

Call for papers

International Conference

World Customs Organization – World Bank

Brussels, 3-4 June 2013

Informality, international trade and Customs

Informality is, first and foremost, a concept. There are neither "informal" individuals nor "informal" goods. Informal merely says what they are not (formal), not what they are. This nomenclature applied to the social sciences first appeared in the early 1970s¹ to term the activities which escaped economic and statistical measurement. Its analytical usefulness has been recently questioned. When investigated in the field, informality unveils well rooted and organized rationales, which tends to represent it as a reorganization of forms rather than a simple obscure disorder. As such, informality has been focused on by intellectual streams that are theoretically different: neoliberalism recognizes the informal sector and its fluidity as confirmation of a free market without regulation, while the opposite view is more Keynesian - that the informal economy can be dealt with by more state intervention; Marxist approaches suggest that an informal economy obscures capitalist dominance and exploitation of these activities.

The international trade of goods reminds us of a sobering reality. On the one hand, informality has passed into common usage, particularly among Customs and Tax civil servants in emerging and developing countries, the traders themselves, and "international development experts". On the other hand, in the past couple of decades, international transport, especially air transport, and the opening of Asian economies influenced many developing and emerging country entrepreneurs to gain access to long-distance international trade. This class of retailers who previously waited at home for the arrival of foreign peddlers or who were small cross-border smugglers have become long-distance and major traders. These importers form and lean on local, regional, linguistic networks, parts of which extended outside their nation of origin to set up as intermediaries in Asia, Americas and Europe. Further, at the individual level, formal and informal activities are increasingly overlapping, which weakens categorizations of actors and pleads for a focus on practices. These practices are generally not bureaucratized or standardized, in contrast with those of multinational companies historically implanted in the developing countries since colonial times. This reality limits *de facto* the ability of the State to regulate this kind of international trade.

In developing and emerging countries, customs and tax officers complain about "the informal". However, no clear definition of informality is shared from one country to another, and the relationships between customs and "informal" also vary extensively. At the same time, the customs administrations are in constant reform, at the instigation of the expertise and the international standards (international agreements, "best practices", reform supported by donors). Over the last decade, these bureaucratic norms are negotiated from their conception as they must reconcile two strong and seemingly opposite demands: one, the private sector's demand for accelerated controls considering the increase of the volumes of exchanged goods and two, the demand of political power to strengthen the security of supply chains.

The main consequence is that the customs administrations which were focused on commodities at time of their border crossing are increasingly monitoring the entire route. More information about the goods and those who transport and exchange them is sought by the administrations. This increase of the information flows infers a demand to formalize international trade regulation practices. The arenas of international institutions, however, where standards are elaborated and expertise is developed, are

¹ Keith Hart, 1973. « Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana », *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 61-89.

dominated by major businesses, either directly by international associations of importers or logistic operators, or indirectly by means of negotiations and discussions with the governments which are members of the international organizations.

A first consequence is that the produced standards go towards more formalization and the bureaucratic practices of the State are conceived to fit with the bureaucratic practices of the multinational companies. A second consequence is that, in developing and emerging countries where "the informal" built itself a social and economic legitimacy, the customs administrations adopt informal practices of taxation, to negotiate and incite the "informal" importers to pay, even by reducing the legal fiscal pressure, to avoid dedicating important resources to fight smuggling or to maintain, locally in border areas, some kind of social peace.

The objective of this conference is two-fold. First, the aim is to promote applied research on the relationships between States, customs administrations and local importers. As such, the contributions of practitioners are encouraged, especially in a narrative style to report on specific and exceptional administrative practices, the difficulties in implementation and the observed outputs. Second, the aim of the conference is to deepen the analysis of informality as a reality in international trade in a multi/interdisciplinary perspective (social anthropology, law, economics, history, political science, and sociology).

Professor Keith Hart will deliver a keynote address.

Proposal of papers may address four major topics, although this list is not exhaustive:

- the local importers of developing and emerging countries, their individual trajectories, their practices and their relationships with the administrations controlling the borders, their organization as transnational commodities value chains and the relationships between these chains,
- the economic, political, and social effects of the international movements of goods subject to informal practices,
- the representations, the official and unofficial practices of the border administrations in relation with what/whom they name "informal",
- the role of administrations and international/transnational organizations producing norms to rule international trade flows, within an ideological framework influenced by corporations promoting self-government while the usual forms of national sovereignty remain in place.

The selection committee is composed of Keith Hart (University of London, University of Pretoria and University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban), Thomas Cantens (World Customs Organization and Centre Norbert Elias EHESS), Robert Ireland (World Customs Organization), Cristiana Panella (Royal Museum for Central Africa), Gael Raballand (World Bank).

Submissions can be written in French or English. Interpretation will be available during the conference.

The deadline to submit a proposal (300 words) is January 30, 2013. To respond to this call, you can contact one member of the selection committee: Thomas Cantens (thomas.cantens@wcoomd.org), Keith Hart (johnkeithhart@gmail.com), Robert Ireland (robert.ireland@wcoomd.org), Cristiana Panella (cristiana.panella@africamuseum.be), Gael Raballand (graballand@worldbank.org).

Authors of the proposals will receive an answer before February 15, 2013. Full length papers should be received by the selection committee no later than May 15, 2013. Funding for the presenters' stay will be paid. Airplane tickets may also be paid depending on the availability of donors funding. The publication of a collective book is envisaged.