

## 'When the stomach is full we look for respect': perceptions of 'good work' in the urban informal sectors of three developing countries

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Monteith, W., & Giesbert, L. (2017). 'When the stomach is full we look for respect': perceptions of 'good work' in the urban informal sectors of three developing countries. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(5), 816-833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016650606>

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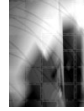
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Article

# ‘When the stomach is full we look for respect’: perceptions of ‘good work’ in the urban informal sectors of three developing countries

Work, employment and society

2017, Vol. 31(5) 816–833

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DOI: 10.1177/0950017016650606

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## Abstract

There is growing interest in the ability of the informal sector to provide gainful work in much of the developing world. However, the literature on work in the informal sector remains dominated by resource- and rights-based approaches, which fail to consider the features of work valued by informal workers themselves. This article investigates perceptions of ‘good work’ based on focus group discussions with informal workers in the capitals of Uganda, Burkina Faso and Sri Lanka. Using the capability approach as a framework, it reveals that informal workers value a combination of instrumental features of work, such as income and working hours, and intrinsic aspects, such as relationships and recognition. The article’s findings contribute to debates on quality of work in formal and informal contexts by illustrating the role of social and environmental conversion factors, including gender and class relations, in mediating the relationship between work and well-being.

## Keywords

Burkina Faso, capability approach, focus group discussions, informal sector, quality of work, self-employment, social recognition, Sri Lanka, Uganda, well-being

## Introduction

Work is important not only as a provider of income, but also as a source of personal development, psychological stability and social participation and recognition (Burchell et al.,

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2014; Dahl et al., 2009). While certain forms of work are considered better providers of such benefits than others, there remains debate on exactly what constitutes good work, i.e. work that impacts positively on a person's well-being. It was long assumed that only registered forms of employment based on universal labour standards could generate the conditions necessary for good work (Deranty and MacMillan, 2012). However, this assumption has been brought into question over the past 30 years by the rapid expansion of the informal sector. Contributions to *Work, employment and society* have been at the forefront of efforts to unpack and understand the sector, showing it to be a 'persistent and ubiquitous feature of the economic landscape' (Williams and Nadin, 2012: 1) and a potential provider of 'decent work' and valuable work life experience (Hill, 2001; Tipple, 2006).

The growth of the informal sector is particularly pronounced in the developing world, where it is driven by urbanization, the shrinking of the public sector and the increasing number of young people entering the labour market (Bremán, 2010; World Bank, 2012a). However, empirical studies of quality of work remain predominantly focused on the experiences of formal employees in developed countries (e.g. Dahl et al., 2009; De Bustillo et al., 2009). Using Amartya Sen's capability approach as a framework, this article seeks to address this gap by investigating the features of work valued by workers in the informal sectors of three developing countries.

## **The informal sector: resource-based and socio-political approaches**

The informal sector has a long conceptual history, and debates over its identification and measurement are ongoing (e.g. Gërxhani, 2004; Portes et al., 1989). Empirical studies have shown that the sector is highly heterogeneous, varying according to a complex combination of socio-economic and cultural factors (Bremán, 2010; Davis, 2006; Harriss-White, 2010). Williams and Nadin (2012: 2) note that at their broadest, informal activities include 'all work that is not "formal employment"' – defined as paid work registered with the state – including 'unpaid domestic work', 'unpaid voluntary and community work' and 'paid undeclared work'. This article restricts its focus to the latter category, i.e. to undeclared forms of employment in firms that are not or only minimally registered with state authorities. Specifically, it investigates work in the context of the 'small-scale informal sector', which provides work for the majority of the urban workforce in the developing world (Harriss-White, 2010). This category includes entrepreneurs working in their own informal sector enterprises as own-account workers or employers, subcontractors of enterprises and employees working in the informal enterprises of others. However, it excludes unregulated workers in large private firms and public-sector institutions (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2012).

It is possible to identify two key branches of the literature on the informal sector in the developing world. First, the resource-based literature approaches the informal sector as a collection of businesses (units of production) whose growth is constrained by access to various resources, such as information and capital. This literature has shown informal business performance to be highly heterogeneous, opposing the long-standing view of informal activities as purely subsistence-oriented (De Mel et al., 2009; Grimm et al., 2011). Second, the socio-political literature conceptualizes the informal sector as a

collection of activities resulting from state withdrawal and the structural marginalization of particular sections of society. This literature has emphasized the more destructive strategies of 'survivalism' present in the sector (Davis, 2006), and the social institutions – organized around gender, age, caste and class – that provide forms of affiliation and protection in the absence of state support (Harriss-White, 2010; Lindell, 2010).

Both literatures have shown women's participation in the sector to be more constrained and less profitable than men's due to the endurance of gendered divisions of domestic labour and societal norms that place less value on women's paid work (see e.g. De Mel et al., 2009; Harriss-White, 2010). However, the resource-based approach continues to occupy a more influential position in policy circles (see Benjamin et al., 2014). Writing in this journal, Hill (2001) mounts a critique of this approach, asserting that rather than experiencing work as a purely objective exercise in utility-maximization, informal workers experience it *subjectively* through processes of social exchange, dialogue and recognition. As such, the 'material sphere of economic development and wellbeing' in the informal sector is linked to a social or 'moral' sphere of 'personal integrity' that cannot be meaningfully addressed by resource-based approaches alone (Hill, 2001: 461). A more comprehensive framework is arguably provided by the quality of work literature.

## Evaluating quality of work

The quality of people's work has received renewed attention over the past 20 years, based on the understanding that it plays an important role in increasing productivity and self-sufficiency, and in reducing poverty and social exclusion (e.g. ILO, 2012; World Bank, 2012a). While there is general agreement that quality of work is a multidimensional concept that contains both monetary and non-monetary dimensions (Dahl et al., 2009; Green, 2006; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005), there is little consensus on the dimensions it should contain. This decision is often guided by one of three disciplinary tracks: economy, sociology or psychology. An indication of these approaches is provided in Table 1 (for a detailed review, see Burchell et al., 2014; Dahl et al., 2009; De Bustillo et al., 2009).

Firstly, economic approaches focus on forms of material compensation, such as income, insurances and fringe benefits, based on the premise that labour market activity is the result of the utility-maximizing behaviour of individuals (Dahl et al., 2009). As such, they generally neglect non-monetary outcomes of work, which have been shown to be more influential than earnings in people's own evaluations of their work (Jencks et al., 1988). Secondly, sociological approaches emphasize the importance of skilled work, occupational status and autonomy (influence and discretion over tasks), in the face of the 'dehumanising' effects of the division of labour (Green, 2006: 12). Such approaches have been critiqued for paying insufficient attention to worker preferences (Gallie, 1996). Finally, psychological approaches emphasize non-material benefits of work, such as intrinsically meaningful and challenging work, and social recognition (Deranty, 2009). They are concerned with the psychological sources of worker satisfaction (Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005), which are broadly analogous to Hill's (2001) moral sphere of 'personal integrity'.

**Table 1.** Theoretical approaches to quality of work.

	Characteristics of work	Outcomes of work
Economics	Working hours Job security	Income Fringe benefits Health insurance Pension contributions
Sociology	Autonomy and control Skill utilization Diversity of tasks Opportunities for learning	Autonomy Occupational status Well-being
Psychology	Challenging work Meaningful work Trust at work Relationships at work	Social recognition Job satisfaction Well-being
Interdisciplinary (The ILO's Decent Work initiative)	Working hours Job tenure Non-discrimination Health and safety Healthcare provisions Union coverage	Income Health insurance Social security Pension contributions

Source: Authors' compilation after Burchell et al. (2014), Dahl et al. (2009) and ILO (2012).

International institutions have also waded into debates on quality of work. The ILO's 'Decent Work' initiative (DWI) arguably provides the most prominent multidimensional approach to the evaluation of quality of work, incorporating characteristics and outcomes from all three disciplinary approaches outlined above. The DWI is a rights-based approach comprising a standardized set of indicators derived from the strategic policy objectives of the ILO (see Table 1). Unlike the unidisciplinary approaches, the DWI has formed the basis for a small number of empirical studies of quality of work in developing countries (Luebker, 2008; Tipple, 2006). For example, Tipple (2006) investigates quality of work in home-based enterprises in four developing countries, finding poor rates of health and safety and of union coverage.

However, despite the DWI's provision of a broader framework for evaluating quality of work, it is restricted by a methodological reliance on universally measurable dimensions, which fail to consider conditions specific to the informal sector. For example, while 'union coverage' may provide an accurate indication of 'social dialogue' and representation in the formal sectors of developed countries, it appears less appropriate to workers in informal settings, who instead seek dialogue, representation and well-being through informal networks and associations (Harriss-White, 2010; Lindell, 2010).

## Work and capabilities

One theoretical framework that enables the connecting of material conditions to individual well-being is Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) (Sen, 1999). Grounded in a critique of utilitarian models of human development, the CA emphasizes the need to

consider both the means *and* the ends of a person's well-being. There has been a convergence between sociological approaches to quality of work and the CA in recent years (Dahl et al., 2009). Following Sen, Green (2006) argues that high-quality jobs generate capabilities that workers can convert into well-being and a range of personal goals. A high quality job is therefore 'one that affords the worker a certain capability – the ability and the flexibility to perform a range of tasks [...] to draw on the comradeship of others working in cooperation, to chose from and pursue a range of agency goals and to command an income that delivers high capability for consumption' (Green, 2006: 14–15). Based on this understanding, particular outcomes of work, such as income, may provide particular *capabilities*, such as a high capacity for consumption. However, this transfer is dependent on *social conversion factors*, such as norms pertaining to consumption, and *environmental conversion factors*, such as the price and availability of goods (Sen, 1999). In this way, a person may experience multiple outcomes of a good job and yet achieve a low level of well-being.

The CA provides two particular benefits related to the literatures outlined above. First, it adds value to the quality of work literature insofar as it provides a framework for relating specific characteristics and outcomes of work to the well-being goals that workers have reason to value, establishing a relationship between the objective characteristics and subjective experiences of work. Second, it provides a space for the identification of contextual factors that enable and restrict the conversion of these characteristics and outcomes into well-being. This space is of particular benefit to studies of quality of work in informal, developing contexts insofar as it enables the identification of a broader range of factors – such as economic competition, social welfare systems and gender roles – that are critical to quality of work as it is experienced on the ground (Miles, 2014).

## Country contexts

South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are the two regions of the world with the highest rates of informal employment, in which the informal sector is responsible for approximately 66 per cent and 82 per cent of non-agricultural employment respectively (World Bank, 2012a). Three fieldwork sites with divergent social, economic and demographic profiles were selected in these regions in order to better understand the role of conversion factors in subjective experiences of work. An overview of these factors is provided in Table 2.

While both Uganda and Burkina Faso are classed as low-income, Sri Lanka is a middle-income country that has continued to experience strong economic growth since the end of its civil war in 2009. Uganda has also seen extended periods of growth since the 1990s, accompanied by large-scale development assistance, which have brought down poverty rates to much lower levels than in Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso and Sri Lanka have been particularly affected by political instability in recent years, the former relating to the fractionalization of the ruling party and military, and the latter to the endurance of post-conflict tensions between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and Muslim and Hindu Tamil minorities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014a, 2014b).

The non-agricultural sector contributes significantly to the economy in all three countries. However, it provides work to a much lower proportion of people in Burkina Faso, which is a highly agrarian economy, as it is hampered by lower rates of competitiveness

**Table 2.** Overview of socio-economic and labour market conditions.

Indicators	Burkina Faso	Uganda	Sri Lanka
<b>Socio-economic profile</b>			
Total population (million)	17	38	21
GDP growth rate (%)	6.5	4.4	6.3
GNI per capita in PPP (international \$)	1500	1620	8830
HDI rank (out of 187) <sup>a</sup>	181	164	73
Urban population below national poverty line (%)	25.2 (2009)	9.6	2.1 (2013)
UNDP gender inequality index rank (out of 151)	133	115	75
Non-agricultural sector value added (% of total GDP)	66.2 (2011)	76.2 (2011)	87.9 (2011)
Non-agricultural employment (% of total) <sup>b</sup>	15.3 (2005)	34.4 (2009)	59.2
Informal employment (% non-agricultural)	70.0 <sup>c</sup>	68.5 (2010) <sup>b</sup>	62.1 (2010) <sup>b</sup>
Female labour force participation rate (%)	77	76	35
Gender gap in labour force participation <sup>b</sup>	0.9	0.96	0.48
Gender gap in informal labour force participation <sup>b</sup>	–	0.83 (2010)	0.41 (2010)
Ease of doing business index (rank 1 = most business-friendly)	161	105	152
<b>Business environment</b>			
Global Competitiveness Index (score 1 = least to 7 = most competitive)	3.21	3.56	4.22
Use of an account at a financial institution (% age 15+) (2014)	13	28	83
Public expenditure on health (% of GDP)	3.6	4.2	1.2
Out-of-pocket expenditures on health (% of private expenditures)	82.7	69.1	83.0
Social security coverage (% of employment) <sup>b</sup>	1.2 (2005)	10.3 (2005)	24.1 (2005)

Source: Authors' compilation. Figures refer to the year 2012 and were obtained from the World Bank's Database (2012b) if not otherwise indicated. Other sources: <sup>a</sup>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2007, 2012; <sup>b</sup>ILO, 2014; <sup>c</sup>Traore, 2013.

and 'ease of doing business'. Within the non-agricultural sector, informal activities contribute over 60 per cent of total employment in all three cases. Uganda's informal sector is growing the fastest, at an annual rate of 20 per cent in urban areas, and the country has recently been declared the most entrepreneurial in the world (Singer et al., 2015: 35). Dominant informal activities in the capital Kampala include the retail of produce and second-hand clothing, wood and metal fabrication, transport and food processing (World Bank, 2005). Markets for machinery, electronics and textiles have become saturated with Chinese products in recent years due to the reduction of import tariffs (Lee, 2007). Transport is also a dominant activity in Colombo's informal sector, in addition to construction, hospitality and food retail (Sinha, 2012). Meanwhile, informal activity in Ouagadougou is characterized by the retail of basic foods and clothing (as in Kampala), as well as a nascent construction industry (Benjamin and Mbaye, 2012).

Female participation in both the formal and informal labour markets is considerably higher in Uganda and Burkina Faso than in Sri Lanka, though the latter boasts improved overall gender equality, as captured by the UNDP index. Higher rates of female participation in Uganda and Burkina Faso are arguably driven by lower relative incomes – where one provider is rarely sufficient to sustain a household – among other factors. Women in all three countries are more likely to be own-account workers and subcontractors (rather than employees or owners of informal enterprises) than men, and experience more restricted access to credit (Chen, 2001: 4–5). Furthermore, the social ideal of the 'male breadwinner' remains prevalent in all three settings, and female participation often forms part of a 'double burden' of paid and domestic work (Harriss-White, 2010).

Little information is available on the class composition of the informal sector in each country. Although the sector as a whole comprises several 'fault lines' in terms of its organization and security of labour, the small-scale informal sector is dominated by groups with poor access to formal systems of education, social protection and political organization relative to the broader population (Harriss-White, 2010). In Sri Lanka, caste also serves as a form of secular ranking that 'shapes ideologies of work and status, determines kinship and constrains occupation' (Harriss-White, 2010: 173), albeit one that overlaps with wealth and political power (Silva et al., 2009). In Burkina Faso, however, socio-economic inequalities between the formal and informal sectors are less acute than in the other two cases, and the country has a relatively 'unique' history of avoiding violent conflict based on class or ethnicity (Englebert, 1996).

Healthcare provisions in Uganda are under-resourced and characterized by hidden fees and payments (Meessen et al., 2006), while Burkina Faso has one of the lowest social security coverage levels in the world and no access to free healthcare (Ridde et al., 2014). Sri Lanka, in contrast, has a relatively well-developed healthcare system that is accessible to the majority of the population, despite a reliance on out-of-pocket expenditure (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014b). In response to poor access to formal welfare systems, informal associations are prevalent in all three capitals. In Uganda, informal workers have a more pronounced history of political mobilization than in Burkina Faso, which can be traced back to the government's decentralization programme in the 1980s (Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012). Groups in Sri Lanka, meanwhile, are often organized around the ethnic and religious categories described above, and have been limited by government restrictions on public assembly in recent years (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014b).



## Methodology

A qualitative methodology was designed to generate depth rather than breadth of information on people's experiences and perceptions of work. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected for their ability to generate higher levels of debate and interaction relative to other qualitative methods (Ely, 1994). A total of 13 FGDs were held in the capitals of Burkina Faso, Uganda and Sri Lanka, using a purposive sampling frame. First, a list of groups and associations organized around small-scale informal activities was compiled in each setting with the help of local research collaborators. An early finding of the research was the prevalence and diversity of informal associations in each country, ranging from historical professional associations to temporary savings rounds. Second, a number of the listed groups were approached; they were selected to obtain as diverse a sample as possible in terms of types of profession and levels of organization, while maintaining comparability across countries. Third, receptive groups were asked to provide a set of respondents broadly representative of their organization as a whole (e.g. in terms of age and position). Each group consisted of between seven and nine participants (104 in total), and all were made up of one gender, reflecting the gendered division of informal professions in each country. In Sri Lanka, fewer female groups were identified and sampled due to their lower rate of participation in the informal labour market. Although not captured systematically, a broad range of age groups was present in each discussion, with the exception of male transport groups, whose professions are dominated by men under the age of 40. The final sample is displayed in Table 3.

The selection of 'natural' FGD groups was designed to make use of existing rapport between participants and encourage open discussion (Ely, 1994). However, not all informal workers are organized into visible associations (Harriss-White, 2010). As such, our

**Table 3.** Focus group demographics.

Country	Occupational group	Participants	
		Male	Female
Burkina Faso	Women's market association	0	8
	Mechanics' association	9	0
	Mixed women's collective	0	9
Uganda	Association of transport workers	8	0
	Mixed women's collective	0	9
	Mechanics' association	8	0
	Tailors' association	0	8
	Carpenters' association	8	0
Sri Lanka	Association of transport workers	8	0
	Association of self-employed	8	0
	Market welfare association	7	0
	Association of transport workers	7	0
	Association of food makers	0	7
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>63</b>	<b>41</b>

selection excluded unaffiliated workers and workers affiliated to unidentified groups, who may have placed less emphasis on the social dimensions of work.

Semi-structured FGDs were designed around two core questions and a participatory exercise. The questions asked respondents to: (a) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of their current work; and (b) identify features that they considered important to good work in general. Subsequently, participants were asked to rank the features raised during the discussion from the most to the least important. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage respondents to evaluate and justify certain features of work in relation to others in order to provoke comparison and differentiate between strong and weak preferences. The discussions were facilitated in Luganda, Mooré and Sinhala with the assistance of local collaborators who were present with one of the researchers in each discussion.

Analysis of the verbatim translated transcripts was based on Saldaña's (2009) two-stage approach to qualitative coding using the coding software Atlas.ti. During a first cycle of coding a mix of deductive and inductive codes were applied to the transcripts to identify key attributes of participants (e.g. country, age and gender), and emerging themes of the discussion (e.g. particular benefits and challenges of work). In a second stage, an inductive and eclectic combination of descriptive, process and pattern coding was applied to the transcripts to isolate valued characteristics and outcomes of work and significant personal, social and environmental conversion factors.

## Perceptions and experiences of informal workers

Participants in Kampala, Ouagadougou and Colombo approached the topic of good work not as a set of abstract terms and conditions, but as a series of interconnected features, grounded in their individual and collective experiences. Table 4 displays the average ranking of the 'features of good work' exercise from 13 group discussions.

The listed features span the economic, sociological and psychological branches of the quality of work literature, adding weight to the understanding that good work in the informal sector is comprised of multiple dimensions. They also include features, such as 'access to health services', that may be considered aspects of a *good society* rather than of good work per se. However, it will be argued that these are important findings insofar as they underline the significance of conversion factors in people's experiences of work. The following sections provide a thematic analysis of the dimensions of work that attracted the most discussion across the FGDs: income and health, freedom and independence, trust at work and social recognition, respectively.

### *Income, health and survival*

Income was understood to be an important feature of good work and a key motivation for most informal workers. However, it was rarely seen as an end in itself, but rather a means to manage various situations across personal, social and family life. First and foremost, participants associated income with personal health and survival, emphasizing the importance of working to 'kill hunger' (male street vendor, Colombo) and ensure they do not go to sleep on an empty stomach. This purpose was mentioned most frequently in Ouagadougou, where the average income of informal workers is lowest.

**Table 4.** Average rankings of features of 'good work'.

Average ranking	Feature of work
1	Income
2	Access to health services
~3	Health impact of work
~3	Fundamental rights at work
4	Trust at work
~5	Physical security
~5	Personal freedom and independence
~6	Relationships at work
~6	Work-family balance
~6	Opportunities for training

Note: The results of the consensus ranking exercise in each group were first aggregated into an average for each country, then combined into this overall, three-country ranking.

Second, participants valued income insofar as it enabled them to provide for their families. Important provisions included food, clothes, rent and – in the two African settings – school and medical fees, which are poorly provided for by the state. However, men and women described the relationship between income and well-being in different ways. While women often described the benefits of income matter-of-factly – stating, for example, 'we are able to pay our children's school fees; good work can't do more than that' (female tailor, Ouagadougou) – men spoke at greater length of the value of providing for their families:

When you can provide your family and wife at home with basic necessities [...] this makes your wife proud of you to the extent that she can tell the neighbours: 'My husband is a *boda-boda* cyclist and he provides me with everything that I need'. But if you are a *boda-boda* cyclist and you don't provide for your family, that means that you have not made your job good. (Male *boda-boda* driver, Kampala)

Similarly, male mechanics in Burkina Faso emphasized that their income allowed them to support their households without relying on their extended family, while transport workers in Sri Lanka noted that it enabled their wives to pay for goods in the market in cash rather than on credit. In this way, income was not seen to be of intrinsic importance, but rather cherished insofar as it enabled the purchase of goods (i) that people had reason to value, and (ii) whose provision signified the fulfilment of a valued role in society. Dominant gender roles – such as the ideal of the male household provider – may be understood as a conversion factor between income and well-being that arguably placed additional significance on the income of male participants.

Two further features of good work that emerged strongly from the discussions were related to health: the direct health impact of work, and workers' access to health services. However, different emphases were placed on these features between countries. While five out of eight groups in Uganda and Burkina Faso ranked health-related aspects of work among their top two features of 'good work', no groups did so in Sri Lanka. First,

participants in the two African settings generally agreed that work that posed a threat to their personal health could not be good, irrelevant of the income it provided, emphasizing: 'good work entirely depends on good health' (female vendor, Kampala), 'health is the basis of everything' (female vendor, Ouagadougou) and 'health is wealth' (male mechanic, Kampala).

Second, access to medical services and treatment was also prioritized as a feature of good work in Kampala and Ouagadougou but not in Colombo, arguably due to the increased accessibility and per capita expenditure of its healthcare system. Justifying its selection, a Ugandan mechanic asserted that he had been unable to treat wounds inflicted by his work due to the high price of bandages – the common treatment was to take a painkiller – and that these had subsequently become infected through their exposure to oil. Similarly, a Burkinabé produce vendor explained that she had no choice but to rely on 'traditional medicines' owing to the high cost of a medical appointment (FCFA 1000) relative to her daily income (FCFA 300), leaving her incapacitated for extended periods. In this way, the inaccessibility of affordable healthcare in Kampala and Ouagadougou was understood to exacerbate the negative health impacts of informal work.

The importance of income (as wages or business capital) and to a lesser extent health (as insurances) is well established in the economic literature on quality of work (e.g. Dahl et al., 2009). Similarly, wages, occupational injury rates and social security provisions are incorporated in the DWI. However, the accounts presented here demonstrate that the relationship between income and well-being is mediated by a number of social and environmental conversion factors, such as gender roles and the cost and availability of healthcare, that are neglected in these approaches.

### *Freedom and independence*

Participants drew upon the themes of freedom and independence to describe the influence and discretion they could assert over three core aspects of work: their income, working hours and working activities. As a Sri Lankan three-wheel-taxi driver explained, 'Freedom is there, independence is there, variety is there, [we are] financially good, so we are like birds on three wheels, only feathers are missing [...] others envy us for having those things' (male transport association member, Colombo). His testimony emphasizes the autonomy and variety of informal transport work in Colombo, comparing drivers to 'birds' gliding over the streets of the city.

Many groups valued the autonomy provided by their work in relation to the things that they were able to do and to be outside of it. For example, male *boda-boda* drivers in Kampala emphasized that the flexible nature of their work enabled them to attend important family events such as burials. Furthermore, male street vendors and transport workers in Colombo explained that their work allowed them to take their children to school every day and share a family meal in the evening; benefits that were thought to have been lost in formal professions such as teaching and government administration.

However, participants also asserted that their experiences of freedom were in conflict with other features of their work, such as the need to generate income. This was particularly the case in more competitive sectors, such as mechanics and transport workers in Kampala and Ouagadougou, and taxi drivers in Colombo. For example, a Sri Lankan taxi

driver argued, 'The days we get more freedom we are not earning' and 'If we stay free, we have to stay hungry at home'. As such, although workers were free to manage their time as they pleased *in theory*, in practice, they were often required to work long, unsociable hours in order to generate a level of income sufficient to purchase valued goods, such as those identified in the previous section.

Female participants in Ouagadougou described an additional limitation on the control they were able to exert over their work in practice:

Our fathers and husbands don't have the same vision [as us]. Men are jealous of the success of their wives; they have a negative attitude towards our work and don't want us to be richer than them. This attitude affects the success of our commerce. (Female market vendor, Ouagadougou)

A number of Burkinabé market vendors stated that they didn't have the support of their husbands and that their work created tensions at home when it prevented them from being able to engage in expected forms of domestic labour, thus leading to the reduction of their working hours and income. Furthermore, female tailors provided accounts of colleagues whose husbands had deterred them from working altogether. Their counterparts in Uganda and Sri Lanka also noted the additional burdens of domestic labour; however, such factors were not considered to have such a significant effect on their experiences of work as in Burkina, which has the highest gender inequality ranking of the three countries.

Autonomy and control are central concepts in the sociological literature on quality of work. They are typically evaluated in relation to standardized work procedures, formal rules and surveillance systems; conditions that affect quality of work as it is experienced in the formal sectors of developed countries (Green, 2006; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005). Our findings have shown that the general absence of such conditions in the small-scale informal sector conveys a sense of autonomy to (particularly self-employed) workers. However, significant inequalities are evident both in the realization of this autonomy and in workers' ability to convert it into well-being. For example, while flexible working hours provide male workers in Colombo with the intrinsic benefits of time spent with their children, they can condemn female workers in Ouagadougou to unwelcome forms of additional labour. As such, assessments of independence and autonomy must take into account the mediating role of conversion factors beyond the workplace, such as economic competition and the division of household labour, if they are to accurately reflect gains to worker well-being.

### *Trust and relationships at work*

Participants emphasized the importance of trust within two specific relationships: those with customers and those with colleagues. Firstly, a level of trust between workers and customers was understood to be imperative to the conducting of business, particularly in service industries where customers were required to entrust their possessions to workers. A useful example of the interrelationships between trust, reputation and broader features of informal work was provided in the discussion with Ugandan mechanics. The mechanics argued that the local market for spare parts was filled with 'fake' products produced

by Chinese manufacturers, which they had to use in their repairs. When the parts broke, customers would complain and go to a new mechanic. The new mechanic – desperate for new customers – would then claim they were ‘cheated’ by the old mechanic, before fitting their vehicle with another fake part. This cycle, it was argued, had led to a situation in which all local mechanics had a reputation as being ‘thieves’, to the detriment of the entire profession. In this case, the erosion of trust (and subsequent damage to people’s experience of work) cannot be understood simply as a result of a mechanic’s decision to fit fake parts; it is also a symptom of environmental factors such as the deregulation of the markets for spare parts in Uganda and high levels of economic competition between mechanics.

The second relationship that participants deemed to be important to good work was that between workers and their colleagues or co-workers. Different forms of association were understood to perform different functions. For example, male carpenters in Kampala were organized into associations that enforced fines and suspensions for people who violated codes of customer care or remained in the workplace outside of designated hours. Such associations were understood to play an important role in managing relationships and establishing trust in a profession with a high turnover of young men:

This place has taught us how to behave. We all come from different backgrounds, some come with bad manners, but we have to be trustworthy – like our friend here [gestures at another participant] who is entrusted with the products of others. This place teaches us that. (Male carpenter, Kampala)

The ‘backgrounds’ that were seen to be particularly important to manage in Kampala included party-political affiliations, in a context where clashes often break out in workplaces in the run-up to elections (Goodfellow and Titeca, 2012). In contrast, participants in Sri Lanka emphasized the importance of relationships in managing ethnic and religious divisions in the wake of the civil war, for example by encouraging workers to participate in the cultural and religious ceremonies of their neighbours (male taxi drivers; male street vendors). Finally, women’s associations in Burkina Faso were particularly attuned to issues of gender, for example by providing members with savings schemes for their children’s education, allowing them to save money away from the claims of other members of their households.

Overall, participants identified four key benefits of relationships with colleagues. First, these relationships were understood to be instrumental to other areas of work, for example by providing security, advice, equipment and general forms of stability and assistance. Second, they were thought to provide a safety net by helping to cover medical and burial fees in case of accidents, injuries and deaths in the family (acknowledged as ‘informal insurance’ mechanisms in the resource-based literature; De Mel et al., 2009). Third, collaborative relationships, particularly in the form of associations, were understood to improve recognition of particular professions, and facilitate better collaboration with the government and other groups (emphasized in the socio-political literature; Lindell, 2010). However, finally – and perhaps most significantly – they were seen to provide participants with the intrinsic benefits of solidarity and friendship. As a Sri Lankan street vendor explained:

For around 30 years all [workers] near the Titus Stores Building have been like brothers [...] if someone goes down in business we all discuss it and help him. It has happened to me, I've fallen sick, they have come to the hospital and helped me [...] I was very happy when they came to see me, they even bought clothes for me. (Male street vendor, Colombo)

Groups in all three countries emphasized the spirit of 'togetherness' present in their workplace that had led to the making of 'real friends' that transcended the workplace. As such, relationships at work were not seen simply as a means to other ends, but also as an end in themselves. The training, support and advice offered by relationships at work provided valuable sources of self-realization, emphasized in the psychological literature on quality of work (Deranty, 2009; Green, 2006). This finding challenges the means-to-an-end understandings of labour market activity that underpin economic approaches to work. However, it also provides a critique of socio-political perspectives that reduce relationships in the informal sector to the 'survival' strategies of marginalized classes (Davis, 2006). Although relationships in informal workplaces were often organized around particular material challenges, they were seen to provide additional, intrinsic benefits to worker well-being that developed over time.

### *Social recognition and respect*

A final theme discussed at length in the discussions was that of social recognition, which was understood as a product of the relationship between workers and the broader society. Participants in Uganda and (especially) Sri Lanka talked at length of the significance of both respect and recognition to their experiences of work. As a Sri Lankan transport worker explained, 'When the stomach is full we look for respect; [however,] the level of respect differs according to how the stomach was filled' (male taxi driver, Colombo).

This testimony underlines the importance of receiving respect for one's work – something that is thought to vary according to the nature of the activity being done. Participants provided numerous examples of times when they felt customers had mistreated them, for example by paying late, refusing price increases and making unreasonable demands for when work should be finished. As a Ugandan tailor noted,

I go to companies and schools for tenders to make uniforms, but these people mistreat me [...] they kept on harassing me to finish, but up to now [seven months later] they have not paid me. I would not want my child to suffer like me. At least he should work in an office where they will not despise or mistreat him like my customers are doing to me. (Female tailor, Kampala)

Her quote establishes a connection between a person's physical place of work and the way they are treated in broader society. Similarly, mechanics in Kampala complained of being called 'dirty' by members of the public, while street vendors in Colombo claimed they were referred to pejoratively as 'pavement-' or 'pickpocket kaaraya' ('pavement or pickpocket man'). A number of Sri Lankan participants provided long defences of the value of their work to society, emphasizing, for example, 'We are not doing a three-wheel profession but a *service!*'. Underlying many of these accounts was a desire to be treated 'like humans' (male street vendor, Colombo) and to be recognized for the work that they do.

In contrast, no groups in Ouagadougou identified a perceived lack of recognition or respect from other sections of society. Instead, a number of participants emphasized the similarities between their work and that of their counterparts in the formal sector:

Before, we could envy those who had studied; even with the CEP [primary school certificate] you could find a good job. But now many people have university diplomas and they are not doing well [...] Before, civil servants were living better than us, but now we are equals. The only difference is that they understand papers [administration] better than us. (Female market vendor, Ouagadougou)

Similarly, Burkinabé tailors stated that they could sit at the same table and eat the same food as nurses and teachers. As such, distinctions between their own work and that of their formal counterparts were not seen to produce mistreatment and non-recognition. These differences can arguably be attributed to a combination of social and environmental conversion factors, such as lower levels of competition within the informal sector in Ouagadougou, reduced socio-economic inequalities between the formal and informal sectors and a less pronounced history of class-consciousness and struggle (Englebert, 1996; World Bank, 2012b).

The sociological literature on quality of work emphasizes occupational status, captured through a combination of opinion polls on the status of different professions (prestige) and objective measures of the education and income of different groups. However, such structural understandings of status do not account for differences in the subjective experiences of workers, for example, between Colombo and Ouagadougou. Instead, these differences are better captured by psychological approaches, which maintain that recognition is one of the 'key experiences' through which human integrity and agency is constructed (Hill, 2001: 446) and that its absence is a 'major source of suffering' (Deranty, 2009: 85). This section has shown that recognition, as an intrinsic benefit of work, is shaped – but not predetermined – by conversion factors such as historical structures of class and inequalities between different sections of the economy. These are factors that can conspire to stigmatize informal work, irrespective of its social and economic contributions.

## Conclusions

This article contributes to debates on quality of work by providing an empirical analysis of perceptions of 'good work' among informal workers in the capitals of Uganda, Burkina Faso and Sri Lanka. It adopts Sen's capability approach as a framework that is able to respond to the limitations of instrumentalist, means-to-an-end approaches to quality of work by enabling the identification of factors that mediate between the objective characteristics and outcomes of work and worker well-being. The diversity and complexity of the accounts presented here offer a critique of the utility of standardized, universal measures of quality of work that are based on the historical experiences of work in the formal sectors of developed countries.

Our analysis demonstrates that worker well-being is not ensured by the presence of discrete characteristics and outcomes of work such as autonomy and income, but is rather dependent on the *interaction* between such characteristics and outcomes and relevant



social and environmental *conversion factors*. In the context of the countries studied, these factors include the cost and availability of education and healthcare, the division of domestic labour, economic competition and market (de)regulation and gender and class relations. Although these factors generally impose additional constraints on quality of work as experienced by informal workers, they heighten and dampen the experiences of different groups in different ways. These findings demonstrate the need for investigations of quality of work to consider the social, economic and political contexts in which work takes place if they are to meaningfully reflect the contribution of work to human well-being.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to give particular thanks to Daniel Neff for his input in the design of the research methodology, management of data collection activities in Sri Lanka and invaluable advice on the planning of this article. Thanks also to Expertise pour le Développement du Sahel (EDS) in Burkina Faso, the Centre for Basic Research (CBR) in Uganda and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in Sri Lanka for supporting the research. We further thank the participants of the PEGNet conference and 14th EADI General Conference, which both took place in 2014. Finally, thanks to Melissa Nelson, Laura Camfield and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

### Funding

This research is part of a project entitled 'Employment, Empowerment and Living Standards' at GIGA conducted in cooperation with the German Development Bank (KfW) and funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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**Date submitted** February 2015

**Date accepted** April 2016