

# Introduction

## The long discourse on informality as reflected in selected articles of the *International Labour Review*

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**Abstract.** *This article presents a Centenary Issue on Informality to mark the 100th anniversary of the International Labour Review (ILR). The issue brings together ten articles published in the ILR between 1975 and 2016 that are devoted exclusively to the analysis of informality. This introduction begins with an analytical framework, considers the origins of the informality discourse and then discusses the articles in this Centenary Issue, locating them in the broader literature through illustrative rather than comprehensive referencing. It concludes by looking ahead to what the coming decades of analysis and policy discourse may bring.*

**Keywords:** *informal economy, informality discourse, history of informality, policy and informality, future of informality, role of ILO.*

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### 1. Informality in labour relations

“Informality” is a term that is widely used in analytical and policy discourse, but it is conceptualized, measured and talked about in many different ways. The concept also has a long and meandering history, even longer than the four-and-a-half decades since the term was first used in the *International Labour Review* (ILR), soon after the coining of this word’s application to labour relations. This Centenary Issue brings together ten articles published in the ILR between 1975 and 2016 that are devoted exclusively to the analysis and discussion of informality. There is, of course, by now a vast literature on the topic, and this introduction places the selected ILR articles in the broader context of the discourse on informality.

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The second section of this introduction begins with an analytical framework that may help to make sense of the wide-ranging contributions on informality – theory, empirical observation and policy – found in the literature and reflected in the specific articles included in this issue. The third section turns to the origins of the discourse on “informality”, even before the term was applied to labour relations, before considering the pioneering work of Keith Hart (1973) and the ILO’s *Employment Report on Kenya* (1972). The fourth section briefly introduces the articles in this issue and locates them in the broader literature through illustrative rather than comprehensive referencing (which would be close to impossible). The fifth section concludes by looking ahead to what the coming decades of analysis and policy discourse may bring.

## 2. A framework for analysis and policy<sup>1</sup>

Imagine, for the purposes of argument, a mythical world with no state intervention or regulation. Economic activity will have settled into some pattern dictated by market and other interactions. Now imagine that some form of state regulation is introduced. The responses of economic actors as they adjust their activities can be classified into the following four categories: (A) covered by the regulation and in compliance; (B) covered by the regulation but not in compliance; (C) covered by the regulation initially, but actors adjust their activity in a way that puts them out of coverage; and (D) not covered by the regulation.

This is a very broad perspective and can encompass the behaviour of all economic actors, including both enterprises and workers. Clearly, category A is what we would call “formal”. Categories B, C and D are by implication “informal”, but they have quite different characteristics. Category B comprises illegal behaviour, and its extent is determined to some degree by the level of enforcement of the regulation. Category C is not illegal, since it is outside the coverage of the regulation; but there has been a deliberate adjustment in order to be out of coverage, and this may have economic implications. Category D is also not illegal, but it was not covered by the regulation in the first place and is therefore not affected by it at all. In other writings,<sup>2</sup> I have labelled A, B, C and D, respectively, as “compliers” with legal regulation, “evaders”, “avoiders” and “outsiders”.

Simple as it is, this framework can capture a wide range of issues in the informality discourse that surface in the articles in this Centenary Issue as well as in the broader literature. As we shall see, the framework helps to locate the origins of definitions of informality, going back five decades and beyond. It frames the development of statistical definitions of informality, for example, as evolving from those based on the regulation of enterprises (informal sector) to those incorporating the (non-)provision of various social security benefits to workers (informal economy). It serves to make the point that informality is not

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<sup>1</sup> This framework was developed for a specific application in an ILR article by Chatterjee and Kanbur (2015). See also Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur and Ostrom (2006).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Chatterjee and Kanbur (2015).

uniform. There are different types of informality, each of which needs to be analysed in terms of its own specific causes. The framework underscores the fact that the enforcement of regulations greatly matters for conceptualizing and measuring informality. It emphasizes that illegality should not be lumped together with other forms of informality, such as those in category D, which are not covered by legal regulation at all.

The framework calls for empirical work to distinguish between and delineate different types of informality and for policies to take a granular approach focused on the causal factors leading to any economic activity found in one of the categories of informality. It distinguishes between category C, which is the focus of those concerned with the adjustment of formal activity so that it be not covered by the regulation, and category D, which is the focus of those who would target policy and political organization upon those outside the formal system characterized by category A.

Finally, the framework eschews the common notion that there is something inherently “bad” or “problematic” about informality. As we shall see, this is a historical legacy from colonial times that still governs the administrative mindset. “Reducing informality” per se is not an appropriate objective. Rather, the framework calls for the design of regulation and interventions with appropriate social objectives, taking into account economic and social agents’ varied responses that can be placed into one or other of the four categories, each of which can, of course, be further disaggregated.

### 3. Beginnings of the informality debate

#### 3.1 Informality before “informality”

Before the term “informality” entered the field of development economics, there was already a discussion about phenomena that would be recognized as aspects of informality in the literature that has burgeoned since the term was first used in this sense. The Dutch academic and colonial administrator J.H. Boeke formulated his theory of economic dualism in a series of lectures and papers in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in his *Economics and Economic Policy of Dual Societies, as Exemplified by Indonesia* (1953). A flavour of his characterizations is given by the following:

In dualistic countries, on the other hand, we find precapitalism embodied in the rural “eastern” social system even at the present juncture. The rustic community presents all its characteristics. But here it is brought into direct contact with an imported capitalism in its full bloom. ... We are here dealing with a clash ... which ... finds expression in other departments of life besides the economic – in legislation and in government, in law and judicature, in social organization. (Boeke 1953, 14)

The notion of society being divided into two components in which the rules are very different was carried over into the essay by Nobel Prize laureate W. Arthur Lewis on “Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour” (Lewis 1954). After developing his famous characterization of agricultural and industrial economies, Lewis paints a picture of what later writers

would recognize as urban informality: “the whole range of casual jobs – the workers on the docks, the young men who rush forward asking to carry your bag as you appear, the jobbing gardener, and the like” (Lewis, 141).

Following on from Lewis in the 1950s, the two-sector formulation, each sector operating under different rules, was prevalent in formal economic analysis of the 1960s and 1970s. Todaro (1969) started with a conventional rural–urban dichotomy but went further and introduced the notion of a divide within the urban sector between employment in a “modern sector”, characterized by government intervention through a minimum wage (echoing category A of the framework delineated in section 2), and “unemployment and underemployment”, which would be recognized by later writers as a characterization of informal employment. This formulation and the concept of labour reallocation across the different sectors through migration were the bases of the famous paper by Harris and Todaro (1970). This article, which has so far had more than 10,000 citations on Google Scholar, was chosen as one of the top 20 articles published in the *American Economic Review*’s centenary edition in 2011 (Arrow et al. 2011).

So there was already much discussion, and attempts to formulate key features of informality already existed, before the term “informality” gained currency. Once the term was introduced, in the early 1970s, the literature took off.

### 3.2 The Hart article and the ILO report

Everybody working on informality knows that the term was introduced into the literature by two publications, Hart (1973) and ILO (1972). It is also well known in the field that, despite the earlier publication date of the ILO report, Hart’s article assumes precedence, because an “earlier version of this article was presented to the Conference on Urban Unemployment in Africa held at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, in September 1971” (Weeks 1975, 2). But these two classic pieces of work are nowadays honoured more suitably by referencing them than by actually reading them. It is appropriate, therefore, that this introduction to the Centenary Issue on Informality take a brief look at these two seminal documents.

Hart’s article emanated from his study of the migration of the Frafra from northern Ghana to the urban areas of southern Ghana. The term “informality” is introduced in the third sentence as follows: “Price inflation, inadequate wages, and an increasing surplus to the requirements of the urban labour market have led to a high degree of informality in the income-generating activities of the sub-proletariat” (Hart 1973, 61). The article is a detailed quantitative and ethnographic examination of the income-earning activities of the Frafra in Accra. For example, one respondent illustrated his multiple sources of income, in which informal activities supplemented his formal income:

Mr A.D. in 1966 worked as a street-cleaner at 6s. 6d. per day (which brought in between £6 and £7 per month, after deductions for social benefits and the time-keeper), as an afternoon gardener at £6 per month, and as a nightwatchman at £14. In addition to this annual income of approximately £320, he grew vegetables on his own plot of land which brought in another £100 or so. (Hart 1973, 66).

But the paper also weaves a conceptualization of informality out of the ethnographic detail. With the benefit of distance, a later article by Hart states, Following [Max] Weber, I argued that the ability to stabilize economic activity within a bureaucratic form made returns more calculable and regular for the workers as well as their bosses. That stability was in turn guaranteed by the state's laws, which only extended so far into the depths of Ghana's economy. "Formal" incomes came from regulated economic activities and "informal" incomes, both legal and illegal, lay beyond the scope of regulation. (Hart 2006, 25)

This is the basic analytical conceptualization that has driven the framing of informality in the subsequent literature. It also matches the framework put forth in section 2 of this introduction to classify and categorize the literature, not least because the framework is inspired by it.

In the ILO report, which resulted from a mission to Kenya in the framework of the ILO's World Employment Programme, the first mention of informality and formality in the main text comes on page 5:

The problem with employment is that the statistics are incomplete, covering a major part of wage-earning employment and some self-employment in the larger and more organised firms but omitting a range of wage earners and self-employed persons, male as well as female, in what we term "the informal sector". (ILO 1972, 5)

The ILO report is more policy oriented than Hart (1973), and it makes an effort that will be familiar to modern readers to change the reader's mindset about informal activities:

A common interpretation of the cause of these low incomes (in comparison to average wage levels in the formal sector) has been to presume that the problem lies within the informal sector; that it is stagnant, non-dynamic. ... The informal sector, particularly in Nairobi but to varying degrees in all areas, has been operating under extremely debilitating restrictions as a consequence of a pejorative view of its nature. Thus there exists an imminent danger that this view could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (ILO 1972, 5–6)

The mindset highlighted by the ILO has its roots in Boeke (1953) and brings us right up to the policy discourse of the present day (Kanbur 2014).

## 4. The Centenary Issue and the literature

The articles in this Centenary Issue were published during the period from 1975 to 2016. They track four decades of exponential growth in the literature, which would be impossible to cover and review comprehensively. Indeed, over time, the topic has become ever more important. This has been shown most recently, for example, by the volume on *The Informal Economy Revisited: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future* edited by Martha Chen and Francoise Carré (2020) under the auspices of WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), a leading global organization created to study and advocate on the issues faced by working women in the informal sector.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)

The first three articles of this Centenary Issue (Weeks 1975; Sethuraman 1976; Souza and Tokman 1976) were published in the mid-1970s, soon after Hart (1973) and ILO (1972). They were part of a flourishing research scene at that time, in which Mazumdar (1975) was an early pioneer. Perhaps not surprisingly, these articles are concerned with basic conceptual and measurement issues, although policy orientation is never far from the concepts and measures. The late John Weeks takes on board a definition of “formal” and “informal” that is recognizable from the foundational papers by Hart (1973) and ILO (1972) and is reflected in the general framework presented in section 2:

The distinction between a formal and an informal sector is based on the organisational characteristics of exchange relationships and the position of economic activity vis-à-vis the State. ... Basically, the formal sector includes government activity itself and those enterprises in the private sector which are officially recognised, fostered, nurtured and regulated by the State. (Weeks 1975, 2–3)

Weeks then develops a multisector model and discusses in general terms “policies which could stimulate evolutionary growth in the informal sector” (Weeks, 7–8). However, it is curious that Weeks makes no mention of the article by Harris and Todaro (1970) that was already making waves and has gone on to achieve the status of a classic in the mainstream economics literature.

The articles by Sethuraman (1976) and by Souza and Tokman (1976) are more empirical in nature than Weeks’s, with a focus on taking the concepts to data. Thus, Sethuraman includes a section entitled “Data needs and survey design”. It sets out basic principles that are recognizable to modern researchers, since these principles have informed data collection activities of the ILO and other agencies. The appendix presents nine “criteria for identifying informal sector enterprises”. Among those in manufacturing are the following elements, which are by now very familiar: “(a) It employs 10 persons or less (including part-time and casual workers). (b) It operates on an illegal basis, contrary to government regulations. (c) Members of the household of the head of the enterprise work in it.” (Sethuraman 1976, 81).

Souza and Tokman, in turn, provide a specific application to Latin America. Relying once again on the familiar distinction that, on “the one hand there is the formal sector, in which organised economic activities are concentrated, and on the other the informal sector, consisting of workers who as a rule are not employed by organised enterprises” (Souza and Tokman 1976, 356), the article does a remarkable job of marshalling evidence from nine countries and then highlighting key policy issues that will be very familiar in the context of the current discourse on informality. In particular, consistent with the framework set out in section 2 above, the authors emphasize the direct intervention of support and training for “outsiders” in the informal sector, such as home-based workers and self-employed women, to improve efficiency and income-earning capability, including the development of cooperatives and improving the supply of credit. These are themes that recur throughout this Centenary Issue.

After the burst of activity in the mid-1970s, there appears in the 1980s to have been a lull in articles published in the ILR that dealt exclusively with



informality. (Of course, treatments of this subject did feature under other headings, and much work was published in various ILO technical reports and working papers). Even the 1990s saw only two articles with a primary focus on informality, but these were of great interest. One of them (Sanyal 1991) covered an aspect that had been missing in the earlier focus on concepts and measurement, namely, politics; the other article (Maldonado 1995) presaged a discussion that became prominent in the policy debate, namely, whether to extend regulation to cover the informal sector, or to reduce it to bring informal activities into the formal sphere.

Sanyal (1991) raises the question of how to advocate and organize for policies in the informal sector. Organizing in the unorganized sector may seem like a contradiction in terms, but it is at the very heart of the mission of NGOs like the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India,<sup>4</sup> which Sanyal discusses, and whose leaders he interviewed for the project underpinning his article. SEWA is an organization of women, by women and for women in the informal economy. In conversation with me, the founder of SEWA, Ela Bhatt, has spoken of economic activity, credit, training and so on as being like water, and political organization being like a bowl. Without water the bowl will be empty. But without the bowl the water will simply flow away. Both are needed. Sanyal (1991) probes the many challenges that informal sector groups face in seeking to self-organize, and the dilemmas they face in forming alliances with formal sector groups such as trade unions (see also Chen et al. 2007). These issues are ever present when we move from discussing policy in the abstract to addressing policy as politics.

Maldonado (1995) takes up an issue that leaps out from the framework presented in section 2. The impact of government regulation in that framework is to create the four categories A, B, C and D (compliers, evaders, avoiders and outsiders). As noted, category A represents formality, whereas B, C and D contain different forms of informality. Should regulation attempt to reach out and cover economic actors in category D, who are not currently covered, or should it retreat, so as to reduce incentives for activity that falls into categories B or C? The question is a perennial one, as we shall see, but it had particular significance in the 1990s because of the influential work of Hernando de Soto (1989), who argued that the extension of "good laws" and administration to the informal sector would unlock productive potential. Maldonado (1995) carries out a meticulous examination of a range of policies, and analyses the impact they would have on the informal sector, including the effect of enforcement on illegality.

The first article from the 2000s in this Centenary Issue is by Barbara Harriss-White (2003). It brings an interdisciplinary perspective, from the broader approach of development studies, to a deeper and more granular analysis of the organization of the informal sector. With regard to the informal sector, Elinor Ostrom (1990) emphasizes that what looks "disorganized" – recalling the approach of Boeke's (1953) time – is not so at all, but is highly

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<sup>4</sup> [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org)

regulated through social means. Harriss-White follows this argument when she says that, “In many countries, the larger part of the economy operates beyond the regulative reach of the State. ... Economic order then rests on forms of social regulation rather than state regulation. ... Yet by its very nature the practice of social regulation is exclusive and discriminatory” (Harriss-White 2003, 459–460). Like Sanyal’s (1991) in the political domain, Harris-White’s analysis opens up and disaggregates the black box of informality, but this time in the social arena.

The next article in this Centenary Issue, by Kucera and Roncolato (2008), is itself a comprehensive overview of the informality literature, but, at the same time, addresses two questions that were prevalent at the time and are still open today. These are “two contested issues of crucial importance to policy, namely: formal labour regulations as a cause of informal employment, and so-called ‘voluntary’ informal employment” (Kucera and Roncolato, 321). Taking on board the arguments of such stalwarts of the mainstream economics literature on informality as Fields (1990), Maloney (2004) and Levy (2008), the authors survey the conceptual and empirical literature. They conclude that “the empirical evidence does not support the view that weakening labour regulations is an effective policy for reducing informal employment” (Kucera and Roncolato 2008, 341), thus supporting the position of the ILO. The debate will undoubtedly continue, since, in the policy arena, there remains a strong position in favour of labour deregulation.

The last three articles in this Centenary Issue touch on new and emerging developments in the 2010s. Tomei and Belser (2011) give the background to, and an assessment of, the ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) and Recommendation (No. 201), 2011. Domestic workers, mainly females, have by and large fallen under category D of the framework in section 2, being workers who have not been covered by regulation at all. As Tomei and Belser point out:

There are millions of domestic workers worldwide, mainly women and girls, employed in developing and industrialized countries alike. ... they are often unorganized, overworked, underpaid and abused. The new ILO instruments on decent work for domestic workers state unambiguously that these workers are workers and, as such, are entitled to respect, dignity, and decent work and lives. (Tomei and Belser 2011, 438)

Convention No. 189, for which civil society organizations had campaigned, is an example of an extension of regulation to the uncovered. However, as category B of the framework in section 2 indicates, and as Tomei and Belser also emphasize, monitoring, inspection and enforcement will have to be key components of any implementation strategy.

The article by Williams (2015) provides a statistical update on the prevalence of informality. In the early 2000s, concerns began to be expressed about the enterprise-based definitions of informality. Questions were raised about workers who were employed in enterprises that satisfied various enterprise-level criteria of formality but who nevertheless were not entitled to a range of social protections. This gap was remedied by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2003, which expanded the statistical concept of the informal “sector” to that of the informal “economy”, focusing on the character-



istics of the job. The new definition was subsequently implemented in publications such as *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, first published in 2013, with a third edition in 2018 (ILO 2018). Comparing the two definitions, Williams (2015, 346) concludes that, “for 36 developing countries, the finding is that three in five (59.8 per cent) of the non-agricultural workforce have their main employment in the informal economy, and that just under three in four (74 per cent) of these work in informal enterprises”. He also provides interesting cross-country correlates of informality. Thus, four decades after the ILO (1972) report, three out of five workers were still in the informal economy.

The final article in this Centenary Issue, by Gutiérrez-Barbarrusa (2016), shifts the focus from developing countries to include developed countries. Its approach is not strictly within the framework of ILO definitions of informality, but it develops an index of “precariousness”. It starts with an insecurity index – “ $II = t + s + p$  where  $II$  is the sum of the total employment shares of involuntary temporary employment ( $t$ ), self-employment, considering only own-account workers without paid employees ( $s$ ), and involuntary part-time employment ( $p$ )” (Gutiérrez-Barbarrusa, 490) – and then proceeds to augment this to obtain a precariousness index ( $PI$ ):

$$PI = \frac{(II+UR)+LW}{100}$$

where  $PI$  is the precariousness index,  $II$  is the insecurity index,  $UR$  is the unemployment rate and  $LW$  is the share of low-wage employment (Gutiérrez-Barbarrusa, 498).

Application of this index to the 15 Member States of the European Union before the 2004 expansion reveals, in the context of more developed economies with more formal labour markets under conventional definitions, similar issues to those found in the informal economy of developing countries.

## 5. Where to now?

The articles in this Centenary Issue end in 2016, 41 years after the first paper in the ILR that was devoted exclusively to “informality”, and 45 years after Hart coined the use of the term in this sense in a seminar presentation of the paper that was eventually published in 1973. We have also seen that there was a discourse on informality, without using the term, long before this time.

Where to now? There have undoubtedly been advances in conceptualization and particularly in measurement, and these will continue. But the policy debates have shown a constancy that is unlikely to change. The questions of how much to regulate, how much to intervene and with what objectives have structured the debates and thus the analyses that have been generated by these debates. The later articles, towards the end of this issue, might not seem strangers to the earlier ones, and vice versa. And the articles published in the ILR in two or three decades’ time will equally not be strangers to the

ones included in this Centenary Issue, since the fundamental questions of political economy that give rise to and guide analytical questions are unlikely to change.

However, the economic realities to which policy debates apply will change, and this is bound to colour the debates in the coming decades. There are three realities, in particular, that will have a major impact on the informality discourse. First, the technological juggernaut is displacing low-skilled labour in production and a number of services in favour of capital and of educated and skilled labour. This trend has been much discussed and analysed already, and it will not abate in the coming decades. Second, and relatedly, the worldwide spreading of concerns relating to informality will greatly accelerate in the years to come. Rather than affecting primarily poorer countries, it will encompass richer countries as well. It will be interesting, indeed, to see frameworks that were formulated in the context of developing countries being applied to countries that are considered to be developed. Third, and following on from the first two realities, new forms of social organizations in the informal economy are evolving, making use of new technologies to provide support and advocacy relating to informality. With these three rapidly progressing changes under way, one wonders what a future ILR special issue on informality, perhaps in a few decades' time, will look like.

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