

Chapter 4

URBAN LIVELIHOODS: REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA¹

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1. Introduction

The New Urban Agenda, the 20-year strategy on sustainable urbanization, was formally adopted by over 160 countries at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016. The final document explicitly recognizes “the contribution of the working poor in the informal economy”. It advocates “people-centred” urban governance that empowers and includes stakeholders. This marks a significant global shift in thinking. Civil society actors, notably organisations of informal workers, have played an important role in securing this commitment.

Attention now turns to national and city-level implementation. This paper is a contribution to bolster these efforts. Much of the material draws on the work of the global research–action– policy network WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organising). WIEGO was founded in 1997 to improve the situation of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy through stronger organisations and networks of informal workers, improved statistics and research on informal employment, and more inclusive and equitable policies and practices towards informal workers and their livelihood activities.

Since WIEGO’s founding, interest in – and research on – informal employment has grown considerably. WIEGO’s specific contribution has been to put statistics and

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research into the hands of informal workers and their organisations to bridge ground realities and mainstream policy debates; and to bring the voices of workers and their organisations to policy debates. Drawing on WIEGO's data, this paper presents statistics, survey findings and case study evidence, which demonstrate that including the informal economy in urban policy and practice is both necessary and possible.

2. The Size, Composition and Contribution of the (Urban) Informal Economy

Most people now live in urban areas. The United Nations projects that by 2050, 66 per cent of the world's population will be urban, suggesting that urbanization will continue unabated (UNDESA 2015). Despite predictions to the contrary, urbanization in many countries has not been driven or accompanied by industrialization. Indeed, in some countries, cities are de-industrializing. The net result is that most urban workers in low-income countries earn their livelihoods in the informal economy. The prevalence of informal employment, much of which takes place in public space and informal settlements, is a critical issue for the urban development agenda.

Official labour force statistics show that informal employment² comprises more than half of non-agricultural employment³ in most regions of the global South – specifically, 82 per cent in South Asia, 66 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 65 per cent in East and Southeast Asia, and 51 per cent in Latin America. In the Middle East and North Africa, informal employment is 45 per cent of non-agricultural employment. Estimates for six cities in China show that 33 per cent of non-agricultural employment is informal. These figures also indicate that informal employment is a disproportionate source of employment for women in most regions.

The statistics also show the prevalence of self-employment relative to wage employment.

In all five regions with data plus urban China, self-employment outweighs wage employment as a source of non-agricultural informal employment. Across the regions

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2. These statistics are based on international statistical norms, according to which the “informal sector” refers to employment and production that takes place in unincorporated, unregistered or small enterprises, while “informal employment” refers to employment without social protection through work both inside and outside the informal sector. The “informal economy” refers to all units, activities and workers so defined, and the output from them.
 3. Due to differences in the way countries define urban, non-agricultural employment is used as a proxy for urban employment.

Table 4.1: Specific groups of urban informal workers from selective countries

<p>Domestic work is an important occupation, involving a sizeable proportion of the urban workforce.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>urban employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Africa: 3 to 9% in 7 West African cities and 1 East African city ■ India: 4 % ■ Latin America: 6% in Lima, 8% in Buenos Aires, and 5.5%, on average, for the region as a whole ● <i>urban informal employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ South Africa: 23% ■ Brazil: 9% ■ India: 5% ■ Buenos Aires: 16% ● <i>urban employees/wage workers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Buenos Aires: 10% <p>Home-based work, which cuts across different branches of industry, is an important category, representing a significant share of urban employment in some countries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ urban employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ India: 18% ■ Buenos Aires: 3% ■ South Africa: 6% ■ urban informal employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Africa: 11-25% in 8 cities, 21% in Ghana ■ India: 23% ■ Latin America: 3% in Lima, 5% in Buenos Aires <p>Street vendors constitute an important share of urban employment in Africa, including South Africa, but less so in Latin America, India, and Vietnam</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>urban employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ India: 11% ■ Latin America: 3% in Brazil, 1% in Buenos Aires ■ South Africa: 15% ● <i>urban informal employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Africa: 12-24% in 8 African cities, 14% in Ghana ■ India: 14 % ■ Vietnam: 11% each in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City ■ Latin America: 2 % in Buenos Aires, 9 % in Lima ● <i>urban self-employed</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Buenos Aires: 4% <p>Where waste pickers were identified, they represented less than one per cent of the urban workforce.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>urban employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Africa: 0.1-0.4% in 7 West African cities ■ South Africa: 0.7% (both formal and informal waste pickers) ■ India: 0.1% ● <i>urban informal employment</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ India: 0.1% ■ Latin America: 0.6% in Lima, 0.5% in Brazil

(Source: Vanek et al. 2013)

own account workers (one-person operations) are the largest category of the self-employed. The second largest category is contributing family workers. Employers are often the focus of policy support. However, the statistics show that very few informal workers are employers. In sum, the present-day reality is that most non-agricultural jobs in the global South are informal, and most of those are in self-employment.

Within informal employment, there is considerable diversity in terms of occupational groups and activities. The urban informal workforce is comprised primarily of construction workers, domestic workers, home-based producers, street vendors, transport workers and waste pickers, plus many low-end service occupations (See below Table 1 on specific group of urban informal workers from selective countries). These activities take place in a diversity of workplaces well beyond private commercial spaces. Particularly relevant is that homes often double as workplaces, and public space is an important place of work for the urban working poor (See Chen and Sinha 2016). Urban policymakers and practitioners, in other words, can no longer assume that people strictly live in private residential space and work in private commercial space.

Although the earnings of informal workers are low on average, cumulatively their activities contribute substantially to the economy. For example, in the West African countries for which there are data, the informal sector contributes over 50 per cent to non-agricultural gross value added, while in India the informal sector contributes 46 per cent (ILO 2013). This suggests that the informal economy should not be considered marginal to the economy; rather, it should feature centrally in local economic development strategies.

3. Conceptual Frameworks I: Development Studies

The urban informal economy has been a field of enquiry for over four decades. Keith Hart's seminal analysis first countered the commonly held view that "traditional" activities would disappear by being absorbed into the modern capitalist economy with industrialization (Hart 1973). He argued that informal activities possessed some autonomous capacity for generating growth in the incomes of the urban poor. Since Hart's study sparked research and policy attention on the informal economy, the concept has been hotly debated. These debates however focus less on the informal

economy's potential and contributions, and more on what causes it and the problems and challenges associated with it.

Chen categorizes the academic and policy debates on the informal economy since Hart's study into four schools of thought (Chen 2012). The Dualist school, first promoted by the International Labour Organisation, sees the informal sector as comprising marginal activities – distinct from and not related to the formal sector – that provide income for the poor and a safety net in times of crisis. The Structuralist school, a critique from the left, views the informal economy as consisting of subordinated economic units and workers that serve to reduce input and labour costs, and thereby increase the competitiveness of large capitalist firms (Moser 1978; Portes, Castells and Benton 1989). The Legalist school, championed by de Soto, sees the informal sector as comprised of “plucky” microentrepreneurs who choose to operate informally in order to avoid the costs, time and effort of formal registration, and who need property rights to convert their assets into legally recognized assets (de Soto 1989). The Voluntarist school, a variant on the legalist school, holds that the informal economy is comprised of (mainly) self-employed entrepreneurs who volunteer to work informally, not due to cumbersome regulations but as a strategic choice (Maloney 2004).

Most causal theories are valid, but only for certain segments of informal employment; and no single causal theory can explain all segments of informal employment. Researchers, policymakers and practitioners thus should be acutely aware of which segment of the informal economy they are focusing on. Further, the four dominant explanations – exit from, exclusion from, entry barriers to formal regulations, and subordination to or exploitation by formal firms – are not sufficient. Systemic drivers also shape the ways in which people develop livelihoods and the extent to which those livelihoods are linked to formal and informal enterprises and institutions. WIEGO's 10-city Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) has found that macroeconomic trends, government practices and the legal regulatory environment, and value chain dynamics have major impacts on informal livelihoods (Chen 2014; Dias and Samson 2016). In today's global economy, trends in trade and technology have led to reductions in the employment intensity of growth. Fewer formal jobs are being created and more production is being outsourced through value chains, leading to changes in the nature of work and the structure of labour markets as well as an increase in informal employment (Kanbur 2014).

The mainstream development literature tends to pay little or no attention to the impact of policies and practices of urban practitioners and local government on informality. The article by Chen (2016) in the October issue explores the ways in which urban governance affects technology choices among informal workers in three cities, while Alferts, Dobson and Xulu (2016) show how local government in Durban, South Africa impacts the occupational health and safety of informal workers whose workplace is urban public space. Thara's contribution shows how interactions between representative associations and local government elites in Mangaluru, India shape livelihood opportunities in important ways (Thara 2016). And Banks' article calls attention to the role of police harassment in the "multiple vulnerabilities" associated with livelihood insecurity among young people in Arusha, Tanzania (Banks 2016).

4. Conceptual Frameworks II: Urban Studies

There is also growing interest among urban planners, designers, architects and scholars in various aspects of urban informality. In the urban disciplines, informality was once associated with squatter settlements, but as Roy (2005) argues, it is increasingly recognized as a more generalized mode of metropolitan urbanization, with many components. The term "informality" is commonly used to describe a range of behaviours and practices that are not regulated or controlled by the state or formal institutions, including those related to income generation, service provision, and settlements. The term "informal planning" is also used to refer to unofficial planning processes by the state that happen outside regulatory procedures, notably quasi-legal land transfers (Duminy 2011).

Such analysis exposes two underlying structural tensions. First, Watson (2009a) identifies a tension that she calls "the 'clash of rationalities' between techno-managerial and market-driven systems of urban governance, services and planning and the marginalized urban populations surviving largely under conditions of informality". In some cities, the tension manifests itself when municipal governments abandon comprehensive planning and increasingly resort to ad-hoc "sanitizing" measures of various kinds (Kamete and Lindell 2010). Whether planned or ad-hoc, the state seeks to sweep away informality. Many make the case for refocusing urban planning on poverty, inequality, informality, and spatial fragmentation by adding a perspective from the global South (Watson 2009b).

The second structural tension exposed by urban specialists is between two modes of informality within cities: informality created from below and informality created from above. In her analysis of land markets and settlements in Indian cities, Roy (2005) distinguishes between informal settlements created by the urban poor (“subaltern informality”) and informal settlements created by the state in collusion with rich residents, housing authorities and private real estate developers (“elite informality”).

In analysing this second structural tension, urban specialists describe how the urban poor create informal settlements or pursue informal livelihoods by operating in the gaps in formal rules (de jure and/or de facto) and the gaps in the use of urban space (temporal and/or spatial). Meanwhile, the state both defines the formal rules (who and what is considered legal/illegal or formal/informal) and creates authorized exceptions to them, including the use of public space, often in collusion with powerful vested interests. Put another way, there are exceptions authorized by the state that the elite take advantage of, and unauthorized exceptions that the non-elite create on their own for survival.

Informality from below: operating in the gaps

Informality from below is associated with the strategies of the urban poor. The urban poor create informal settlements by occupying private land or public space at a point in time, or incrementally over time, with the hope of permanent occupation. And they pursue their livelihoods by appropriating available space and resources, often daily.

Consider street vending, the most visible of urban informal livelihoods. Street vendors appropriate available space in areas with heavy pedestrian flows, usually in central business districts or near transport nodes. They often do so intermittently – at times in the day, week or month – when the space becomes available or when the pedestrian flows are at their peak. Over time, incrementally, some areas occupied by street vendors develop into permanent open air markets. These traditional street markets create “a unique common good, the establishment of a market environment” (Mooshammer 2015).

Informality from above: making rules and exceptions

While informality from below is associated with the urban poor, informality from above is associated with the state: specifically, the ways in which local governments

set the rules of the game but also promote deregulation or legal ambiguity and make exceptions to their own rules.

City governments are thus involved in destroying informal livelihoods by defining what activities are legal/formal and illegal/informal, and criminalizing those activities they deem to be illegal/informal. By designating informal activities and the urban spaces they occupy as “pathologies”, observes Kamete (2012), the state justifies corrective measures to “normalize” urban spaces and, in so doing, to exclude and marginalize informal activities. Rao and Diwadkar (2015) explain that, to do so, city governments portray informal activities from below “as disorderly, chaotic, anarchic, unruly and ungovernable”, noting that city governments are applying this representation to “an ever-expanding and shifting universe of practices” (ibid, page 166). They conclude that marking processes or activities as “informal” allows the state to eliminate them through displacement or criminalization (ibid, page 172).

In sum, the urbanists politicize the discourse on informality – a contribution that is often missing in the development economics literature.

Clash of informalities

Access to and use of public space, public services and public procurement represent domains where informality from above and from below are contested, often to the disadvantage of the urban poor. Street vendors are an iconic example of such contestation. Recent case studies of policy responses to street vending and street vendors’ responses to policy changes illustrate the complex political dynamics when city governments decide to restrict the use of public space in central business districts by street vendors, who they associate with crime and grime. Membership-based organisations (MBOs) of street vendors in the WIEGO network have faced relocations with mixed consequences; for example, the 2013 relocation of the wholesale market in Lima, Peru benefited market traders and porters with better working conditions, but left street vendors without the economic linkages upon which they had depended for decades.

To address such clashes, workers’ organisations in the WIEGO network have developed methodologies for engaging with local governments to address their needs for access to public space, public services and public procurement processes (Roever and Skinner 2016). One such methodology is the development of multi-stakeholder platforms that bridge the interests of multiple organisations within a

single occupational sector, of multiple organisations across occupational sectors, and of multiple organisations plus government and non-government stakeholders. For instance, several organisations in Lima, Peru formed a Self-Employed Workers' Platform to aggregate their proposals for social dialogue, finance, training, social protection and enterprise management to present to municipal governments.⁴ A second methodology involves sustained policy dialogues, as in the case of HomeNet Thailand, which has used this method to advocate for better public services, including water, health care and transportation (See Chen and Sinha 2016; Tangworamongkon 2015).

5. New Policy Directions

While the urban planning literature has usefully re-politicized informality by asking fundamental questions about how practices are identified as informal, its broad pessimism around the possibilities of more inclusive practices stands in contrast to the efforts of workers' organisations to advocate around specific demands at both local and global levels. These efforts often fall into one of three categories that together represent an emerging framework for policy and practice related to urban informal work.

First, many organisations are engaged in efforts to “reduce the negatives”. For instance, while conventional approaches to enterprise growth emphasize the productivity and size of enterprises, MBOs are engaged in efforts to make visible the risks and costs associated with working in public space, such as policy uncertainty, harassment and evictions by local authorities, and occupational health and safety risks, to create a more stable and predictable work environment. This is a critical area for policy reform given that informal workers lack basic social and legal protections unless they make efforts to claim these.

Second, MBOs are also engaged in efforts to “increase the positives”. These tend to focus on establishing their legal identity as workers and pushing for regulatory reforms that recognize, validate and support their work, rather than problematize their informal status. These efforts take place at local and global levels. Locally, street vendors and waste pickers have engaged in legal struggles to establish their right to work – for example, street traders in South Africa and India (Roever and Skinner

4. See <http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Plataforma-Lima-Peru-2014.pdf>.

2016; Roever 2016) and waste pickers in Belo Horizonte, Bogotá and Pune (Dias 2016; Chikarmane 2012). Notably, these efforts aim to reduce the degree of informality under which these workers operate; in other words, they are in effect bottom-up efforts at formalization. Globally, informal economy worker-based movements and their allies have advocated successfully for new International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions (WIEGO 2016) and were very active in the processes that resulted in the NUA, agreed at Habitat III.

A key area of positive intervention is access to infrastructure and basic services for informal workers at their workplaces, whether in public space or in their homes. The IEMS results identified infrastructure deficits as a key driver of working conditions for all three occupational groups studied (See Molaney 2004; Chen 2014; Roever 2014; Dias and Samson 2016), and many MBO partners in that study have used the findings to advocate for improved access. Challenges related to infrastructure also include high costs and poor quality. These challenges are highlighted in advocacy efforts that link informal livelihoods and informal settlements, such as the joint response to the Habitat III Zero Draft presented by the Grassroots Partner Constituency of the World Urban Campaign's General Assembly of Partners.⁵

Third, as a key enabling condition, organisations of informal workers are making efforts to institutionalize their voice in rule setting and policymaking forums. Though collective bargaining is traditionally understood as the domain of formal sector trade unions with employers, collective bargaining by informal worker organisations, with both the state and market actors, is quite common and increasing in scale and impact (Budlender 2013). HomeNet Thailand has facilitated collective negotiations with municipal authorities by home-based workers (relocated from central Bangkok to the periphery of the city) for additional bus routes and a pedestrian over-bridge at a dangerous traffic junction. StreetNet International has taken a particular interest in working with its affiliates to establish statutory bargaining forums between street traders and local governments. Organisations of waste pickers in Brazil, Colombia and India have negotiated contracts and infrastructure (e.g. sheds and equipment) from local government (Chen et al 2013).

5. The WIEGO network and Slum/Shack Dwellers International are the co-chairs of the Grassroots Partner Constituency.

6. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to challenge common assumptions about the informal workforce and the state. The first such assumption is that informal workers operate outside the reach of the state because they seek to avoid regulation. The reality is more complex: informal workers are often inside the punitive arm, but outside the protective arm, of the state; and informal workers regularly engage with the state to seek protection and support. The second assumption is that employment consists mostly of wage employment in privately owned commercial spaces. In cities across the world, households are the major site of production and public space is the major site of exchange. Yet city governments and urban planners do not recognize homes as workplaces, or “slums” and squatter settlements as hubs of production; nor do they recognize street vendors for their contribution to exchange and trade in the city. Most importantly, the three policy priorities identified in this paper (reducing the negatives, increasing the positives and inviting informal workers to the policy table) represent a significant innovation – a proposed shift – in the relationship between informal workers and local governments.

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