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The Invisibility of Wage Employment in Statistics on the Informal Economy in Africa: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

Through a Tanzanian case study, this paper challenges the claim, along with the statistics that support it, that self-employment is the dominant employment status in the informal economy. The paper begins by reviewing key insights from relevant literature on the informal economy to argue that conventional notions of ‘wage employment’ and ‘self-employment’, while unfit for capturing the nature and variety of employment relations in developing countries, remain central to the design of surveys on the workforce therein. After putting statistics on Tanzania’s informal economy and labour force into context, the analysis reviews the type of wage employment relationships that can be found in one instance of the informal economy in urban Tanzania. The categories and terms used by workers to describe their employment situation are then contrasted with those used by the latest labour force survey in Tanzania. The paper scrutinises how key employment categories have been translated from English into Swahili, how the translation biases respondents’ answers towards the term ‘self-employment’, and how this, in turn, leads to the statistical invisibility of wage labour in the informal economy. The paper also looks at the consequences of this ‘statistical tragedy’ and at the dangers of conflating varied forms of employment, including wage labour, that differ markedly in their modes of operation and growth potential. Attention is also paid to the trade-offs faced by policymakers in designing better labour force surveys.



1

Introduction

It is now common to argue that in developing countries and, more specifically, in the African context, wage employment has become the exception and self-employment the rule, particularly as a result of the growth of the informal economy. This is a widely held belief among policymakers. Their focus in supporting actors in the informal economy has turned, therefore, to how to stimulate this growth in self-employment through formal titling of property to allow for access to credit, through micro-credit schemes, and by providing training in entrepreneurship, particularly for the younger actors.

A wealth of labour force surveys invariably suggest that working in one's own business is by far the most prevalent type of employment relationship in the informal economy (and in agriculture), which mirrors and arguably justifies policies that obsessively focus on promoting self-employment and small enterprises. Through a Tanzanian case study, this paper questions the common assumption or claim that self-employment is the dominant mode of employment in the informal sector, and questions the wisdom of statistics on the informal labour force. The paper starts by reviewing some key insights from the literature on the informal economy and from relevant economic theory. Our aim is to understand how conventional notions of 'wage employment' and 'self-employment' simultaneously fail to capture the nature and variety of employment relations in the informal economy, and yet these notions are central to the design of workforce surveys in developing countries. The analysis then deploys these insights to look closely at the particular type of wage employment relationships that are found in one concrete example of the informal economy in urban Tanzania.

The real dynamics at work in one sub-sector of the informal economy, and the categories and terms with which workers describe their employment situation, are then contrasted with the categories and terms used to frame the questions from the latest Integrated Labour Force Survey in Tanzania (ILFS thereafter), carried out in 2006. The paper scrutinises how key employment concepts and terms have been translated from English into Swahili, how the translation biases respondents' answers towards 'self-employment', and how the translation then leads to the invisibility of wage labour in the collection of statistics on employment in the informal sector, both urban and rural. The paper also looks at the consequences of this 'statistical tragedy'. Conceptually speaking, we argue that this assumption conflates varied forms of employment, including wage labour, that differ markedly in their modes of operation that determine (or hinder) productivity growth (or the lack thereof) and the growth in incomes of the working population – the working poor, in particular. Attention is also paid to the most significant trade-off faced by policymakers in designing better labour force surveys.

2

Informal economy as self-employment?

Keith Hart, the inventor of the term 'the informal sector', claims that the 'distinction between formal and informal income opportunities is based essentially on that between wage-earning and self-employment' (Hart 1973, p. 68), a dichotomy that has been relentlessly adhered to by policymakers in developing countries. In clarifying this distinction between wage labour and self-employment, Hart argues that 'the key variable is the degree of rationalization of work – that is to say, whether or not labour is recruited on a permanent and regular basis for fixed rewards' (ibid). This is the conventional view of wage labour, where the wage rate is fixed *a priori* and, hence, profits are the residual or, using de Quincey's famous phrase, they are 'the leavings of wages'. Indeed, if the wage rate is predetermined (agreed in advance), it follows that the profit per worker will be equal to the difference between the value added per labour time and the wage rate. If the price of the output or, alternatively, (real) labour productivity falls short of expectations, or if demand falls short of actual supply, profits will be squeezed since the wage rate is fixed beforehand. In such a situation, the employer bears the risk that profitability turns out to be lower than expected, given the level of the wage rate. The wage labourer, in contrast, bears the risk of unemployment if the enterprise continues to fail to live up to profit expectations.

Hart's restricted definition of 'wage labour' as permanent and as regular recruitment for fixed awards is indeed plausible when it comes to describing the nature of the employment contracts in the formal sector. This is the conventional or 'formal' definition of wage labour, which generally refers to 'workers on regular wages or salaries in registered firms and with access to the state social security system and its framework of labour law' (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2000, p. 89). Production based on this type of 'formal' wage labour is only viable, therefore, under conditions where productivity is reasonably high and stable relative to the fixed wage rate. 'Formal' wage contracting is indeed unlikely to be widespread under conditions where labour productivity is low, volatile, or unpredictable, which are precisely the conditions that prevail so widely within the informal economies in developing countries.

Nevertheless, and in a departure from Hart's analysis, it does not follow from this that all activities within the so-called informal sector are based on self-employment and, hence, that the capital/labour relation ceases to exist or does so only marginally. In making this assumption, Hart falls prey to the fallacy of 'misplaced aggregation' (a term borrowed from Myrdal, 1968, Appendix 3): that is, conceptually conflating entities that do not belong together and, thus, should not be aggregated into one category. Indeed, the catch-all category of 'self-employed' conveys a connotation of an individual's own business and/or a family business, of asset ownership, however limited, and of entrepreneurship and some degree of economic independence (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001, p. 91). But, as Breman argues, 'what at first sight seems like self-employment and which also presents itself as such, often conceals sundry forms of wage labour' (Breman, 1996, 8). The reasons such work might seem like self-employment are that wage labour consists of unorganised labour, unprotected and casual, often combined with ownership of small-scale productive assets to engage in petty commodity production, possibly drawing on household labour, while both hiring in or out labour according to seasonal peaks or demand fluctuations. Hence, under conditions of low productivity in the context of the uncertain environment of informality, the character of wage labour assumes a variety of forms that cannot readily be identified by the formal definition of wage labour. On the contrary, under these conditions, wage labour exists, but in forms that differ markedly from this conventional, formal definition of wage labour.

To understand how informality works, therefore, it helps to turn de Quincey's phrase on its head: What often prevails in informal production is not that 'profits are the leaving of wages', but, on the contrary, that 'wages are the leavings of profits'. The implication is that capital confronts labour not

as a risk-taking entrepreneur but as a rentier, thus leaving labour to manage the risks inherent in low and volatile productivity, a condition that is often more conducive to self-exploitation by the worker (or the exploitation of household labour) than to growth in productivity. In these circumstances, therefore, workers act as entrepreneurs only in the sense that they have become managers of two sets of risks under adverse conditions of extreme competition: the daily insecurity that results from an uncertain income, on the one hand, and the ever-present chance of erratic job loss, on the other (Wuyts, 2011).

Interestingly, Hart gives quite a detailed account of the variety of production forms that exist in the informal sector: 'In practice, informal activities encompass a wide-ranging scale, from marginal operations to large enterprises' (Hart, 1973: p. 68). Yet, surprisingly, he does not draw the obvious conclusion that these varied and often highly differentiated forms of production must imply the existence of a variety of labour regimes, including various forms of wage labour. For example, Hart explicitly excludes from his analysis 'casual income flows of an occasional nature' (p. 69), but recognises that 'some may be hired to small enterprises which escape enumeration as establishments'. He, nevertheless, goes on to say that 'the ensuing analysis is restricted to those who, whether working alone or in partnership, are self-employed' (p. 70).

Hart's restricted conceptualisation of wage labour is perhaps understandable given his explicit focus on small-scale entrepreneurial activities in the informal sector. What is more problematic, however, is that this exclusion from enquiry has become a more or less taken-for-granted assumption. Thus, academic writing, policy analyses, and discussions widely understand the informal sector as the realm of self-employment. For example, the respective analyses of informal activities by Maliyamkono and Bagachwa (1990), Jamal and Weeks (1993), Sarris and Van den Brink (1993), and Tripp (1997), which reflect quite different positions on other issues, all seem to take this assumption of informal sector as self-employment more or less for granted. Claims like 'in urban Tanzania today, a majority of men, women and children, as well as those employed in the formal economy, obtain most of their livelihood from self-employment and working on projects located in the home' (Tripp, 2006, p. 105) are either unsubstantiated or take official statistics at face value. This is extremely problematic, as the next sections aim to show by closely looking at Tanzanian estimates on the informal economy and the 2006 Integrated Labour Force Survey.



The 2006 ILFS in context

Estimates on the size of the informal economy in Tanzania have radically changed over the years. This change seems to have been driven, above all, by political authorities who initially viewed the informal economy as a problem and later as a potential for growth. Whereas estimates until 1997 did not generally acknowledge the growth of the informal economy, after the revision of the national accounts in the 1990s, new estimates were made for the size of informal production (Jerven, 2011, p. 385). On the basis of this, Jerven (2011) cites that ‘a time series was developed by extrapolating these trends and, contrary to earlier assumptions, assuming that the informal sector would increase when the formal sector was in decline, rather than move with it’ (p. 385). Such change in the critical assumption underlying these projections was made possible by the existence of new studies on Tanzania’s informal economy in the early 1990s. But the fact that these studies were carried out in first place signals a broader shift in the government’s economic policy and its attitude towards the informal economy: Whereas during the state-led economic period, Tanzanian authorities had a hostile attitude towards the informal economy, it came to be seen as a potential for growth in the wake of liberalisation.

The relationship between politics and data production is also relevant when considering labour force surveys. These have become the least frequently carried out surveys in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the 1980s, as international donors directed their support towards income and expenditure and integrated household surveys (Oya, 2013, p. 257). Against this trend, Tanzanian authorities have done relatively well, as two labour force surveys were completed in 2000/2001 and 2006, and a third one is now under way in 2013. Although the quantity of available data on labour is higher in Tanzania than elsewhere in SSA, the quality of such data is low. There is a consensus that a major problem with labour force surveys is that their modules are designed with the realities of advanced economies in mind (Standing, 2006). However, the implications of this problem are less univocally understood. Indeed, the fact that the tools used for surveys on employment stem from OECD countries implies that they are not fit to record self-employment. For example, a recent survey experiment by the World Bank in Tanzania aimed to test the extent to which labour statistics are affected by the way in which questions are asked. The experiment included a shorter and longer module to determine employment status. Although its authors demonstrate the ‘significant’ impact from the way questions on employment status are asked (Bardasi, Beegle, Dillon, and Serneels, 2010, p. 25), in the grand scale of things, the picture that emerges from both modules suggests that self-employment is the norm in SSA. The percentage of people in ‘paid employment’, for example, varies by a maximum of 5.5 per cent, and as little as 0.1 per cent, but never exceeds 20 per cent. Self-employment, with or without employees, and unpaid family work, when combined, still make up the lion’s share of employment, at no less than 77 per cent (ibid, p. 41).

With others (Oya, 2013, pp. 257–259), we argue instead that the main consequence of the OECD origin of labour force surveys is that their definition of paid employment, rooted in the conventional conceptualisation of formal wage employment that can be observed in these countries, is inadequate for capturing informal and precarious forms of wage labour in developing countries. Following this argument, labour force surveys in developing countries, and especially in Africa, tend to misleadingly identify self-employment as the predominant type of employment status in the informal economy and grossly underestimate the extent to which people do enter the labour market.

For example, Table 1 gives the breakdown of the labour force by type of employment according to the Tanzania 2006 ILFS.

Table 1: Currently employed persons by employment status

Employment status	Share of total labour force (%)
Work on own farm or shamba	67.5
Unpaid family helper (agriculture)	7.9
Unpaid family helper (non-agriculture)	3.5
Self-employed (non-agriculture) with employees	1.8
Self-employed (non-agriculture) without employees	9.1
Paid employee	10.5

Source: ILFS 2006, Table 5.7: p. 38

If these data are to be believed, then Tanzania should be seen as a rapidly growing economy with nearly 90% of its labour force in self-employment – a remarkable success.

Table 2 gives a more detailed breakdown of the employment status in the informal sector by male and female, and by main and by secondary activity, according to the Tanzania 2006 ILFS.

Table 2: Engagement in the informal sector by employment status

Employment status	Main activity			Secondary activity		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Paid employee	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.2	0.4
Self employed (non-agricultural) with employees	17.0	9.9	13.8	7.8	3.2	5.6
Self-employed (non-agricultural) without employees	81.1	87.1	83.8	89.8	94.4	92.0
Unpaid family helper (non-agricultural)	1.2	2.4	1.7	1.7	2.2	1.9
Total	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ILFS 2006, Table 6.7: p. 46

The table shows that, in the informal sector, 'paid employment', at a mere 0.7 per cent for main activity, is deemed to be a very rare type of employment relationship. Self-employed workers without employees constitute the dominant type of employment status, at 83.8 per cent. Together with self-employed workers with employees, at 13.8 per cent, self-employment totals a staggering 97.6 per cent of employment in the informal sector. This also reveals an interesting anomaly in these data: while paid employees constitute only 0.7 per cent of the total, the self-employed with employees account for 13.8 per cent. Assuming that the self-employed with employees employ at least one employee each, these figures appear to hide the importance of paid employment.

Understanding the way these statistics are generated must start with a discussion of the ILFS definitions of both paid employment and the informal economy, as this has important implications for

the kinds of questions that inform the statistical picture on informal employment. The ILFS definition of the informal sector closely follows definition provided by the International Classification of Status in Employment (ICSE). Two characteristics are worth underlining at this stage. First is that the 'informal sector is considered as a subset of household enterprises or unincorporated enterprises owned by households' (NBS, 2007, p. 7). The pitfalls of treating the household as an uncontroversial and coherent unit of analysis have been raised, specifically in poverty surveys (Randall and Coast, 2013) and at a more general level in the study of the process of development (Guyer and Peters, 1987). Second, according to ILFS, informal enterprises may or may not employ labour. Importantly, what differentiates labour-employing informal enterprises from those without a workforce is whether employees are employed 'on a continuous basis'.

In other words, those informal enterprises that recruit 'employees on an occasional basis' will be classified as self-employment activities without employees. This has serious implications for the results that ILFS yield. Given that informal employment relationships are often insecure and not continuous, such a categorisation results in a systematic bias towards underestimating the number of employees actually employed by informal enterprises. One can discern a similar bias against capturing 'paid employment' in the informal economy and recording it as unemployment instead. Thus, the ILFS states that 'paid employees are persons who perform work for a wage or salary in cash or in kind. Included are permanent, temporary and casual paid employees' (NBS, 2007, p. 36). However, those persons 'who were working but whose work was not reliable with regard to its availability and adequacy in terms of hours were considered unemployed' (NBS, 2007, p. 23). Much of the precarious underemployment in the informal economy is, therefore, questionably recorded as unemployment.

4

Informal wage employment in Tanzania

One instance of informal employment relations in the real world ...

Having reviewed the problems with the ILFS definitions of the informal economy and paid employment, the paper will now explore how such definitions affect the wording of the questions asked by the ILFS to generate its statistical information on employment status in the informal economy. As the goal is to assess the extent to which the 2006 ILFS statistics have a sense of reality on the ground, it might be useful to proceed from the 'bottom up'. This begins by giving centre stage to a concrete instance of informal employment relations – those in the public transport sector in Dar es Salaam. Having analysed the dynamics at work therein, and how these employment relationships can be categorised, the paper will then review how the categories used by ILFS might capture such reality.

Dar es Salaam is Tanzania's largest city, with no less than three million people.¹ Approximately ten thousand privately owned minibuses, known in Swahili as *daladala*, provide the cheapest form of public transport in the city, whereas the public sector transport company operates no more than two dozen buses. Results from two different questionnaires administered in the late 1990s and early 2000s to these bus workers found that family or household employment, so central to mainstream conceptualisations of economic informality (de Soto 1989), are the exception to the rule in this sector. Instead, the *daladala* operations are characterised by a clear division between a class of bus owners and a class of transport workers. Over 90 per cent of the *daladala* workforce, whose total number is estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000, sell their labour to bus owners.² Furthermore, the vast majority of these workers (83.9 per cent) are employed without a contract (*kibarua* in Swahili).

Beyond the obvious fact that these are casual workers who do not own the buses on which they work, their actual employment relationship with bus owners does not easily translate into any of the conventional categories of 'paid employment' and 'self-employment'. Some qualifications are, therefore, necessary for appreciating the dynamics at work, starting from highlighting which categories these workers do not fit. Workers pay a daily rental fee (*hesabu* in Swahili) to bus owners for operating the bus. The daily return for workers will consist of whatever remains after paying the daily rent to bus owners, petrol costs, and any other work-related expenditures (such as the cost of repairing a tyre or bribing oneself out of the hands of traffic police) have been deducted from the gross daily income. Hence, workers are not waged in a conventional sense, nor would it be correct to categorise them as pieceworkers. The remuneration for the daily piece of work tends, in fact, to be unknown. Furthermore, working at a loss, i.e. ending the working day without being able to collect the daily sum expected from the owner, or, more frequently, not having enough cash to fill the full tank with petrol, is not an uncommon outcome. In this case, workers would fill part of the tank, which would imply that the daily sum to be earned the day after would be even lower.

The fact that workers are not waged in a conventional sense, nor are they pieceworkers, does not imply that labelling them as self-employed micro-entrepreneurs, as policy makers and official statistics on the informal economy commonly do, is a better fit. Recalling the key fact that these workers do not own any capital (in this case the buses on which they work), categorising them

¹ UDA, Dar es Salaam public transport company, was operating about 20 buses in 2010. Unless otherwise stated, this section draws on Rizzo (2011, 1183–1200).

² The 'average' bus owner in Dar es Salaam owns one or two buses. Thus, there is no significant concentration of bus ownership.

as self-employed would imply a notion of entrepreneurship and economic independence that would be highly misleading. It would also conceal the fundamental power relation at play between bus owners and workers. We thus concur with Breman's comments on the nature of rickshaw runners in Calcutta, who similarly pay a daily rental fee to rickshaw owners and face uncertain daily returns from work. Breman warns that these workers cannot be conceptualised as 'independently-operating small entrepreneurs, ... but dependent proletarians who live on the defensive' (Breman 2003, p. 154). The modalities of employment and remuneration of the workforce can in fact be best understood as a strategy by bus owners, or *de facto* employers, to transfer business risks squarely onto the workforce.

Daladala workers sell their relatively unskilled labour to employers in a context of an oversupply of unskilled job seekers. Taking advantage of this, bus owners impose on workers the daily sum expected for a day's work without any real negotiation. Extremely long working hours (the average day lasting 15 hours and the work week lasting more than 6.5 days) and occupational uncertainty (employment on a bus lasts no more than 7 months on average) are the consequences of the very high daily rent that owners expect from bus workers. Workers' responses to being financially squeezed by bus owners consist of speeding, overloading the buses, and denying boarding to passengers entitled to social fares, all actions that aim at maximising returns from work on a given day. The failure to regulate labour relations in the *daladala* industry thus lies at the root of the infamous unruly conduct of its workers.

This is just one example of the employment relations that prevail in one particular type of informal economic activity in one context. It illustrates the way in which conventional categories of both 'wage/paid employment' and 'self-employment' do not easily apply to the reality faced by those informal workers and the complexity of the employment relationship linking them to employers. At the same time, however, it is important not to lose sight of two key characteristics that ultimately define their employment status. First, these workers do not own any of the capital with which they work in the informal economy. A clear division between capital and labour can be observed here, making the notion of self-employment implausible in this case. Second, it is precisely because of workers' economic vulnerability that they are deprived of a conventional wage employment relationship with employers. But in light of the fact that these workers only own their labour, they are best categorised as people in (uncertainly) paid employment in the informal economy. Many other forms of paid employment are to be found in different economic sectors and in different contexts, with the working poor often straddling precarious wage employment with some ownership of equally insecure, very small-scale activities in the informal economy (Bernstein 2010). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of employment relations in which the poor can be engaged, they certainly do not easily match the conventional conceptualisation of both 'paid employment' and 'self-employment'. With these remarks in mind, the analysis now utilises the 2006 Integrated Labour Force Survey in Tanzania as a way to investigate how these conventional categories are used to generate statistics on the informal economy.

... and the 2006 Integrated Labour Force Survey

The importance of paying attention to the way in which key employment and work concepts are translated from English into other languages in labour force surveys is often acknowledged in the literature but less often investigated. This is problematic as ultimately it is in languages other than English that questions are posed to labour force survey respondents. Translating words and concepts, often ideologically loaded and context specific in their origin, into other languages is not an easy task. Questionnaire respondents reference local categories when making sense of

employment questions. As the analysis below will reveal, there is a lot to be lost in the process of translating the labour force questionnaire into Swahili.

Putting concerns about the household as a unit of analysis aside for a moment, consider, for instance, the ILFS introductory question on household economic activities, to be answered by the head of the household on behalf of his/her household members. In English it reads:

Does this household or anyone in this household engage in any of the following activities? a) Wage Employment (yes/no), b) Working on own or family business (excl. Agriculture), c) working on own shamba, fishing or animal keeping d), do you have any paid employees. (NBS, 2009a, ILFS, p.3.)

What differentiates the four (not mutually exclusive) possible answers, at least in the English version of the questionnaire, are the three possible types of employment status: 1) being a wage employee, as per option (a); 2) being self-employed, as per in options (b) and (c); and 3) being an employer, as per option (d). In Swahili, however, 'working on own or family business' is translated as 'kazi isiyo ya kilimo' (NBS, 2009c), which literally means any 'work that is not agriculture'. Strikingly, and misleadingly, the reference to self or family employment in business or agriculture, central to the English wording of the questionnaire, is dropped altogether in the Swahili version.

The section of the questionnaire on the individual respondent's main economic activity (rather than on households at an aggregate level) does better, as it presents an accurate correspondence between English and Swahili survey questions. This time around respondents are in fact asked whether their work entails self-employment: 'kujijiri mwenyewe binafsi'. However, what matters above all in respondents' choice of the answer that best describes their employment status is how they understand the main alternative answer they might opt for, namely 'paid employment', to which the analysis now turns.

In the 2006 ILFS, the Swahili translation of the term 'wage employment' is also problematic. The term used in this case is 'ajira ya mshahara'. While this literally means wage (mshahara) employment (ajira), such terminology clearly connotes registered employment in the formal sector, 'proper jobs' for the lay Swahili mother-tongue speaker. As a taxi driver put it when interviewed by one of the authors on how he would describe with his own words the categories used in the ILFS, 'you can identify yourself as having "ajira ya mshahara" if you have a formal employer, a contract and a wage' (author interview, 2013). His understanding of key employment categories in Swahili confirms that which the author derived from over a decade of fieldwork on informal labour in Dar es Salaam.

Part of the problem lies in the ambiguity of the term 'ajira' in Swahili. Broadly speaking 'ajira' is used to denote employment of any type. In this sense, one reads and hears that 'Tanzania tatizo ni kwamba *hakuna ajira*' (the problem in Tanzania is that there is *no employment*). Yet, at the same time, people use the word 'ajira' to mean registered employment, as opposed to employment of precarious and informal nature. For example, *daladala* workers, whose employment is informal and precarious, can often be heard saying that 'tatizo la kazi ya *daladala* ni kwamba *hakuna ajira*. Kibarua tu' (the problem of work in *daladalas* is that *there is no formal employment*. Only casual work). Failure to appreciate the two possible meanings of the word 'ajira' in Swahili would potentially allow the implausible translation of the sentence above as 'the problem of work in *daladalas* is that there is no employment!' Instead, when workers refer to their work as work without 'ajira', they mean that it is work without rights and security, in other words, informal. The way in which the

concept of 'paid employment' is translated into Swahili by ILFS, therefore, fails to connote informal wage labour in a way that reflects how the lay Tanzanian talks about it.

The bias against recording informal wage employment is present also in the questionnaire section focusing on working patterns of individual members of the household. The question on 'what was the economic activity in which you spent most of your time?' has 'employee in a wage job' as one of its five possible answers (the other four being self-employed, working on your own or family farm, unpaid work in family business, and other). The Swahili wording of 'employee in a wage job' as 'mwajiriwa wa kulipwa' once more points to formal sector employment. And so does the range of subsectors in which an 'employee in a wage job' might be employed: the central government, the local government, a parastatal organisation, a political party, co-operatives, NGOs, international organisations, religious organisations, and the private sector (NBS, 2009b, LFS 2, p. 3). It is very plausible that a respondent answering this question will fail to match his/her informal employer with any of the possible employers from the survey list, and will not opt for declaring himself/herself as an 'employee in a wage job'.

ILFS, therefore, puts forward a stark and questionable dichotomy between paid and self-employment, and a leading one at that. Consider the implications of the translation issues of 'self-employment' and 'paid employment' together. On the one hand, 'self-employment' is translated in extremely loose terms, to the point that any work outside agriculture seemingly fits into it, or that work by people who do not own any capital can be misleadingly identified as 'self-employment'. In the words of the same taxi driver,

'you could call me self-employed if I owned the car in which I work. Or if I owned the capital with which I opened a small shop and worked on it. But as I don't own my car, and as I work for someone without any contract, you should call me a *kibarua*, a casual worker ... You can't call me a paid employee either, as I don't have an employer'.

On the other hand, paid employment is translated in very narrow terms, so that only those in formal and registered paid employment are likely to identify themselves as 'paid employees'. Arguably, it is out of this contrast between an overly expansive notion of self-employment and an extremely narrow notion of paid employment that the official statistics are created, thus suggesting that the informal economy consists of a teeming mass of family entrepreneurs.

A depiction of economic informality as self-employment is then consistently built upon by the 2006 ILFS, specifically through its modules on the informal economy, where information on informal business is sought (see questions 26–32, which are designed for 'business owners only'). The focus is on understanding how businessmen in the informal economy set up their businesses, where they operate from and how often, and their sources of credit and training, but without much consideration of how many of these respondents can really be understood as businessmen in any meaningful way.

5

Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that wage labour is far more prevalent within the informal economy than it is made out to be by official statistics, according to which it hardly exists. At the root of the invisibility of informal wage labour lies the fact that conventional categories of 'self-employment' and 'wage employment', on which labour force surveys rest, are inadequate for capturing the heterogeneity of employment relations found in the informal economy and the heterogeneity of relationships between capital and labour that mediate poor people's participation in the (informal) economy. Through a close look at the case of Tanzania, the paper has highlighted the remarkable distance between the complexity of the employment relationships linking informal wage workers to employers in one sub-sector of the informal economy and the clear-cut categories used to frame questions for the 2006 ILFS.

The analysis has further argued that the Swahili words chosen for asking workers whether they are in wage employment communicated a very narrow connotation of paid employment in the formal sector. By contrast, 'self-employment' is translated in extremely loose terms, arguably acting as a 'catch all' category in the Tanzanian context, as observed by Breman with reference to the Indian context. In sum, this paper argues that the ILFS statistical suggestion that only 0.7 per cent of workers in Tanzania's informal economy are wage workers, and the remaining are self-employed in one way or another, rests on disturbingly shaky grounds. To address this major shortcoming, attention should be paid to formulating questions for detecting and understanding the nature of informal wage labour, or the work of *kibarua*, a word ubiquitously referred to by informal wage workers in Tanzania to describe their status, yet a status that is strikingly at the margin of the 2006 ILFS.

Such problems with labour force statistics are, as we have argued, not peculiar to Tanzania. The purpose of using the same categories of 'paid employment' and 'self-employment' to survey the state of labour forces across countries is, after all, to compare individual countries and changes within countries over time. If anything, one would expect that in Tanzania, where Swahili is the language spoken nationally, the translation of these employment categories could be easier than in countries in which a multiplicity of vernacular languages are spoken. However, as this paper has shown, this is not the case. This disclosure raises a serious trade-off between the comparability of Tanzanian labour statistics to those of other countries, and the suitability of labour force categories to the Tanzanian context. If the picture of informal economies presented by ILFS has indeed no analytical purchase on actual realities on the ground, as we would argue with reference to the Tanzania 2006 ILFS, efforts to identify labour categories that are intelligible to respondents should take priority. Instead, the preference for statistical comparability of labour markets and informal economies across countries is arguably acting as a barrier to understanding the working relations in which the working poor are enmeshed. It also acts as a vehicle to justify policymakers' tired utopias of eradicating poverty through various forms of support to informal micro-enterprises.

The question of what kind of data are needed for building more realistic statistics on labour forces in the informal economy goes hand in hand with the issue of how one can address such a myopic policy focus. This paper, then, sought to emphasise the urgent need to move away from the problem of 'misplaced aggregation', which results from conflating into one catch-all category various forms of production that are essentially different, not just as static entities, but also in terms of their dynamic potential. It is indeed difficult to see how one can address the issue of the dynamic potential of the informal economy without taking explicit account of these diversities in production and their corresponding labour regimes.³

³ Lebrun and Gerry (1974, pp.23–24) provide a useful overview on this theme, although they frame their analysis as a study of 'petty production and capitalism' and not of self-employment and the informal economy.

Coming to terms with these issues, however, would require a shift in focus towards the analysis of capital accumulation and its relation to the transformation of labour regimes in the so-called informal sector, an issue on which mainstream literature on economic informality is sorely silent.

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