

Panel Session Overview

Panel Chair: Matthew Bacon

Title/theme: Tackling the informal economy

A threat to some, an opportunity for others, and a potential source of income for those facing financial hardship, the informal economy is a subterranean world of work and often an important aspect of social and economic life in urban and rural settings throughout the world. Examples include cash-in-hand work, street trading, cigarette bootlegging, drug dealing, waste management, the sex industry, and human trafficking. It is now widely recognised that such economic activities are not minority practices that only exist in the hidden interstices of contemporary society. What needs to be done about the informal economy is becoming a priority issue for many governments, policy makers and practitioners. At the national and city levels of governance and policing, certain economic activities are transformed into social problems to be regulated, controlled or fought. The global economic crisis of recent years, with its attendant rise in unemployment and the cost of living, has made the examination of the informal economy a matter of contemporary relevance and significant importance.

This panel pulls together three empirical research papers by experts in the field and will thereby explore different manifestations of the informal economy and the ways in which it is and could be tackled.

The presenters and abstract titles are:

- ‘The informal regulation of an illegal trade: the hidden politics of drug detective work in England’ (Matthew Bacon)
- ‘Engaged in informal economy and victim to externalised harm? A comparative analysis of Accra (Ghana) and Porto Alegre (Brazil)’ (Lieselot Bisschop, Diego Coletto and Gudrun Vande Walle)
- ‘The nuances in policing Brussels’ informal street trade’ (Dominique Boels)

Abstracts

The informal regulation of an illegal trade: the hidden politics of drug detective work in England

Matthew Bacon (University of Sheffield)

Topic: Police and Crime

Key words: drugs, policing, informal economy, occupational culture, ethnography

A cosmic array of drugs are produced, sold and used by the people of the world for profit and their pharmacological effects. Although their contributions to cultural practices and social life should not be overlooked or undervalued, certain drugs are widely acknowledged to be the direct and indirect cause and consequence of a great many problems and are without doubt a seriously harmful threat to society. Drug control policies define the confines of illegality and describe the course of action adopted or proposed by the government of

any given nation. Whilst such policies inarguably have a profound effect on the structure, composition and operations of the drug trade, in this paper I will demonstrate that they actually tell us very little about how and why laws and programmes designed to deal with drugs are rolled out or put into practice on the frontline. More specifically, I will argue that police enforcement strategies and tactics are central to the moulding of policy as it moves from its written form to action in the everyday work of officers involved in the policing of drugs and the investigatory process. Despite the apparent failure of policy initiatives and policing interventions to adequately regulate the illegal drug trade, remarkably few social scientists have endeavoured to examine the drug control activities of the police and so the subject area is under-researched and therefore under-theorised. Drawing on the findings of an ethnographic study of specialist detective units that are licensed to police drug markets and drug-related crime, this paper explores the dynamic interaction between the formal and informal aspects of police organisations and offers an insight into the world of police detectives and the policing of drugs. It explores the idea that officers do not always follow organisational rules and guidelines defined in policies by examining the role of informal norms, values and beliefs in shaping their decisions and behaviours. Furthermore, it suggests that the work of drug detectives should be perceived as an informal activity that results in the informal regulation of an illegal trade.

Engaged in informal economy and victim to externalized harm? A comparative analysis of Accra (Ghana) and Porto Alegre (Brazil)

Lieselot Bisschop (Ghent University), Diego Coletto (University of Milano Bicocca), and Gudrun Vande Walle (Ghent University)

Topic:

Key words: informal economy, waste management, E-waste, victimology, grassroots organizations

Given the increasing world population and our increasing consumption, waste is an issue that has great impact on the livability of urban areas. A massive industry deals with recycling and disposal of all that is discarded. These actors can work at local level, but waste is also traded on the global market. Waste became a true commodity in contemporary society. Besides formal actors also informal actors play a role. For these informal workers, economic profits, social recognition and working conditions can be very different. The general result is that waste has changed from a useless residue to an economic resource. At the same time, it causes problems to environmental and human health. The difference is often linked to the dismantling and recycling policies and practices. Particularly the disposal of hazardous waste has been referred to as problematic. This is illustrated by the illegal trade in hazardous waste (e.g. electronic waste) in which industrialized countries externalize the harm to developing regions of the world. In these developing countries there is often a multitude of workers who operate in the informal economy, transforming the management of waste in an important source of livelihood. A reaction to dealing with the illegal trade in waste and with the informal management of waste is traditionally one of a government reaction through regulation and enforcement. This risks neglecting the potential for empowered solutions to deal with waste management that have arisen in developing countries. In this paper, we focus on these informal actors in the global South, who have made waste management their source of income. They develop their economic activities on a local level,

often with limited means, but nevertheless with a degree of organization. These actors are however part of the economic globalization as well, inherently connected to global trade. This paper brings together findings from case studies in two big cities in the global South: the trading, dismantling, recycling and refurbishing of generic waste and e-goods in the cities of Accra (Ghana) and Porto Alegre (Brazil). On the one hand, these workers can be considered victims (socially, economically and environmentally). On the other hand, there is also potential for creative solutions despite these unfavourable living and working conditions. This comparative case study analyses both of these aspects and explores the potential for engagement of these workers through grassroots organizations.

The nuances in policing Brussels' informal street trade

Dominique Boels (Ghent University)

Topic: Criminalization and Social Exclusion

Key words: informal economy, street selling, case study, Brussels

Notwithstanding the relevance and importance of the informal economy, the literature is characterised by a striking lack on empirical research on this topic. More specifically, there is limited qualitative research on the Belgian informal economy, resulting in little in-depth knowledge on this phenomenon. We try to contribute to the literature (criminological knowledge) on the informal economy by reporting the results of our empirical research on the informal economy related to street selling in Brussels. We opted for a qualitative case study, making use of observation (50 hours), document analyses and semi-structured interviews (30 recorded and 10 not recorded) with street sellers, policymakers, enforcers and intermediates (e.g. social workers). Our results point to the existence of different types of informal street selling, whether or not related to formal street selling. For street sellers residing illegally in the country, informal street selling is a survival strategy which is opted for in view of limited formal and informal income alternatives. Their situation is characterised by a high degree of precariousness given their migration status and labour situation. Remarkable is the low public enforcement priority which is given to these types of informal selling, which is mainly based on two factors: (1) neutralisation of the phenomenon (by the government, enforcers and some intermediates) and (2) high workload at the level of the public prosecutor. Private enforcement actors seem to give more priority to the phenomenon, albeit experiencing difficulties in controlling the street level. In conclusion, we argue the need to monitor the activities in view of the precarious situation of many of its participants.