

**This article was published as:**

BOELS, D. (2014). It's better than stealing: informal street selling in Brussels, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 34 (Issue 9/10), 670-693 (DOI 10.1108/IJSSP-04-2013-0049).

URL: <http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=ijssp>

## **It's better than stealing: informal street selling in Brussels**

### **Introduction**

Notwithstanding the differing scale of street selling between countries and cities (Bhowmik, 2005), this ancient activity is considered to be ubiquitous (Bromley, 2000) and increasing. The latter fact is tied to changes in the global economy associated with post-modernity (Cross, 2000). Accordingly, street vending, as an urban income-generating activity, has been studied in many settings. However, most empirical studies published in English focus on street trade in developing countries (e.g., Bhowmik, 2005, 2010), Middle and Latin American countries (e.g., Coletto, 2010; Cross, 1998; Cutsinger, 2000; Harrison and McVey, 1997; Middleton, 2003) and southern European countries (e.g., Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2011; Bellinvia, 2013; Lazaridis and Koumandraki, 2003; Nelken, 2006). Given that Western societies have also experienced more contractual and short-term employment, higher levels of unemployment and a decrease of expenditure on metropolitan administration and welfare services, urban areas in these societies are deemed to be informalised (Williams and Windebank, 2001). We thus see no reason why street selling would not occur in these societies, which implies the need to fill this gap in the literature by studying the topic in such areas.

Albeit street selling can take place in a purely formal manner (Bromley, 2000), some studies have been executed within the topic of the informal economy (Coletto, 2010; Cross, 2000), on the assumption that street selling is one of the most visible manifestations of the informal economy (Thomas, 1992 as cited by de Bruin and Dupuis, 2000). Such studies have highlighted the fragmentation and heterogeneity of informal selling in terms of organisation (sellers and the trade), working conditions, motives (Bromley, 2000; Coletto, 2010), degree of legality of the occupation of public spaces, labour relations (Coletto, 2013) and (evolution of) regulatory mechanisms (Bellinvia, 2013; Coletto, 2010; Morales, 2000; Smart, 1986). Interestingly, certain studies tend to focus on specific types of sellers, such as Nigerian disc-sellers (Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2011) or immigrant beach sellers (Nelken, 2006), whereas others (in the domain of economics, sociology of work and marketing) focus on geographically limited spaces (e.g. de Bruin and Dupuis, 2000; Witkowski, 1993).

Considering street selling as a form of informal economy should not imply adopting a dualistic point of view, in which the formal economy is seen as unrelated to the informal economy (Chen, 2004). Indeed, many researchers have contested the usefulness and empirical tenability of a dual point of departure (Alderslade *et al.*, 2006; Boels, 2013; de Bruin and Dupuis, 2000; Coletto, 2010; Cross, 2000; Verhage and Shapland, 2013). Notwithstanding the main focus of this article is informal street selling and its participants, we equally endorse this lack of a clear distinction between the formal, informal and illegal/criminal economy, partly on the basis of our empirical results which confirm the fluidity of the informal economy (Cross, 2000: p. 33). In this article, we define the informal economy as those parts of the economy that are not officially regulated, enforced and/or registered (Adriaenssens *et al.*, 2009). Rather than simply contributing to the debate on the informal economy, we fill a gap in the existing empirical literature on street selling by focusing on a North European country and the informal economy by executing qualitative research in a neglected field of study. In line with de Bruin and Dupuis (2000), Smart (1986) and Witkowski (1993) we focus on two formal open - air markets (one private and one public) and the surrounding sales venues. The focus on informal street selling in a specific area of Brussels, where both formal and informal street selling take place and have not been studied before, enables us to study the interrelated types of selling.

This approach equally enables us to move beyond the study of a specific type of seller in terms of both nationality/origin and sold goods to generate a broader empirical framework. We focus on two main levels: (1) the activity and (2) the workers. We identify the types of informal street selling within the geographical boundaries of the case, but, more importantly, we identify and elaborate on the decisions of sellers with regard to their entry into the business, the organisation of their work and their own perceptions of their activities. In this respect, we identify the viewpoint of informal workers, without whom the informal economy would not exist.

The selected area, referred to as Brussels South, is geographically located in two municipalities near the Brussels South railway station (Anderlecht and Sint-Gillis). The complexity of the Belgian government is disproportionate to the country's size and thus requires some explanation. Since 1970, Belgium, which is a federalist country, has five levels of governance: (1) federal, (2) community, (3) region, (4) province and (5) municipality. This structure implies that whereas policy areas are regulated in general at the federal level (e.g., migration, justice, labour regulation), other related topics (or subtopics) are regulated at the level of the community (e.g. integration of migrants) or the region (e.g. employment mediation)<sup>i</sup>. As illustrated with regard to migration by van Meeteren *et al.* (2008), this can lead to paradoxical situations in which the federal government forbids certain migrants from staying legally in the country, whereas the Flemish government offers support to migrants for illegal stay. The region of Brussels comprises 19 municipalities. Although we refer to Brussels, our case study is not geographically located in the capital of the country, but in two adjacent municipalities, infamous for their flourishing informal street trade (which is the reason we selected them). Furthermore, these municipalities are characterised by multiculturalism and socio-economic deprivation.

Street selling<sup>ii</sup> is not defined in Belgian law but would fit under the category of ambulatory trade<sup>iii</sup>, which is defined by law as the sale, the offer of sale or the display (in order to sell) of products and services related to these products.<sup>iv</sup> In contradiction to Bhowmik (2005) but in line with Coletto (2013), we suggest that street selling is not purely self-employed labour. In short, according to the federal regulation on ambulatory activities, formal selling can be executed in public markets, private markets and public spaces such as roads, places adjacent to public roads and commercial parking lots insofar as the organisation of these activities has been approved by the host municipality. Furthermore, sellers need authorisation for ambulatory trade granted by services of the Crossroad Banks of Enterprises.<sup>v</sup> The practical organisation of ambulatory trade is regulated by the municipality or the private organiser (in the case of a private market), albeit taking the federal regulations into account.

## **Methods**

In order to grasp the diversity of street selling in the case and to understand the choices of people involved, interviews and observations were the main methods used (Beyens and Tournel, 2010; Boeije, 2005) (see Table 1). Sellers were not only approached during their selling activities but were also contacted through intermediate organisations and snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Kleemans *et al.*, 2008). Dutch, French and English were the languages in which these interviews took place. Approximately 50 hours of observations were carried out, dispersed over different days and hours in order to provide a broad view on the setting (Coletto, 2013). Additionally, documentary analyses served to identify the policy (Vervaecke *et al.*, 2002), which we see as a combination of

regulation and enforcement (cf. Cross, 2000).<sup>vi</sup> These methods are in line with previous research on informal street selling (e.g., Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2011; Bellinvia, 2013; de Bruin and Dupuis, 2000). Owing to the sampling strategies and the limited number of interviews, the results cannot be taken as representative of the sector, but this does not diminish the value of the explorative research, especially given the validation of the interview results by observation (van Meeteren *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, since several types<sup>vii</sup> of sellers were interviewed, the sector was covered to a large extent.

Table 1. Overview of the interviews

	N recorded	N non-recorded	N respondents	Interview length
Street vendors (SV) <sup>viii</sup>	11	6	18	30 min – 1.5 h
Regulators (ER)	2	0	3	1 – 2.5 h
Enforcers (EE)	11	3	16	1 – 2.5 h
Intermediates (EI)	7	1	8	1 – 2.5 h
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>45</b>	

### The markets and their surroundings

The neighbourhood hosting the private market<sup>ix</sup> is often portrayed as a dangerous area inspiring fear and feelings of insecurity (De Caluwé, 2012). The near surroundings of the market, however, radiate a lively, animated and multicultural atmosphere (owing to the crowd of people dragging shopping trolleys or carrying bags, traffic jamming the streets and acquaintances greeting each other) than feelings of insecurity. The market is organised each Friday, Saturday and Sunday, attracting up to 650 traders (mostly with North African and Pakistani roots) and 100,000 visitors and/or clients during weekends (De Caluwé, 2012). On Fridays and on weekend mornings one can walk in the market and look at the merchandise without being crowded. From approximately 11:00 to 11:30 on Sundays, however, the market gets very crowded (under good weather conditions): it is constantly jammed; shopping trolleys and people bump into each other; clients check out the merchandise, talk to family/friends about it; clients and sellers are actively involved in bargaining; and sellers loudly praise their goods. Nearly all imaginable goods (e.g., food, clothing, furniture) are provisioned at low prices, mainly attracting a range of poorer clients. At the main entrance to the market, people group together around the shops (e.g., the Polish butcher's) and pavement cafés. Talking, drinking, laughing, selling and buying are their main activities. The street opposite the main entrance is known for its flourishing car trade (import-export companies), mainly run by Africans. At the top of this street are some cafés and small shops that exhibit their merchandise on the pavement. Further down cars pass slowly and groups of men talk, observe, laugh, shout, negotiate and sell on the pavements.

Fewer than two kilometres away, the public market is open each Sunday from 08:00 to 13:00. Walking out of the railway station, one comes across stands of textiles (mostly sold by Pakistanis), beauty products and biscuits. A little further down the street along the railway tracks, there are four rows of stands with diverse goods such as flowers, handbags, linen, underwear and shoes. The market extends to the north-east, where three more rows of stands exhibit different goods such as textiles, toys, shoes, olives, bread, pastries and exotic spices. The fruit and vegetable stalls are mainly concentrated on the other side of the railway tracks.

### More insights into the nature of informal street selling

Informal street selling not only takes place within the area of the formal markets but also outside them. In regard to links with the formal markets, two types of informality are discernible: (1) informal selling in the formal markets and (2) informal selling outside the market domain, but during market hours. The 'independent' informal street trade takes place on the street, but also in cafés.

#### *Informality within formal markets*

Four subtypes are discernible of which illegal (and thus non-declared) employment is the first. This can take two main forms: (1) employment of people permitted to reside legally in the country but not permitted to work<sup>x</sup> or (2) employment of people not authorised to stay (and thus) work in Belgium. Different tasks, reflecting different degrees of responsibility, are performed ranging from getting a coffee for an employer to helping with the supply of the stands and selling the merchandise. The smaller jobs done by migrants, who offer their services here and there during the setting-up of the market, are usually not performed on a regular basis and do not offer a fixed 'salary'. Sale of merchandise by illegal migrants takes place on a regular basis.

Second, undeclared labour by employees authorised to stay and work in the country is assumed to occur by some respondents. For example, a regulator states:

'I think that is the order of the day. Especially here, the foreigners, they always have an uncle, a brother, a cousin who coincidentally came along to help. So these men, they are not declared. Because in some stalls there are five, six persons. If he has to declare and pay for all of them, that can't be profitable'. (ER1)

Sometimes, these employees receive social benefits, thus committing social benefit fraud. However, not only employees fail to declare their activities. According to an enforcer, stallholders are equally guilty of social fraud since they sometimes make use of forged authorisations.

Third, sellers without authorisation for ambulatory trade infiltrate the markets and blend in with the formal sellers. Two subtypes are present: (1) people walking around the market trying to sell goods (e.g., smartphones, watches, phone cards, bread, toys) and (2) people who adopt more or less fixed places between the established, formal stands. The former occur in both markets, whereas the latter mostly occur in the public market. Between the formal stands of the public market informal sellers display counterfeit perfumes, clothing and sunglasses on the ground. Although their exact position might change from week to week, they always settle in the same row. Selling techniques vary from showing the merchandise (subtype 1) to loudly praising the reasonable price of the perfumes (subtype 2).

Lastly, counterfeit goods are sold in some formal stalls in the private market. Popular items are handbags (Gucci, Vuitton, Prada), Burberry watches, clothing (hats, t-shirts) and beauty products.

#### *Informality outside the private market*

In addition to bread and telephone cards, counterfeit goods (e.g., Vuitton handbags and wallets, Guess T-shirts, Dior perfumes) are sold outside the side entrance. It is notable that the sellers are not active on Sundays because of the presence of police regulating the traffic. This is deemed necessary given the huge amount of visitors attracted by the market on Sundays. Although the police are there to regulate the traffic instead of controlling sellers, the latter do not perform their informal activities

right in front of the police. On Fridays and Saturdays, the sellers risk patrols, which is why all sellers keep an eye out for potential enforcers. Our interviews suggest that the seller who first sees an enforcer whistles, resulting in all sellers quickly collecting their goods and running away to the subway station or to the nearby square. The perfumes are assumed by enforcers to originate from China or Turkey. They sell for ten euros, yielding a profit of five to seven euros per bottle. In order not to compete too much with each other, sellers report making arrangements regarding the selling price. Sellers buy these perfumes from intermediates (arrangements are made by phone so that street vendors cannot identify the supply depot), who buy the goods in large quantities from importers in Antwerp or Ostend. In order to reduce risk, communications are done by mobile phone instead of in person. In this way, suppliers avoid being identified by street sellers, who thus cannot give information on their suppliers or stocking place to enforcers.

Outside the main entrance of the market, between shops/cafés and parking spaces, people wander around on weekends to sell different goods (e.g., sunglasses, smartphones, discs). On Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, cigarette sellers offer their products in a rather subtle manner (by gently saying 'cigarettes, cigarettes?'). On Sundays, the number of sellers can be as high as 25, but is significantly smaller on Fridays. This difference is related to the number of clients, which is higher on the weekend. Two main groups of sellers are discernible, each working on their own territory: Polish and Romanian sellers work at the top of the market (in front of the East European shops) whereas North African sellers conduct their business further down. Interestingly, East European sellers are not there on Fridays. North African sellers work on the three market days, irrespective of the weather.

Common to both groups of sellers is their adaptation to controls by enforcers; in order to minimise the financial setback of confiscation, they do not carry their cigarettes on their person (see also Coletto, 2010). Accordingly, enforcers cannot prove they are selling cigarettes and thus cannot confiscate them. Instead, the cigarettes are hidden in the near surroundings: in shopping bags between or in parked vans, in neighbouring houses or in shops. The formal businesses employed as storage places in this trade are largely assumed to be aware of the practice. Although no direct proof is available, some experts believe the legal business receives a (financial) reward for its involvement. Some sellers work with messengers who guard the stock and bring the cigarettes when the sellers need to be supplied. Not all sellers employ messengers and the ones who do mainly make use of their services on busy Sundays. In addition to these messengers, 'observers' are believed by one enforcer to be on the lookout for enforcers, although this is denied by one seller. Although cigarettes are offered per carton, they can also be bought singly or per pack. Larger quantities are not sold at the market itself, but orders can be placed there, just as they can be placed over the phone. The price per carton ranges between €20 and €25, depending on the brand. Sellers do not always have all the usual brands in stock; their trade depends on what their suppliers can sell them. At the market, illicit whites (e.g., Viceroy), counterfeit (e.g., Marlboro) and contraband<sup>xi</sup> (e.g., L&M) cigarettes are sold.

#### *'Independent' informal selling*

In the street opposite the private market, a specific type of informal street business exists, linked to car import-export companies. One of the main activities is the purchase of cars intended for resale and export to Africa. Usually, the cars, sometimes wrecks according to Western standards, are filled with different goods such as old TVs, mattresses or car parts, which are sold in Africa. On arrival,

these cars are either still used as a means of transportation or cannibalised and their parts used to repair other cars. A seller explained that people on the street execute different activities such as making contact with car traders, negotiating prices, searching for specific car parts, selling stolen car items, servicing cars, cannibalising cars and cleaning cars. The people involved originate mainly from Niger, Guinea, Nigeria and Senegal. One seller explained that sellers of the same nationality group together. According to him, difficulties can arise within groups (e.g. delivering wrong goods, not paying in time), which are sorted out internally, sometimes with the use of violence.

Less visible is the sale of goods in cafés in the area of Brussels South. Although this type of selling exceeds the geographical boundaries of the case, the city centre is avoided because of additional difficulties linked to the presence of tourists (e.g., more café owners refusing entrance to sellers, more controls). Goods such as clothes, watches, gadgets and discs are widely sold in cafés, implying serious competition between sellers. One clothes seller, however, did not perceive other sellers as competition, given the quick rotation of clients in cafés. Most sellers have regular cafés and regular clients. The preference for cafés owned and visited by immigrant people is explained as follows:

‘Ah, it is really another world. So, it is a Moroccan café, I mean the owner is of Moroccan origin. A lot of Moroccans drink tea. Someone comes, even someone from black Africa or the Eastern Bloc, and he comes to sell something. They are not astonished, they are not shocked. Why? For two reasons: they know that this man has no, erm, that it is his income. But also, in his home country it is a [customary] method of trade’. (E12).

According to a social worker, clothes sellers can pay their suppliers (e.g. Pakistani wholesalers) later in case they do not possess the necessary capital to buy their merchandise (insofar as the seller-supplier relationship is characterised by a certain level of trust). Another option is to buy the clothes at a market, where it is not necessary to buy in large quantities.

Discs (mostly of films, but sometimes also music) are sold by sellers of different nationalities (e.g., Nigerian, Kenyan, Moroccan, Guinean, Congolese). One enforcer assumed the market for this type of trade was significantly decreasing given the expanding opportunities for individuals to watch films (e.g., digital TV) or listen to music (e.g., legal and illegal downloads). Nevertheless, for the poor population it might remain an attractive market if they cannot afford digital TV or the internet. Albeit quite uniform, the method of working shows some small differences. Some sellers display discs on tables, walk around the café, return to tables to probe interest in purchase. After that, all discs are collected. Others however show their discs per table and stay at the table while clients study the deal. Sellers work nearly every day. According to some respondents, pirated discs are also sold in video-shops. These shops are believed to fabricate their own copies in order to survive given the high competition of the internet. One former disc seller even believes video-shops send out sellers on the streets as well.

The sale of discs in cafés (referred to as ‘peddling’ by Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2011) is characterised by several degrees of professionalisation. Large-scale dealers (originating from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Kenya), using sophisticated machinery, employ many sellers who are subject to different payment modalities: (1) income depends upon the number of discs sold, (2) no wage is paid, but free board and lodging are offered and (3) fixed day/month salary (approximately €150/month). Additionally, a seller explained that small-scale dealers work with less sophisticated machinery, which is also used

by sellers who have enough capital to buy a duplicating machine in order to copy discs. On the other hand, some suppliers frequent the cafés and streets to sell:

‘Yeah, you have to. You give to people, you wait for your money, but sometimes you have to wait a long time for your money. And then people disappear because they are arrested... It has its risks. It’s really survival, it’s not erm... Yeah, it is big business and you can earn a living out of it but it’s always a cat-and-mouse game with the police, eh?’.  
(E16).

#### *Enforcement of informal street selling?*

Many public and private enforcement actors are involved in the policing of street trade, which implies the presence of plural policing (Jones and Newburn, 2006a). Enforcement of the specific ambulatory trade regulation is the responsibility of the police, the economic inspectorate<sup>xii</sup> and the organisers of the markets. In this respect, the private market organiser hires private security (“manned guarding” [van Steden and Huberts, 2006, p. 19] or “manned or staffed services” [Wakefield, 2003, p. xxi] as a type of commercial security) and has installed CCTV (“technical equipment services” [van Steden and Huberts, 2006, p. 21] or “security hardware industry” [Wakefield, 2003, p. xxi] as a type of commercial security) to keep informal sellers out of the market (e.g., cigarette sellers) and to detect small crime (e.g., pickpocketing). Given the limited public police patrols in the private market for these goals<sup>xiii</sup>, the private owners of the market have turned to private policing in order to protect their business. A proper arrangement of the market is furthermore endeavoured by employing parking controllers (cashing parking money), market controllers (verifying the correct emplacement of stall holders and cashing their placement fee) and waste controllers. This finding is in line with Wakefield (2003) stating that: “the expansion of mass private property has already placed large areas that form sites of public life under the control of private security” (p. 56).

Given the nature of the activities, additional public enforcers are active in controlling the Brussels street trade such as the social inspectorate (verifying employees' credentials). The sale of counterfeit goods falls within the scope of the police and economic inspectorate. In terms of detection, however, neither of these actors gives high priority to street selling or counterfeiting<sup>xiv</sup>. What is more, the police are rather tolerant of street selling, especially in the Brussels South area, given that it enables people to survive and, according to some enforcers, that it is not perceived as serious crime. Furthermore, the perceived lack of judicial consequences does not enhance the prioritising. Although most police forces have a special unit which works to detect counterfeiting, in general local authorities are more concerned with social disorder and infractions directly threatening physical harm instead of counterfeiting. One enforcer said:

‘I mean, I’m gonna buy a Dolce and Gabbana t-shirt, you’re not gonna feel attacked by that. You’re not afraid. I’m not gonna beat you. You’re not attacked. So, the feeling of insecurity, produced by counterfeiting, there’s no feeling of insecurity, hey. But if I come to steal from you or beat you or steal your purse, that’s a feeling of insecurity. So, you personally will be hurt. Then it becomes a priority. But the counterfeit Dolce and Gabbana or Louis Vuitton or whatever that I’m gonna buy, how does it hurt you? No hey.... That doesn’t have an impact on people. And politically, it hasn’t got an impact.’  
(EE6)



Furthermore, enforcers claim informal street selling is seldom prosecuted in Brussels<sup>xv</sup> owing to the high workload of the public prosecutor, the small number of complaints by (informal) employees and the lack of physical harm. Only in serious cases (e.g., multi-recidivists, human trafficking, employment of four or more illegal workers) does prosecution take place. Whether or not sellers of counterfeit products are prosecuted is believed to depend on the workload of the prosecutor. In order to avoid people feeling they can act with impunity, other consequences are linked to infractions such as administrative fines, confiscation and voluntary renunciation of goods.

In terms of private industry, however, counterfeiting and piracy can have serious financial implications. With regard to counterfeiting, brand holders can join organisations that organise the detection of counterfeit products (e.g., by hiring private detectives who execute investigative functions for private companies [Jones and Newburn, 2006b; van Steden and Hubers, 2006]). In our case, their job mainly constitutes the gathering of information, which is subsequently handed over to the brand holder or to the police who can execute further investigations. In this respect, the relation between public policing agents and private detectives is characterised by a co-operative relationship (Jones and Newburn, 2006b). This takes on the form of *operational* co-operation (i.e. actual contribution in research activities of one another) and *offering advice* (i.e. giving advice and background information on goods and services that can be useful for investigation) (Mulkers, 2002)<sup>xvi</sup>. The tobacco industry also hires private detectives to gather information in order to hand it over to public authorities. Likewise, private detectives work for the music industry, focusing on the identification of the sources of piracy. Notably, although detection of piracy and counterfeiting is important for the private industry, the focus is not necessarily on street sellers. Whereas some brand holders adopt a zero-tolerance policy, starting a civil court procedure for each counterfeit item seized, others only take action when a predetermined minimum amount is detected. Accordingly, informal sellers do not face frequent or high risks from this enforcement scope.

The presence of private policing actors, in addition to public actors, is explained in public policing literature by several changes in the structure of formal social control, offering a more extensive role for private security personnel in public social life (Mulkers, 2002; Wakefield, 2003). At least in Britain, this is related to an increasing demand for greater security in a climate of declining faith in the police's ability to prevent crime. In this respect, private policing can be implemented in the public sector in order to decrease perceived anti-social conduct in these spaces (Wakefield, 2003). But, in the case of informal street selling, private policing agents seem to be brought into action not only to this end. In addition to providing a sense of security, private agents are hired and private security is installed to protect the private business and its interests: the correct and honest execution of the market in order not to scare off clients and stall holders; tackling of unfair competition for brands by searching for the origin of counterfeiting<sup>xvii</sup>. It is unclear which intention has the most weight, but the private policing agents are clearly focused on both ensuring the security of the public and on protecting the interests of the private businesses. To this latter goal, there is a form of co-operation between public and private agents, in the form of information exchange.

### **Choosing informal street trade: profile, organisation and motives of sellers**

#### *The sellers*

The interviewed street sellers were of different nationalities: Moroccan, Polish, Mauritanian, Nigerian, Tunisian, Senegalese and Belgian. The majority of them were illegal, although in the course

of the research one seller was notified that he could stay permanently as his child was born in Belgium. Of the six sellers who resided legally in the country, two still had a regularisation application<sup>xviii</sup> running. Only one respondent was a formal, registered seller; the other 17 were informal sellers.

This sample cannot be taken as representative of the whole sector. Notwithstanding that, all respondents indicated that informal street selling is mostly executed by migrants (non-autochthonous people). Despite the high number of 'illegal' people participating in this type of activity, informal street trade is not exclusively the domain of people residing illegally in the country. For instance, legal residents in search of extra income (partly owing to the economic crisis) are equally involved in this business. Nearly all informal sellers are male, although some exceptions exist such as female East European cigarette sellers.

### *Starting the business*

Social capital is of crucial importance for starting up as an informal seller. In line with Bourdieu (1986) and Leerkes *et al.* (2006), we describe social capital as the ability to mobilise resources (money, employment, housing, information, documents) from ethnic and familial networks. Especially for illegal people, friends, family or acquaintances play a crucial role in making contact with potential employers (both in markets and outside, e.g., in construction sector) or other sellers, which is confirmed by empirical research on survival strategies of illegal people in Belgium (Devillé, 2006; van Meeteren *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, with regard to disc-sellers, experienced sellers or dealers would test people (who they perceive are in need of money) by giving them some discs to sell. If they are successful, they can continue. One intermediate put it as follows:

'It's all about the money, they are just surviving. But it's a real network, because newcomers see that, they just accompany a friend who is doing that with another friend. He sees that: ah, what is it? That's the way it goes. But they're not gonna do that with just anybody'. (E16)

Occasionally, sellers start on their own account, by asking established sellers what they need to do or whom they need to contact in order to start. After initial contacts in the car business, a newcomer needs to be tested for trustworthiness by completing a sort of internship. The same holds for selling in cafés: if problems arise, the newcomer is not welcome anymore. This finding indicates that sellers partly rely on the goodwill of café-holders.

In addition to social capital, money, as a result of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), is a prerequisite. For instance, cigarette sellers need to buy their merchandise in advance which can require start-up capital of €6,000 or €7,000. There are two reasons for this amount of capital: (1) a seller wants to buy several brands to reach more clients and (2) sellers cannot buy small quantities of cigarettes. First, suppliers would not sell limited quantities but second, since not all brands are available at all times, some sellers build up a reserve of certain brands. In order to copy discs, one needs a minimum of about €100 to €200 for the purchase of a computer, duplicating machine, blank discs, cover sleeves and a little bag to store the discs. Of course, more expensive machinery exists for copying discs, but less advanced machinery also does the trick. If sellers do not have this kind of start-up capital, they can sell discs for dealers and receive a commission or – as is the case for clothes, for example – they

can pay for their goods after they have sold them. Thus, economic capital is less important than social capital.

### *Specialisation, organisation of work and income*

With the exception of the sale of cigarettes, no consensus exists on specialisation. Whereas some sellers and intermediaries argue that sellers stick to one type of good, others sell different types of goods in order to increase their income (e.g., belts and perfumes). Some sellers say they could sell different types of goods, but choose not to since they have a fixed clientele and some expertise in their business. Selling different goods would thus require an extra investment in those two areas.

The number of days and hours sellers work varies, partly depending on the type of goods sold and on the location. Cigarette sellers work from approximately eight or nine in the morning to three or four in the afternoon. The North African sellers work there three days a week and search for other (informal) jobs during the week (mainly in construction or in markets), whereas the East European sellers do not work on Fridays (some not on Saturdays either). Despite the application of the same sale prices, one seller claimed no price arrangements are discussed between sellers but that experience has resulted in similar prices. In line with Bromley (2000), the interrelations between the sellers are characterised by both competition and support, although the latter is usually reserved for members of the same (religious) background. Each seller has regular clients and additionally approaches potential clients on the pavement. Since no formal arrangements exist between the sellers with regard to clients (except the above-mentioned territoriality), fights occasionally break out over clients:

‘Me, I never fight. Never. But I see how people do it. For one client, for four euros, they fight. Because they need the money. They need it’. (SV3).

Like cigarette sellers, other sellers who work in the surroundings of the markets adopt the latter's opening hours. Sellers in cafés on the other hand usually start after office hours, when clients start going to cafés. Their daily activities are diverse (e.g., going to school, buying merchandise, resting, searching for a job).

The income from street selling depends upon the type of goods and external factors such as the number of clients and the weather. Illegal people selling in markets earn between €25 and €40 a day (implying over 12 hours of labour). As one intermediary said:

‘They won't exactly make a fortune. And it is extremely precarious, of course. But for people it is really a way to make ends meet, hoping to find housing and some food’. (EI5)

The wage for odd jobs in markets is usually not agreed upon before the start since sellers do not want to be perceived by employers as ‘difficult’ or ‘making a lot of demands’ (SV13). Sellers receive what stallholders wish to give that day, which varies between two and ten euros (sometimes people are paid in kind). Complaints from workers are rare, because they need all the money they can get. The profit of cigarette sellers varies between one and four euros per carton sold, according to the brand and the number of cigarettes purchased (lower in the case of a large purchase). Income is higher on the weekend but differs between sellers: from €20 to €80 on Fridays and from €60 to €400 on Sundays. Messengers are given some money at the end of the day, depending on the earnings of the seller they are working for. Sellers of phone cards claim benefits vary between half a euro and

one euro per card sold, depending on the type of card. Again, during weekends and public holidays more cards are sold because of the larger market.

The majority of the sellers claim their income from street selling is enough to survive, that is, to pay for rent, food, clothing and a cup of coffee once in a while. Of course, some sellers do not execute their activities solely within the geographical boundaries of the case study. Young males often share a studio in order to reduce the rent, whereas others live in squats. If their income is not sufficient, other solutions are sought, such as borrowing money from friends, voluntary work, stealing (only one seller admitted his friends tend to steal), reliance on social aid and/or other informal jobs (e.g., moving, construction, odd jobs). These jobs, which are often desired, are not easy to obtain for two reasons: (1) demand outstrips supply and (2) employers often recruit people they know they can trust, given the fact that, in construction for instance, the workers have to handle expensive materials. All in all, sellers' total income is either totally informal or a combination of formal and informal sources.

### *Why informal street selling?*

Survival is uniformly acknowledged to be the main reason for starting informal street trade. In many cases, informal sellers are not permitted to reside and/or work legally in the country. Accordingly, because of the lack of viable (income) alternatives, informal street trade is opted for with the intention to meet basic needs:

‘But yeah, it’s just a survival strategy. Also, rent is always high here. So, in order to apply for papers, you need an address. In order to have an address, you need to pay. In order to pay, you need a job, well yeah a job or you work on the side or you know, then they know someone from their country who’s selling discs and who’s going to cafés to sell discs at three euro, five euro’. (E16)

‘Many people who work undeclared are people who are not officially resident, illegal people, so they cannot do otherwise than work undeclared’. (EE3)

Whereas the lack of official papers can be understood as a reason to start informal selling, a social worker argues that even when people have residence and work permits some continue their activities partly because they cannot meet formal work criteria (e.g., language skills, qualifications) (E14). For instance, practical experience is usually not enough to get a formal job; certificates are equally required:

‘And it is very..., I think that informal economy is so popular because it’s so hard to go formal. Who wants someone who doesn’t speak Dutch or French well, or who’s 40 or 50 years old?’ (E14)

Additionally, informal street selling can supplement insufficient income (be it from social benefit or from formal or informal labour):

‘Many people do that to have an additional income. Their goal is not to earn billions and billions and billions...it’s more to improve their daily life, you see. So, they tell themselves: “Oh well, it doesn’t hurt anyone, I don’t steal, anyway, I’m not gonna take your purse, I’m not gonna steal food, I’m just doing a little business that’s harming no

one. And I don't harm the brands why? Because they have enough money". Yes okay, but still, you don't have to overdo it. The law is there for everybody'. (EE6)

Interestingly, the decision to sell on the streets, in comparison with other informal business, can be a result of the reflection of standard economic activities in the home country of sellers. Remarkably, some sellers prefer to work as an 'independent' seller than as an employee in a market since the latter makes them feel exploited:

'They don't have papers, you see? So, if they don't work, what will they do to pay rent and all? Otherwise they will sleep outside. For instance, if you work with people on the market, you'll earn €25 and have to be at the market at four in the morning until five in the evening. So €25, I don't think this is right. You see? Because people here take advantage of people without papers'. (SV11)

One seller interviewed quit his market activity and started as an independent seller for this reason. On the other hand, some sellers do not quit their informal job since they need the money (notwithstanding that they are aware they are underpaid):

'I can put up with being exploited because I want to eat, I don't want to sleep in the streets'. (SV13)

In line with previous research on migrant entrepreneurial activities in Greece (Lazaridis and Koumandraki, 2003), the preference for self-employment can equally be prompted by psychological advantages such as experienced freedom and the wish not to get employers into trouble. In addition, the lack of representation of (informal) street sellers and their limited organisational power may also explain their lack of rebellion. Sellers find the work hard and would prefer to do other work (e.g., work for which they are actually qualified). Notably, most street sellers do not call their activities a job, but refer to it as 'temporary aid' (SV13) or 'a defence' (SV6) (the latter referring to police being able to confiscate goods). They do not refer to it as a regular job, given the fact that a regular job entails a long-term legal contract (they are well aware of the fact that their activities are not legal).

Most street traders interviewed furthermore acknowledge the non-legal aspect of their income-earning activities, but perceive it as a better alternative than stealing or selling drugs, albeit for different reasons. For instance, one seller prefers not to sell cigarettes for religious reasons:

'Cigarettes? I don't do cigarettes. No, it's "haram", it's not good. It's selling poison to others'. (SV6)

Another seller does not wish to steal or sell drugs because of the higher prison sentence:

'You're going to steal or something and one day or another they're going to catch you. If you sell drugs too, one day or another they're going to catch you. You'll go to prison, I don't like that. We're already in a prison'. (SV3)

Another seller stresses he wants to do something to earn money:

'I'm obliged to do anything to make a living. I have my mother, she needs money in Morocco. Here, I have a house, I need to pay for it. I don't have social welfare, I don't have an unemployment allowance, so what would I do? Better to steal or what? I prefer

to work like that, I sell cigarettes. I'd sell anything, but I don't steal. I don't have a habit of stealing. Now I feel I'm working, you see. I work, I don't do something bad'. (SV11)

Another seller put it like this :

'I'm not a criminal, I'm not a seller of drugs, I'm not a thief, nothing like that. I'm a man who wants to live like everybody else'. (SV9)

The perception of informal street trade (even when counterfeit goods are sold) as a better alternative than stealing (or other crimes) is shared by some intermediaries and enforcers, who point to the lack of physical harm or lack of feelings of insecurity this offers:

'Ow they don't have another choice eh. What do they have to do otherwise? It's still better than stealing eh. Come on, in the end, they do something, they sell something eh. They do not steal'. (E16)

Strikingly, one enforcer even labels the illegal employment in markets as a form of solidarity, characteristic of Islam. Given the low enforcement priority attributed to (informal) street selling in combination with the necessity of survival, the low deterrence value of controls on informal street sellers is not surprising. First of all, the police as an institution hold no fear for African sellers:

'The police here are peanuts. There, you are really afraid of the police, eh. They beat you and all eh. I mean... so they just laugh at them here. Just out of fear to get sent back, that yeah. They all have that, they all have that. But real fear of the police? No'. (E16)

A differential influence of the potential implications of control can be detected. Since many sellers do not possess much, they are not able (or claim not to be able) to pay the fines. Furthermore, the risk of imprisonment is low. Although repatriation is perceived as rather uncommon, many sellers somehow still fear the risk, but by working in visible and accessible places such as markets, illegal people only increase the risk of being arrested, not of being expelled.<sup>xix</sup> The consequence that undoubtedly hurts the most is the confiscation of goods, which most sellers interviewed have already been subjected to (one seller losing up to €4,000 in two years). The lack of judicial consequences also has low deterrent power:

'So I think that if you know "today I am caught and next month I go to court" you will think twice. If you are caught today and you don't appear in court within two years and you have already received a letter saying you are dismissed... Plus, six months pass between the time you are caught and the time you receive the first letter. These people have to survive so they just continue'. (E18)

The continuation of informal activities does not imply a total lack of enforcement influence, however. Two sellers stopped and/or did not restart their activities and some sellers adapted their selling strategies in order to reduce the risk of getting caught (e.g., only doing business indoors with trustworthy clients). In sum, the enforcement side of the policy hardly deters people from informal selling given their need for income and the lack of viable alternatives.

### **Beyond the streets: a reflection**

The above-mentioned results offer some important insights for sociologists and criminologists although the case, an area of urban poverty, might have influenced the results (e.g. overestimation of the survival function of the informal economy, confirmation of one single theoretisation on informal economy) (Williams, Nadin and Rodgers, 2012). Nonetheless, our study reveals some important similarities with studies in other countries, such as the adoption of defence strategies (Coletto, 2010), sale of counterfeit goods (Coletto, 2010) and deterrent influence of confiscation (Coletto, 2010; Nelken, 2006; Reyneri, 2004). As in previous research, barriers to formalisation (Alderslade *et al.*, 2006) and lack of alternative opportunities (Lazaridis and Koumandraki, 2003) are important in understanding why people turn to the informal economy, in this case informal street selling, reflecting a structuralist explanation of informal entrepreneurship (Williams *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, in a way, street selling is a 'logical' option since it requires relatively few competences (e.g., language or professional skills), is relatively accessible (given its high visibility and its execution by peers) and is for many migrant sellers a habitual method of income generation (similar to behaviour in their home country). Furthermore, this activity leans very closely to the legal trade, both for sellers and for customers. This however does not detract from the precarious position of street sellers given their working conditions (long hours, all weathers, unpredictable clients, the susceptibility to controls) and the illegal status of many sellers. Their livelihood is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. These findings indicate that informal economic activity is not solely driven by the desire of employees to circumvent regulations and financial (social and tax) contributions. Moreover, they reflect the strength of people (e.g., flexibility, agency), who survive in precarious circumstances, partly thanks to the entrepreneurial skills reflected in their street-selling activities. For people residing legally in the country, this survival function is less dominant (they have more easily access to welfare), although it still fulfils the function of income generation. Thus, their activities can also be explained by the structuralist theoretisation on informal entrepreneurship (Williams *et al.*, 2012). Here too, accessibility and few requirements in terms of conditions to start up a street business play an important role in the selection of this type of informal work. In case of labour relations, the hiring of illegal and/or undeclared personnel is inspired by the wish or even need not to pay the minimum wages.

In regard to the policy on street selling, the regulation of ambulatory trade does not have a great influence on informality. Regarding the enforcement side of the policy, the deterrent influence of confiscation is not unique to the Brussels situation (Coletto, 2010; Nelken, 2006; Reyneri, 2004). Sellers furthermore risk forced repatriation (if they reside illegally in the country), fines (if they do not possess an employment card) or adjustment of social benefits (if they receive them). In practice however, forced repatriation is perceived by sellers, enforcers and intermediates to be rare<sup>xx</sup>. Since migrants who are theoretically not authorised to stay and/or work in the country continue to find their way to Brussels without being encouraged to return (i.e., low risk of forced repatriation, see *infra*), they have to find ways to support themselves. In an urban area with many inhabitants of similar origin, they gravitate toward a type of informal income-generating activity that thrives in such a setting. In this respect, the specific regulation of street trade seems to have less influence on informality - executed by illegal migrants - than the migration policy, which does not allow people without a residence permit to work formally and which does not always enable forced repatriation (see *infra*). Some migrants live for over ten years in Belgium without any guarantee that they will be given legal status, which illustrates significant flaws in the policy.

*Low prioritising*

Why does informal street selling continue in Brussels, notwithstanding the possibility to control the situation (the concentration of sellers in the surroundings of the market is well-known to enforcers) and the economic/financial reasons (e.g. loss of taxes in case of cigarette sale) for intervention? What are the explanations for the policy of tolerance or *laissez-faire* approach<sup>xxi</sup> (Williams et al., 2012, p. 528)? First of all, informal street selling and counterfeiting are no official priority for the *local* public enforcers (local police in the area [ZVP 2009-2012]<sup>xxii</sup>, the economic and social inspectorate). No real link between street selling and serious or organised crime is perceived. At best, the sale of cigarettes is perceived as the last link in a broader network. In this respect attention is more focused on the underlying networks and the origin of the cigarettes than on the street level. Furthermore, since the markets take place on weekends (except for the private one which also takes place on Fridays), controls should take place during weekends, when enforcers cost more due to higher remuneration during weekend hours. According to the immigration officer, the availability of personnel has an influence on the limited amount of controls in the case. Local authorities are believed to prefer mobilization of expensive personnel for phenomena, which receive higher priority.

Accordingly, the high workload of the public prosecutor dictates a preference for 'more serious' offences, which do greater harm (financial, societal and/or physical). Since detecting and prosecuting all infractions is impossible, the decision to focus on infractions resulting in great harm is understandable and desirable. Much depends, however, on the question 'harm to whom'? In theory, informal street selling can harm the legal industry (e.g., tobacco industry, brands such as Louis Vuitton, Dior, etc.), clients (e.g., bad quality) and inhabitants (e.g., nuisance). In our case such harm is seen as minimal by all except a few respondents (enforcers specialised in detecting counterfeit goods and private detectives working for the private industry). As little attention is paid to street selling in terms of policy, the welfare of the informal sellers seems to be of small concern, although one of the government's tasks is to protect all its citizens. One can hypothesise that the government gives priority to the safety of its legal residents over the safety of the illegal and more marginalised residents, who are less influential. Of course, the government does provide support for (illegal) migrants by way of social inspectorate<sup>xxiii</sup>, non-profit organisations and social workers. In essence, however, the informal sellers in this case fall well outside the scope of these institutions for different reasons. In some sense, they are characterised by a certain 'visible invisibility'.

Third, although the enforcement establishment knows where informal selling takes place, it faces several practical difficulties in controlling street selling (e.g., informal sellers running away, referred to as a 'cat-and-mouse game'). Enforcers claim these experienced difficulties do not play a role in the low ranking of enforcement of informal street selling. However, some do acknowledge it as 'beating one's head against a brick', thus reflecting low belief in the effectiveness of enforcement<sup>xxiv</sup>. As Bacon (2013a; 2013b) has illustrated in policing illegal drug markets, such occupational beliefs may influence the everyday practice of enforcers<sup>xxv</sup>. However, in Bacon's study, policing drug markets was an official priority of the police, whereas policing informal street trade (and counterfeiting linked to street trade) in our studied area is not an official priority for the police (ZVP 2009-2012). As such, there is no unofficial deprioritising (in favour of crimes perceived as more pressing to deal with) of an official priority. Notwithstanding, the same rationale of enforcers can be detected in both studies: focus on the perceived 'severe' cases, i.e. those linked with crime. At best, in the case of informal street selling, there is an unofficial confirmation of deprioritising. However, since the occupational culture of enforcers was not the focus of this study and was thus not studied through ethnographic fieldwork (as Bacon did), this remains a mere hypothesis.



Fourth, several public actors are authorised to enforce the regulations, resulting in the bizarre situation whereby each actor admits the low priority given to the phenomenon of street selling but at the same time referring to other actors who are supposed to be more active in this regard. In the end, no clear public ownership of the problem exists. The legal private industry, which has more interest in the phenomenon (because of the unfair competition and potential loss of clients), could be a major player, but since its main concern is the origin and distribution of counterfeit goods it focuses on those higher in the chain than street sellers. The fact that informal street selling provides goods that satisfy the needs of low-income clients in big cities (e.g., counterfeit cigarettes; Sassen, 2007) does not put enough weight in the balance. Concerning the relation between the public and private policing actors, no public-private partnerships are present (van Steden and Huberts, 2006). There is however a co-operation - in the form of proactive and reactive information exchange - between public actors and private investigators in the detection of counterfeiting. In the enforcement of the other types of informal street selling, the exchange of information is strictly reactive: when small crimes or unlicensed sellers (more specifically subtype 3 of informality within markets) are detected by the private security (and goods are confiscated), the police are informed by the managers of the private market. In this respect, the blurring of boundaries between public and private roles (Crawford *et al.*, 2005; Wakefield, 2003) is not a real issue in this case and hardly counts as an explanation for the low prioritising of informal street selling by public actors. All in all, as in other countries (e.g. Reyneri, 2004 for Italy) street selling and counterfeiting are not high on the government's list of priorities.

#### *Influence of migration policy*

Strikingly, the Belgian government preserves the informal economy on two levels, first and foremost by the implementation of a policy of tolerance on a local level. On the federal level, the preservation is more indirect. As already mentioned, by failing to adhere to an effective enforcement of the migration policy<sup>xxvi</sup>, Belgium (and specifically Brussels) is confronted with people who remain officially under the radar. Migration to Belgium is regulated by one major law ('Foreigners' law')<sup>xxvii</sup>, that distinguishes two types of admission to the country: (1) short stay (less than three months)<sup>xxviii</sup> and (2) long stay (over three months). The law identifies five different juridical motives for obtaining a residence permit: international protection (asylum), reunification of a family, economic motives, study related reasons and regularisation procedures (CGKR, 2013) (e.g., regularisation for medical or humanitarian reasons). The procedure potential migrants need to follow (and the criteria they need to meet), depends upon their juridical motive and should in principle be started in the country of origin<sup>xxix</sup>. Some of our respondents entered the European Union or Belgium legally (i.e. in accordance with the different criteria of entry) – but their stay exceeded the permitted term or their procedure was still running (in which case they reside legally) – whereas others entered illegally.

The flaws in the enforcement of the migration policy in our case are mainly visible in the deficient tracing and repatriation of migrants of third countries<sup>xxx</sup> in illegal stay. Theoretically, when arrested, migrants in illegal stay receive an order to leave the country (the date by which they should leave is mentioned on the order). In most cases, these migrants are encouraged to leave the country independently<sup>xxxi</sup>. Migrants can organise their return with their own financial resources or can make use of programs offered by the International Organisation for Migration (Roosemont, 2009). In our study, a clear tolerance towards the presence of certain illegal migrants is detected. According to the local police, they do not actively look for or arrest migrants of North-African or Pakistani origin in

illegal stay. They do not wish to devote precious time to this activity<sup>xxxii</sup>, knowing effective results – return or forced repatriation – will fail to happen. What happens when they detect and arrest such a migrant? The police officer explains that in 99% of the cases, the Immigration Office delivers an order to leave the country immediately. They do not deliver an order to leave the country with administrative detention in a centre (where illegal migrants reside awaiting their involuntary expulsion). Two respondents differ in the perceived reasons for this. The police officer claims that (1) North African countries do not easily retrieve their own citizens (which is denied by the immigration officer)<sup>xxxiii</sup> and (2) the Immigration Office wishes to avoid too many people of the same ethnic background in closed, secured centres in order to avoid riots. The immigration officer however refers to the foreigners' law, which states that administrative detention in a closed centre can only be executed in view of forced repatriation. In case the immigration office knows that repatriation is not possible (because the migrant cannot be adequately identified), migrants cannot be detained in a closed centre. Indeed, identification and identification documents are necessary to return to the home country. According to the immigration officer, illegal migrants are aware of this and adopt several strategies to hinder their identification (e.g., deliberately not carrying identification documents). This is confirmed by one interviewed seller, explaining his deliberate use of a false name when arrested. What is the result of all this? An ordinary order to leave the country is handed over to these migrants without detention in a closed centre. Thus, these migrants are supposed to leave the country within a certain time frame<sup>xxxiv</sup> independently, which is why they are released from the police station. Since most of these migrants do not return to their home country, they stay in Brussels and continue their survival activities. This scenario is well known within the police force (and within the immigration office), and influences their daily activities – which is in line with Bacon (2012a; 2013b).

The presence of illegal migrants is thus a societal reality, of which the government is well aware. We identify two more potential reasons why the government, despite the obvious advantages of 'cleaning up' the sector (and more specifically criminal cigarette selling), chooses not to dispel this type of informal trade. Not only would displacement be a more realistic outcome than the disappearance of the informal street trade but, more importantly, all those relying on it would be faced with serious losses (e.g., poor clients, traders going bankrupt, illegal people losing an important source of income), possibly resulting in social disorder or criminality and confronting the government with its inability to handle the consequences of migration. In this respect, informal street selling might be perceived as a social safety net, a means of income for people who would otherwise risk committing crime, rioting or revolution (Bhowmik, 2005; Bromley, 2000; Coletto, 2010, 2013; Morales, 2000). This hypothesis is confirmed by the neutralisation of informal street selling by enforcers, intermediates and sellers, who claim that informal street selling is a better alternative than stealing or other serious crimes. All in all, different assumptions about informal street selling and informal sellers and certain migration policy issues shape the low enforcement prioritisation of the phenomenon.

Associated with the difficult enforcement of migration policy is the understanding expressed by social workers and North African sellers that many North African illegal migrants experience difficulties returning home, because of unrealistic perceptions of Europe in their home countries (i.e. as a 'land of milk and honey'). These unrealistic perceptions not only lead to migrants feeling disillusioned, but also cause them to regret having migrated and feelings of failure<sup>xxxv</sup>. Since their actual situation is rarely communicated to family and friends in the home country, we see it as the

government's task to prevent this by setting up and expanding effective information campaigns<sup>xxxvi</sup> in popular emigration countries (e.g., Morocco [CGKR, 2013]).

## Conclusion

Our results confirm the interrelation between the formal, informal and criminal economies, in terms of work as a unit of analysis (e.g., involvement of formal enterprises in storage of goods sold informally or illegally afterwards) and of workers as a unit of analysis. Similar to Coletto's (2013) study on street vendors in Brazil, our results indicate that street sellers have no homogeneous profiles and well-defined boundaries. Workers, in this case street sellers, can be regulated (formal workers, e.g., declared employment), can fall outside the scope of regulation (e.g., working and/or residing illegally in the country, working on an undeclared basis) or can shift between being and not being regulated (e.g., employment being declared one day, but not another day). Although workers and their work are not necessarily officially regulated, informal self-regulation does apply to the case. In this respect, sellers have a reputation to keep up so they cannot afford to sell poor-quality products (e.g., blank discs, stolen goods). Furthermore, territoriality prevails, as found in Coletto's (2010) study on street traders in Brazil. All in all, informal trade finds a space between the imposition of regulations and the poor enforcement of those regulations. This confirms our definition of informal economy as those economic activities that are not officially regulated and enforced. Although Cross (2000) attributes the lack of enforcement to a combination of the inability of the state to do so and the ability of the poor and unorganised to oppose enforcement, we have attributed this mainly to a lack of willingness by the state to give the matter high priority and to the tolerance of state agencies. Although we have indicated some potential explanations for this, we argue the need (at least) to monitor this situation, given the extreme precariousness of the situation in which many street sellers find themselves. We furthermore argue the conceptual relevance of our empirical study given the nuances it highlights. We have not only identified different types of informal economic activities within the sector of street selling, but we have also found varying motives for informality (e.g., informal street selling greatly but not solely as a survival economy) and contrasting influences on informality (e.g., deterrent influence of confiscation but lack of deterrent influence of forced repatriation of illegal migrants). We have furthermore identified several nuances in the policing of informal street selling. Furthermore, this case equally stresses that informal economic activities are not part of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but are not necessarily unknown to the government (e.g. registered offences). All in all, these conclusions stress the importance of careful use of general statements about 'the' informal economy.

## References

- Adriaenssens, S., Van Meeteren, M., Pacolet, J., De Wispelaere, F., Hendrickx, J. and Engbersen, G. (2009), *De ongekende samenleving: schattingen en inzichten over irreguliere migranten en economische schaduwactiviteiten*. [Online] Available from: <http://hiva.kuleuven.be/resources/pdf/publicaties/R1276.pdf> [Accessed 15th March 2011].
- Alderslade, J., Talmage, J. and Freeman, Y. (2006), *Measuring the informal economy – one neighbourhood at a time*. Discussion paper prepared for the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program. [Online] Available from: [http://www.brookings.edu/metro/umi/pubs/20060905\\_informaleconomy.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/umi/pubs/20060905_informaleconomy.pdf) [Accessed 29th November 2012].

Antonopoulos, G.A., Hornsby, R. and Hobbs, D. (2011), "Sound and vision. Nigerian street entrepreneurs in Greece", in Antonopoulos, G.A., Groenhuijsen, M., Harvey, J., Kooijmans, T., Maljevic, A. & von Lampe, K. (eds.) *Usual and Unusual Organising Criminals in Europe and Beyond: Profitable Crimes, from Underworld to Upperworld*. Apeldoorn/Antwerpen/Portland, OR, Liber Amicorum Petrus van Duyne, Maklu, pp. 1-15.

Atkinson, R. and Flint, J. (2001), "Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: snowball sampling strategies", *Social Research Update*, 33, pp. 1-4.

Bacon, M. (2013a). "The informal regulation of an illegal trade. The hidden politics of drug detective work", *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 6 (1), pp. 61-80.

Bacon, M. (2013b). "Dancing around drugs. Policing the illegal drug markets of the night-time economy in England and Wales", in Saitta, P., Shapland, J. & Verhage, A. (eds.) *Getting by or getting rich? The formal, informal and criminal economy in a globalised world*. Eleven Publishers, The Hague, pp. 261-283.

Bellinvia, T. (2013), "Immigrant street vendors in Italy: discursive practices and power relationships", in Saitta, P., Shapland, J. & Verhage, A. (eds.) *Getting by or getting rich? The formal, informal and criminal economy in a globalised world*. Eleven Publishers, The Hague, pp. 286-304.

Beyens, K. and Tournel, H. (2010), "Mijnwerkers of ontdekkingsreizigers? Het kwalitatieve interview" in Decorte, T. & Zaitch, D. (eds.) *Kwalitatieve methoden en technieken in de criminologie*. Leuven, Acco, pp. 200-232.

Bhowmik, S.K. (2005), "Street vendors in Asia: a review", *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 28-June 4, pp. 2256-2264.

Bhowmik, S.K. (2010), *Street vendors in the global urban economy*, Routledge, London.

Boeije, H. (2005), *Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek. Denken en doen*. Boom onderwijs, Amsterdam.

Boels, D. (2013). "The Belgian Informal Economy: A Case Study of Seasonal Work in Fruit-growing in South Limburg", in Saitta, P., Shapland, J. and Verhage, A. (Eds), *Getting by or getting rich? The formal, informal and criminal economy in a globalised world*, Eleven Publishers, The Hague, pp. 201-231.

Bourdieu, P. (1986), "The forms of capital", in Richardson, J.G. (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, New York, Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258.

Bromley, R. (2000), "Street vending and public policy: a global review", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 20, N° 1-2, pp. 1-29.

CGKR (2013). *Migratie. Jaarverslag 2012*. Brussel, Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en voor Racismebestrijding. [Online] Available from: [http://www.diversiteit.be/?action=publicatie\\_detail&id=162&thema=2&select\\_page=216](http://www.diversiteit.be/?action=publicatie_detail&id=162&thema=2&select_page=216) [Accessed on 26 June 2013].

- Chen, M.A. (2004). *Rethinking the informal economy: linkages with the formal economy and the formal regulatory environment*, Paper presented at the EGDI-WIDER Conference (Helsinki, Finland), 33 p. [Online] Available from: [http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/publications/files/Chen-Rethinking-Informal\\_WIDER\\_paper.pdf](http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/publications/files/Chen-Rethinking-Informal_WIDER_paper.pdf) [Accessed on 15th March 2011].
- Coletto, D. (2010). *The informal economy and employment in Brazil. Latin America, Modernization and social changes*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Coletto, D. (2013). "The Informal Economy and its Dilemmas in Latin America: The Case of Street Vendors in Porto Alegre, Brazil" in Saitta, P., Shapland, J. & Verhage, A. (Eds.), *Getting by or getting rich? The Formal, Informal and Criminal Economy in a Globalised World*, Eleven Publishers, The Hague, pp. 345-368.
- Crawford, A., Lister, S., Blackburn, S. and Burnett, J. (2005). *Plural policing. The mixed economy of visible patrols in England and Wales*. The Policy Press, Bristol.
- Cross, J.C. (1998), *Informal politics. Street vendors and the state in Mexico City*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Cross, J.C. (2000), "Street vendors, modernity and postmodernity: conflict and compromise in the global economy", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 20, N° 1-2, pp. 30-52.
- Cutsinger, L.E. (2000), "Tips of the Trade: Street vendors and the State in Barbados, West Indies", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 20, N° 3-4, pp. 64-75.
- De Bruin, A. and Dupuis, A. (2000), "The dynamics of New Zealand's largest street market: the Otara flea market", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 20, N° 1-2, pp. 53-75.
- De Caluwé, D. (2012), *Kuregem. Deel 1: historische context*. Brussels, Gillis Printing Company.
- Devillé, A. (2006), "De onzichtbare rechteloze klasse. De leef-en belevingswereld van mensen zonder wettig verblijf in Vlaanderen en Brussel", *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, Vol. 2, pp. 131-156.
- Harrison, M. and McVey, C. (1997), "Conflict in the City: street trading in Mexico City", *Third World Planning Review*, Vol. 19, pp. 313-326.
- Jones, T. and Newburn, T. (2006a). "Understanding plural policing" in Jones, T. & Newburn, T. (Eds.), *Plural policing. A comparative perspective*, Routledge, New York, pp.1-11.
- Jones, T. and Newburn, T. (2006b). "The United Kingdom" in Jones, T. & Newburn, T. (Eds.), *Plural policing. A comparative perspective*, Routledge, New York, pp. 34-54.
- Kleemans, E.R., Korf, D.J. and Staring, R. (2008), "Mensen van vlees en bloed. Kwalitatief onderzoek in de criminologie", *Tijdschrift voor criminologie*, Vol. 50, pp. 323-336.
- Lazaridis, G. and Koumandraki, M. (2003), "Survival ethnic entrepreneurs in Greece: a mosaic of informal and formal business activities", *Sociological Research Online*, [Online] Vol. 8, N°2. Available from: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/8/2/lazaridis.html> [Accessed on 16th January 2012].

Leerkes, A., Engbersen, G. and van San, M. (2006), "Schaduwplaatsen. Patronen van ruimtelijke concentratie en incorporatie van illegalen in Nederland", *Mens en Maatschappij*, Vol. 81, N° 3, pp. 223-251.

Middleton, A. (2003), "Informal traders and planners in the regeneration of historic city centres: the case of Quito, Ecuador", *Progress in Planning*, Vol. 59, pp. 71-123.

Morales, A. (2000), "Peddling policy: street vending in historical and contemporary context", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 20, N° 3-4, pp. 76-98.

Mulkers, J. (2002). "Politie en privé-detectives: partners in researchwerk?" in Mulkers, J. (Ed.), *Privé-detectives. Ontwikkelingen inzake private opsporing*, Maklu, Antwerpen/Apeldoorn, pp. 11-25.

Nelken, D. (2006), "Immigrant beach selling along the Italian Adriatic coast: de-constructing a social problem", *Crime, Law and Social change*, Vol. 45, pp. 297-313.

Reyneri, E. (2004), "Immigrants in a segmented and often undeclared labour market", *Journal of modern Italian studies*, Vol. 9 (1), pp. 71-93.

Roosement, F. (2009). *België stimuleert terugkeer van illegale vreemdelingen*, Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken, Brussel.

Sassen, S. (2007), *A sociology of globalization*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York.

Smart, J. (1986), "The impact of government policy on hawkers: a study of the effects of establishing a hawker permitted place", *Asian Journal of public administration*, Vol. 8, N° 2, pp. 260-279.

Van Meeteren, M., van San, M. and Engbersen, G. (2008), *Zonder papieren. Over de positieve van irreguliere migranten en de rol van het vreemdelingenbeleid in België*, Acco, Leuven.

Van Meeteren, M., Engbersen, G. and van San, M. (2009), "Striving for a better position: aspirations and the role of cultural, economic and social capital for irregular migrants in Belgium", *International migration review*, Vol. 43, N° 4, pp. 881-907.

Van Steden, R. and Huberts, L. (2006). "The Netherlands" in Jones, T. & Newburn, T. (Eds.), *Plural policing. A comparative perspective*, Routledge, New York, pp. 12-33.

Verhage, A. and Shapland, J. (2013), "Getting by or getting rich, or simply looking for a better life? The informal economy in times of economic crisis", Saitta, P., Shapland, J. and Verhage, A. (Eds), *Getting by or getting rich? The formal, informal and criminal economy in a globalised world*, Eleven Publishers, The Hague, pp. 389-404.

Vervaecke, G., Vanderhallen, M., Opdebeeck, A. and Goethals, J. (2002), "Het ontwerp van een gevalstudie", in Beyens, K, Goethals, J., Ponsaers, P. and Vervaecke, G. (Eds.), *Criminologie in actie*, Politeia, Brussel, pp. 419-443.

Wakefield, A. (2003). *Selling security. The private policing of public space*. Willan publishing, Devon.

Williams, C.C., Nadin, S. and Rodgers, P. (2012). "Evaluating competing theories of informal entrepreneurship: some lessons from Ukraine", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, Vol. 18 (5), 528-543.

Williams, C. and Windebank, J. (2001), "The growth of urban informal economies", in Paddison, R. (Ed.), *Handbook of Urban Studies*, Sage Publications, London.

Witkowski, T.H. (1993), "The Polish consumer in transition: shopping Warsaw's street vendors and open air markets", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 20, pp. 13-17.

ZVP (2009-2012). Zonaal Veiligheidsplan 2009-2012, PZ Zuid 5341. Available from: <http://www.lokalepolitie.be/sites/5341/images/stories/PDF/zonaalveiligheidsplan.pdf> [Accessed on 22nd April 2012].

---

<sup>i</sup> These authorities will change, however (the region and community levels will gain more authorities at the expense of federal government), as a result of the State Reform (the sixth in the history of Belgium), ~~which is~~.

<sup>ii</sup> In this article, the terms street selling, street vending and street trade are used interchangeably.

<sup>iii</sup> Thus, street selling is subject to the policy determined on the federal and municipal level regarding ambulatory trade.

<sup>iv</sup> Law of 4 July 2006 amending that of 25 June 1993 regarding the execution of ambulatory activities and the organisation of public markets (Belgian Bulletin of Acts [B.B.A.] 25 August 2006).

<sup>v</sup> This is a database hosting identification data of enterprises.

<sup>vi</sup> In this article, regulation refers to the official body of laws and degrees at the federal, provincial and/or local level. Enforcement refers to actions by different official actors to verify compliance to the regulation.

<sup>vii</sup> Sellers of different nationalities; sellers of different goods.

<sup>viii</sup> For reasons of anonymity, we coded our respondents. SV: street vendor; ER: Expert Regulator (i.e. persons working for institutions authorised for establishing regulation); EE: Expert Enforcer (i.e. persons authorised to enforce the law, for instance police officers, members of economic inspectorate, immigration officer); EI: Expert Intermediate (i.e., social worker, street worker, member of the legal tobacco industry).

<sup>ix</sup> The private market is privately owned, organised and exploited by a public limited company (plc), whereas the public market is organised and exploited by the municipality. Public accessibility to the private market is restricted to market days, whereas the public market space is constantly accessible.

<sup>x</sup> Some foreigners need an employment card (which provides permission to work) in order to work legally. When they do not possess this card but are at work, this is also categorised as illegal employment.

<sup>xi</sup> Illicit whites are produced legally for tax-free sale in a market where they are not sold legally. Contraband cigarettes are smuggled but are original brands.

<sup>xii</sup> The enforcement service of the federal public service for economy, S.M.E.'s Self-Employed and Energy.

---

<sup>xiii</sup> These patrols are more focused on ensuring security (reassuring the public [Wakefield, 2003, p. 53] than on law enforcement (enforcement of law related to street selling).

<sup>xiv</sup> This service has a separate unit focusing on the detection of counterfeiting. Notwithstanding several attempts, we never received an answer to our request for an interview.

<sup>xv</sup> Statistics from the public prosecutor, indicating the number of files in relation to street selling, reveal an incomplete picture, which is why they are not included in this article. They do, however, allow us to conclude that dismissal is by far the most frequent decision taken by the public prosecutor in such cases.

<sup>xvi</sup> Notwithstanding the law on private detectives and the stringent regulations regarding the exchange of information by police that apply to the co-operation between both parties.

<sup>xvii</sup> This is in line with Mulders' (2002) definition of a private investigator as a detective investigating in exchange for a payment by a client in order to safeguard his or her interests and rights.

<sup>xviii</sup> Regularisation is one method of receiving a residence permit.

<sup>xix</sup> An enforcer claims the Immigration Office gives priority to the expulsion of illegal employees (in comparison with illegal people who work on their own account or who do not work) because the costs of expulsion are charged to the employer. Otherwise, the Belgian state has to pay for the expulsion costs.

<sup>xx</sup> Statistics regarding repatriations in the Brussels Region were asked, but the Immigration Office was not able to provide them on that level. Statistics are only available on the federal level. Since migrants in illegal stay have no *official* place of residence (because they are in illegal stay) it is not possible for the Immigration Office to associate an illegal migrant to a certain municipality/city/region. Unfortunately thus, we cannot confirm this perception with statistics.

<sup>xxi</sup> Which, in theory, is more related to a neo-liberal than a structuralist theoretisation on informal entrepreneurship (Williams *et al.*, 2012).

<sup>xxii</sup> In this policy plan, specific phenomena are the unit of analyses (e.g., theft in cars, youth criminality). In this respect, topics such as illegality, poverty or survival have no place in the policy plan of the local police.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This enforcement service checks the correct implementation of the social security regulation.

<sup>xxiv</sup> In order to be fully correct, perceptions of beating one's head against a brick are also detected in enforcers specialised in detecting counterfeit, who do continue to search actively for counterfeited goods. However, since their domain of authorisation largely exceeds the case (both in terms of geographical boundaries as in terms of activities, i.e. also sale in shops), they cannot be focused entirely on informal street selling in Brussels South.

<sup>xxv</sup> In the sense that officers do not always follow organisational rules and guidelines defined by policies, due to informal norms, values and beliefs which shape their decisions and behaviours (Bacon, 2013a). In short, Bacon (2013b) argues that decisions and behaviours of police officers are influenced by structural, cultural, personal and situational factors.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Note that the same federal public service, namely the FPS Internal Affairs, covers Migration policy and Safety and Prevention.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Law of 15 December 1980 concerning the admission to the territory, the stay, the settlement and the expulsion of migrants, *Bulletin of Acts* 31 December 1980.



---

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The permission for this type of stay (i.e. a visum) is also referred to as a Schengenvisum (CGKR, 2013, p. 36).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Exception to this principle is the regularisation of stay for humanitarian or medical reasons (CGKR, 2013).

<sup>xxx</sup> Third countries are all countries but the EU-27 countries (CGKR, 2013). We focus on these countries since most migrants in the case originate from these countries (except the East-European cigarette sellers).

<sup>xxxii</sup> In theory, the mayor or his proxy needs to verify - after the term to leave the country has elapsed – if the migrant has left the country by controlling his address. Furthermore, the mayor or his proxy is required to urge the police to continue executing such residence controls (Circular of 10 June 2011 concerning the authorities of the mayor in relation to the expulsion of a citizen of a third country). In a minority of the cases, illegal migrants are immediately sent to closed centres awaiting their involuntary expulsion (CGKR, 2013). According to the immigration officer, this is the case when an illegal migrant – who can be identified – has committed offenses against public order.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The interviewed police officer refers to the administrative rigmarole this implies.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> According to the CGKR (2013), the EU has agreements regarding taking over of citizens with 13 countries: Russia, Georgia, Moldavia, Ukraine, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hong Kong and Macao. However, the interviewed immigration officer argues information on such agreements is not communicated externally for two reasons: (1) avoid jeopardizing negotiations with countries and (2) agreements and cooperation with home countries often changes, e.g. in function of a change in regime. He thus doubts the reliability of the information of the CGKR (2013) on this point. During the interview with the immigration officer, we implicitly heard that cooperation with Pakistan is difficult, whereas many repatriated migrants return to Morocco (implying cooperation with Morocco).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> An order to leave the country immediately still implies a period of 5 days before the person can be expelled involuntarily.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Some migrants, of course, do obtain residence permits and/or Belgian nationality, find jobs etc. and are thus perceived as successful migrants by their compatriots. Furthermore, given that they spend their holidays in their home countries, taking different luxuries with them (e.g., fancy cars, toys, clothing) they confirm the prevailing perception of a rich Europe.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Information – and dissuading campaigns were conducted in 2012 in Cameroun, Armenia, Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Russia-Caucasian area (CGKR, 2013). This year, the State Secretary of Asylum and Migration went to Algeria as part of such a campaign.