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**CAIRO PAPERS
IN SOCIAL SCIENCE**

INFORMAL SECTOR IN EGYPT

Edited By

NICHOLAS S. HOPKINS

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THE INFORMAL DIMENSION OF URBAN ACTIVITY IN EGYPT: SOME RECENT WORK

MOSTAFA KHAROUFI

The so-called "informal" economic and commercial activities play a remarkable role in urban Egypt. In Cairo, for instance, they provide a wide range of unusual or common products for a mass market of 12 million consumers. These activities have spread in diverse forms into extensive areas of the city from the urban fringes to the heart of downtown. Although they are neither the exception nor an anomaly in the urban context (the built environment is itself often "informal"), Egyptian researchers continue to call these activities marginal (*hamishi*) or unstructured (*ghayr munadhdham*, *ghayr muqannan*). However, these activities cover entire zones of the urban economy and employ a large number of persons. It is thus interesting to see how the local scholarly literature deals with the type of activity: how does it happen that what is almost the rule is qualified as "marginal" ?

A Problem of Definition

It should be clear right from the start that in Egypt as in many third world countries, so-called "informal" activities present the researcher with a basic question of definition: how to define an economic sector whose meaning is shrouded in ambiguity and for which the most common terms -- *'ashwai*, *ghayr munadhdham*, *ghayr muqannan*, *hamishi*, etc. -- evoke a sense of anomie. This approach is adopted both by studies on small industries in Egypt which attribute the problems of the "informal sector" to "legal or institutional" deviations (al-Zahar 1982), and by research on such illegal activities as fiscal fraud, smuggling, and blackmarket money changing (Diab 1983; Abdel-Fadil and Diab 1987). Thus Egyptian researchers often simply define "informal" as an anomaly with respect to legal and administrative rules.

The terms used have derogatory implications for a situation where the norms which control economic and social life no longer correspond to the objectives and values which the planners consider as legitimate. The notion of anomie implies the need for the "development expert" to intervene, even in a situation of subsistence, in order to organize the activities into a system that can be "managed". The interest in the "informal sector" in the 1970s coincides with the sense of failure which has struck many "experts" in economic policy in many countries of the Third World, including Egypt: chronic rural underdevelopment, tremendous inequality of income, increased poverty, large-scale emigration from rural areas, and urban unemployment. These same problems have led these experts to wonder how populations confronted with these difficulties can even survive in such overblown urban economies. Thus, these reflections on the "informal" owe a lot to the crisis of the restructuring of productive labor which is spectacularly in evidence in poor countries, and to

the role of the industrial and urban workers, who are sometimes considered the "creators" of a new development.

It was not until the 1980s that the informal sector began to attract extensive field work in Egypt. This late-blooming interest is somewhat paradoxical in a country where the limits of the political economy are perceptible, especially in the development of a parallel economic sector of survival and of multiple jobs, i.e., various strategies to accommodate on the one hand the low labor absorptive capacity of the modern sector (450,000 people enter the job market each year) and on the other hand, the usually very low salaries (the basic salary for an official is around LE 150, compared to a price of LE 14 for a kilo of meat).

The concept of "informal" is thus hard to define, and Egyptian researchers were slow to take an interest in this area. This accounts for the fact that reliable figures are few and far between in this area where even concerted efforts do not necessarily produce good statistics.

However, one should note that the first field studies carried out on a large sampling base (CAPMAS 1985, al-Mahdi and Mashhur 1989, Fergany 1990) have thrown light on this aspect of the economy which was previously hidden by microscopic studies, even though various authors estimated the number of jobs in the "informal" sector at two to three million (Fergany 1988, Rizq 1988). The various estimates vary enormously, which reflects the different methods used, and the problems encountered when trying to identify "informal" activities through official statistics (mostly CAPMAS figures). For example, Abdel-Fadil (1983) estimates that there are 876,000 jobs in the informal sector, while Nader Fergany proposes the figure of 2,886,500. CAPMAS itself estimates the number at 3,000,000 (see Fergany as cited by Rizq 1988:32).

Heavily influenced by the methods of the International Labor Organization which developed and popularized the concept of "informal" in the early 1970s, several comprehensive Egyptian studies have adopted the basic criteria accepted by the ILO (number of workers in the enterprise, level of technology, traits of the workers, etc.) (Birks and Sinclair 1982, Rizq 1988, Abdel-Fadil 1989). Thus the various authors pick up several points from this multifactorial definition relating to the type and size of the enterprise, the number of employees, the organization of the work day, the method of payment, the level of training of the workers, the technology used, the amount of capital invested, and where it came from, and the registration or the activity or not with the public authorities. In the definitions, there is no consensus on the validity of these criteria; this semantic uncertainty recurs in the different studies.

In Egypt, studies of the informal sector can be broken down into two categories: a **global** approach, essentially based on analysis of CAPMAS data, and **micro-level** studies usually based on field work.

Macro-level Studies

Until 1985, the statistical services of CAPMAS, the most important source of data on the Egyptian economy, make no mention of all those forms of production or commerce located outside the official sector. The surveys of the urban economy distinguish two sharply defined sectors: *munadhdham / ghayr munadhdham*. The decennial population census, and the annual labor force surveys ignore a whole aspect of economic activity and hence a part of the family income. The questionnaires, which use terms such as "principal activity or job", "economic activity", "work", "job", require the interviewers and the respondents to construct a meaning for the key terms, and some of these interpretations lead to definitions quite different from those used by labor statisticians. These statisticians are aware of the overlapping meanings of such terms as "employed", "inactive", and "unemployed", and stress the "vague boundaries between these three concepts" ("l'indétermination des frontières entre ces trois sous-ensembles", Fressinet 1989:18). Moreover, until 1986 the CAPMAS studies used the week as the period of reference and considered anyone active who was working during that week. Thus, in the labor sample surveys, the Egyptian statistical services only note information on the "principal activity", whether paid or carried out "for the family", and gloss over the widespread phenomenon of secondary jobs where the average hourly income is higher than that in government work.

Government work is considered in Egypt as the main reservoir of disguised unemployment (*al-bitala al-muqanna'a*). One study even showed that the effective working time of an Egyptian official ranged between 20 minutes and 2 hours a day (Wall Street Journal, March 24, 1983). The official thus often adds to his declared activity a secondary one, which he performs outside the legal or conventional rules. This phenomenon has so far eluded the researchers working recently with CAPMAS who, while noting the importance of secondary jobs (8% of the sample have them), are doubtful that any survey aimed at such parallel activities could produce reliable data. Fergany reports (1991:5) that the time spent on extra jobs can amount to as much as 16 weeks a year on the average, "with more time spent by men than by women, and by urban dwellers, especially Cairenes, than by rural people." The uncertainty about employment and unemployment does not reflect so much the imperfect statistical measurement tools as the difficulty of establishing categories in a context in which the sharp conventional distinctions between employed, unemployed and inactive does not work. Thus an "Overview of the Economy and Employment" published by CAPMAS (1991:111) underscores the inability of large-scale surveys to reveal the number of second jobs. The researchers felt that their results fell short of reality: 20% of rural respondents, as compared with only 11% of urban respondents, reported a second job, generally in the private sector, and, for 98% of them, in commerce or agriculture.

In the opinion of CAPMAS itself (1985:9), population censuses and labor force surveys restrict themselves to collecting "data on individuals without tackling other productive agents"; since they are limited to "the study

of establishments with at least ten employees" they do not cover the informal sector workers. But despite their sensitivity to the issue, the most recent CAPMAS study (Fergany 1990) repeats more or less the method used in 1985. This study used two complementary elements in the analysis of the Egyptian informal sector. According to a summary (CAPMAS 1990b:3), it

has followed two complementary approaches in analysing the units of informal sector in Egypt: (1) the household approach, via an additional module to the October round of the 1988 Labor Force Survey ... an individual questionnaire was administered to secure information on the general aspects of the informal sector in Egypt... This questionnaire was completed on household members aged 6+ who practiced any work during the week preceding the survey or during a reference period of one year long ending in the survey date. Persons working for government or the public sector, as well as unpaid family workers in housekeeping and housekeeping-like activities have been excluded from coverage. (2) The economic unit approach, via the complementary survey of the informal sector...

Figures Often Fall Short of Reality

Abdel-Fadil sees the informal sector as a heterogeneous whole including small-scale manufacturing, various repair workshops, itinerant jobs, and personal services. To classify these jobs within the informal sector into various professions and branches and economic activities he uses official statistical sources: the censuses of establishments (1960, 1972), population censuses (1960, 1976), the census of industrial production (1967), etc. It is regrettable that these statistical data ignore the work of children under the age of 15 years and the role of family workers, both of which are frequently used by artisanal activities such as sewing, automobile repair, etc. Abdel-Fadil stresses how hard it is, with official figures, to estimate the level of employment in various services which occupy the urban "sub-proletariat": shoe shiners, rag pickets and garbage collectors, car watchers, doormen, etc.

To calculate employment in these small enterprises, Abdel-Fadil falls back on the census of small industries conducted by CAPMAS in 1967. Of these businesses, some 144,000 employing less than ten persons were somewhat arbitrarily assigned to the informal sector. The total employment was 284,000 persons. Two-thirds of these businesses are urban. They include numerous artisanal workshops whose production is intended for the local market (furniture, garment making, small-scale metal-working, etc.) In 1976, the number of artisan jobs, according to the CAPMAS data, was 205,338, as compared to 199,580 in 1967. More than 72% of these artisanal businesses employed from one to five workers. A good number of these artisans, such as plumbers, carpenters, etc., were itinerant -- 73,000 according to the 1960 census of establishments.

Abdel-Fadil underlines the fact that the "informal" labor market is characterized by a high degree of segmentation, the recruitment of marginalized men and women, unreliable employment, and very low social mobility. Thus he feels that this is a refuge sector for a large number of poor workers in

Egypt -- perhaps 555,000 of whom 379,000 are urban. In the urban areas, informal jobs and informal housing go together; more than half the informal sector workers live in informal housing, where rents are only half what the private sector charges. This is especially true for such urban zones as Hada'iq Hilwan, 'Ayn Shams, Matariyya, Bulaq al-Dakrur, or al-Haram. Abdel-Fadil argues that during the 1960s and 1970s there has been a transfer to the seasonally employed and the unemployed from the agricultural sector to the informal services sector. He concludes from this that rural emigration in Egypt has "simply transformed rural unemployment into urban unemployment" (1983:81), and that despite the tendency to see the informal sector workers as a "reserve army" for the modern sector of the economy, mobility between the two sectors is in fact low.

In her analysis of the structure and operation of the informal sector, Rizq (1988, 1991) summarizes the different approaches to the informal sector and suggests defining it by adopting the criterion of the "absence of administrative registration" (tax registration, accounting, social insurance, etc.). Noting the different approaches to estimating the number of jobs in the informal sector, she offers her own estimate of 2,416,181 jobs in the three sectors of production, commerce, and services. She then enumerates the characteristics of the informal sector in Egypt: level of skills of the labor force, incomes, job stability, level of technology, raw materials, etc. In another study, a preliminary CAPMAS report on "Unorganized economic activity in Egypt," Rizq (1990:24) defines informal activity by "the absence of registration with the authorities, enterprises employing less than five persons, and with a capital of less than LE 5000" (around \$2000 at the time).

Micro-level Studies

The "micro" level studies are more informative and relevant. They allow us to identify those characteristics of the informal sector which do not appear in the major statistical surveys carried out at the national level. "Micro" studies have been carried out by demographers, sociologists, economists, and others.

One of the first studies on this theme, exhaustive in its geographic coverage and its sample, defines the "informal sector" as "those non-financial activities which break the laws regulating businesses and labor" and which deliberately sidestep the requirement to keep account books (CAPMAS 1985:7). This survey covers a sample of 5000 cases in the governorates of Cairo, Asyut, Alexandria, Dimyat, and Giza; there were 11,337 "salaried" workers, including 5,032 employers and 6,305 employees. The study stresses the efforts to disguise the number of workers, especially by ignoring children under 15 years of age, or by not declaring workers, etc. The spatial spread of these activities sometimes makes them difficult to count. The survey included both fixed structures (stores and kiosks or booths) and itinerant activities. It seems to have been easier to locate the former, since 74% of the sample had a fixed locale in stores, while the rest were in workshops, kiosks, or sold in the street, perhaps from trays or carts. The circumscribed nature of the activities gives them their own logic, often hard to convey: the informal "units" are

often small, they have an average of 2.25 persons per unit, the activities are often run by families, and kinship links are important since in 32% of the cases the business was inherited.

Following up on this major field study, the National Center for Social and Criminological Research (NCSCR) highlighted the role played by the informal sector in creating urban jobs, and stressed in a recent study (al-Mahdi and Mashhur 1989) that the heads of informal enterprises keep no accounts and pay only an operating fee rather than a tax. This study emphasizes fiscal irregularities, and argues that the informal activities should be legalized by bringing them within the tax system.

Like the CAPMAS study, the NCSCR study tries to show the essential role played by the informal sector in creating urban jobs. This study provides very useful data, even if the description it gives does not allow for any better definition of the informal sector. According to this study, in the informal sector the units are small, the capital and the number of employees are limited (less than LE 10,000 and less than ten employees), and the operators do not keep accounts and only pay a fee in lieu of a tax. The field research took place in the Maarouf quarter, situated in the heart of downtown Cairo. The results show that the informal activities are thoroughly integrated into the urban fabric since 27.6% of them are located in apartments and other residential areas. The authors stress the flexibility of the informal sector which allows for the inclusion of migrants, of those without schooling or who dropped out of school, of the jobless, or of workers looking for a better paying job. The study gives very useful figures on all this. These activities represent 35% of all activities in the Maarouf quarter. There are altogether 2227 units which can be classified into 11 branches which the study groups as follows:

formal private sector	1348
informal private sector	778
public sector	98
international institutions	3

Informal activities are presented in two ways:

-- There are "fixed" units which are the majority since they include about 65% of the sample. They include three sectors of activity (production, services, and commerce) and employ 1108 persons (an average of 2.5 employees per unit), to wit, 510 in services, 404 in production, and 196 in commerce.

-- There are "itinerant" units, including the sale of foodstuffs, and activities linked to transport, to production and to the repair of household utensils. Child labor is important here (32 cases), despite the fact that the survey took place during the school year. It is interesting to note that 124 people were solely occupied in an itinerant activity for periods varying from 10 to 30 years, which means that there is not much social mobility in this sector. The relatively advanced age of most of the persons working in these branches is evidence of that.

Cross-tabulation of the variables of sex, age, geographical origin, and level of training gives a description of the population employed in informal activities in Maarouf quarter. Most of the operators are men (apart from 28 women); most workers migrated to Cairo many years earlier and have a low level of both schooling and training.

The study shows that at least 70% of the employees are paid daily or weekly, while 10% are paid piece work rates. The average daily salary in the fixed units is LE 5.5, for a weekly average of LE 34 (1988 figures).

In the conclusion, the authors insist on the ability of the informal sector to provide jobs to those without much schooling, while providing an income 3 to 4 times higher than that offered locally by the so-called formal sector.

There is no definition of the activities labelled informal in the study which Hoffman (1986) carried out in the city of Fayoum. Hofmann classifies them arbitrarily into four sectors: agro-alimentary, mass consumption products, repairs, and construction materials. These branches turn out to be major generators of employment even if the number of jobs is inadequate to cope with demand for jobs by young people, which was rapidly growing in the 1980s. Hoffman notes that the informal sector has the same number of jobs in Fayoum as public sector industry does. Ninety percent of the jobs in the informal sector are in garment-making, furniture, food, and the production of metal goods. The rapid increase of jobs in the furniture sector is linked to the regional reputation of the local workshops, and also to urban growth which leads to higher demand. This branch includes about a quarter of the workers in the local enterprises.

Anthropological Studies

There are many approaches to, and definitions of, the informal sector, so that one can wonder how a single study can reflect its dynamism. In this respect, socio-anthropological studies have shown the way. Anthropology is the most recent of the social sciences to have dealt with the informal sector. It seems as if the other disciplines which started earlier were unable to grasp all the social complexity of the informal sector, and have indirectly pointed research towards the use of anthropological methods in the analysis of socio-economic facts. This kind of research tries to see the "informal" sector "from below" (cf. Hopkins 1987). Thus the "informal sector" can be located at the intersection of "production", of "work", of the "bureaucracy", of the "firm", of "petty commerce and crafts", and of the "distribution system". The social organization of work can be analyzed in these different contexts in order to isolate its salient aspects.

I can only cite a few works representing this point of view. For instance, there is a study of the structure and organization of the "spontaneous" or illegal markets in Cairo (their location and size, the socio-economic characteristics of the vendors, how they entered the market, their social mobility, the attitudes towards their occupation, etc.) (Tadros et al, 1990).

Referring to the definition given in the Egyptian law of 1957, Tadros et al (1990:4) consider the itinerant merchant as one who "sells or exposes for sale

any goods or merchandise, or practices a trade of industry on the street or in a public place and lacks a permanent shop" or one who "moves from one place to another..." This phenomenon is not limited to poor areas of Cairo, nor restricted to neighborhoods on the outskirts, since the 18 markets which were identified are situated in different sectors of the capital. The biggest markets are those of Bab al-Luq, Shubra al-Kheima, Tawfiqiyya, `Abdin, Zaytoun, and Ma`adi.

The study shows that the stereotypical image of a vendor who is "itinerant, migrant, illiterate," attracted to Cairo by job possibilities, is erroneous: from the survey of 192 vendors, it appears that they are often young, married, from urban areas south of Cairo. Furthermore, the sale of fruits and vegetables is partly under the control of people from Upper Egypt.

My own study in the Dar al-Salam neighborhood of Cairo also shows that the "satellite" retail trade of fruits and vegetables is marked by a unified system linking the wholesale distribution point to the retailers (Kharoufi 1991). This trade is carried out in a space that was not intended for it. It does not lead to any accumulation of capital, and the retailers keep neither accounts nor stock. Whatever profits there are is used for home consumption. Nonetheless, this trade links a small urban space (the streets of the neighborhood) to a larger one (the Cairo wholesale market). It is founded on the more or less common origin of the petty retailers, the intermediaries (*wasit* or *qammat*), and the wholesalers (*mu'allim*). It is the wholesalers, rich and powerful men, who organize and control both the circulation of goods and money and the organization of work.

Stauth (1986) carried out an anthropological study of the aluminum workshops and their setting in al-Gamaliyya, centering on the relations between the different social groups involved in this economic sector. The study was carried out between October 1981 and November 1984, at a time when there were many economic changes in Egypt due to the "Infitah" policy. The author selected a sample of 13 workshops from the 200 located in al-Gamaliyya, between the Huseayn mosque and Bab al-Nasr, all of which had official permits, employed from 5 to 10 persons and maintained relations with the State firms.

Stauth describes the workshop (*warsha*) as a place where communication and work, production and marketing, take place. He describes how local notables emerge, playing the role of intermediary between officials and the neighborhood residents, and thus occupying a key place in the popular economy. These notables are essentially brokers who control and distribute the aluminum quotas, and also supply the black market. Stauth shows how the production units indirectly depend on big capital (for raw materials), how they serve to integrate their working class employees, and how they retain considerable flexibility in work and production.

These workshops are threatened from several directions. Workshops using outdated techniques may disappear; the officials may harass them by enforcing regular working hours; and the labor force may move on to other jobs. The only survivors are those who have enough capital to transform their workshops into small industries with up to 100 workers.

Another aspect of informal work in Egypt is the use of child labor (6-12 years of age). The number of working children is on the increase. The annual CAPMAS Labor Force Survey estimated their number at 3.5% of the labor force in 1979, 5.3% in 1980, and 7% in 1984. The total in 1984 was 1,104,300. A study carried out by the Department of Anthropology of Alexandria University illustrates this (1986). The study was carried out in the quarter of Bab Sharqi in Alexandria, where there is a high concentration of workshops. It is based on a socio-anthropological approach (observation, questionnaires, case studies) and analyzes the attitudes of Egyptians to manual labor. Manual labor here means various trades such as electrician, mechanic, merchant, blacksmith, plumber, etc., -- in other words, the trades which are associated with the poorer classes. A sample taken at Bab Sharqi (which is considered as the second largest quarter of the city, with an area of 14.8 sq. km. and a population of 239,410 at the time of the study) is representative of the demographic characteristics of Alexandria.

The study has two parts: first, the evaluation of manual labor and the characteristics of the population in question, then the socio-economic conditions of the children from age 7 to 15 who work as manual laborers. A sample of 50 such children who work full-time shows the particularities of this labor force in Alexandria. Thus, 40% of the sample explain their early entry into the labor force by saying that they were imitating their parents. Those in this category have generally been working for one to three years. These children come from poor backgrounds, belong to large families, and were hired through family or neighborhood connections rather than through employment bureaux. The children are a windfall for these branches of the informal sector; they provide a cheap labor force for mechanical workshops, carpenters, painters, electricians, barbers and hairdressers, dressmakers, and so on. This study shows that these children work in conditions to which their physical abilities are not suited, and without social or health protection. 70% of the children work for more than 7 hours a day, and the others from 5 to 7 hours a day; 80% have no annual holiday, and 24% do not have a regular weekly day off. More than half of them (57%) are only paid a symbolic amount -- 54% are paid less than LE 10 a month, and 57% have been through at least one period of a year or more without any pay at all.

This aspect of informal labor in Egypt is one of the research themes developed by UNICEF which in a 1988 study showed the various abusive forms of exploitation in the activities which hire children under the age of 15, despite existing legislation. Two field studies are worth noting. The first was carried out in greater Cairo, with a sample of 580 children aged from 6 to 15, and provides above all some case studies. The second is more qualitative and concerns children working in 50 tanneries in Misr al-Qadima, in the southern part of Cairo (see also 'Abdallah 1988).

The work of women, often carried out in the home and either undeclared or deliberately hidden, remains underestimated: employed women were 5.5% in the 1976 census and 8.9% in the 1986 census. The 1986 census counted 868,189 urban working women as against 381,532 in the rural areas, although the economic crisis in Egypt required more women to work. But women work

irregularly, according to circumstances, in a word, "informally", and it is difficult to capture this work in figures. Anthropological approaches have been more revealing of women's contribution to the household income (Ibrahim and Papanek 1982; Khouri-Dagher 1985).

The analysis of some so-called "informal" activities has led to a comparison with some corporations which dominated urban Egypt until the 19th century. This is the case with the study of the *zabbalin* (garbage collectors/rag pickers) carried out by R. Assaad (1988:181-192). Assaad first analyzes the precapitalist relations of production, where the ties within a single corporation created a "cohesion among the members of a single trade." These "hierarchical" relations between different actors (here Coptic *zabbalin* and their partners or financiers from the oasis of Kharga) are thought to be still alive despite many changes since the end of the 19th century. Analyzing parallel phenomena in the construction sector, Assaad (1990:2) remarks, "What we now call informal is merely the persistence of aspects of the preexisting institutional order that the new order failed to displace. In Egypt, customary norms and personal and community ties were the basis of the guild system, which was the primary instrument of economic regulation in the cities until the end of the nineteenth century."

Conclusion

The quantitative studies, based on statistical data from CAPMAS, do not deal with the process of interpenetration of economic activities. Close observation shows that it is absolutely necessary to reconsider the point of view based only on locating production and service units as they appear in the official statistics. A relevant analysis would necessarily include research among the persons and households involved in the so-called informal sector. This would lead to an understanding of the functioning and the role of a sector which, together with the industrial and commercial sectors, constitutes the productive foundation of the country's economy. If the "informal" "refuse de représenter des formes reconnaissables" (Petit Robert: "refuses to take on a recognizable shape"), more sensitive field research would help reveal its contours and explain the reproduction of urban populations.

While the role of "informal activity" appears to be increasingly influential in shaping a whole area of the urban economy left to the "survival strategies" of ordinary citizens, such activity is not easily grasped by using macro-economic and sociological methods. While these studies are useful, they need to be completed by the study of family strategies, occupational networks, and so on. The observation of limited groups often shows that the so-called informal sector is a "well-greased" system which helps explain the Egyptian "miracle": the day-to-day survival of large numbers of people thanks to the vital role of adaptation played by the traditional patterns of solidarity in these groups. Thus, one would be encouraged to suggest that the important role of social and cultural factors refutes the narrow and rational logic of an economistic approach aiming to create a quantitative classification.

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