

## THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN ALGERIAN SOCIETY

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### Abstract:

Through this article, we will discuss the most important elements that characterize the phenomenon of informality in Algeria, and this is through studying the reality of the informal economy in Algeria, where the latter has witnessed rapid development and widespread spread in various vital sectors in recent decades, and it has also come to affect various social classes in Algerian society due to the presence of factors that contributed to its spread. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the specificity of the informal economy in Algeria, based on studying the most important groups working in it, and the most important sectors that are active in it, and then after that we show the extent of the state's adaptation to this economy.

**Keywords:** The informal economy, informal groups, informal sectors.

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### Introduction:

In recent years, the informal economy in Algeria has witnessed significant expansion, playing an active role in absorbing unemployed labor. It has also extended to various vital sectors in the country. Based on this observation, this study aims to explore the issue of the informal economy in Algerian society by examining the key aspects that distinguish it from the formal economy. This includes analyzing the stages of its development in Algeria, identifying the main sectors it encompasses, understanding the reasons for its expansion, and assessing the state's stance on this economy.

#### 1- Importance of the Study:

- Growing interest in the informal economy by both international and national institutions.
- The increasing expansion of the informal economy at the expense of the formal economy.
- The rise and diversification of social groups engaged in the informal economy.

#### 2- Objectives of the Study:

- Understanding the specific characteristics of the informal economy in Algerian society.
- Examining the extent to which the Algerian state has adapted to the informal economy.

#### First: The Concept of the Informal Economy

The early signs of informality emerged in the 1950s when developing countries experienced rural-to-urban migration. This shift led to increased urbanization, rising unemployment, and the spread of marginal and informal activities. The most notable model explaining the early signs of informality during this period is Arthur Lewis' model, which distinguishes between two economic sectors in developing countries: a modern sector and a traditional sector.

In 1972, the International Labour Organization (ILO) officially recognized the concept of the informal economy in its first study conducted in Kenya. Since then, with the formal adoption of the term "informal sector," numerous studies and theoretical approaches have emerged to define this sector. As a result, there is no single comprehensive definition. However, after reviewing the literature on the informal economy, it is evident that most researchers classify its definition into two categories: a **descriptive definition** and an **applied definition**.

The **descriptive definition** focuses on the characteristics and features of the informal economy, including small-scale employment, reliance on family labor, non-compliance with administrative regulations and state laws, lack of engagement with financial and formal institutions, low educational levels of workers, and operations conducted in temporary, semi-permanent, or mobile workspaces. It is important to note that not all these characteristics must be present—any one of them may be sufficient to classify an activity as informal.

On the other hand, the **applied or formal definition** is based on official criteria to classify activities, such as the absence of a commercial registration, non-payment of taxes, lack of social security coverage for workers, and the absence of organized accounting records in enterprises.

## **Second: A Historical Overview of the Development of the Informal Economy in Algeria**

The development of the informal economy in Algeria can be divided into two main phases:

### **1- The Socialist Phase:**

During the 1970s, Algeria adopted an economy based on heavy industrialization policies, which positively impacted employment by creating job opportunities for various social groups. This economic dynamic led to a decline in the unemployment rate, reaching 14% in 1977.

However, the informal economy in the socialist era began to emerge in the late 1970s with the rise of the parallel market, also known as the black market. This phenomenon resulted from centralized planning and the concentration of decision-making power at the central level for investment programs and projects across different sectors. Additionally, inefficiencies in the public sector's distribution of products and markets contributed to the problem.

The state's monopoly on importing consumer goods, coupled with its failure to supply local markets while demand continued to rise, led to what became known as the problem of scarcity. This scarcity, in turn, facilitated the emergence of parallel trade. Furthermore, a parallel financial market developed due to the increasing demand for foreign currency to purchase goods and products from abroad and resell them in local markets.

Regarding the social groups most active in the informal sector during this period, women, children, the elderly, and disabled individuals played a significant role.

The defining characteristic of the informal economy in the socialist phase was its emergence as a response to scarcity in goods and consumer products, aiming to create a balance between supply and demand in the market.

### **2- The Liberal Phase:**

Algeria entered the liberal economic phase in the early 1990s by adopting a market economy. This shift was driven by the economic crisis that had affected the country since the mid-1980s,

culminating in the 1989 constitution, which introduced key liberal principles, marking the end of the socialist era.

This fundamental transformation was accompanied by a series of economic reforms, including:

- **Restructuring the national economy** in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), leading to the rescheduling of external debt, implementing a structural adjustment program for the public sector, reducing the state's role in employment, and withdrawing its social support for consumer goods.
- **The state's withdrawal from foreign trade monopolization** and the liberalization of imports, allowing the private sector to import goods and products to meet local market demands.

These reforms had several negative consequences, the most significant being a **job crisis** due to mass layoffs in public enterprises and declining employment opportunities in the public sector. This crisis greatly contributed to the expansion of the informal economy, which became a primary source of employment and income for marginalized social groups.

### 3- The Main Sectors of the Informal Economy:

The informal economy in Algeria has affected various vital sectors, with the most prominent being:

#### 3.1- The Commercial Sector:

The commercial sector is one of the most significant areas impacted by the informal economy. Many researchers have examined this sector by studying its activities outside the legal framework. It is commonly referred to as the **informal commercial sector**, **informal trade**, or the **parallel market**—all terms that describe commercial transactions that evade tax and trade regulations.

Informal trade encompasses all commercial activities that escape state statistics and violate the legal and regulatory frameworks governing trade. In Algeria, the commercial sector has been one of the most affected by the informal economy, experiencing the highest percentage of unregulated activities.

#### 3.2- The Productive Sector:

The informal economy has also become associated with **productive units**, such as small businesses and enterprises that employ a limited number of workers without officially registering their activities.

The **African Union's 2009 definition** of the informal sector highlights the significance of the productive sector in shaping the informal economy. According to this definition, the informal sector includes all enterprises that are usually unregistered, have a low level of organization, productivity, and profitability, and have **limited access to markets, credit facilities, and training**. Many international organizations and national statistical agencies now use the **size of the productive unit** as a primary criterion for defining and measuring the informal productive sector due to its practicality.

The informal productive sector is also known by several terms, the most common being "**black labor**." According to the researcher **Alfred Sauvy**, black labor refers to economic activities conducted secretly, without state knowledge, and without official declaration. Meanwhile,

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**Raymond Klatzmann** identifies black labor as taking multiple forms, the most notable being **the employment of workers without official registration**.

It is also important to note that the informal productive sector is not limited to unregistered businesses. It also includes **home-based activities** that operate outside the legal framework.

#### **4- The Main Social Groups Active in the Informal Economy:**

The informal economy includes various social groups with different motivations and interests. The most significant of these groups are:

##### **4.1- Women:**

Women are among the most active social groups in the informal economy. Their participation is particularly evident in **retail trade, sewing, hairdressing, food preparation, and street vending**. However, they also represent the **poorest** segment within this economy.

One of the key studies addressing women's work in the informal economy was conducted by **INSTRAW**, which categorized women's work into four groups:

- a. Women working **temporarily**.
- b. Women working in **subcontracting enterprises**.
- c. Women working **from home**.
- d. **Self-employed** women.

Another significant study by **Maldonado C. and Gaufryau B.** explored the role of women in the informal economy across various African countries. The researchers concluded that women are a **dominant** force in this sector, particularly in retail trade, whereas men **control** wholesale trade. Their findings indicate that the informal economy is **female-dominated** in most African countries, with **53% of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo** and **63% in Côte d'Ivoire** engaged in informal economic activities.

In Algeria, **Lakjaa A.** conducted a study on **home-based informal work**, such as sewing, embroidery, weaving, knitting, and food production. He found that the **majority** of workers in this sector are **women**.

##### **4.2- Children:**

Child labor in the informal economy is a pressing issue globally. The key **causes** driving children into early labor include:

###### **a. Poverty and school failure:**

- Poverty significantly impacts children, as **low-income families** are often forced to send their children to work to help cover basic needs.
- School failure is another major factor, often linked to poverty. Children who struggle in school frequently enter the workforce early.

###### **b. Family problems:**

- Some children **must** work due to **family issues**, such as **parental separation, the absence or death of a father, a work-related accident causing disability, or a chronic illness affecting one of the parents.**

#### 4.3- Street and Stationary Vendors:

This group has been widely studied by **urban sociologists** and is classified under **informal commerce**, often referred to as **street trade** or **itinerant trade**.

- **Street vendors:** These individuals **move** from one location to another, selling goods without a **fixed** spot and operating **without a legal permit**.
- **Stationary vendors:** Unlike street vendors, they **occupy fixed spaces** in **public areas** such as **markets and sidewalks** but **still operate without licenses**. Selling on sidewalks is often seen as an **alternative to begging** and a **way to escape poverty**.

Researcher **Lubell H.** attributes the spread of street vending in urban areas to the **failure of local authorities** in enforcing regulations. He suggests that some government inspectors **accept bribes** from street vendors, allowing them to continue operating illegally.

#### 4.4- Public Sector Employees ("Cumulards")

Public sector employees are involved in the informal economy through **additional, undeclared work** either **after official working hours** or **during sick leave**. This extra work can take the form of **paid employment, trade, or independent professions**.

Researcher **Adair Ph.** studied informal employment in Algeria and **distinguished between:**

- **Workers primarily dependent on the informal economy.**
- **Public sector employees who participate in informal economic activities as a secondary source of income.**

#### 5- Causes of the Expansion of the Informal Economy in Algeria:

Algeria underwent a radical transformation in the **early 1990s**, shifting from a **planned economy** to a **market economy**. This transition led to **political instability**, weakened state oversight of economic activities, and a **reduced governmental role** in both economic and social sectors. These factors contributed to the **rapid growth of the informal economy** as a **substitute for the state's failure** to regulate economic activities.

Although Algeria entered the **21st century** and has largely overcome the crises of the 1990s, the **informal economy continues to expand**. The main **factors driving its persistence** include:

##### 5.1- Structural Adjustment Policies and Their Negative Consequences

During the **early 1990s**, Algeria implemented **economic restructuring programs** under the **guidance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank**. These policies contributed to the spread of the informal economy through:

- **Trade liberalization.**
- **Privatization of public sector enterprises.**
- **Increased prices for public sector goods and services.**

The most severe consequences were:

- **Worsening poverty levels.**
- **Declining purchasing power.**
- **Rising unemployment**, which jumped from **19% in 1990 to 29.5% in 1999.**

During the period **1990-1998**, around **600,000 workers** were **laid off**, further fueling the expansion of the informal economy.

#### **Fourth - The Most Active Categories in the Informal Economy:**

The informal economy employs various social groups that differ in motives and interests. Among the most important of these groups, we find the following:

##### ***1 - Women Category:***

Women are among the most significant social groups active in the informal economy. Their work is particularly evident in retail trade, sewing, hairdressing, food preparation, and street vending. Women also represent the poorest category within the informal economy.

One of the most notable studies on women's work in the informal economy is the **Instraw** study, which categorized women's work into four groups:

- a) Women working temporarily.
- b) Women working in subcontracting businesses.
- c) Women working from home.
- d) Independent working women.

Among the most important studies that examined women's work in the informal economy is the research conducted by **MALDONADO.C** and **GAUFRYAU B**, which explored the role of women in the informal economy in several African countries. The researchers concluded that women are an essential element in this sector, predominantly active in trade, especially in retail, while wholesale trade is dominated by men. They found that the informal economy is largely female-dominated in most African countries. For example, in Congo, women make up **53%** of the informal economy workforce, while in Côte d'Ivoire, they constitute **63%**.

In Algeria, researcher **LAKJAA A** conducted a study on informal work, particularly home-based activities such as sewing, embroidery, spinning, weaving, and food product manufacturing. The study concluded that most workers in this field are women.

##### ***2 - Children Category:***

The phenomenon of child labor in the informal economy is one of the major challenges faced by societies worldwide. The primary reasons driving children into early work in the informal economy include:

- **Poverty and School Failure:** Poverty significantly impacts children, as low household income forces them into early labor to help meet living costs. School failure is also a contributing factor, often linked to poverty.

- **Family Problems:** Children may face family issues that compel them to work. These problems include parental separation, the absence or death of a father, workplace accidents causing permanent disability, or chronic illness affecting one of the parents.

### 3 - *Street and Settled Vendors:*

This category has received significant attention from researchers and urban sociologists. It is often categorized in literature under the informal trade sector and referred to as "street vending" or "itinerant trade."

- **Street Vendors:** These individuals sell goods in a mobile manner, in various locations, and without official permits from state authorities. Researcher **Lubell H.** attributes the spread of street vendors in cities to the negligence and leniency of local authorities in enforcing laws and regulations that prohibit informal trade. The researcher suggests that bribery plays a role, as officials may accept bribes from street vendors to allow them to continue operating.
- **Settled Vendors:** These individuals sell their goods in fixed locations within public spaces, such as markets and sidewalks, without government authorization. Selling on sidewalks, for instance, is often seen as an alternative to begging and a solution to poverty.

### 4 - *Public Employees (Cumulards):*

Public employees are linked to the informal economy through secondary informal work, whether after official working hours, during sick leave, as wage-based jobs, trade activities, or other professions.

Researcher **ADAIR Ph.**, in his study on informal work in Algeria, emphasized the need to distinguish between:

1. **Wage earners and independent workers** who are primarily engaged in the informal economy.
2. **Employees in the formal economy** who also engage in informal work as a secondary activity (extra work).

### Fifth - **Causes of the Spread of the Informal Economy in Algeria:**

In the early **1990s**, Algeria underwent a major transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. This shift led to political instability, weakened state oversight of economic activities, and a reduced governmental role in the economy and social affairs. Consequently, the informal economy expanded as a means to compensate for the state's inability to regulate its economy.

Although Algeria entered the **third millennium** and overcame many crises of the **1990s**, the informal economy has continued to grow. Below are some of the main factors contributing to its expansion:

#### 1 - *Structural Adjustment Policies and Their Negative Effects:*

The implementation of structural adjustment programs in the early **1990s**, based on the recommendations of the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and the **World Bank**, had negative consequences that fueled the expansion of the informal economy. These included:

- Trade liberalization.

- Privatization of public sector enterprises.
- Increased prices of public sector goods and services.

The most significant consequences were worsening poverty, declining purchasing power, and a rise in unemployment from **19%** in **1990** to **29.5%** in **1999**. During this period (**1990-1998**), approximately **600,000** workers were laid off.

### ***2 - Urbanization and Migration:***

During the **1970s** and **1980s**, Algeria experienced rapid urban growth due to rural migration to major cities, driven by industrialization policies. In the **1990s**, security crises further fueled rural-to-urban migration.

The resulting rapid population growth increased Algeria's urbanization rate from **30% in 1966** to **65% in 2006**. As a result, the informal economy played a crucial role in absorbing new entrants into the labor market, given the inability of the formal economy to accommodate them.

### ***3 - Employment Crisis:***

The growing number of job seekers and the limited employment opportunities in the formal sector have led to a job crisis, particularly among young people. This employment shortage caused the informal employment rate to rise to **27.8%** in **2001**.

### ***4 - Legal and Tax Constraints:***

Economist **De Soto H.** linked the growth of the informal sector to social and tax constraints. In Algeria, the social security contribution rate is high, at **31.5%** of the declared wage.

The **National Statistics Office (ONS)** reported on **July 25, 2010**, that nearly **50.4%** of wage earners were not registered with the social security system, based on a **2009** study involving **9,472,000** workers, of whom **778,000** were unregistered. This highlights the social vulnerability prevalent in Algeria.

Additionally, Algeria's tax laws are complex, frequently changing, and characterized by high tax rates. According to a **2007** study by the **National Statistics Office**, **two-thirds** of employers and independent workers evade taxes entirely. Among them, **75%** are independent workers and **25%** are business owners.

## **Sixth - The Algerian Government's Position on the Informal Economy:**

### ***1 - Political Stance on the Informal Economy:***

In recent years, the informal economy has posed a significant challenge to Algerian authorities due to its widespread presence across vital sectors and social groups. The government has publicly emphasized the need to address this economy, citing its negative impact on economic growth, unregulated trade, production decline, loss of tax revenues, and risks to public health and security.

Initially, the state aimed to **eradicate** the informal economy by forming a **National Committee** dedicated to eliminating the informal market. However, in recent years, the government has shifted its approach to **organizing** rather than **eliminating** the informal economy. This is evident in its support for **self-employed entrepreneurs**, particularly targeting youth engaged in informal activities.

## **2 - Legal Stance on the Informal Economy:**

Unlike countries such as **France**, which legally regulates informal labor, Algeria lacks specific legal frameworks to address it. The penalties for employers who fail to declare workers are relatively lenient, with fines as low as **2,000 DZD**. Moreover, Algeria has no designated public institution responsible for combating informal labor, unlike **France's National Office for Combating Illegal Work**.

This absence of legal and institutional frameworks underscores the need for Algeria to formalize and integrate the informal economy into the formal sector.

### **Conclusion**

The informal economy in Algeria emerged during the socialist era, serving as a means to meet the basic needs of society in terms of goods and services that the formal economy failed to provide. However, after Algeria transitioned to a market economy and implemented restructuring policies—resulting in negative consequences—the informal sector took on a social role by providing employment and income for unemployed and impoverished social groups.

Faced with the widespread phenomenon of informality across various vital sectors, the state has taken a firm stance by seeking to regulate and combat it through all possible means. The government now perceives the informal economy as a threat to the national economy.

### **Study Findings:**

- The informal economy in Algeria is predominantly male-dominated.
- The informal economy in Algeria is most prevalent in the commercial sector.
- There is no clear stance from the Algerian government regarding the revision of labor and social legislations to include workers in the informal economy. In this regard, the Egyptian experience in social security for informal workers is particularly noteworthy, as it is considered a pioneering model for legalizing social security for informal economy workers.
- The Algerian government is leaning toward adapting to the informal economy by regulating it rather than attempting to eradicate it entirely. This includes benefiting from its revenues by subjecting its activities to the tax system and integrating informal workers—such as informal entrepreneurs—into the formal economy.
- Employment in the informal economy has become the epitome of precarious work, as workers in this sector lack even the most basic rights guaranteed under labor legislation.

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