



THE IMPACT OF COVID 19 PREVENTION MEASURES ON WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN SENEGAL

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ABSTRACT: *The informal sector, or informal economy, is a real employment niche and a godsend for young people facing the harsh reality of unemployment and underemployment. However, in senegal, with the covid-19 crisis, this sector, known for its vulnerability, has been further weakened by certain government measures to combat the covid-19 pandemic (introduction of a curfew, closure of schools, markets and other places of business, ban on inter-city transport, etc.). This article, therefore, proposes to analyse the impact of these measures on informal sector enterprises and workers in senegal, particularly in dakar. The results we have obtained, thanks to an exclusively qualitative methodology, show that the application of such measures during the covid revealed an accentuated precariousness of informal work. In addition to having favoured the decline in turnover of informal enterprises, which are also confronted with the problem of indebtedness, they have contributed significantly to the unemployment of employees and other self-employed workers in this sector.*

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, Informal Economy, Informal Sector, Informal Worker.



RESUME: *Véritable niche d'emplois, le secteur informel, ou économie informelle, constitue une aubaine pour les jeunes confrontés à la dure réalité du chômage et du sous emploi. Toutefois, au Sénégal avec la crise de Covid-19, ce secteur connu par sa vulnérabilité a été davantage fragilisé par certaines mesures gouvernementales de lutte contre la pandémie de covid-19 (instauration d'un couvre-feu, fermeture des écoles, des marchés et autres lieux de commerce, interdiction du transport interurbain, etc.). Cet article se propose donc d'analyser l'impact de ces mesures sur les entreprises et les travailleurs du secteur informel au Sénégal et particulièrement à Dakar. Les résultats auxquels nous sommes parvenus, grâce à une méthodologie exclusivement qualitative, démontrent que l'application de telles mesures a été, durant la covid, révélatrice d'une précarité accentuée du travail informel. En plus d'avoir favorisé la baisse du chiffre d'affaire des entreprises informelles, également confrontées à la problématique de l'endettement, elles ont contribué de manière significative à la mise au chômage des salariés et autres indépendants de ce secteur.*

Mots-clés: Covid-19, Economie Informelle, Secteur Informel, Travailleur Informel.



INTRODUCTION

In senegal, the response to the covid-19 pandemic (introduction of a curfew, closure of schools, markets and other places of business, ban on intercity transport, etc.) Has put a strain on the local economy and exposed companies to the crisis and many workers to unemployment. With no legal or social protection [destremau (2013)] and a greater risk of unemployment and poverty [chen et al (2005), fao¹ (2020)], informal sector workers, who constitute more than half of the employed labour force (ansd², 2013), have been the most vulnerable category to this situation.

This study takes place in the context of the implementation of these measures (march to june 2020), and provides a sociological perspective on the impact of senegal's response to covid-19 on informal sector workers. It analyses the problems arising from the application of these measures and their consequences for these categories of workers who are already on the margins of social and legal protection. The aim is, therefore, to offer a scientific view, free of any "spontaneous sociology" (bourdieu, chamboredon and passeron, 1983), of the effects of senegal's measures to contain the covid-19 in a context marked by a series of demonstrations against them³.

The methodology used is exclusively qualitative. It is based on testimonies collected through individual interviews, from around twenty informal workers in dakar.

The article is structured in two parts. The first part presents a brief review of the literature on the informal sector. The second part sets out the context and the research problem. The third part describes the methodological approach. The fourth part analyses the problems generated by the application of covid-19 prevention measures among informal sector actors in senegal, which include a drop in business turnover, unemployment among employees and the self-employed, not to mention the anguish caused by the impossibility of repaying contracted loans. In the end, a discussion of the results is proposed in light of the concept of model transfer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the beginning of the 1970s, when the ILO⁴ first began to work on the issue, the informal sector has undergone rapid development in the social and economic sciences. Among the debates that have fuelled thinking on the subject, the question of its definition and characterisation, as well as that of its impact on the economy of developing countries, seem to be those that most interest researchers. In addition to these issues, there is the question of the working and living conditions of workers in this sector.

¹ Food and Agriculture Organisation.

² Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie.

³ In June, several cities in Senegal, including Dakar, were the scene of several nights of demonstrations against the curfew and for the lifting of the ban on intercity transport. These demonstrations were preceded by a strike called by transporters to demand the resumption of intercity transport.

⁴ International Labour Office.



Definition, Characterisation et Challenges of the Informal Sector

The evolution of the concept of the informal sector has followed the evolution of the sector itself. As Kanté (2002) recalls, in the 1970s the concept was used to designate small-scale activities, essentially intended to provide a subsistence income for new urban dwellers, the product of a particularly large rural exodus. Subsequently, he points out, the concept was extended to all small-scale activities which, because of their traditional origin or their recent or spontaneous nature, have multiplied and consolidated in relation to the endemic unemployment which is constantly increasing in the various African countries faced with the economic crisis and the social consequences of structural adjustment programmes.

For its part, the definition proposed by the ILO (1993) presents the informal sector as a set of units producing goods and services with the main purpose of creating jobs and income for the people concerned. These units, having a low level of organisation, operate on a small scale and in a specific way with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production. This definition gives rise to a dual conception of the informal sector, associating, on the one hand, marginal activities (on the streets or in makeshift establishments) and production and service crafts and, on the other hand, small-scale trade.

Nevertheless, the informal sector does not only cover informal enterprises, but also a double dimension: that of non-salaried employment in micro-enterprises and that of informal salaried employment (Destremau, 2013). Ultimately, it refers to "all activities of trade, production of goods and services with a market value (...) That partially or totally escape the legislation and standards that govern the fields of activities and practices of the same categories" (Niang, 1996: 57).

It consists of informal own-account worker enterprises (family enterprises) employing family helpers or casual workers and informal employer enterprises (micro-enterprises) that may employ a small number of permanent workers (less than 5 or 10 depending on the country) (Babou and Adair, 2016). Labour relations in this sector, where they exist, are based primarily on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relationships rather than on contractual arrangements with formal guarantees (ILO, 1993).

In the ILO characterisation (cited by Droh, 2013), the informal sector encompasses seven criteria: ease of access (1), use of local resources (2), labour-intensive technology (3), family ownership of the enterprise (4), small scale of production operations (5), a market open to unregulated competition (6), and qualification acquired outside the school system (7). For Bodson, Roy and Hentic (1995), the small size of the enterprise (employing at most five people), the low level of income, the non-registration and the absence of separate accounting or the ease of access are the main characteristics of this sector.

According to Amara et al. (2018), informal sector activities in Africa have the following characteristics: they are traditional, small-scale family production units; they present a certain harmony with local mentalities and cultures; much of their functioning is integrated into dominant social processes; their almost systematic involvement in networks (composed of other informal sector enterprises) naturally pushes them towards collective entrepreneurship; a central dimension in contexts (such as Senegal) where resources are scarce and difficult to access; finally, they have diverse relationships with the formal sector, which can be seen as a factor of integration into the national economy and a source of collective learning.



However, far from still being able to be considered as a residue of "primitive" pre-capitalist, domestic or agricultural economies, the informal sector appears to be constitutive of the development modes of global capitalism. In fact, it encompasses an important development issue in that it is now the most common form of labour market integration in developing countries (Bacchetta, Ernst & Bustamante, 2010).

Because of the number of enterprises that make up the informal sector and their contribution to job creation and GDP⁵, the informal sector constitutes a real safety valve. For example, in Senegal, the creation of small production and/or service units operating in the informal sector is a godsend for young and often poorly qualified people. The employment opportunities offered by this sector allow the reintegration of young people. In total, it generates more than 90% of jobs. 83% of the active population aged 15 and over in Dakar work in the informal private sector, compared to only 10% in the modern private sector (Amara et al, 2018).

Nowadays, the informal sector, also referred to as the "underground economy" or "marginal economy" (Ndébi and Dama, 2020), has spread to almost all economic activities and involves all socio-professional categories, either as promoters or as consumers. Despite this, and as several studies show, informality generally rhymes with precariousness and is often associated with notions of poverty, vulnerability, survival, underemployment, etc.

The Vulnerability of Actors in the Informal Economy

Situated on the margins of labour regulation and designated among the poorest workers, informal sector workers, whether employees or self-employed, are the categories most exposed to the risk of loss of employment and income and to work-related social risks. Their employment is not guaranteed by any contract and they are generally not entitled to any social benefits. Nor do they usually have organisations representing them on a seasonal, casual or temporary basis (FAO, 2020). This type of employment is therefore characterised by the absence of legal or social protection, recourse to informal institutional mechanisms marked by exploitation, generally unstable employment, and low and irregular income.

For all these reasons, non-formal employment is rightly considered unprotected employment as opposed to formal employment. Indeed, "whether they are street or market sellers, domestic workers, seasonal agricultural workers, family helpers, day labourers, hired construction workers, or others, there are either no or virtually no practical arrangements for them to contribute to social insurance, or the amount of contributions is higher than they can afford (especially since employers do not contribute), or the irregularity of their income prevents them from making regular contributions to existing schemes; or the institutions collecting these contributions inspire too little confidence in them to entrust them a priori with part of their income" (Destremau, 2013 : 3). In addition to these problems, there is the lack of health insurance because the health facilities affiliated to the insurance schemes for the poor and vulnerable are too far away, difficult to access, of low quality, under-equipped and constantly understaffed (Lund, 2012).

The working conditions of these workers are poor and are more or less identified with job insecurity, discrimination, non-standard working hours, low levels of training and income, job insecurity and lack of social protection. They are also victims of abuse of power in the absence

⁵ Gross Domestic Product.



of any regulation governing their activities (WCL⁶, 2002), not to mention the fact that they do not benefit from the advantages of social security schemes against accidents at work and occupational diseases, or the fact that informal workplaces are not covered by health and safety at work.

Context and Problem

As the literature presented above shows, informal sector actors are the most vulnerable category of workers. The shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic should, therefore, not leave them on the sidelines if they are not the most exposed.

In Senegal, the response to Covid has been marked by the gradual implementation of several measures. Indeed, following the closure of borders, schools and places of worship and the banning of gatherings, the President of the Republic introduced a State of emergency with a curfew (the hours of which varied gradually over time), as well as a ban on intercity travel and the closure of markets. These measures have obviously contributed to slowing down economic activity, exposing businesses to a drop in revenue with the consequent effect of reducing staff numbers. The informal sector, known for its actors' vulnerability, is not susceptible to this crisis.

This is what the present study seeks to demonstrate, by subscribing to the hypothesis of aggravated vulnerability and analysing the forms of vulnerability induced by the application of Covid-19 prevention measures among workers in the informal sector in Senegal. In concrete terms, this article seeks to answer the question: what is the impact of the application of government measures to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic on workers in the informal economy (or informal sector) in Senegal and particularly in Dakar?

Such a perspective obviously places our article within the classic approach that apprehends the informal sector in terms of the resourcefulness and vulnerability of its actors. However, it is more ambitious because it aims to highlight the risks associated with the transfer of models, especially when we know that the prevention model promoted in Senegal is an attempt to appropriate measures applied in a foreign context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on a qualitative research methodology based on individual interviews with some twenty-five employees and company managers in the informal economy operating in Dakar. A non-probability sampling of the accidental type was used for this purpose. The survey sample is therefore made up of units of the population encountered at random (Depelteau, 2010). Nevertheless, an effort was made to diversify the sample (employees and heads of informal enterprises) and to seek empirical saturation.

For each category of informal actor, employees and self-employed on the one hand and company managers on the other, a specific interview guide was designed to analyse the constraints relating to the application of anti-Covid measures. The survey was carried out in June 2020 in full application of the restrictive measures mentioned above.

⁶ World Confederation of Labour (WCL).



RESULTATS

The results of our study show that informal sector agents have been confronted with several obstacles resulting from the application of the restrictive measures in the context of Covid 19. In particular, businesses have suffered from a drastic fall in turnover, while employees and other self-employed people have been forced into unemployment. In addition, many actors were faced with the impossibility of repaying loans taken out by individuals or banking institutions.

Companies Facing a drastic Fall in Turnover

For four months (March to June), informal sector enterprises were confronted with the harsh reality of the evils of Covid-19. Policy measures aimed at limiting its spread caused significant harm to informal sector entrepreneurs. Indeed, the closure of markets, particularly in Dakar, has forced many economic units to close. Prior to this measure, the closure of borders and the ban on intercity transport had disrupted the distribution of goods. This led to disruptions in supply and thus to a problem of stock availability. The consequence of this state of affairs was, of course, a reduction in the activities of informal businesses and therefore a drop in their turnover.

Like Mbéry, who runs a shop selling second-hand clothes in Colobane, entrepreneurs in the informal sector have had a hard time coping with this situation:

"We are trying to get our heads above water but it is impossible because everything is hard. The authorities have taken decisions that do not account for the people of the informal sector. Yet we contribute to the country's progress because we give jobs to young people and we contribute to taxes by paying the licence and other fees to the town hall. Every day I came down to 30,000 to 40,000 francs. In a month, my activity brought in at least 500,000, without forgetting the young people who came to take my goods to sell and collect commissions. I paid all my expenses and I made a lot of profit but now it is difficult to earn 100,000 francs a month".

On the corniche, the same is true. Babacar (carpenter, cabinetmaker and upholsterer) has been producing and selling furniture for over 10 years. But he is experiencing a similar situation for the first time:

"I have been here for more than 10 years. It has never happened to me to stay one or two weeks without producing or selling. But with the crisis, I have been without producing a single table for over a month. (...) My stock is still not sold and it is difficult to get wood because the whole circuit is closed. The suppliers who have it are few and far between and they have driven up the prices. (...) If I at least had ordered, I would try to buy to earn the minimum but the problem is that we don't see any customers anymore. I earn almost nothing and I struggle to pay my rent".

Babacar's case shows that, in addition to the difficulties in obtaining supplies, some entrepreneurs in the sector are struggling to sell their already available products because of the lack of customers. The latter seem to have changed their priorities because they have also suffered the economic impact of the crisis. They, therefore, prefer to focus on the purchase of basic necessities. This seems to justify the fact that among the informal entrepreneurs least affected by the crisis are the neighbourhood shopkeepers who sell foodstuffs. However, although they are less exposed than their peers, they have suffered a drop in turnover due to



stock-outs, the drop in customers' purchasing power and the rise in prices.

The testimony of Mamadou (shopkeeper in Fass) is, in this respect, very illustrative:

"Yes, I think we are doing better than others, but we are also suffering the effects of the disease. Personally, I earn less than half of what I used to. Many clients don't have the purchasing power they used to have. In some families, the person who used to pay for the ration no longer works. Some people ask me to give them credit, but I rarely accept because having goods to sell has become more difficult and I don't want to run the risk of seeing my stock run out without having enough to renew it".

Other entrepreneurs we met agree with those whose testimonies are reported here.

These various observations allow us to say that businesses in the informal sector have suffered the full impact of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The reduction in the purchasing power of customers, disruptions in the supply chain and price increases have had an impact on the activity and turnover of informal entrepreneurs. In addition, the closure of markets has forced others to stop their activities and simply remain inactive. This situation has been aggravated by the fact that, according to the entrepreneurs interviewed, they have not benefited from the subsidies granted to the private sector by the State.

Unemployment among Employees and Self-Employed

The damage suffered by informal enterprises affected their employees as well as the intermediaries who were in the production and/or marketing chain. The informal entrepreneurs we met who, at times, continued their activities in this context of Covid-19 were obliged to release all or part of their staff to ensure the minimum of viable activities. This is certainly a pragmatic solution to minimise costs and cope with the drop in revenue. But the consequence of such an option is the unemployment of workers formerly employed by these companies.

This unemployment also affects informal day labourers recruited by formal enterprises. Indeed, faced with the drop in their turnover, these companies were obliged to release some of their employees, particularly informal workers; the latter were not taken into account by the obligation for companies benefiting from the extension of the VAT⁷ payment deadline and the State⁸ subsidy to pay part of the salary (70%) of the employee made technically unemployed because of Covid-19. This is the case of Antoine (ex. Day labourer in a local factory):

"I was working as a day labourer in a factory. I don't have a contract and I was paid on a daily basis. With Covid-19, they let us know that they didn't need us anymore because there was less work and they wanted to avoid the rallies, but they kept some who had contracts. Even the others who had contracts and were temporarily released were given their salaries. But we were not given anything. This is a double standard".

The case of this day labourer shows that the lack of social protection makes informal sector actors more vulnerable than other categories of workers; a vulnerability that has, therefore, increased with Covid-19. Intermediaries who acted as touts for formal and informal businesses

⁷ Value Added Tax.

⁸ These measures were taken by the President of the Republic to support companies and encourage them to keep their staff.



and who received commissions were also adversely affected by the pandemic.

In the commercial sector, touts like Mor were simply thrown out of the loop:

"I work at the HLM market but I have stopped because of the disease. I work at the HLM market, but i've stopped because of illness. My role there was to identify customers and direct them to shops that sell the products they needed. Sometimes I would collect the goods to sell them in the aisles and then I would pay the manager who would give me my share at the end (...). There are many people in the markets of Dakar who only do this because it pays. You can earn 3,000 to 5,000 francs a day without any charges. It is because of the illness that the shops no longer call on us because some have closed and others no longer have many customers".

The same is true in other areas such as transport. Here, the ban on intercity travel has meant a real loss of income for intercity drivers (and their apprentices) who have been forced to park their vehicles for several months. Similarly, some brokers⁹ who participated in the transport service offered were forced to withdraw from the circuit for lack of commission. In addition to these categories of newly unemployed, there are also self-employed people such as the managers of gargotes and food sellers (peanuts and doughnuts) who used to operate in front of schools, markets and on the street.

The words of Binta (a breakfast seller in front of a high school in Dakar) reflect this economic damage:

"My main activity was selling breakfast. I can no longer sell because the pupils are my customers and the schools are currently closed. It is with this activity that I managed to provide for my family. Now I don't do anything. It is difficult".

The comments quoted in the illustration highlight the fragility of workers in the informal sector as well as that of their households. In addition to economic vulnerability, they highlight a social or even psychological vulnerability that can be seen in the psycho-emotional burden resulting from the impossibility of meeting household needs due to the cessation of informal activities.

A Concern about Unpaid Loans

In addition to the above-mentioned prejudices, some workers in the informal sector lived with the anxiety of not being able to honour their commitments to their creditors (banks, microfinance institutions and individuals).

This situation seems to particularly affect Maimouna (owner of a multiservice business set up opposite a school) who fears being sued by her creditor:

"I had obtained a credit of 600,000 fr from a banking institution to buy equipment. I have to pay 40,000 fr per month but after 3 months of repayment, the crisis came. The bank is putting pressure on me, it has even offered me flexibility, but even with that, I am not able to repay because my business is no longer working. I am afraid that they will seize my equipment or that they will file a complaint against me".

The anxiety experienced by this woman is similar to that experienced by other entrepreneurs and self-employed workers who, despite their goodwill, find it difficult to honour their

⁹ Discounters operating at vehicle stops and bus stations.



commitments. This is the case of Binta (a breakfast seller) who owes three months' rent to her landlord:

"What bothers me in all this is the fact that I have not paid my rent for a few months. I have a landlord who is very sympathetic and knows that my business is not working since the coronavirus spread. He tried to reassure me but I'm not the kind of person to beg for mercy. I have trouble sleeping because I don't want to be disrespected one day. This situation really worries me".

It is therefore clear, that in addition to the economic loss, many workers in the informal sector experience the torment of not being able to honour their commitments. At a time when some fear legal proceedings, others seem to feel morally embarrassed by their creditors and/or lessors.

For others, this situation is accompanied by a feeling of injustice and contempt when it is known that informal sector agents feel that they do not benefit from the support measures initiated by the Senegalese authorities.

The feeling conveyed by Modou (a tailor at the Colobane market) is representative of the perceptions of many of the actors we met:

"The State has taken the measure of subsidising businesses to help them keep their employees, but as far as I know no worker in the informal sector has benefited from this. I have heard that the State has asked the banks to postpone the repayment of loans to businesses, but we are not taken into account. We create jobs, and we pay taxes but we are left to our own devices. It's all very well to think about health, but if the State had thought about the people in the informal sector, it wouldn't have rushed to block everything and impose a halt to our activities".

However, measures to support informal sector workers have been announced by the public authorities, but it seems that the actions promised to this effect have not yet benefited the people we spoke to.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The Covid-19 pandemic, beyond its uncertainty, has put the modes of public regulation to the test. This study shows that in the Senegalese context, the application of restrictive measures against a backdrop of public policy transfer seems to have led to a problem of adaptability. Olivier De Sardan (2021) put forward the idea of revenge in the context to analyse the perverse effects of the transfer of the model. The traveller model of travel restriction has thus contributed to further weakening the actors of the informal economy in Senegal. The work of Saunier (2014) has also discussed the complexity of taking on ideas and practices from outside a local context.

Obviously, the restrictive measures applied in Senegal followed the examples of China and California (in the USA), which were sold, rightly or wrongly, as a way of popularising a model that had been tested elsewhere since the early months of Covid in Senegal. This article, therefore, confirms the risks associated with the dissemination of copy-paste models despite the efforts of persuasion or socialisation (Debonneville & Diaz, 2013) that have been undertaken. In so doing, it confirms the need to think and act locally in order to implement



public measures even in a crisis context.

CONCLUSION

The covid-19 pandemic, a global health crisis, has had enormous consequences, particularly for the informal sector in senegal. The data collected in this article show that the application of the response measures to this pandemic (introduction of a curfew, closure of schools, markets and other places of business, prohibition of inter-city transport, etc.) Has led to a fall in the turnover of entrepreneurs in the sector and forced employees into unemployment. This has made them even more vulnerable.

In addition to adding to the scientific literature on labour and particularly on the informal sector, this article highlights one of the many incongruities of senegal's strategy for responding to covid-19. It thus constitutes a significant contribution to the reflection on covid-19, which has become, in addition to a political and health emergency, a fairly transversal scientific subject. However, the non-exhaustive nature of the study and its limited time frame (march to june 2020) reduce its generalisability and its capacity to question the long-term impact of the measures in question.

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