mechanism for gender mainstreaming, providing an institutional social shield that allows women workers to bypass sociocultural gatekeepers and neutralise gendered assumptions regarding technical aptitude and attain site leadership roles previously reserved for men.

However, the study reveals a fundamental asymmetry in how this certification is valued. While the state and institutional framework prioritises the “Paper” as a vital tool of linking capital to legitimise workers, the private sector largely remains impassive. This structural rigidity amongst contractors prevents the transition of human capital into tangible financial capital, creating a critical mismatch: the worker gains of formal identity but this does not translate into economic security. Consequently, the certification remains a hallow victory as the aim of improving livelihoods through formalisation of skills fails to

penetrate functional biases of the market. Ultimately, the study concludes that while RPL successfully converts human capital (tacit skill and mastery) into linking social capital (institutional recognition), it currently fails to translate into a significant increase of the financial capital (wages) due to persistent market resistance.

Recommendations

Based on study findings, the following are practical policy recommendations: -

To prevent the erosion of bonding social capital, VETA should facilitate “artisan guilds” where certified workers act as lead mentors. This ensures that RPL process strengthens community safety nets rather than creating an elite tie of certified against the uncertified. Additionally, incubation programs focusing on financial capital management and negotiation agencies should be established immediately following certification. These skills would help workers to articulate their values to contractors and not just through papers. Finally, to bridge the information gap between certified workers and potential employers, the establishment of a digital registry is recommended. For sustainability and local relevance, this platform should be managed through a strategic partnership between VETA and local municipal authorities, facilitating real time access to a verified pool of certified labour.

Conflict of Interest

I declare that there are no competing financial/institutional interests that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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