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Informal Workers and the State: The Politics of Connection and Disconnection During a Global Pandemic

Max Gallien and Vanessa van den Boogaard

November 2021

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Summary

In low- and middle-income countries, informal workers are particularly vulnerable to the health and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and often neglected by policy responses. At the same time, the crisis is rapidly changing the ways that states engage with informal workers. We argue that the relationships between informal workers and states – and the politics of creating and accessing these linkages – are a critical and frequently overlooked part of the politics of the pandemic. Both pre-existing structural disconnection from the state—embodied, for example, through limited access to health infrastructure—and state attempts to build new connections, including through cash transfer programmes for informal workers, have a profound impact on the effectiveness and reach of state crisis responses. Without considering the varied and dynamic nature of the linkages between states and informal workers we cannot understand the heterogeneous health and economic impacts of the pandemic, state capacity to respond to the crisis, or institutional change in the context of crisis.

Keywords

Informality; informal economy; Covid-19; informal taxation; social protection; crisis responses

Authors

Max Gallien is a political scientist specialising in the politics of informal and illegal economies, the political economy of development and the modern politics of the Middle East and North Africa. Max is an IDS Research Fellow in the Governance Cluster and with the International Centre for Taxation and Development (ICTD) where he leads the research programme on informality and taxation with Vanessa van den Boogaard, as well as the ICTD's capacity building programme.

Vanessa van den Boogaard is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Tax and Development (ICTD), where she co-leads the research programme on informality and taxation and leads the programme on taxation and civil society.

Executive summary

Informal workers make up over 60 per cent of the global labour force and more than 80 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (ILO 2018). In low- and middle-income countries, they have been particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been in part due to unsafe work environments, limited capacity to adjust workspaces to comply with public health measures, constraints to accessing public health care, and embeddedness in global trade networks that have been affected by the pandemic. Critically, key determinants of informal workers' vulnerability relate to their relationship—or lack thereof—with state structures. The nature of pre-existing disconnection between the state and informal workers has shaped the design and effectiveness of many state responses to the crisis, with informal workers excluded from common forms of state-driven relief programmes, wage furlough schemes, or tax delays.

Exclusion, however, is only a part of the story. While informality is commonly conceptualised in opposition to the state, some connections between informal workers and the state have long existed, including through municipal registers for street-vendors or social protection programmes aimed at informal workers. Critically, these points of connection vary between countries, regions, and between different groups within the informal economy. By examining the effect of the pandemic on informal workers and their relationship with the state, we show how state responses to the crisis have been shaped by pre-existing relationships with different economic groups in society.

Meanwhile, early indications suggest that the crisis is shifting the politics of the state's relationship with informal workers, with institutional changes that may positively or negatively affect longer-term outcomes for informal workers. In some cases, states have targeted new relief and social protection programmes at informal workers. In other cases, states have renewed efforts to 'control' informality through, for instance, the demolition of unregulated market spaces, ostensibly justified by concerns about hygiene and safety. As states seek to find new ways to finance the recovery, extracting revenue from informal economies is increasingly discussed as a policy priority. At the same time, some groups of informal workers have new incentives to engage in collective action in order to make demands of the state, with growing expectations of the state's responsibility to provide essential services, particularly around health care and sanitation. These bargaining dynamics reflect shifting notions of the rights of citizenship and what the state owes both citizens and migrant workers.

Interconnections between the state and informal workers will continue to be formed and restructured in the post-crisis context, with consequences for state-society and state-business relationships that far outlast this pandemic. This

paper argues that neither the impacts of the crisis nor state capacity to respond to the crisis can be understood without understanding the changing nature of the relationships between the state and informal workers. In particular, we cannot understand heterogeneous crisis outcomes and the nature of social and political inclusion and exclusion without exploring the varied and dynamic nature of the interconnections between the state and informal workers, and the related politics of connection and disconnection.

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1. Introduction

As Covid-19 intensified across the globe in early 2020, much scholarship drew attention to variation in the health and economic effects across countries and demographic groups, policy choices, and state capacity to respond to the crisis. To fully understand variation in outcomes and state responses in low and middle income countries, we argue that it is necessary to consider the multi-faceted relationships between the state and informal workers, who make up over 60 per cent of the global labour force and more than 80 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (ILO 2018).¹ Informal workers are especially vulnerable to the health and economic effects of the crisis, with almost 1.6 billion informal workers globally affected by lockdown and containment measures and/or working in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic (ILO 2020d, e, f; Schotte *et al.* 2021; Daniel *et al.* 2020), yet have often been neglected by policy responses (Rateng 2020a). Focusing on the impacts of the crisis on informal workers enables us to see how states' capacity to address the crisis has been shaped by pre-existing relationships with different economic groups in society, with the politics of connection and disconnection shaping heterogeneous crisis outcomes.

Key determinants of informal workers' vulnerability in the context of the crisis relate to their relationship – or lack thereof – with state structures. The nature of pre-existing disconnection between the state and informal workers, with informal workers excluded from formal regulatory structures and workers' benefits, has shaped the design and effectiveness of many state-driven relief programmes. Indeed, informal workers have been excluded from common forms of state-driven relief programmes, including furlough schemes or the provision of personal protective equipment.

While this disconnection is important to understanding heterogeneous outcomes, the politics of exclusion is only part of the story of the multi-faceted and varied relationships that informal workers have with the state. While informality is commonly conceptualised in opposition to the state, connections between informal workers and the state have long existed, though they are unevenly distributed and often contested.² Interconnections between informal workers and

¹ We take a broad conception of informal work, including both rural and urban informality, informal work in both the formal and informal sector, as well as informal own-account workers. We follow the International Labour Organization's (ILO) definition of informal employment as 'all remunerative work (i.e., both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. Informal workers do not have secure employment contracts, workers' benefits, social protection, or workers' representation' (ILO 2020c).

² This is in line with a growing body of literature dispelling simplistic views of the relationship between the state and the informal economy (see e.g., Chen and Carré 2020, Meagher and Lindell 2012, Meagher 2010).

the state reflect varied modes of interaction, including the communication and enforcement of regulation, including through meetings between labour inspectors and the heads of informal associations; the payment of taxes, licences, or fees; registration for state programmes or authorisations, such as through municipal registers for street-vendors; the transfer of information; accessing public services and social welfare, including through social protection programmes aimed at informal workers; and processes of negotiation and bargaining.

Where they exist, interconnections between the state and informal workers are often more limited than state links with formal sector workers or enterprises, mediated through, for example, chambers of commerce, formal tax arrangements or employment-based social security schemes. As a result, most policy solutions aimed at improving informal livelihoods have focused on restructuring the relationship between the state and the informal economy. For instance, taxpayer registration drives are often motivated by benefits for both the state and informal workers thought to be associated with an institutionalised relationship (Gallien *et al.* 2021; Gallien and van den Boogaard 2021, forthcoming). Other strategies grant greater importance to the agency of informal workers and the need for bottom-up accountability to keep the state in check, often aiming to encourage informal labour organisation as a means of making collective demands of the state.³ While approaching the ‘problem’ of informality from different perspectives, both types of strategies effectively assume that the economic and political outcomes of informal workers are shaped by the nature of their interconnections with the state.

While the politics of building, seeking, or avoiding such interconnections between states and informal economies pre-dates the current global pandemic, early indications suggest that the crisis is shifting the politics of the state’s relationship with informal workers, often in divergent directions, with institutional changes that may positively or negatively affect longer-term outcomes for informal workers. These politics have been shaped by shifting narratives about informality in divergent directions, either recognising the ‘essential’ nature of informal work or further stigmatising it as unhygienic and, thus, dangerous to the broader public. In some cases, states have introduced new relief and social protection programmes targeted explicitly to informal workers, underpinned by increasing recognition of the ‘essential’ nature of informal work. In other cases, by contrast, states have renewed efforts to ‘control’ informality through, for instance, the demolition of unregulated market spaces. While such strategies of control are not new, they have been underpinned by novel vigour, with states motivated, at least

³ For examples of collective organising within the informal economy, see the work of groups such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), India’s Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), or Homenet; for efforts to connect informal workers more effectively with formal trade unions, see The Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s recent partnerships with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Africa. For a theoretical discussion of these dynamics see Lindell (2010).

ostensibly, by concerns about hygiene and safety that are especially salient in the context of the pandemic. Meanwhile, fiscal pressures facing states have led to increased policy attention to taxing the informal economy as a means of filling fiscal gaps. The variety and divergent nature of new interconnections between the state and informal workers makes clear that these points of interaction are not necessarily unidirectional or limited to a single use, while they can transform significantly over time. Underpinned by these discursive and fiscal dynamics, the intersections between states and informal workers will continue to be formed and restructured in the post-crisis context.

While state responses to informal workers often receive greater attention, informal workers have also been leading efforts to shift the nature of their relationships with the state. Often facing unprecedented challenges, some groups of informal workers have had new incentives to engage in collective action in order to make demands of the state. These efforts are underpinned by growing expectations of the state's responsibility to provide essential services, particularly around health care and sanitation and shifting notions of what the state owes both citizens and migrant workers.

Fuelled by the state and informal workers alike, the crisis has significantly shaped the relationships and points of interconnection between the state and informal workers. The pandemic has been 'generative of political subjectivities that reveal important shifts in the... relations between state and society' (Chigudu 2019: 413), though, as we will explore below, with significant variation across sub-populations in the informal economy – particularly with regard to women and informal migrant workers.⁴ Accordingly, we argue that neither the crisis nor the nature of state capacity in the crisis response can be understood without understanding the changing nature of the interconnections between the state and informal workers. In particular, we cannot understand heterogeneity without exploring the varied and dynamic nature of the relationship between the state and informal workers and the related politics of connection and disconnection.⁵ Our analysis of the changing politics of informality contributes to an examination of the pandemic that considers both its wider structural political

⁴ The vulnerability and experience of informal workers during the Covid-19 pandemic has been highly heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of the sector itself. While informal workers as a broader group have been particularly vulnerable to the economic and health challenges of the pandemic, there remains huge variation in the actual lived experiences of informal workers. Notably, informal work frequently overlaps with other forms of economic, political, and geographic marginality, which can further exacerbate the hardship of informal workers. This is in line with scholars of critical medical anthropology, who recognize that social relations and structural power dynamics shape the nature, intensity, and distribution of viral infections and diseases within society (see e.g., Young 1982; Hamdy 2008).

⁵ This is in line with theoretical approaches that make clear that the interaction and blurred lines between formal and informal institutions is critical to understanding institutional outcomes (see e.g., Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Meagher 2007; Gallien 2020), as well as those that emphasize that the state is a product of the incorporation and appropriation of existing social forces (e.g., Migdal 2001).

economy and its more unruly ‘complexity, uncertainty, contingency and context-specificity’ (Leach *et al.* 2021).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The second section outlines the politics and outcomes of the pre-existing disconnection of informal workers from the state, discussing the implications of informal workers lacking access to public health care and social welfare programmes during a global pandemic, while being excluded from the most prevalent forms of crisis relief. The third section highlights the ways in which the crisis is serving as a catalyst for institutional change in the relationships between the state and informal workers – what we describe as the new politics of connection. Emphasising the heterogeneous dynamics across and between demographic groups, we explore the ways in which the intersections between the state and the informal economy are being shaped by the politics of the pandemic, simultaneously prompting new forms of inclusion, and reinforcing old patterns of exclusion. The fourth section reflects on how more focused exploration of the nature and effectiveness of states’ interactions with the informal economy can better inform our understanding of both the impacts of the crisis and the reach and effectiveness of state institutions. The final section concludes and highlights key avenues for future research.

2. Informal workers and the politics of disconnection

Informal workers largely lack many of the institutional relationships that the state has with formal workers, including through labour regulatory institutions, work-mandated social protection schemes, and business and tax registers.⁶ Part of this disconnection is definitional – we often classify informality through the absence of one or more of these connections – but is also driven by both histories of state marginalisation and limited organisational capacity within the informal economy.⁷ In the context of the current crisis, with informal workers often disconnected from state institutions, their vulnerability to both the health and economic effects of the pandemic is exacerbated in at least three central ways. First, informal workers are less likely to have access to health care and other workplace-related protections, reflecting longstanding societal divisions in access to essential public goods. Second, informal workers are more likely to be dependent on informal social welfare and face new debt as informal social safety nets collapse. Third, informal workers have lacked access to many state-funded crisis relief programs. These dynamics both exacerbate and reinforce longstanding inequities between those connected to and disconnected from the state.⁸

1.1 Lack of access to health care

In the context of a pandemic, ‘the ability to access quality health care can become a matter of life and death’ (ILO 2020a: 3). It is estimated that half of the global population lacks access to essential health services and about 40 per cent of people are not affiliated with a publicly mandated programme that guarantees access to health care, though with massive differences between regions and income groups (WHO and World Bank 2017; ILO 2017). Informal workers’ ability

⁶ This does not mean that informal workers are disconnected from all state institutions, while patterns of disconnection differ across different regions and among sub-populations of informal workers. This recognises, for instance, the diversity of state actors involved with registration programmes (Gallien and van den Boogaard 2021, forthcoming), as well as the reality that more marginalised populations in the informal economy, including women and migrants, are less likely to have interconnections with the state.

⁷ As has been well established, in many contexts informal workers are not well-organised or mobilised, while their organisational structures may be particularly vulnerable to co-optation (Lindell 2010; Meagher 2014; Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan 2013), with policymakers correspondingly giving less priority to their needs and interests. Some sub-sections of informal workers may face particularly challenging constraints to organising, including those working in sectors that are less visible, such as domestic work. While there is increasing scholarship on the political standing and influence of informal workers in various contexts (e.g., Holland 2015, 2016; Tandler 2002), policy outcomes during the pandemic have shown the ways in which representation shapes outcomes and access to relief, as we will show below.

⁸ Effectively, the politics of disconnection during a pandemic serve to ‘socially pattern disease and... reinforce or exacerbate hierarchical distinctions between different members of the body politic’ (Chigudu 2019, 417; see also Dionne and Turkmen 2020).

to access health care is substantially lower than for those in formal employment (e.g., Alfery 2013; WIEGO 2020a), while evidence suggests that the barriers to accessing health care and aversion to hospital care are particularly significant among informal workers (e.g., Sychareun *et al.* 2016). Even where health care can be accessed, it frequently comes with additional expenses that exacerbate the economic hardships of informal workers.⁹ Prior to the pandemic, for instance, it was estimated that 800 million people globally spend at least 10 per cent of their household budget on health care each year (WHO and World Bank 2017).

Informal work also frequently overlaps with other forms of social, economic, or political marginality that can complicate access to health infrastructure. Perhaps most critically, informal migrant workers face multiple overlapping vulnerabilities that affect their access to appropriate care. These include a lack of entitlement to health care, linguistic barriers that hinder communication with service providers, a lack of access to facilities in underserved locations, limited awareness of their right to receive health care where it exists, and an unwillingness to come forward for care due to fear of arrest and/or stigmatisation (Guadagno 2020). At the same time, the pandemic worsened health and sanitation conditions for many informal workers. For example, in Uganda, lockdown directives and the suspension of public transport forced informal market vendors to live in markets, with poor sanitation and hygiene facilities (Odinga 2021).

1.2 Exclusion from social protection and reliance on informal social welfare

Informal workers are frequently excluded from social welfare and protection programmes that could alleviate some of the negative impacts of the crisis, as they usually cannot rely on protection through social insurance or poverty-targeted social assistance schemes (Alfers 2020; ILO 2018; ILO 2020d; Medina and Schnieder 2018; WIEGO 2019).¹⁰ Instead relying largely on informal institutions of social welfare through family networks or community organisations. As these networks have been increasingly exhausted as a source of capital as a result of the pandemic, informal workers have been forced to search for new forms of borrowing. Given pre-existing low levels of capital stocks and savings, early evidence suggests that debt burdens have increased substantially in some contexts, exacerbating pre-existing economic vulnerability (e.g. Guérin *et al.* 2020; SEWA 2020a).¹¹ For example, in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and

⁹ While rigorous studies of the effect of user fees for overall access to health are lacking (e.g., Lagarde and Palmer 2011), there is significant evidence that user fees are regressive, impacting the poorest to a greater extent, with a particularly negative impact on women (e.g., Ekwempu *et al.* 1990; Nanda 2002).

¹⁰ Of course, many social protection programmes do not necessarily exclude informal workers, particularly where they are targeted based on indicators of poverty. However, even as a sub-group, informal workers are more likely to be excluded from schemes

¹¹ Moreover, as unsecured debt has been harder to access, there has been an emergence of new forms of secured debt that threaten household assets (see e.g., Guérin *et al.* 2020).

Myanmar, 'the patchiness and inadequacy of government social aid during the pandemic – especially for workers in the informal economy – has exacerbated household indebtedness as many have had to take new loans simply to pay for survival' (McCarthy *et al.* 2021). As women already had less access to capital than men (e.g., Delecourt and Ng 2019), gendered inequities are further exacerbated. Compounding the problem, many informal workers lack access to formal sources of finance, leaving them to rely on private moneylenders or commercial partners such as employers, customers, or wholesalers (Martinez and Rivera-Acevedo 2018; Guérin 2014; Guérin *et al.* 2021).¹² While the former may charge extortionate fees, increasing debt to the latter risks enabling forms of indentured labour. Regardless of the source, increasing debt is likely to have long-term implications for informal livelihoods, poverty, and the nature of urban spaces.¹³

1.3 Inaccessible crisis relief

Disconnection from state institutions has persisted in the context of state-led crisis responses. Arguably, the most significant effect of the crisis on low-income communities in the global South has been the result of informal workers' exclusion from rapid-response relief and social protection programmes, with relief programmes demonstrating an overwhelming bias to the formal sector across diverse contexts (e.g., Rateng 2020a; Battersby 2020; Afshar and Devenish 2020; Qiang and Kuo 2020). Thus far, state-led crisis relief has primarily been based on two pre-existing intersections between states, businesses, and citizens, with relief channelled through formal sector businesses or targeted to vulnerable communities that were previously registered in some form by the state. While it is understandable that states used these pre-existing intersections because of the need for timely payments, they critically have often excluded informal workers.

First, a substantial set of emergency relief globally has been distributed either to or through formal sector businesses (e.g., Gentilini *et al.* 2020; Raga 2020), which are often well-connected to the state through multiple channels. Forms of relief distributed in this manner include furlough and wage support programmes for formal sector businesses, including small businesses and self-employed individuals in the formal sector, and temporary policies that have helped businesses cope, including tax reliefs, tax filing extensions, (e.g. Mascagni *et al.*

¹² We do not presume that there is a clear binary between formal and informal finance or financial inclusion and exclusion.

¹³ For instance, informal workers with previously limited margins of survival will find it difficult to undertake business ventures, with informal workers increasingly shifting into subsistence agriculture or other modes of survival.

2020).¹⁴ Identification of recipients for these types of relief has typically been facilitated by pre-existing tax registrations of formal businesses and self-employed entrepreneurs (see e.g. ILO 2020b). Naturally, these types of relief have been unavailable for informal workers, including those employed ‘off the books’ in the formal sector.

A second set of emergency relief programmes has been delivered through pre-existing programmes and registers that target socio-economically vulnerable communities or has required prior registration with other government agencies. Indeed, the United Nations (UN) (2020: 9) suggests that best practice responses to the crisis use pre-existing national social protection programmes. Notably, some relief programmes have recognised informal workers as a particularly vulnerable group, while the UN (2020: 9) suggests that basic social protection be extended to informal workers – though with providing clear guidance about how to target these workers. Accordingly, most programmes have targeted relief using pre-existing registers of vulnerable populations without a specific focus on informal workers (e.g., Rateng 2020b; Kimani *et al.* 2021).¹⁵ While some informal workers overlap with groups included in these registers, vulnerability is an imperfect proxy for informality, leading these programmes to exclude significant subsets of informal workers.

Meanwhile, requiring prior registration with social protection programmes or other government agencies has been a common feature of many relief programmes (ILO 2020d: 6) and have limited informal workers’ ability to access relief. For example, in South Africa, access to relief for informal shops, known as spazas, included exclusionary conditions including registration with the South African Revenue Service and South African citizenship (DSBD 2020).¹⁶ Accordingly, in many such contexts, government responses and conditions for relief ‘have demonstrated considerable bias towards the large-scale formal actors and pushed towards formalization of the informal sector through the conditions’ (Battersby 2020; see also Rateng 2020a).¹⁷

¹⁴ While wage subsidies represent a smaller percentage of crisis-related relief programmes in LMICs (19 per cent) and LICs (9 per cent) relative to the world at large (31 per cent), they still represent a considerable proportion of relief strategies (Ritchie *et al.* 2020).

¹⁵ These include, for instance, programmes that have targeted workers on registers that indicate eligibility for subsidised foodstuffs, fuel, or health care, as has been the case in Morocco (OECD 2020), or communities with high poverty rates, as has been the case in Pakistan (Bourgault and O’Donnell 2020b).

¹⁶ Indeed, many spaza shops ‘lack the means to apply’ for relief, reflecting the reality that ‘the government did not engage with informal traders to co-design their strategy’ (du Toit and Mitlin 2020). Other barriers to receiving relief emerged in this context given the practical challenges of having identity authenticated, with beneficiaries having to sleep in queues overnight at government offices to receive grants when eligible.

¹⁷ As an example of voices calling for formalisation throughout the pandemic, Qiang and Ghossein (2020) argue that ‘The current pandemic has made it more urgent to seize the opportunity for unlocking the potential of the informal sector’ through formalisation.

Certain subpopulations of informal workers are particularly likely to remain invisible to state-led relief programmes. Informal migrant workers, for instance, are often both absent from these forms of state databases and unable to return to their home countries as a consequence of lockdowns. The dynamics of exclusion during the crisis thus reflect a long-standing history of informal work overlapping with multiple dimensions of disconnection from the state.¹⁸ They also highlight, again, the importance of recognising heterogeneity and context-specificity within the informal economy, and of recognising that even programmes aimed specifically at informal workers may risk focusing on ‘easy to reach’ informal workers, missing out communities at the intersection of multiple marginalities.

¹⁸ Significant proportions of urban informal labour populations migrated from rural communities to cities, frequently settling in urban informal settlements that are disconnected from other state services.

3. The new politics of connection: Crisis and institutional change

While the politics of disconnection have exacerbated inequality and reinforced exclusion of informal workers, the Covid-19 pandemic has in some cases served to draw attention to the unique vulnerabilities associated with informal work. In many contexts, new points of connection between informal workers and states have been forged, including novel efforts to deliver short-term relief to informal workers or register informal workers for social protection programmes, to control and regulate informal work, and to expand bargaining between informal workers' organisations and the state. Critically, new points of connection between informal workers and states are not necessarily one-directional or of a single use; instead, they can be used to both support informal workers in novel ways while also introducing new measures of control and extraction.

The pandemic is thus functioning as a catalyst for change, while also shaping the structure of new interconnections and affecting the renegotiation of pre-existing ones. For one, the fiscal context of the crisis has shaped the nature of the relationship between the state and informal workers. In the early days of the crisis, there was a willingness to expand public spending in order to support vulnerable groups.¹⁹ Especially in developing countries, however, crisis-related spending has also presented significant concerns about growing debt, inducing policymakers to seek new revenues, including from the informal economy. Further, the crisis has shaped the discourses around 'informal' and 'essential' work and the boundaries and rights of citizenship, in turn shaping the relationship between the state and informal workers. On the one hand, renewed public attention has reinforced a longstanding framing of informal work as a danger to public health and safety and, hence, as something that needs to be controlled and contained (e.g., Collyns *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, there has been increased recognition of the essential nature of informal work to the functioning of economies and societies (e.g., WIEGO 2020b; Sabatini 2020). The ways that states respond to these shifting fiscal pressures and narratives have significant implications for the nature of new interconnections between states and informal workers. These interconnections are likely to continue to be formed and restructured in the post-crisis context, with lasting and significant effects for the relationship between the state and the informal economy.

¹⁹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Policy Responses to Coronavirus* document for example specifically recommends that countries strengthen national and subnational-level support to vulnerable groups to limit further deterioration in their circumstances and to strengthen inclusiveness' and discusses a range of interventions that have been visible across 2020 (OECD 2020).

3.1 Crisis Relief: New intersections, old exclusions

While few relief programmes during the early months of the pandemic targeted informal workers, some countries have since tried to specifically target them through short-term cash transfer programmes and temporary extensions of social protection programmes to previously excluded groups (UN 2020; ILO 2020d; Schwettmann 2020).²⁰ Prominent examples include income replacement measures for informal workers in Thailand and Peru (UN 2020: 9) and targeted cash transfers to informal fruit and vegetable sellers in Burkina Faso and informal workers Morocco and Togo (Kaboré 2020; OECD 2020a; ILO 2020d: 5). In many cases, and in line with previous evaluations of such efforts, these new programmes face significant challenges in identifying and delivering benefits and risk reproducing old exclusions (see e.g., Kimani *et al.* 2021). For example, a survey of informal workers in 2020 found that less than half of informal workers received cash or food benefits in 12 cities where governments announced relief measures to support vulnerable groups, while the level of relief provided was insufficient to have a positive impact on food security and coping strategies (Alfers *et al.* 2020).

Even new programmes specifically targeted at informal workers have often required previous registration with government agencies, as described above. Relief strategies have thus struggled to reach those that were excluded by previous programmes. Moreover, by relying on brokers and intermediaries known by the state, they reinforce power and exclusionary dynamics through the flow of information, capital, and control. For example, in Kenya, the government relied on chiefs to provide community members' names and phone numbers to the national government to support a database that could administer relief, though the inclusiveness of these lists was undermined as chiefs were 'deemed to have favored certain locals, as well as undeserving relatives and friends residing outside their locations' (Rateng 2020a). In this context, '[g]etting a cash grant depends on who you know' (Rateng 2020b).

Many of the systematic challenges of crisis relief programmes reflect longstanding exclusionary dynamics with regard to informal workers (e.g., Meagher and Lindell 2013). First, the lack of clear communication channels between many informal workers and state agencies can mean that information about relief programmes does not reach eligible informal workers. For example, workers in some sectors, including domestic work and industries where sub-contracting of informal work is common, are less likely to have an intermediary connection with the state, such as a labour organisation that may share

²⁰ The pandemic has likewise drawn attention to the need to reinforce and extend national social protection systems on a more permanent basis (ILO 2020d; Alfers 2020; Lind *et al.* 2021), though the outcomes of this renewed attention are not yet certain.

information with them. In these contexts, employers may either not have appropriate information about benefits for employees or not share that information, increasing the relative invisibility of workers to the state.

Second, people engaging in informal work do not always define themselves as informal workers – for example, describing their work as something they just do to survive rather than a ‘real’ business – and thus may not be aware of their eligibility for various programmes. Evidence suggests that this is particularly likely among female informal workers (Haque *et al.* 2020). For example, in India, female agricultural workers who work on family land frequently describe themselves as housewives, even though the majority of non-harvesting activities are done by them, alongside all livestock care and business activities (Rai 2019; Kulkarni *et al.* 2020). Similarly, home-based garment workers often do not acknowledge their contribution to the supply chain, compounded by the official lack of recognition of home-based work as a trade (Mahmud and Huq 2013).

Third, low levels of education among informal workers may mean that they face additional challenges in applying for relief programmes, while the time burden of applications can be prohibitive (e.g., Harlin 2020; Alfors 2013). Technological requirements, such as registration through digital platforms or access to formal banking to receive relief immediately exclude those that do not have access to use these technologies or services (ILO 2020d; Adegoke 2020; Afshar and Devenish 2020). Where registration requirements present burdens to accessing relief, women and other marginalised groups are most likely to be excluded. In Pakistan, for example, the reliance of the Ehsass Emergency Cash Program – which purposively targets women – on mobile phone registration and national identification has led to women making up only 43 per cent of recipients overall, with up to 78 per cent of women in poverty excluded as direct recipients (Bourgault and O’Donnell 2020b). Worsening pre-existing gender biases in targeting and identification, during the crisis women have been more likely to give up phones and internet access before men within households.²¹

Fourth, there are good reasons to believe that limited trust in state institutions, histories of harassment at the hands of state agents, and the precarious legal position of many informal workers may have left them suspicious of new state efforts to register them (e.g., Narula 2020). This is particularly relevant given widespread evidence that trust in the state and the public health system improves utilisation rates of health systems and underpins the resiliency of health systems (e.g., Blair *et al.* 2017; Vinck *et al.* 2019). During the Ebola epidemic from 2014–16, for example, longstanding relationships of neglect by the state, regional and demographic inequality, and experiences of structural

²¹ For example, Alvi *et al.* (2020) report that as households in Gujarat state in India faced income losses, women’s cell phones were one of the first expenses to be cut from households’ budgets.

violence fuelled distrust of the Sierra Leonean state and ultimately impacted some individuals' willingness to engage with the public health system (see e.g., Wilkinson and Leach 2015; Wigmore 2015; Christensen *et al.* 2020). The importance of trust in the context of the current pandemic is further reinforced given widespread evidence of false information being shared about Covid-19 (e.g., SEWA 2020b; Hassan 2020), reminiscent of the role of rumours, lies, and disinformation in fuelling distrust in the state and public health system during previous epidemics (see e.g., Wigmore 2015; Chigudu 2020).

Consequentially, access to new forms of targeted relief has varied across sub-populations, with early evidence making clear that new interconnections with the state have been particularly unlikely to be established with women (e.g., Pande *et al.* 2020), reflecting longstanding gendered challenges of targeting, access, and uptake of social protection programmes (e.g., Lund and Srinivas 2005; Bourgault and O'Donnell 2020a). Nevertheless, this gendered outcome has not been universal – in some cases, including Dakar, Delhi, Mexico City, and Durban, women have been more likely than men to receive relief, reflecting the reality that relief is more likely to reach those previously covered by some form of social assistance (such as families with children) than those previously uncovered (Alfers *et al.* 2020: 3). Once again, recognising heterogeneity within the informal sector itself provides a critical angle to understanding and evaluating the effects of these programs.

3.2 Connection, taxation, and control

While states have built new intersections with informal workers to facilitate the channelling of aid and relief, such points of connection may be limited to the short term given their substantial costs and the growing fiscal pressures facing states. Rather than solely providing relief, new points of connection have also emerged in line with two central state logics: the control of public space and taxation. Critically, regardless of their initial intent, many new points of connection between states and informal workers can provide states with the necessary tools – information about informal workers, points of contact, and channels of communication – that can subsequently be employed to restrict informal work, restructure informal spaces, or extract revenue from informal workers.

First, state reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic have typically included substantial restrictions on the use of public and private space, representing 'an exceptional exertion of state authority' (Nyama *et al.* 2020). While measures have been generally broad and aimed at formal and informal enterprises alike, informal workers have been particularly affected for several reasons, including their frequent inability to work from home, take advantage of furlough schemes, or swiftly adapt workspaces to comply with state-sanctioned health criteria (Noko

2020; Adegbeye 2020; du Toit and Mitlin 2020). In some contexts, poor populations and informal workers have been particularly targeted in the enforcement of lockdown regulations – with, for example, almost a quarter of a million people arrested for contravening regulations in the first two months of the lockdown in South Africa (BusinessTech 2020). Similarly, in Nairobi there has been an increase in human rights violations, police violence, and harassment of small and micro business operators as a result of the pandemic (Kimani *et al.* 2021).

Aside from more broadly applied lockdowns, some states have given increased policy attention to restructuring informal economic spaces, often underpinned, as discussed above, by public discourse and misinformation that associates informal work with a lack of hygiene and the spread of the pandemic (e.g., Collyns *et al.* 2020). In some cases, these discursive dynamics have increased the vulnerability of informal workers by inciting prejudice, social sanctions, harassment, and violence. For instance, during the pandemic, a municipal government in Mexico City confiscated street-vendors' tricycles with the justification of preventing a 'sanitary risk' (Harvey with Focal Cities team 2020), while local authorities in Zimbabwe destroyed informal vendors' stalls during a lockdown in order to ensure that cities are 'clean, orderly and well-managed' (Minister of State for Harare Oliver Chidawu cited in Mukeredzi 2020). These dynamics reflect longstanding patterns of state engagement with informal workers and public space, with informality often being stigmatised and informal workers often blamed for problems over which they have little control.²²

Second, while states are thus reinforcing old patterns of control of informal workspaces, increasing fiscal pressures have led to greater policy attention to taxing the informal economy – long on the policy agenda in the global South (Moore 2020; Gallien *et al.* 2020; Gallien and van den Boogaard 2021, forthcoming). While the early phase of the pandemic saw widespread expansionary fiscal policy, governments around the world – and particularly in low-income countries – quickly began discussing the pressing need for revenue (e.g., ATAF 2020), with renewed policy attention focused on the revenue potential of the informal economy (ATAF 2021; Monye and Abang 2020; Naija247news Editorial Team 2021; Emejo 2020). In Algeria, for example, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has pointed to new revenue raised from the informal sector as an alternative to international borrowing in order to finance the crisis (Hamadi 2020). Critically, taxing the informal economy may be facilitated by newly created registers of informal workers for crisis relief programmes, with new information provided to the state potentially facilitating the identification and

²² For instance, some states have a longstanding history of demolishing informal workplaces and settlements (e.g., Resnick 2019; Wilkinson 2020), a phenomenon Chigudu describes as revealing the state's 'arbitrary and spectacular power thinly veiled under appeals to creating urban order' (2019: 433).

taxation of informal workers (Gallien and van den Boogaard 2020).²³ The involvement of tax registers in the organisation of crisis relief programmes has been notable in multiple countries, such as Jamaica, where access to the Covid-19 Allocation of Resources for Employees programme was dependent on the provision of a tax registration number, despite being open to informally employed workers (Jamaica Observer 2020). The risk of crisis relief programmes being used to extract new revenues from the informal economy has been a serious concern of informal workers and advocacy groups in a range of countries (e.g., VISET 2020). While efforts to extract more taxes from informal economic clusters are frequently framed as creating a 'level playing field' or generating positive externalities for informal workers themselves, the empirical experience with such initiatives has often not merely been disappointing on revenue grounds, but highly counterproductive from developmental, fairness and equity perspectives.²⁴

Both state controls on informal workspaces and taxation of informal workers provide reminders that new points of connection between informal workers and states are not necessarily one-directional or of a single use. They can be mobilised both to support informal economic clusters *and* to control and extract revenue from them. This provides relevant context to the reluctance of some informal workers to engage with state structures, even during the crisis. For example, groups of informal workers, such as undocumented migrants or those working or living in refugee and detention settlements, have expressed reluctance in engaging with state structures (see e.g., Lim 2020).

3.3 Non-state intermediaries, co-production, and labour organisation

Naturally, new interconnections between informal workers and the state are not created in an institutional vacuum, but are shaped by non-state intermediaries, such as informal associations, labour unions, or non-state service providers. In the context of the crisis, these intermediary actors may establish or reinforce supplementary relationships with the state; operate parallel to, instead of with or against, the state; or create new points of tension and competition with the state. We consider these possibilities in the context of non-state service provision and informal labour organisation, paying particular attention to the ways that these intermediaries shape the relationship between the state and informal workers, as well as state capacity and authority.

First, in contexts where states provide insufficient relief to informal workers, non-state actors play a large role in supporting social welfare and providing public

²³ It has been long understood that legibility is an important requirement of taxation, state capacity, and state control (e.g., Lee and Zhang 2016).

²⁴ For a more thorough discussion of these issues, see Gallien *et al.* (2021), Gallien and Van den Boogaard (2021, forthcoming), Moore (2020), Joshi *et al.* (2014).

goods either in parallel to or in conjunction with the state.²⁵ During the crisis, non-state actors have frequently taken on more responsibility to provide essential services to informal workers, operating ‘below’, ‘beside’, and ‘beyond’ the state (Bellagama and Klute 2008). For example, through their childcare centres, India’s Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) has been providing food to young children and their families during the crisis, while its low-cost health centres have been providing medicines and creating affordable hand sanitizers (WIEGO 2020c; Sen and Haque 2021). Similar examples in other contexts are abundant (e.g., Scheepers *et al.* 2020; Rateng 2020b; Conteh *et al.* 2021). Dynamics of coproduction and supplemented service provision are also evident in the role that non-state community actors have played in building trust in and extending access to public health care systems and information, particularly among informal workers (e.g., WIEGO 2020c).²⁶

While in some contexts, working with non-state intermediaries has improved the design of relief strategies by ensuring that they are embedded in local contexts, the use of intermediaries in identifying beneficiaries or delivering relief can lack transparency and reinforce inequalities, as described above. In other cases, state reliance on non-state actors has represented an offloading of government responsibility and a ‘moralising bias’ against what some see as ‘government handouts’ (du Toit and Mitlin 2020). For instance, the Solidarity Fund in South Africa, created to enable the private sector and civil society to support the Covid-19 response, stopped providing emergency food rations, with the interim CEO noting, ‘We cannot perpetuate a society where we are always benefactors of handouts. We need to activate communities to do things for themselves’ (cited in Hosken 2000). Second, in some contexts, informal associations and labour unions are increasingly building or reinforcing points of connection with the state in order to better represent the interests of informal workers (Schwettmann 2020; Afshar and Devenish 2020). Informal workers’ organisations and international networks have issued various statements and demands to policymakers to address issues that are of increased importance as a result of Covid-19, including income security; food distribution; tax, fee, and rent relief; job security; health care; and occupational health and safety (WIEGO 2020c). In some instances, this has resulted in positive government responses, including recognition of the need to address the welfare of informal workers. For example,

²⁵ This reflects what Post *et al.* (2017: 955) describe as the ‘supplemented state’ model of hybrid service delivery. In effect, non-state actors may work to achieve goals for which ‘formal institutions were designed, but failed, to achieve’ (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 729) in line with co-production, with citizens ‘augment[ing] or contribut[ing] to the actions of public agencies and invok[ing] conjoint behaviour’ (Joshi and Moore 2004: 47).

²⁶ This in line with robust evidence of the ways that non-state actors can encourage case reporting in the context of a public health crisis and increase access to treatment (e.g., Tsai *et al.* 2020; Christensen *et al.* 2020; Kruk *et al.* 2015). Non-state actors have furthermore been called upon to co-develop more locally appropriate containment measures in recognition of the ineffectiveness of blunt instruments, such as blanket lockdowns, when it comes to the informal sector (Wilkinson 2020; Patel 2020).

the South African Informal Traders Alliance, WIEGO, and the Joburg Informal Traders Platform called for informal workers to be exempted from lockdown measures (Muller 2020), leading to the government revising lockdown measures to exclude some informal food vendors (Battersby 2020).

Despite some productive engagement, however, the challenges associated with organisation in the informal economy means that there is both a dearth of informal associations capable of mobilising advocacy efforts and an uneven distribution of representation within the informal economy (Lindell 2010). At the same time, even where informal labour organisation is possible, there is no guarantee that the state will engage with these groups in good faith. As noted above, new points of connection between informal workers and the state do not inherently lead to productive relationships and positive outcomes for informal workers. Here it is critical to consider the role of informal workers alongside other groups vying to influence state policy in the post-pandemic context. Formal actors, who are potential targets for post-pandemic revenue-raising, may have an explicit interest in arguing for greater taxation of informal sector actors, while often enjoying greater political representation and advocacy through lobby groups. This highlights the importance of considering both changes in the vertical relationship between informal workers and the state and in the horizontal relationships between informal workers and other societal actors – both as a risk and as an opportunity for solidarity.²⁷

²⁷ We are grateful to our colleague Armin von Schiller for highlighting this dynamic to us.

4. Informality and the politics of the pandemic

The dynamics of connection and disconnection discussed above not only have significant and lasting effects on the lives and livelihoods of informal workers but also provide critical insights into the politics of the pandemic. They can bring greater nuance to our understanding of the role and limitations of the state in responding to crisis. Analyses of the crisis in the social sciences have brought renewed attention to the study of the state, in line with the longstanding trend of 'bringing the state back in' (e.g., Skocpol 1985; Centeno, Kohli, and Yashar 2017). Many have highlighted that only the state has the power to introduce the broad containment and enforcement measures that the crisis requires, while state capacity, trust in the state, and structural inequities resulting from state policy centrally shape the effectiveness of those measures (e.g., Bosancianu *et al.* 2020; Gisselquist, Vaccaro and UNI-WIDER 2021; Amoah 2020).

Among studies of the state in the context of the pandemic, there has been a particular analytical focus on state capacity, following significant variation in state responses and ability to institute effective lockdowns, organise contact tracing systems, and communicate credible public health strategies.²⁸ Much of this work has focused on the ability of states to effectively control the public health crisis and to offer social relief. Analyses of the state's capacity to engage with informal workers have notably been largely absent.²⁹ This is problematic: analyses of the state and state capacity in relation to the crisis are critically incomplete without accounting for variation in the ways that states engage with the informal economy and their heterogeneous capacity do so effectively.

Empirically, studying informal work can help us to better understand the effectiveness and reach of state institutions. The politics of connection and disconnection in relation to informal workers presents a mechanism through

²⁸ Along with regime types, state capacity stands as the most referenced evaluative framework within the emerging literature on the comparative politics of the pandemic. By August 2020, a search for 'Covid-19' and 'state capacity' in Google Scholar already found over 700 papers. A focus on state capacity has been particularly prevalent in analyses of jurisdictions that handled the early stages of the pandemic relatively well, such as Hong Kong (Hartley and Jarvis 2020) and Singapore (Woo 2020), as well as of comparatively bad performances, including by the United Kingdom and United States. As Ang (2020) notes 'democracy by itself is no guarantee of efficacy; it must also be combined with wise leadership and state capacity'.

²⁹ This in part can be explained by the fact that informal dynamics have not been systematically captured by the most popular empirical bases for comparative work on Covid-19 and state capacity – policy trackers and publicly available quantitative metrics, such as number of infections, deaths, or changes in employment and GDP. Our comments here relate primarily to discussions in political science and development studies. While there has been some attention to informal workers during this crisis, some of which we cite in this paper, this has primarily come from NGOs and work on inclusive economies.

which we can assess how effectively states have managed the crisis. For instance, common metrics of state capacity consider how effectively states have implemented emergency social protection and formal tax relief, rates of unemployment, or how quickly formal businesses are able to re-open after lockdowns, though often fail to consider individuals and businesses that are invisible to or ignored by state programmes (e.g., Lim 2020; OECD 2021). Given that over half of the global labour force is informally employed (ILO 2019), understanding the nature of state engagement with informal workers is necessary to more accurately assess state capacity to manage the economic effects of the crisis. A focus on informality will also provide insight into the importance of trust and political legitimacy to states' ability to 'get things done' (Centeno *et al.* 2017: 13; see e.g., Hartley and Jarvis 2020). As highlighted above, trust is particularly relevant in the context of politically and economically marginalised groups, which often work informally. Examining informal workers' trust in the state helps to contextualise and politicise the idea of trust as a product of longstanding structural marginalisation and the broader histories of the relationships between the state and particular groups within its territory.

A closer consideration of the relationship between states and informal workers can also deepen theoretical discussions of state capacity. First, the ability of states to draw on pre-existing relationships with informal economic clusters or construct new points of connection in order to deliver rapid relief makes clear that state capacity is shaped by the ability to institutionalise or mobilise interactions with societal actors. Whether organised labour, business communities, diaspora populations, or workers in the informal economy, state capacity is mediated through broader political relationships and engagement with social forces.³⁰

Second, the ways that the state interacts with informal workers may shape citizen expectations of the state, creating positive or negative reinforcing impacts on state capacity. For instance, where the state newly engages with informal workers and institutionalises relationships with them, whether independently or through intermediaries, it may positively reinforce its capacity to interact with and serve citizens more inclusively. Indeed, there is increasing discussion of what states owe informal workers, including migrant workers, with increasing popular attention paid to their work conditions, food security and healthcare (WIEGO 2020c). At the same time, in some contexts the crisis is shifting expectations of the state and citizenship, with calls not just for emergency relief, but improved access to basic services – especially with respect to sanitation, water provision, and hygiene – 'beyond an emergency response' (e.g., Nyama *et al.* 2020; Balbuena and Skinner 2020). In this way, the crisis is enabling and reinforcing

³⁰ This represents the state's political settlements, to use one common theoretical formulation (Khan 2011), or a classic state-in-society model, to use another (Migdal 2001; Migdal, Kohli and Shue 1994).

what Chigudu (2019, 432) describes as an expansion of the ‘politics of expectation’.

While growing citizen expectations of the state may lead to greater political mobilisation and an expansion of the responsibility of the state, however, it is also possible that if the state does not fulfil expanding citizen expectations, the shifting ‘politics of expectation’ may lead to increased distrust in the state, a reinforced reliance on non-state actors or self-help, and exit from the state and state services (see Chigudu 2020). Whether or not the state responds to expanded demands of citizenship, access to essential public goods shapes citizens’ ‘lived citizenship practices, community mobilizations, and intersectional claims-making to... citizenship, recognition, and belonging’ (Sultana 2020).³¹ The impact on state capacity, whether positive or negative, may be self-reinforcing, in part because of the path dependent nature of many of these institutional relationships and in part because of the challenges of reining in fundamental expectations about the rights of citizenship once they have been accepted (e.g., Pierson 1994).

Third, and building on the previous points, considering informal workers in the context of the pandemic serves as a critical reminder that state capacity is embedded in political and institutional histories. While the relative lack of connections between states and informal workers is frequently attributed to weak state capacity to ‘penetrate’, control or ‘formalise’ informal economies, this perspective has been significantly challenged in recent years. Both state disconnection from informal economies and the nature in which connections are organised are embedded in political choices and a wider set of power relations (Holland 2016; Tendler 2002; Gallien 2020). Paying attention to informality in the context of the crisis helps us to see that state responses have heterogeneous effects on different groups, shaped by political and institutional histories of inclusion and exclusion. Stronger state capacity does not guarantee more positive outcomes for informal workers; rather, outcomes depend on what the state does with its capacity in relation to different groups and how these groups are able to negotiate new forms of state engagement, navigate changing institutional environments, or organise to resist forms of state control. For example, greater state capacity may imply more severe restrictions on the movement of informal migrant workers or street-vendors or the destruction of their places of work, while simultaneously enabling relief for certain groups of informal workers, including those that are better educated or politically connected. Analysing the state in the context of informality can thus provide both greater nuance in our empirical understanding of the heterogeneous effects of the crisis and a conceptual framework to understanding the link between these outcomes and state capacity.

³¹ This is in line with a growing body of literature that views citizenship as contingent on interactions between the state and citizens (e.g., Roitman 2007; Anand 2017; Hern 2019).

5. Conclusions: The state, informal workers, and the long shadow of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the ways that states engage with informal workers. Drawing attention to the heterogeneous dynamics across states and among different groups within the informal economy, we have drawn attention to the significance of the politics of connection and disconnection during a global pandemic. As we have highlighted, the effects of the crisis for both states and informal workers have been shaped by the absence, existence, and nature of the interconnections between states and informal economies. This is not altogether surprising: in recent years, almost all prominent proposals on how to improve informal livelihoods – from top-down formalisation and registration efforts to informal organising and collective action strategies to support for ‘inclusive economies’ – have sought to restructure the relationship between informal workers and states. Meanwhile, theoretical approaches to informality have highlighted that the interaction between formal and informal institutions is critical to understand institutional outcomes, that the lines between them are not always clearly drawn, and that states’ involvement in informal institutions needs to be considered (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Meagher 2007; Gallien 2020). While the recognition of the importance of informality to statehood, and vice versa, is thus not novel, we highlight its substantive relevance to the current politics of the pandemic.

The pandemic has been a catalyst for rapid institutional change at the intersection between states and informal workers. It is enabling reforms – registration efforts, strategies to expand taxation, economic support programmes – that have long been used by state actors but often previously lacked resources or incentives for implementation. The context of the pandemic – an increasing acceptance of state control of public space, rapid fiscal expansion followed by increasing concerns about public debt and changing and often contradictory discourses around informality – shapes the intersections between informal workers and the state, as well as the relative abilities of different actors to react to and cope with reforms. This is critical in light of the heterogeneity of actors and marginalities within the informal economy. In particular, the crisis has exacerbated challenges facing vulnerable groups within informal economies, including migrants, women, and those engaged in atomised activities without labour representation. Critically, new interconnections between the state and informal workers will have effects that will outlast the immediate crisis. Evidence is still emerging on the nature and impact of these dynamics and should continue to be tracked and explored over the coming years. Nevertheless, the very fact

that informality is being overlooked by both scholars analysing the crisis and policymakers responding to it implies an urgent need to highlight its importance in shaping institutional change and the effectiveness of crisis responses.

As we note above, new institutional dynamics between the state and the informal economy are of central theoretical significance in at least two ways. First, the rapidly shifting nature of these dynamics provides ample opportunity to test previous theories and accounts of formal–informal interactions. For instance, under what conditions do ‘informal institutions sustain or reinforce – as opposed to undermine or distort – formal ones’ in the context of the crisis (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 734)? Where informal workers are better organised, are they more effectively able to demand support from the state? Second, an informality perspective challenges emerging discourses on state capacity in the context of the pandemic. Intersections between states and informal workers – as well as the heterogeneous ability of different groups to mobilise, influence and utilise these intersections – have critically shaped the nature, effectiveness, and outcomes of state responses to Covid-19. An understanding of the significance of these intersections to policy outcomes allows us to better contextualise, qualify and politicise state capacity, highlighting the importance of the relationship between the state and groups within society and their heterogeneous effects on outcomes during and after the immediate crisis.

From this theoretical significance productive avenues for future research emerge. These include more in-depth application of theories of informal institutions to the institutional changes triggered by the crisis, evaluations of the effectiveness of new social protection programmes in targeting informal workers, and deeper exploration of the heterogeneous experiences of different groups within the informal economy. Additional work may track the long-term implications of new social protection and relief programmes for citizen understandings and expectations of citizenship. Research may also usefully draw attention to the ways in which new points of connection are shaped not only by the needs, demands, and organisational capacity of informal workers, but also by the political and historical context in which they are embedded.

Two trends in particular will be of relevance to scholars of informality and the state for years to come. First, as we have noted, the past months have seen broadly divergent narratives around informality, some highlighting its role in ‘essential’ work, and others reinforcing views about informality as a subversion of state control. These tensions will be exacerbated by changes in the informal sector itself, as sustained high unemployment across the economy will lead to new entrants into the informal economy, displacing and deepening pre-existing vulnerabilities among informal workers. Tracing how these narratives evolve and consolidate will be of particular interest, as will an exploration of their underlying drivers and effects on the expectations of state responsibilities to informal workers.

Second, sustained fiscal contractions and the related urgency of revenue needs is likely to shape the development and use of new points of connection between the state and informal workers. As we note above, new interconnections are not necessarily fixed in their use, and may transform over time. A key emerging question is then whether fiscal constraints within the recovery period will lead to an increasing re-purposing of these intersections by states. For example, it will be critical to trace the degree to which the increased visibility of some forms of informal work – through, for instance, requirements to register with the state to receive emergency relief – will give rise to new attempts by the state to ‘formalise’ and especially to tax informal work more extensively. The impacts of such strategies will have heterogeneous effects on different groups, depending on their varying ability to resist additional taxation or to negotiate its terms. While we hope that the Covid-19 pandemic is not here to stay, the ways in which the state interacts with informal workers in its wake will be shaped by the virus’ shadow long into the future.

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Institute of Development Studies
Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
+44 (0)1273 606261
ids.ac.uk

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