

UNDERSTANDING INFORMALITY

TOWARDS A MULTI-
DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS
OF THE CONCEPT

Cities Alliance
Cities Without Slums

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KEY MESSAGES



This review is part of the Global Informality Paper Series, and it outlines a new approach to a more differentiated understanding of the concept of informality.



Informality as a concept has been approached from different angles and been subject to different discourse, and each discourse has contributed particular ideas about the informal. In the absence of precise definitions, a decomposition approach is applied to identify and visualize similarities and differences in understanding informality.



Specifically, this paper provides a short overview of the most influential discourses on informality in an (urban) development context informal economy, informal housing, informal land, and urban informality discourses to then present an analytical framework to capture these different views on the informal.



The discussion of informality is very complex and multi-layered. A taxonomy is proposed on seven dimensions of the informal based on the grouping of 120 distinct ideas. A multi-dimensional understanding of informality unlocks comparison between discourses.



Five practice documents of Cities Alliance and its members are analyzed to highlight differences and similarities and suggest promising ways. Different discourses depict informality by referring to its economic, legal, technical, organisational, political, social, and cultural dimensions.



The way we define informality shapes our actions. Definitions draw borders between what we consider and what we exclude in a specific context. A multi-dimensional understanding of informality unlocks comparison between discourses.

Cities Alliance - Global Programme on Informality

Two billion informal workers and one billion slum dwellers worldwide remain exposed to hostile policy environments and the sharpest impacts of poverty, social exclusion, climate change, and inadequate public health systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with already insufficient public service provision have exacerbated the vulnerability of low-income communities, elderly, children and women. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed long overdue structural problems derived from inequality and sets the momentum for a radical shift in the way cities are planned and managed. It is no longer acceptable that a major part of the world's population does not have access to minimum safe living conditions to deal with the pandemic. Thus, there is a strong need to address slums and informality on a permanent basis, with a fair and equitable allocation of resources, services, and land and public spaces.

Cities Alliance has been working to both highlight and improve the living conditions of slum dwellers for two decades, and can play a relevant role promoting this radical shift, legitimated by its institutional trajectory and robust membership.

The Global Programme on Informality seeks to build a coalition to globally overcome the political, knowledge and resource gaps for addressing informality of land, labour and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis, with three specific objectives:

- 1) Mobilise Cities Alliance members, their constituencies and development partners to promote joint efforts and increased knowledge on addressing and harnessing informality and responding to COVID-19 in cities.
- 2) Identify key knowledge gaps and produce knowledge products that distil the results and learning from the dialogues and peer-learning and disseminate them to a global audience.
- 3) Facilitate a joint narrative and Cities Alliance coalition to deliver an advocacy and outreach campaign to a global audience to raise awareness on effective COVID-19 responses and demonstrate solutions to informality.





1 INTRODUCTION

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Informality is a complex topic with a long history.

Five decades ago, a study in Ghana resulted in the first comprehensive discussion on informality in a development context.¹ Hart coined the term informal economy that became an important concept to describe national economies in the developing world.² The idea of informality has been used in different knowledge domains and discourses. Several have made important contributions to improving our understanding of the Global South's urbanization processes: informal economy, informal housing, informal land markets, informal law, and informal institutions.

This paper is part of a larger review series on informality launched by Cities Alliance. Since its creation in 1999, this multi-institutional platform has been at the forefront of the debate on slums, slum upgrading, and the role of informality in cities of the Global South. Cities Alliance has recently launched the Global Program on Informality. The overall aim is to fundamentally alter how knowledge is created and shared on informal settlements and related topics. One of its objectives is to build a coalition to globally overcome the political and geographic as well as knowledge- and resource-related gaps for addressing the issue of informality in housing, land, economy, and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis.

The "Practice Review of Informality" is embedded in the **Global Program on Informality** and proposes a new take on cross-sectoral knowledge sharing. Each paper addresses an important topic of informality by reviewing the literature produced by Cities Alliance, its members, and other important knowledge stakeholders whenever needed. Developed in close collaboration with the restructuring of

the knowledge library, several elements have been developed to enable better access and more targeted impact. The paper and its content have been tagged to unlock the potential of text-based online searches to make the content more accessible.

Our world is changing at an unprecedented pace.

This also imposes new demands on knowledge creation. The authors of this paper perceive the paper as a current snapshot of the practitioner's knowledge on the given topic. We encourage the readers to get in touch with us for further suggestions and comments. This feedback is very valuable to us and may include, among others, specific references to new projects and case studies, missing concerns, and proposals for future review topics. Interested parties can also sign up for the mailing list of the Global Programme on Informality. The papers shall be updated regularly (traceable in the version index) to keep pace with the evolving knowledge of the Global Community of Practice.

by Anthony Boanada-Fuchs, Vanessa Boanada Fuchs, Anaclaudia Rossbach and Susana Rojas Williams

1 – Hart, 1973.
2 – Chen, 2012.



2 INFORMALITY IN DIFFERENT DISCOURSES

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2.1 Informality in the Economic Discourse

The informal economy is the oldest and best-studied dimension of informality. While the discourse still faces the difficulties in quantifying and defining informality,³ there is broad consensus about its growing importance over the last decades. Economic informality is the major generator of new employments in the developing world, even if accompanied by high levels of underemployment, insecurity and low-income level.⁴ The informal sector accounts for up to 80% of certain national economies in the developing world, but even represent between 8 and 10% in Western Europe and the United States.⁵

Two broad explanations for the existence and persistence of informality are put forward. Both share a common tendency to equate informal economy with illegality and poverty.⁶ In a structuralist interpretation, informality is perceived as a consequence of an uneven capitalistic development and “bad” for the economy and the state.⁷ The second school of thought is called legalists and emphasizes the competitive advantages of informality.⁸

Informality is seen as a rational response to (over)regulation. In such light, informality is often equated with the

activities of creative and self-employed urban poor whose potential is primarily curtailed by a lack of access to financial resources. Scholars like Hernando de Soto describes the “informals” as “plucky entrepreneurs making a major contribution to the national economy.”⁹ The argument put forward is that informality should not be suppressed but rather be unlocked by regularizing the “dead capital” of informal goods and real-estate assets through large-scale legalization campaigns.¹⁰

While politically appealing, due to its apparent economic benefits and strong linkages to poverty alleviation, such approach has been highly questioned for its actual effects on the lives of the urban poor.¹¹ This criticism has been particularly voiced by proponents of the land management discourse,¹² who argue that not legal titles (de jure) are primarily needed but de facto tenure security shifting the importance from laws to politics.

The concept of the informal economy has undergone a considerable development with the common denominator of perceiving informality as activities that transgress formal regulations. While the initial description of Hart was very rich in detail, addressing political roots and cultural aspects, the adoption of the concept by international organizations is paralleled by a reduction to a mere economic understanding.¹³ From such angle, three different levels of non-compliance with formality may be distinguished: the avoidance of labour laws, tax evasion, and the non-respect of official norms and standards.

The incentives for economic activities to remain informal can be different – the majority of informal workers and businesses have little other choices. Still, a distinguishable share of informal entrepreneurs moves to or remains in this sphere to benefit from competitive advantages (ease of entry, reduced operational costs, no tax burden). Infor-

3 – Chen, 2006.

4 – Vanek, 2014.

5 – Portes and Schauffer, 1993; Becker 2004.

6 – Berner, 2001; Gilbert, 1990.

7 – Kanbur, 2011.

8 – such as self-employment, flexible labor safety rules compliance, for an overview, see. Rakowski, 1994.

9 – Bromley, 1990.

10 – De Soto, 2003.

11 – Gilbert, 2002.

12 – Durand-Lasserve and Royston, 2002.

13 – for an overview, see Peattie, 1987.

mal economic activities are often flexible and small-scale with skills “often acquired outside of formal education, labour-intensive methods of production and adapted technology.”¹⁴ While it has been argued that there is no theoretical justification to analytically exclude informal practices of the corporate sector (fraud, corruption, etc.), this is hardly done in practice.¹⁵

2.2 Informality in the Housing Discourse

The relation of informality and housing is intimately connected to the idea of self-help. This idea can be traced back to the early 1960s and the writings of John Turner, Charles Abrams and William Magnin.¹⁶ Turner, an architect who is less the inventor than the promoter of the idea of self-help, took interest in the shelter provision logic of the urban poor and carried out extensive field research on squatter settlements in Peru.¹⁷

In his publications, Turner describes the efficient and natural way rural-urban migrants meet their basic housing

needs through auto-construction. The concept of self-help refers to irregular construction practices organised by the end-user. Such activities often avoid taxes and permits. The discourse perceives the formal and the informal as mutually exclusive. Whereas the informal leans on traditional material and techniques related to family and subsistence, the formal is equated with modernity led by the state. Turner argues that governments should refrain from oppressing and destroying informal construction but acknowledge their valid contribution to solving escalating housing shortages.

The idea of self-help directly informed World Bank supported housing programs of the first generation such as sites and services and slum upgrading schemes. In its Vancouver conference (1976), the UN-Habitat also endorsed a housing program based on the concept of self-help. In practice, such initiatives greatly lagged behind expectations (see review paper on the challenge of slums),¹⁸ which partly reflects the limitations of their theoretical basis.



14 – Portes and Schauffer, 1993.

15 – Tokman, 2016.

16 – Abrams, 1977.

17 – Harris, 2003.

18 – Bredenoord and Lindert, 2010.



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The concept of self-help concentrates on auto-construction and its cost-saving potential without addressing causal links with small-scale production, irregular status, and aligning the construction process to financial capacities. Most projects had only limited success as they attempted to formalize self-help, which added bureaucratic obstacles resulting in time delay, escalating prices, and commercialization of housing supply.

Later authors, following particularly the categorization of Drakakis-Smith¹⁹ contextualize building practices of self-help into a larger framework of informal housing options.²⁰ Such scholars also broadened the concern to incorporate issues of tenure status, regulatory conformity, and the politics of land. With the broadening of concern, the definition of informality surpasses the concept of self-help. However, over the last two decades, academic attention on the topic of informal housing and self-help has been rather minimal²¹ and the discourse largely dissolved into the urban planning and land management literature.

2.3 Informality in the (Land) Tenure Discourse

The debate on informal tenure breaks with conceptual dichotomies. Discussions on land tenure systems in developing countries have heavily relied on the concepts of formality and informality while at the same time managing to break with their dichotomous configuration. The discourse stresses the social dimension of informality by perceiving informality as an alternative institutional structure that guarantees rights associated with land. In contrast to developed countries, where tenure is associated with written rights and property titles, in most parts of the Global South tenure remains a product of constant social relations and negotiations.²² These tenure systems are products of extremely complex historical, cultural, and institutional processes.²³

The state has an active stake in drawing lines between informality and formality. Proponents of this discourse perceive the origin of informal tenure, on the one hand as the natural (customary) status, on the other hand as state-produced due to high technical standards and regulatory frameworks, political inflexibility and failure of adequate formal provision. The focal point of the land tenure discourse is to illustrate the diversity of tenure agreements in the absence of the State and legal titles.

Unlike the economic discussion around Hernando de Soto that focuses on *de jure* title (legal tenure security), proponents of this discourse argue for the need for *de facto*

19 – Drakakis-Smith, 1981.

20 – see for example Kombe and Kreibich, 2000.

21 – Bredenoord and Lindert, 2010.

22 – Durand-Lasserve and Selod, 2009.

23 – Bukhari, 1982; Al Sayyad, 1993; Payne, 2001.

security. Informal institutions and actors, such as religion and beliefs, family and communal structures, and (informally acting) politicians and landlords, are of central importance in securing tenure rights worldwide. In such view, the formal and informal are not perceived as opposites but rather as an array of tenure arrangements spanning from formal titles to degrees of informality as involved in land subdivision and squatted settlements.²⁴

The land management debate is interested in the influences of the formal on the informal and vice-versa.

Evidence points at an increasing superposition of formal and informal logic: e.g. informal land subdivisions adopt layouts and institutions from the “formal” city or the

increasing replacement of reciprocal and distributional exchanges by market-based transactions. With ongoing commodification, informal property markets seem to obey the same laws and principles as any other market.²⁵ Another form of formalization consists of governmental attempts “by which informal tenure is integrated into a system recognized by public authorities.”²⁶

Given this diversity, scholars have put forward a system of classifying the level of informality based on the level of tenure security and the associated rights.²⁷ The elaboration of a formal-informal degree, though limited in its focal lens (tenure), is one of the biggest contributions of this discourse to an interdisciplinary discussion.



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2.4 Informality in the (Urban) Planning Discourse

Informality has also become a concern for planning scholars over the last two decades.²⁸ Conceptually, the discussion connects to the debates of housing studies in Latin America (Abrams, Turner, Magnin) while distancing itself from the pure economic informality promoted by the ILO.²⁹ The emphasis, however, is on the political and socio-cultural

dimensions of the informal. Such concerns emphasize the active construction of informality by planning practices. While sharing the argument of economic legalists that formal regulations are the underlying cause of informality, this discourse also highlights the ideologies and motivation involved in legal and regulatory practices.

Informality is conceived as a direct product of the government that voluntarily ignores (*laissez-faire*), erases (omission from city maps, slum destruction), but also eventually supports and stimulates. The aim of this scholarship is to show the selective governmental tolerance towards different kinds of informality: high-end development projects are tolerated and legitimized (a process described by Oren Yiftachel as “the whitening of grey cities”) while informal settlements face omission, repression or destruction.³⁰

24 – Keivani and Werna, 2001; Kombe and Kreibich, 2000.

25 – Kombe and Kreibich, 2000.

26 – Durand-Lasserve and Selod, 2009.

27 – Payne, 2002.

28 – Innes et al., 2007; Al Sayyad and Roy, 2004.

29 – Al Sayyad, 2004.

30 – “blackening” process, see Yiftachel, 2009.

The discourse on urban planning emphasizes the connection between formality and informality, which is mostly perceived as a directional one, in that the formal produces the informal. In most works, formality is thus seen as the *raison d'être* of informality. At the same time, formality is the stable point of reference. The discourse relatively neglects the opposite direction, how informal may influence or is part of formal practices and how informality may be a differentiated reality in itself.³¹

A second and complementary viewpoint on informality has been developed that describes informality as a form of collective opposition, whether in the form of passive³² or more active resistance. This resistance may be a political³³ or a cultural expression based on a "new way of life" given rise to alternative forms of urbanization.³⁴ Informality from such vantage point is seen as anti-modern – not in a pejorative way as in the 'Culture of Poverty'³⁵ but as a hindrance to the expansion of modern/Western institutional structures.³⁶



3 TOWARDS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF INFORMALITY

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The short outlines of the four informality discourses have shown differences and commonalities in the historical roots and the ways of defining informality. In the following section, we shall jointly consider the discourses to look at how informality is conceptualized. This is done on two levels, first on the configuration level (how the informal relates to the formal), and second on the ascribed meanings to informality.

3.1 The Configuration of Informality to Formality

Philosophically and linguistically speaking, informality is a hetero-defined term to say it gains its identity through its opposite. Strictly speaking, the in-formal is the negation of the formal, albeit this view is hard to be found in the actual debate. In practice, the literature largely ascribed distinct characteristics to the informal and the formal, making them separate identities rather than negations of each other.

Three concepts are needed to explain constellations: the formal, the informal and the non-formal. The term non-formal is used to capture the actual negation of the formal. The informal is situated within the non-formal but can also be congruent with it.

The configuration of informality to formality can take several forms, based on six different ideas related to two fundamental concepts: constellation and connections. The constellation of the formal and informal may take the form of negation, opposing polarities, or a continuum. By contrast, connections may consist of no/little connections, directional linkage, or interconnectivity.

31 – Al Sayyad, 2014.

32 – silent encroachment of the ordinary Bayat, 2000.

33 – Roy, 2009; Roy, 2011; MacLeod and Jones, 2011.

34 – Varley, 2013; Al Sayyad, 2014.

35 – W.A. Lewis, 1954.

36 – Roy, 2005; Varley, 2013.



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The idea of negation situates closest to the philosophical understanding of informality as being directly defined by its conceptual opposition. The informal is equated with the non-formal, and while the most intuitive understanding, it is almost completely absent from the literature. Nevertheless, the idea of negation can be identified on the level of conceptualizing the informal, describing it as the area outside of the formal (economy, legal system, mainstream culture, etc.) or lacking a defining characteristic of the formal (structure vs. non-structure, productive vs. non-productive, modern vs. non-modern, etc.).

Opposing polarities differ from negation by ascribing informality to distinct nature. In such a view, the informal is not automatically shaped by the formal but has its characteristics. We may thus speak of a bi-polar/dualistic configuration. This constellation has a long lineage as it can be already identified in Hart's and Turner's seminal works on the informal economy and self-help housing.³⁷ Similarly, the ILO definition which uses seven indicators is based on

a dualistic view. This has been criticized as an inconsistent and non-rigorous approach because only the concept of negation allows dissecting empirical evidence and associating it to one or the other reality.³⁸

The bi-polar idea faces the great challenge of assigning a specific meaning to a single pole (large/small, effective/ineffective, organized/unorganized etc.). In practice, non-opposing (and sometimes even similar) characteristics are often ascribed to each pole. This way, the conceptual illustration loses its referential purpose. Despite its theoretical flaws, the bi-polar concept is the most dominant form of describing the constellation of the informal and formal. This view is particularly well developed in the debate on the informal economy and urban informality.

The continuum acknowledges overlay realities and, therefore, proposes a more nuanced reading of the formal-informal constellation. Perceiving the formal and informal as a degree has been developed early on in the tenure discourse, but also emerged in the discussions on urban planning,³⁹ and economics.⁴⁰ However, authors arguing for breaking with binary oppositions generally content themselves by pointing at the metaphor without attempting to precisely situate a specific reality on the continuum.

Strictly speaking, such degree spans more within informality (from informal-informal to informal-formal) than

37 – Hart, 1973.

38 – Leaf, 1992.

39 – Roy, 2011.

40 – Blunch et.al. 2001.

between the formal and informal.⁴¹ This may be explained by the fact that, within all discourses, the formal remains the pole of reference. Such an understanding often comes in par with the idea of directional influence flowing from the formal to the informal.

The three forms of connections are isolated directional linkage and interconnectivity. Theoretical concepts have ranged from perceiving the informal to the formal as separate entities with (little or) no connections, directional influence, and interconnected counterparts.

The formal and informal are isolated and with no or few connections. In early works of economic informality, the dichotomy was seen as two poles with no or marginal connections. It was also very difficult to find practical accounts of isolated entities in the analyzed literature. There appears to be a larger consensus among all discourses that little or no connections between the formal and informal is incompatible with manifestations in reality and can be considered as outdated viewpoints.

Directional linkages depict causal influence between informality and formality. Such views stand at the very core of the conceptualization of economic legalists and housing studies. The informal is seen as a temporary necessity, an externality caused by state inefficiency. Informality would similarly disappear once public actions are addressing the bottlenecks preventing formal institutions from absorbing informal activities.

Directional links can also be identified in the urban planning literature. Formal is equated with the view of the dominant, consequently, the informal is produced by the state and its administrative apparatus.⁴² This idea is partly reversed by authors who stress the cultural particularity of informality as resistance to established norms.⁴³

The concept of interconnectivity relies on crisscross patterns of influence. A consequence of interconnectivity is that it also influences the standpoint from which an author writes. At the same time, discussions on directional links are anchored into the formal, interconnectivity attempt to treat the formal and informal equally by acknowledging their constant mutual influences.

The relationship of interconnectivity can be found in the discourse of housing and land management that have provided practical accounts for the mutual influences of

the formal in the informal, such as the informalization of housing provision, sites and services but also the imitation of formal plan layouts in informal land developments. Proponents of economic informality argue for perceiving informality and formality as a mutually supporting system⁴⁴ with great inter-connections.⁴⁵

3.2 Ascribed Meaning to Informality

The second step in analysing the discourses on informality is by extracting the ideas attached to the concept of informality. The precise workflow is explained in a text box and in more length in a supporting paper.⁴⁶

Dimensions of informality are an effective analytical tool to dissect complex discourses on informality. In this section, we break down the conceptualization of informality along seven dimensions. While the names of these dimensions strongly recall the names of actual discourses on informality, they differ in important ways. Discourses on informality are not confined to one single dimension but draw from the dimensions to different degrees. Even the rather narrow understanding of the informal economy draws heavily from other dimensions, such as technical, legal, and organizational aspects of informality.

The Economic Dimension features the richest set of ideas. It conceptualizes informality as an alternative economic activity taking place outside the formal economy. Most commonly, informality is associated with poverty and developing countries, and often stated characteristics are the irregular status and a low level of productivity. The identified main advantages are being more efficient and cheaper and representing a valuable support system for the “surplus workers” and the “petty commercial class”. In addition, informality is also “important for the middle class, even the elite.”



41 – Roy, 2005.

42 – Porter, 2011.; McFarlane and Waibel, 2012; Roy, 2005.

43 – Varley, 2013.

44 – Bugra, 1998.

45 – Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993.

46 – Boanada-Fuchs and Boanada Fuchs, 2018.

Text Box 1: How this Taxonomy has been Developed

This paper is based on research findings of a former project and published in the International Development Policy Review.⁴⁷ The different dimensions of informality have been developed by a deep analysis of key publications. These texts were identified by a combined workflow based on expert feedback and online research. Twenty key publications were chosen for the in-depth text analysis.

Each key publication featured at least a dedicated section on informality. These text passages were analyzed to identify and extract any specific idea on informality. Every nuanced meaning has been recorded to not eliminate the depth and richness of the debate. While “missing legal recognition”, “unauthorized”, and “illegal” could be seen as describing the same idea, these were kept as three distinct ideas as each nuance helps to highlight slightly different aspects of legal status. This also implies that no attempt was made to qualify identified terms or exclude any con-

traditions. Consequently, in our category of organization, we find “lacking predefined structure” but also “being organized” as they are not perfect oppositions of each other’s meaning.

The resulting plethora of associated meanings and relationships were grouped into larger blocks of meanings. Applying such a simplification mechanism, we discovered that all 120 single ideas could be grouped into seven dimensions.

The applied research design is not without limitations. First of all, it shares all shortcomings of a selective literature review, and there is also no guarantee that the developed list of subcategories is complete. The taxonomy could also be done differently – our framework should be seen as a proposal that is subject to change and can be fine-tuned based on future research efforts.

The ideas of economic informality

(1) outside formal economy (2) response to insufficient provision/structural deficiency (3) inefficient/poor quality/low-skill/low-tech/no resource access (4) low productivity/ low wage (5) small-scale (6) exploitative (7) harmful to national economies (8) under-employment/part-time/irregular/temporary (9) temporary phenomenon (macro) (10) competitive disadvantage (11) risky (12) cheaper/less expensive/economic efficient/affordable/profitable (13) resource efficient (14) rational choice / not economically irrational (15) a valuable support system, safety net (16) ease of entry/ opportunity (17) self-employed (18) other value system / not price-determined (19) non-monetary exchange/ barter/unremunerated (20) poverty (21) developing countries (22) dependency (23) vulnerability (24) inequality (25) important (26) no access / excluded (27) solution / successful (28) desperation (29) only option / lack of alternative (30) periphery

The legal dimension deals with the relation of informality to the established legal system.

Informality comprises of “activities at the edge of the law”⁴⁸ that are “without legal title”⁴⁹ and are violating general laws. Such activities are perceived as illegal as seen in the specific cases of land invasion and squatting. Albeit informality lacks the official powers to sanction contracts, legal informality also has its own laws and mechanism that allow “to enforce implicit contracts.”⁵⁰



The legal dimension of informality emphasizes that informality consists of ‘activities at the edge of the law’, being ‘without legal title’ or violating general laws.

There is much conflation of illegal and informal, particularly as informal is seen as a more politically correct term. Strictly speaking, an important aspect of informality is simply illegal, including criminal activities such as extortion, bribery, theft, drug- and people trafficking, money laundering and deliberate tax evasion. The avoidance of jointly

47 – Boanada-Fuchs and Boanada Fuchs, 2018.

48 – Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993.

49 – Leaf, 1992.

50 – Maloney, 2004.

discussing informality and illegality owes more to political correctness than methodological consistency. Understandably, as the notion of illegality is discursively dangerous and “justifies the worst repressive options.”⁵¹ Negative use of the term slum is often connected to discourses that stress their illegal nature (see review paper on the challenge of slums).

The ideas of legal informality

(1) outside the formal legal reach (2) no enforcement of contracts and rights (3) own laws (4) no title/ property rights (5) missing legal recognition (6) squatting/land invasion/encroachment (7) unauthorised/ prohibited (8) illegal (9) violation of general laws (10) non-compliance to legal rules (11) criminal activities (12) harassment, extortion, repression, discrimination (13) bribery (14) drug trafficking, people smuggling, money laundering, stolen goods (15) produced by laws

The technical dimension is the most recurring group of ideas associated with informality, at least when considering the analysed literature used to establish the taxonomy. At the same time, this dimension has not been the focus of an own discourse.



Technical Informality is taking place outside the reach of regulations, consisting of uncontrolled, unrecorded, and/or unplanned activities. Informal activities are often described as missing official permits and being non-compliant to technical standards.

Informality is described as occurring outside the reach of regulations, consisting of uncontrolled, unrecorded, and/or unplanned activities. These activities often miss official permits as they are non-compliant to technical standards, such as work safety regulations, or try to avoid taxation and the payment of service fees. As a result, informal solutions may be part of “black market transactions”⁵² that are “not



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defined in the rule book”⁵³ and of “substandard quality.”⁵⁴ As a consequence, informal solutions are often unprotected and unsafe, sometimes even polluted and dirty. Generally, technical informality stresses the fact that informal activities lack the benefits of their formal counterparts.

The ideas of technical informality

(1) outside regulation (2) uncontrolled/unregulated (3) unauthorised(4) unrecorded/hidden (5) unplanned (6) missing permits / missing registration (7) produced by regulations (8) undermining order / regulation / planning (9) inadequate/sub-standard/dirty/polluting/slum (10) not protected / not insured/insecure/unsafe/instable/poorly maintained (11) lack of services / benefits (12) avoiding taxation, ‘off the books’ (13) avoiding payment of service fees (14) violating work safety regulations and social security (15) non-compliance to technical standards/rules

51 – Durand-Lasserve and Tribillon, 2001.

52 – Papola, 1980.

53 – Innes et al., 2007, p. 198.

54 – Leaf, 1992.

The organizational dimension has high levels of conflicting concepts. More commonly stated is the idea of the informal as being organized with its own “organizing logic” and “system of norms”⁵⁵ that might even be complex, diverse or “very heterogeneous.”⁵⁶ However, some authors also mention the lack of structure perceiving informality as unorganized, “defying the rectilinear order”⁵⁷ which outcomes are “unpredictable”⁵⁸ – or just plainly as the “way of doing things.”⁵⁹

Less contested positions conceptualize informality as outside organizational structures or unconventional solutions that do not comply with organizational standards. The more normative meanings perceive informal organizations as largely superior to their formal counterparts, being fast, flexible, and dynamic due to their process-oriented, gradual, and/or incremental nature.

The ideas of organizational informality

- (1) (highly) organized
- (2) organizationally complex
- (3) diverse
- (4) horizontal networks/non-hierarchical
- (5) brokerage
- (6) not complying to organisational standards
- (7) unconventional/unpredictable/ambivalent
- (8) faster
- (9) easier / simpler
- (10) flexible / freer
- (11) dynamic
- (12) spontaneous/independent/organic
- (13) process
- (14) incremental / gradual
- (15) adaptive

The political dimension stresses the role of governments in creating informality. An intuitive understanding of political informality is to equate it with the unofficial and the domain beyond “the reach of different levels and mechanisms of official governance.”⁶⁰ It is strongly argued that the state actively produces informality by deciding to take different stances towards it, such as oppression, tolerance, or more paternalistic attitudes that enable to politically manipulate the masses.



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55 – Roy, 2005, p.,148.

56 – Maloney, 2004, p.1160.

57 – Varley, 2013, p.7.

58 – Mcfarlane, 2012, p.91.

59 – Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 38.

60 – Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur, and Ostrom, 2006, p. 4.



Political informality equates the informal with the unofficial and the domain beyond 'the reach of different levels and mechanisms of official governance'. It sees informality as state-produced.

Traditionally, the informal population is often equated with the urban poor who "cannot participate"⁶¹ or just have no political voice. More recently, the urban planning literature describes informality as a form of political resistance or even an anti-state, where deprived individuals deploy heroic efforts in order to attempt influencing politics.

The ideas of political informality

- (1) outside official governance (2) unofficial (3) produced/impacted/stimulated by the state (4) politically tolerated (5) turned the blind-eye upon / ignored / neglected (6) lack of capacity and means (7) manipulated/patronage (8) excluded from participation / no voice (9) not (politically) recognized (10) destruction/eviction (11) influence politics/political advantage (12) political resistance or political grassroots movement (13) 'anti-state' (14) heroic (15) not visible / omitted

The social dimension is created by the way formality is defined within society. Social informality is then put in relation to this standard. By contrast, the cultural dimension contains all ideas ascribed to informality as an own identity and culture.⁶² Dissecting a social from a cultural understanding is not a simple task. Social emphasizes the outside view and the relation of informality to society. By contrast, cultural informality adopts an inside view and captures the elements that make informal people a distinct group with shared characteristics. Such understanding stands partly in the line of the "culture of poverty" and shares the shortcoming of top-down normativity.⁶³

There are two contrasting views on the social dimension. We found some work that conceptualizes the informal population as socially excluded and as a part that is not accepted and marginalized. Informal activities are perceived as illegitimate, illicit/immoral or even socially corrupted. Other authors paint a more positive picture, describing the informal as being tolerated, stressing a social struggle or even a social resistance by mainstream society. From a social viewpoint, informality is relying on casual and interpersonal relations. Its "own informal or group rules"⁶⁴ are based on "personal affective ties"⁶⁵ and are characterized by reciprocity, trust, sometimes even intimacy.

The ideas of social informality

- (1) illegitimate (2) corrupted / damaging behaviour (3) immoral/illicit/indecent (4) socially tolerated/ included (5) social struggle (6) resistance (7) trust (8) social/interpersonal relations / friendship (9) reciprocal/collaborative (10) intimate (11) casual (in social terms) (12) socially excluded (13) marginal (14) not accepted (15) identity

Cultural informality is highlighting the ideas of family, tradition, and subsistence. From such an angle, informality is depicted as self-provided and self-sufficient solutions. This idea has a strong link to the fight for survival and everyday subsistence guaranteeing a "hand-to-mouth existence."⁶⁶

A cultural reading stresses the "habitus of the dispossessed,"⁶⁷ where the family or community-based "peasant system of production"⁶⁸ is dominant. It combines traditional, even indigenous, and local knowledge with "pre-capitalistic" techniques.⁶⁹ The urban planning discourses has, similarly to the political resistance, introduced the idea of cultural resistance, where informality is the anti-modern, creative, and new way of life.

The ideas of cultural informality

- (1) self-provision/self-help/self-sufficient (2) self-initiated/intentional (3) survival (4) subsistence/short-term strategy (5) everyday life (6) family or communal-based based (7) traditional/rural (8) local/grass-root level (9) indigenous (10) customary (11) anti-modern (12) cultural resistance (13) alternative way of life/own culture (14) creative/improvised (15) cultural similarities

61 – Varley, 2013, p.14.

62 – We also were unable to identify any reference to the informal being outside of the formal culture.

63 – O. Lewis, 1963.

64 – ILO, 2002.

65 – Innes et al., 2007, p.198.

66 – Hart, 1973, p.84.

67 – Mcfarlane, 2012, p.93.

68 – Papola, 1980, p. 819.

69 – Maloney, 2004, p.1159.



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4 ANALYSING THE CITIES ALLIANCE KNOWLEDGE LIBRARY

The outlined framework was applied to the knowledge library of Cities Alliance. Identifying the right documents was once again the biggest challenge. Experts within the network of Cities Alliance were contacted to indicate publications that feature a longer discussion on the informal. In addition, the consortium of the library tender⁷⁰ produced an overview of all knowledge products that featured a high number of the word count informal* in the text body. These were then analysed to identify documents of relevance for this study.

In total, five documents have been analyzed to provide a deeper insight into how Cities Alliance and its members conceptualize informality. The documents were selected for their representative nature for a specific discourse on informality and the quality of conceptualization of the informal. The results are provided for each document separately.

4.1 A Short Overview of the Analysed Documents

Cities Alliance (2019) Addressing Informality in Cities Policy Paper

This policy paper was written for and presented at the World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders, convened by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in Durban, in November 2019.⁷¹ The short policy paper argues strongly that governments need to recognize

informality as a key contributor to the economies of emerging countries. It identifies the need for better-informed government responses to maximize the potential of informality while curtailing negative effects, such as socio-spatial inequality.

A political understanding of informality influences the characterization of informality. It is perceived as a product of urbanization that is shaped by the position and action of governments. As the document provides specific recommendations of actions and priorities (road map), the sections discussing the informal are relatively short. Despite the limited space dedicated to characterizing the informal, the applied framework can unearth a focus on the economic and technical dimensions of the informal.

Cities Alliance (2016) The Role of the Informal Economy in City Growth

A second document written by Cities Alliance is a research report within the Future Cities Africa Initiative. The “Transformational Change in Sub-Saharan Cities: The Role of Informality in the Hybrid Economy of Uganda” extensively reviews the literature on the informal economy and develops the idea of a hybrid economy that emphasizes the interlinkages of the informal and formal economy by arguing to perceive it as one continuum.⁷²

We analysed the section on the reconceptualisation of the urban informal economy (p.50-56) that provides the basis for developing the hybrid economy model in the research report. The section discusses the ways the informal economy (or sector) has been described in the literature. Naturally, the economic dimension dominates the informal view, but the technical and political understanding is well present in the document.

70 – A tender was running in parallel to the writing of a paper series. This consultation aimed at reforming the knowledge library of Cities Alliance and has developed as part of this assignment a new tagging taxonomy. An expert in data mining and machine learning mined all documents on the back-end.

71 – Cities Alliance, 2019.

72 – Lloyd-Jones and Redin, 2017.

UN-Habitat (2009) Global Report on Human Settlements: Planning and Informality

The Global Report on Human Settlements (GRHS) is a publication series of UN-Habitat. The ground-breaking report of 2003 (Challenge of Slums) has been highly influential among practitioners and academics and contributed to establishing the topic within international diplomacy. The 2009 report is dedicated to "Planning Sustainable Cities" and discusses the effectiveness of the tool urban planning to tackle the urbanization challenges in the 21st century.⁷³

The chapter "Planning and Informality" (p.47-54) provides a detailed debate on urban informality and its connections to planning by outlining the characteristics of informality, the global trends, factors affecting informality, and the responses of planning circles. Interestingly the document section is concerned with informality in the Global South and dedicates an entire page to developed and transitional countries.

The characterization of informality is rather comprehensive, with many ideas concerning the economic, legal and organizational dimensions of informality. As the debate emphasizes the relation of informality and planning, most characterizations are about technical informality.

UN-Habitat (2013) Global Report on Human Settlements: Informal Transport

A second GRHS of UN-Habitat is dedicated to mobility.⁷⁴ The "Planning and Design for Sustainable Urban Mobility" report provides a smaller section on informal transport (p.26-30). A very dense debate on informality is provided

on a few pages. This document is particularly interesting as informal transportation is not subject to a distinct informality discourse.

The characterization of the informal draws heavily from three dimensions. While the economic dimension is, in terms of occurrences, the most important dimension, the relational share points to a foremost technical and organizational understanding of informality. Social and cultural ideas are only little addressed while the political dimension is completely absent.

Landmark (2011) Managing urban land a guide for municipal practitioners

Landmark developed this guide for municipal practitioners. Developed as a hands-on document in the context of South Africa, the intention was to encourage government officials to use their capacities and knowledge to identify tools and techniques that can eventually lead to pro-poor outcomes. A dedicated section addresses the informal land market by highlighting its structure, the importance of social relations, their overlap with formal markets, and the role of the state (p. 25-29).

The characterization of informality is relatively balanced, and only the legal dimension is absent. The informal land literature often stresses the idea of a degree spanning between informal and formal land tenure and the role of politics and regulations therein. As tenure is a social relationship, particularly in African countries with tribal land management systems, a social and cultural understanding of informality is well developed.



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73 – UN-Habitat, 2009.

74 – UN-Habitat, 2013.

4.2 Highlighting Differences and Similarities of Informality Concepts

There are interesting overlaps and differences between the analysed documents. The analysed documents provide longer text passages on informality. We highlighted every single idea we could find and marked them in our

taxonomy. Some ideas did not neatly fit into the pre-existing structure, and the taxonomy was finetuned and extended. The taxonomy with seven dimensions is a work in progress and is likely to change from one analysis of documents to the next one. Important is its capacity to highlight similarities and differences within and between discourses (practitioner-focused and academic).

Text Box 2: A Visual Representation of the Ideas was Developed to Allow In-depth and Quick Comparison

Each dimension has 15 ideas (the economic dimension has twice the number), and we grouped them into 3 by 5 box fields with the starting letter as a bolded outline. The respective numbers are connected to specific

ideas as outlined in section 3. At the same time, such representation allows to visually compare the different documents and identify similarly shared ideas as well as compare the overall weight of dimensions.

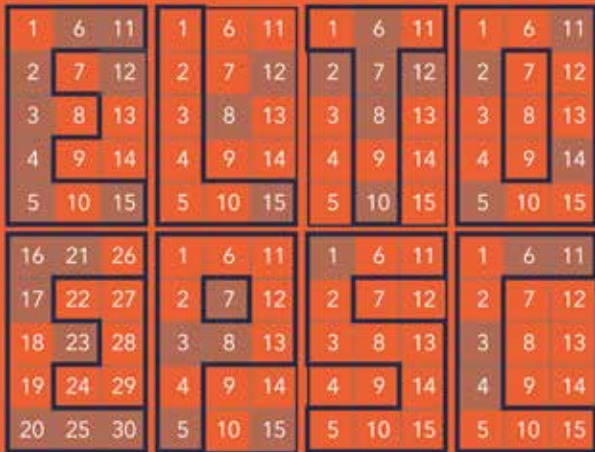


- Economic Dimension (1-15)
- Legal Dimension (1-15)
- Technical Dimension (1-15)
- Organizational Dimension (1-15)
- Economic Dimension (16-30)
- Political Dimension (1-15)
- Social Dimension (1-15)
- Cultural Dimension (1-15)

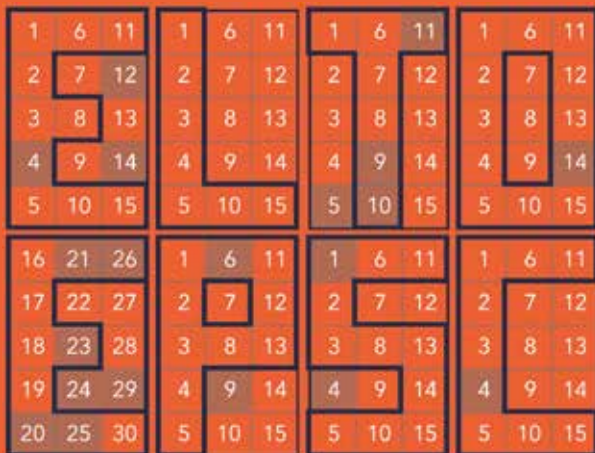
Each document has its distinct view on informality. This is well illustrated by the figures that help identify the density of ideas within a dimension and the attributed weight between dimensions. The document on the informal economy provides the most ideas on the political (shared) and the cultural dimension. Informal Planning scores the highest in economic, legal and technical dimensions, while informal transport grants the deepest insights into organisational informality. The document on informal land is the one in the sample with the most ideas in the social and political, latter is shared with the document on the informal economy. An interesting fact is that the overall density of ideas (The share of mentioned ideas to the total) is rather comparable, ranging around a third (29%, 30%, 32%, 34%) with a notable exception, the policy paper with a stronger emphasis on government action.

Each document also has its blind spot. No analysed document uses the full range of dimension ns of informality. These blanks (defined by less than one idea per dimension) differ from one document: two times, no idea about the legal and social dimension of informality could be found. In contrast, the cultural and the political dimension were left out one time. These blind spots represent opportunities to communicate between discourses. The dense technical understanding in the informal planning document could inform the other discussions on informality. The strength of the discussion of informal land markets in the political and social dimensions could be useful for other debates.

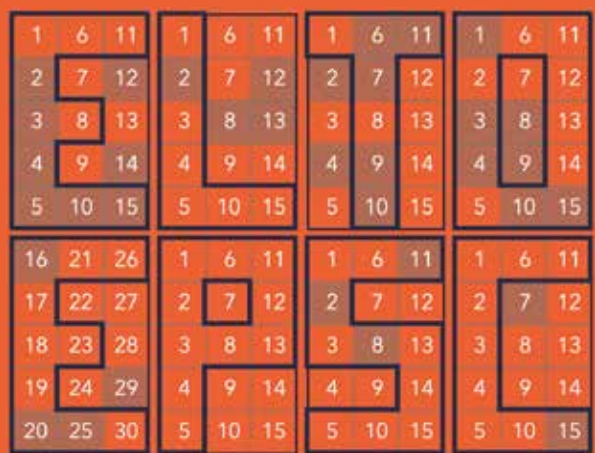
Informal Economy



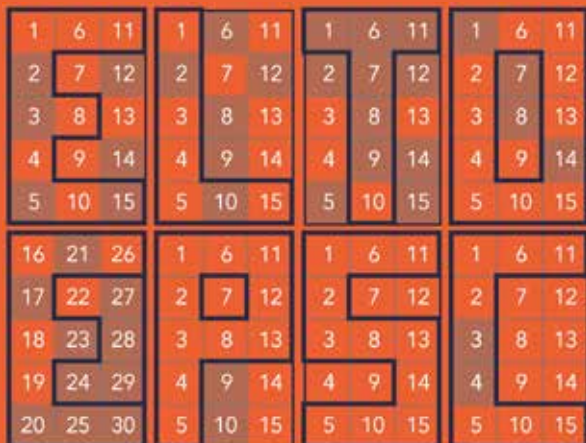
Urban Informality



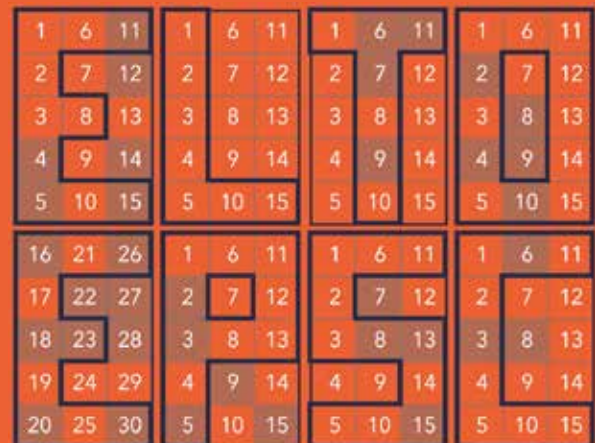
Informal Transport



Informal Planning



Informal Land Market



There are many informalities in the practitioner's literature. What this document analysis clearly shows is how our understanding of informality differs. The differences occur in how a conceptualization of informality emphasizes certain dimensions of informality and the very specific ideas attached to the term of informality. Each idea could be assessed for its importance and relevance. Such dialogue could ultimately lead to a new working definition of the informal or facilitate the dialogue between international organizations and stakeholders on the ground. Informal activities appear to be highly context-specific, and working with local actors could help to pinpoint similarities and differences between views on informality.

Important: Illustrating the similarities and differences is the first step towards a more comprehensive understanding of informality.





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5 CONCLUSION AND WAY AHEAD

Similar to the pervasiveness of slums in contemporary urbanisation, debates on the informal are here to stay.

The current discussion is split between different topics and spearheaded by various international organisations, leading to topic fragmentation and different viewpoints on the topic. Further complicating is the fact that definitions of the informal are largely missing.

It is of utmost importance to delineate informality.

This delineation has to be done by analysing the characteristics of informality and how the entity of informality relates to formality in both its constellation and the nature of exchange. Unfortunately, this is hardly done in practice, and we have only a vague understanding of what constitutes the informal (and what does not). Vagueness and absences of definitions open up a topic for interpretation and the possibility to fill the void with meaning. This can be a dangerous process when driven by wrong intentions. As we have seen in the review paper on the challenge of slums, the flexibility of the term can be misused to justify the worst actions. A similar risk can be observed for the use of the term informality.

The way we define informality shapes our actions. Definitions draw borders between what we consider and what we exclude in a specific context. They are therefore instrumental in influencing our understanding of a topic and the ways we develop answers to problems. In a forthcoming paper, we are attempting to provide evidence of the link between informality concepts and policy recommendations.⁷⁵

A multi-dimensional understanding of informality unlocks comparison between discourses.

The discussion of informality is very complex and multi-layered. We developed a taxonomy of meaning based on several dimensions. Different discourses depict informality by referring to its economic, legal, technical, organisational, political, social, and cultural dimensions. We analysed documents that discussed informality in different contexts: cities, economy, planning, land and transport and could highlight how each discourse contributes a different viewpoint on informality. While there are considerable differences between the analysed documents, the taxonomy also points to enough common grounds, shared ideas on the informal.

Preliminary findings reveal a promising road map towards a holistic understanding.

The findings of this paper are promising as the framework was developed from mostly academic sources but could be rather smoothly adapted to the practitioner's literature. A separation line between academia and practice is rather difficult to draw, and the taxonomy was slightly adapted and extended.

More research is needed on the practice of informality and its connection to policy recommendations.

The biggest challenge remains the identification of documents where informality is discussed in an adequate depth. While the data mining approach has proven successful, we want to reiterate the open call for involvement. Get in touch with Cities Alliance and/or the authors to provide feedback and share any document you are aware that could be useful to expand this analysis on informality concepts.

75 – Jähn and Boanada-Fuchs, in preparation.



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