

Chapter 1. Portraits of informality

Many of us may think we know what informality really is. Yet, the reality it captures is often less obvious than it seems. This chapter presents the informality profile of individuals and households across countries and regions. It relies on International Labour Organization (ILO) individual-based data on informal employment for 119 developing and developed countries, and the new Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Key Indicators of Informality based on Individuals and their Household (KIIbIH) database, available for 27 developing and emerging countries. Both refer to the ILO definition of informal employment, which includes employment in the informal sector, informal employment in the formal sector and informal employment in households. The resulting comprehensive portrait of informally employed individuals and their dependents shows distinct patterns that policy makers must take into account to effectively tackle the challenge of vulnerability in the informal economy.

Informality is a global phenomenon, but manifests itself in unique ways across countries and regions

The informal economy is likely to conjure different meanings and connotations around the world. Yet, whatever images come to mind, the informal economy undeniably encompasses a wide range of unregistered, unprotected and unregulated activities (Box 1.1), and affects the daily lives of most workers.

Informal employment is the reality for the majority of the world's employed population

Most of the world's employed population is in informal employment: 2 billion workers, representing 61.2% including agriculture and 50% excluding agriculture¹ (ICLS, 1993^[1]; ICLS, 2003^[2]; ILO, 2018^[3]). The majority – 1.7 billion, or 85% of informal workers – work in informal sector economic units.

Box 1.1. Differentiating between the informal economy and informal employment

The informal economy refers to all economic activities, excluding illicit activities, by workers and economic units that are, in law or in practice, not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements (ILO, 2015^[4]).

Informal employment refers to working arrangements that are *de facto* or *de jure* not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation or entitlement to social protection or certain other employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.).

The definition of informal employment used in the report differentiates three groups of workers: (i) employees, (ii) employers and own account workers, and (iii) contributing family members.

- i. An employee is considered informally employed if his/her employer does not contribute to social security on his/her behalf or, in the case of a missing answer, if he/she does not benefit from paid annual leave or sick leave.
- ii. An employer (with hired workers) and an own-account worker (without hired workers) is considered informally employed if he or she runs an economic unit² in the informal sector (a non-incorporated private enterprise without a formal bookkeeping system or not registered with relevant national authorities). In the case of the question not asked or a missing answer, the enterprise is considered part of the informal sector if there is no fixed place of work or it employs five employees or fewer. This threshold can vary, depending on the reporting structure of country questionnaires.
- iii. Contributing family workers are informally employed by definition, regardless of whether they work in formal or informal sector enterprises.

For detailed information, see methodology in Annex A.

Recent evidence also shows that informality occurs across employment statuses. Globally, informal employment accounts for more than four of five own-account workers, one of two employers,³ two of five employees and the totality of contributing family workers. Such aggregate figures point to a very diverse set of actors, encompassing street

vendors, waste collectors, daily wage workers, seasonal farm labourers, domestic workers and home-based workers subcontracted by formal firms.

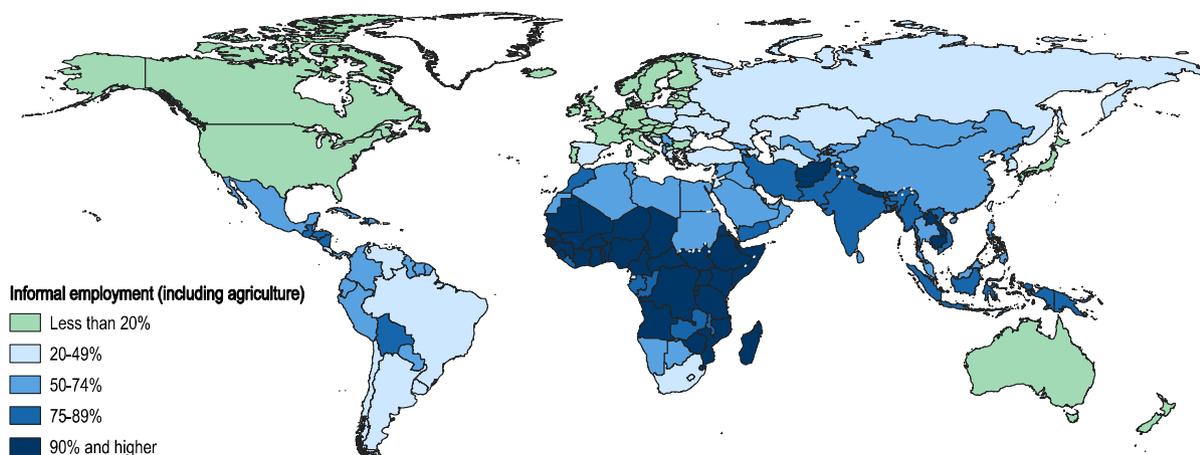
This reality of the world of work also comes with substantial labour rights challenges. Informality can undermine workers' rights and unions' role in collective bargaining and social dialogue. For employees, it implies lack of access to employment-based insurance schemes, such as old-age pension insurance. For independent workers (employers and own-account workers), it implies that their economic units are not legally recognised and are non-compliant with fiscal and social security obligations. Independent workers also face serious difficulties engaging in commercial contracts, accessing formal finance, markets and property, and, for many, accessing and affording social security.

Informality is the norm in the Global South

There are large disparities in the distribution of informal employment across regions and levels of development. Emerging and developing countries have substantially higher rates of informality: the share ranges from 18.3% in developed countries to 67.4% in emerging countries and 89.8% in developing countries (ILO, 2018^[5]).

Figure 1.1. Informal employment dominates in the Global South

Share of informal employment in total employment including agriculture (2016)



Notes: A common set of operational criteria is systematically used to identify workers in informal employment and those employed in the informal sector. Own-account workers and employers are in informal employment if they run informal sector economic units (non-incorporated private enterprises without formal bookkeeping systems or not registered with relevant national authorities). Employees are in informal employment if their employers do not contribute to social security on their behalf or, in the case of missing answers, if they do not benefit from paid annual leave and paid sick leave. Contributing family workers are in informal employment by definition (ICLS, 2003^[2]). See methodology in Annex A.

Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

The vast majority of workers in Africa rely on the informal economy: 85.8% in Africa and 89.2% in sub-Saharan Africa (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). The share of informal employment ranges from 34% in South Africa⁴ to above 90.0% in most African countries for which data are available.⁵ Southern Africa has a lower level of informality (40.2%) due to a combination of relatively higher levels of socio-economic development, higher proportions of wage employment in total employment, below-average employment-to-

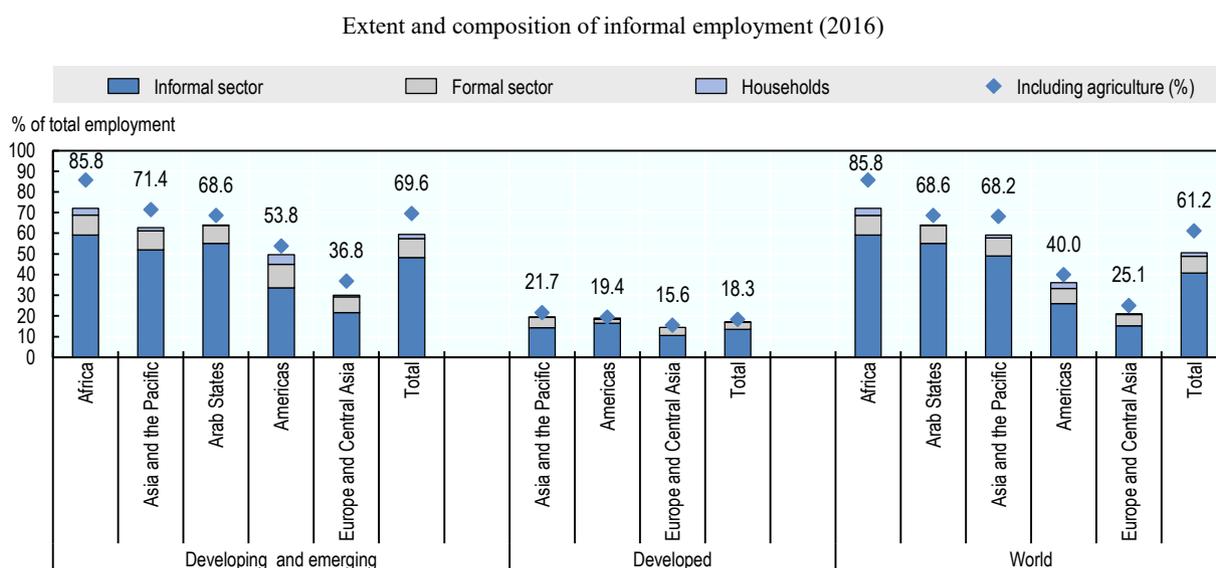
population ratios and above-average shares of social protection expenditure in percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) (ILO, 2017^[6]).

Asia and the Pacific has the second-highest level on average (68.2%), ranging from 21.7% in developed countries to 71.4% in developing and emerging countries: below 20.0% in Japan, just above 30.0% in the Republic of Korea and 90.0% and above in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal.

The Arab States have the third-highest level on average (above 68.0%); the Americas have the fourth-highest level on average (18.1% in Northern America and 53.1% in Latin America and the Caribbean). Again, there is significant variation across the region, ranging from 24.5% in Uruguay to 30-40% in Costa Rica and Chile, close to 80% in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and above 80.0% in the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

In Europe and Central Asia, the level on average is about 25.0%: 15.6% in developed countries and 36.8% in emerging countries. Half or more workers in Albania, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan hold informal jobs.

Figure 1.2. Informal employment varies by level of development



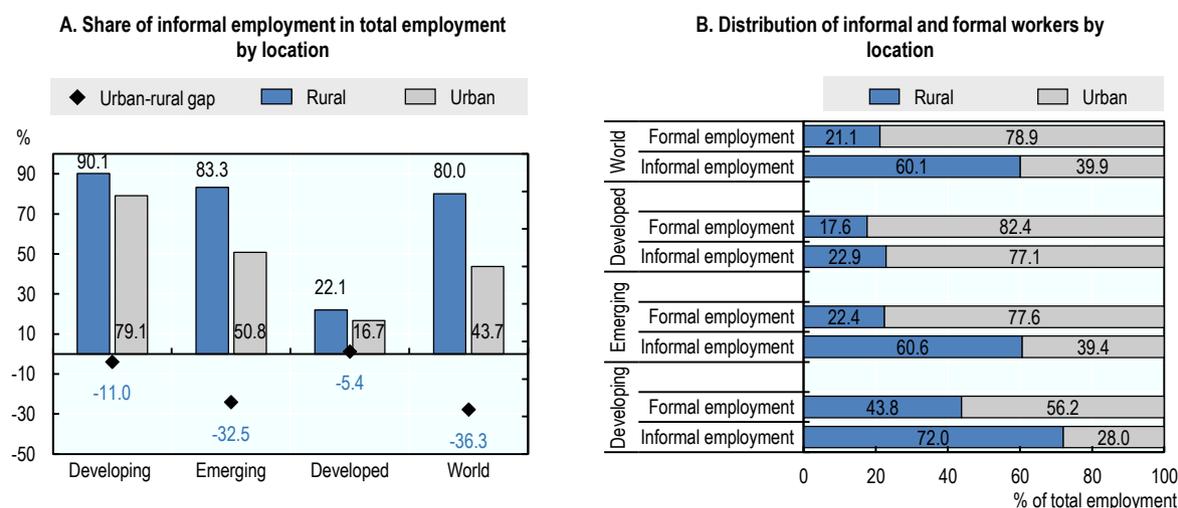
Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Informality has a strong rural dimension

People in rural areas are almost twice as likely as those in urban areas to be in informal employment: 80% vs. 43.7% (Figure 1.3A). Moreover, 60.1% of workers in informal employment live in rural areas, while 78.9% of those in formal employment live in urban areas (Figure 1.3B). Workers in agriculture represent more than half of rural informal employment.

Figure 1.3. Informality has a strong rural dimension

Distribution of informal employment, by rural/urban location (2016)



Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Informality dominates in agriculture and industry

Independently of area of residence, the agriculture sector presents the highest level of informality worldwide (93.6%), followed by the industry sector (57.2%) and service sector (47.2%) (ILO, 2018^[3]). Nevertheless, the high exposure of agricultural workers to informality only partially explains the urban-rural differences in informality rates. Other factors include the institutional and economic environment (e.g. limited access to public infrastructure and services, and differences in quality of services and local governance); personal and employment characteristics of the rural population (including higher incidence of poverty, lower education levels or over-representation of employment status the most at risk of informality); or traditions and rural actors' perceptions of laws and regulations and social norms (Jonasson, 2012^[7]; Weng, 2015^[8]).

Vulnerable groups are disparately exposed to informality

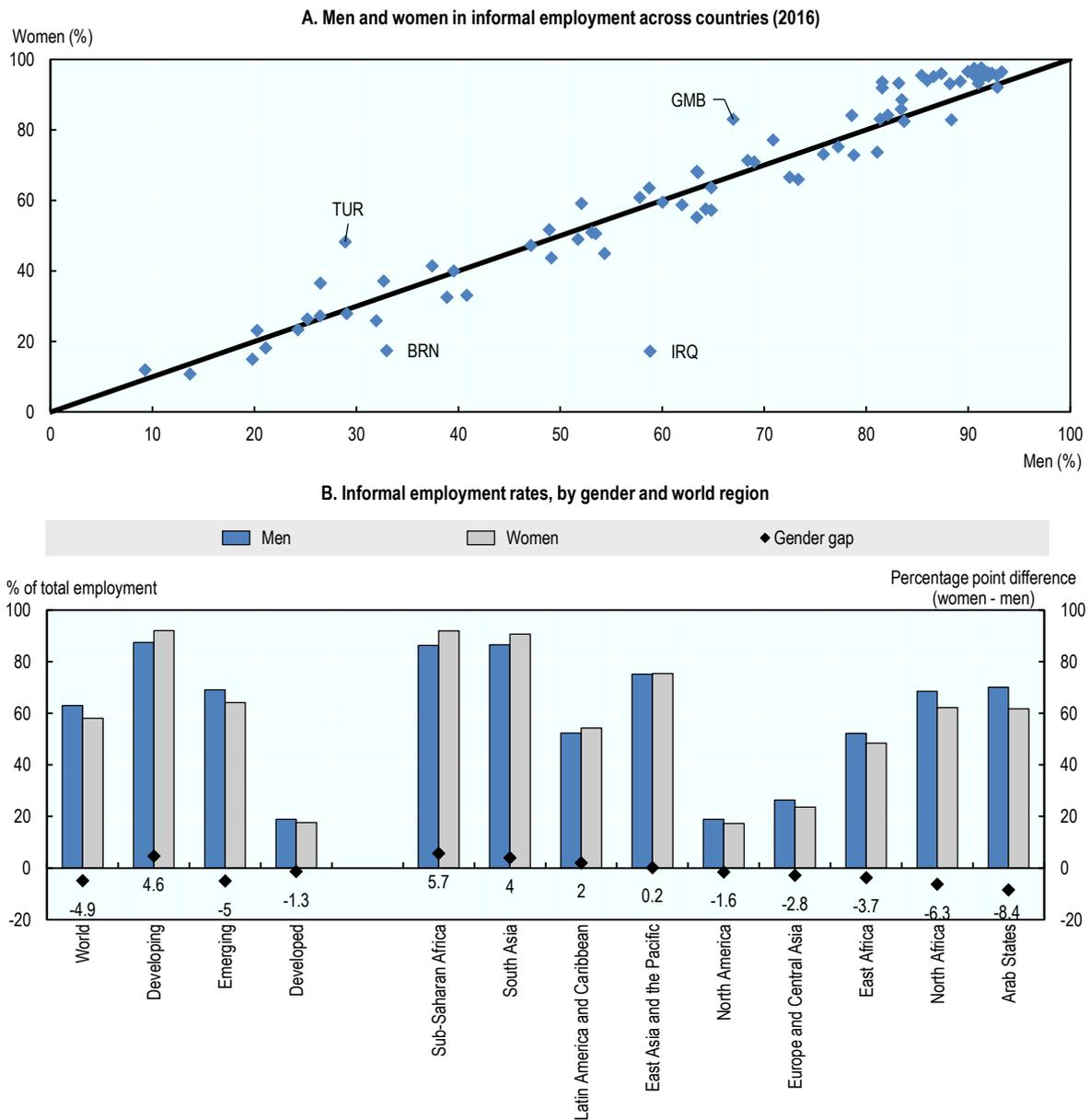
As stated in ILO Recommendation No. 204 (ILO, 2015^[4]) concerning the transition from the informal to the formal economy, the informal economy is primarily characterised by a diversity of situations – among countries, groups of workers and types of economic units within countries – in terms of forms of informality, underlying causes, working conditions and level of exposure to vulnerability for workers and households (Chapter 3). Informality is not a consequence of misguided policy alone; personal characteristics can make access to formal employment difficult. These include low education level; discrimination based on gender, age, religion or ethnicity; poverty and productivity (both factors in and exacerbated by informality); and preferences.

Globally, informal employment is a greater source of employment for men, but there are large disparities across countries

Worldwide, informal employment is a greater source of employment for men (63.0%) than for women (58.1%) (Figure 1.4A). The large disparities in the gender dimension

across countries and regions reflect the influence of major countries, such as the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, where men face higher exposure to informality. It also results from structural effects associated with important gender gaps in employment-to-population ratios, which mitigate the influence of countries where women are more affected, as seen in India or Pakistan. However, in a small majority of countries for which data are available (55%), the share of women in informal employment exceeds that of men. Women are also more exposed in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin American countries and in most low- and lower-middle-income countries (Figure 1.4B).

Figure 1.4. There is a lot of variation across countries in the gender distribution of informal employment



Source: ILO (2018_[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

By contrast, women are less exposed than men in the Arab States and North Africa, where women's employment-to-population ratios are much lower than men's. There, the minority of women employed tend to be over-represented in the public sector or at least occupations and types of enterprises that are more likely to be formal. In most regions, women in informal employment are more often found in the most vulnerable segments of the informal economy (Chapter 5).

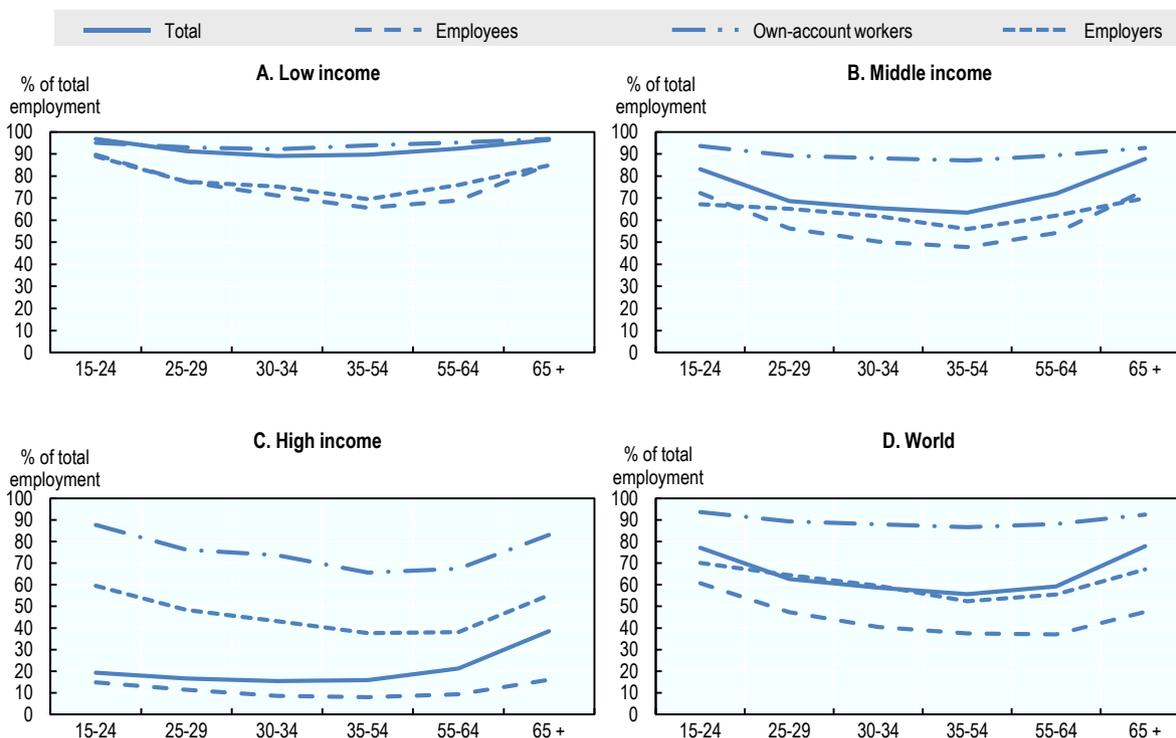
Youth and older workers are more exposed to informality

There is substantial variation in the level of informal employment over the lifecycle, with youth and older workers disproportionately affected. More than three-quarters of youth and older workers are in informal employment, compared with 57% of those aged 25-64 (Figure 1.5A). This implies some 362 million young people in informal employment worldwide, more than half living in sub-Saharan Africa or southern Asia. The overall share of informal employment and variation in the U shape over the lifecycle varies, depending on employment status. The share of informal employment decreases rapidly with age and reaches the lowest levels for employees and, to some extent, employers, but it remains almost flat and above 80% for own-account workers. There is an increase in the informal employment rate at older ages, notably after statutory retirement age (Figure 1.5A, 1.5B, 1.5C, 1.5D).

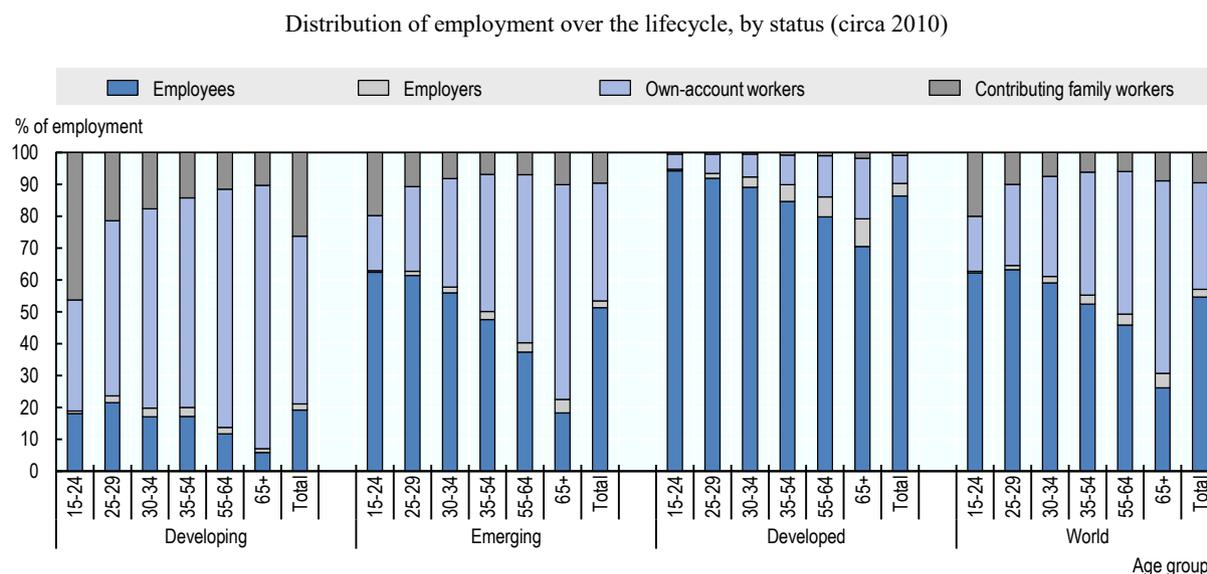
The various levels of exposure depending on employment status and the composition by status of total employment over the lifecycle partly explain the variation of informality with age (Figure 1.6). There is an over-representation of statuses at risk of informality at the early and latest life stages, such as higher proportions of contributing family workers at younger ages and own-account workers at age 65 and over. In developing countries, informality is largely driven by own-account employment, which represents the majority of employment and tends to offer limited opportunities for transition; employee and employer categories tend to have more opportunities for formalisation. In emerging countries, there are also more opportunities among employees and employers as age increases. By contrast, as in developing countries, the prospect of formalisation over the lifecycle for own-account workers, in the absence of dedicated interventions or changes in the macroeconomic context, is more limited. In developed countries, formality among employees is high overall. Among employers and own-account workers, there is a clear trend of transition to formality with increasing age and experience (at least until retirement age) (Chacaltana, Bonnet and Leung, forthcoming^[9]).

Figure 1.5. Informal employment rates are highest for youth and older workers

Informality age profile by employment status – world and country income groups (2016)



Notes: Global and regional estimates based on data for 110 countries representing 85% of the world's employed population and on country data for the latest available year. Contributing family workers are in informal employment by definition, independently of formal or informal nature of economic units and of age.
Source: ILO (2018^[31]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Figure 1.6. Distribution by employment status varies over the life cycle

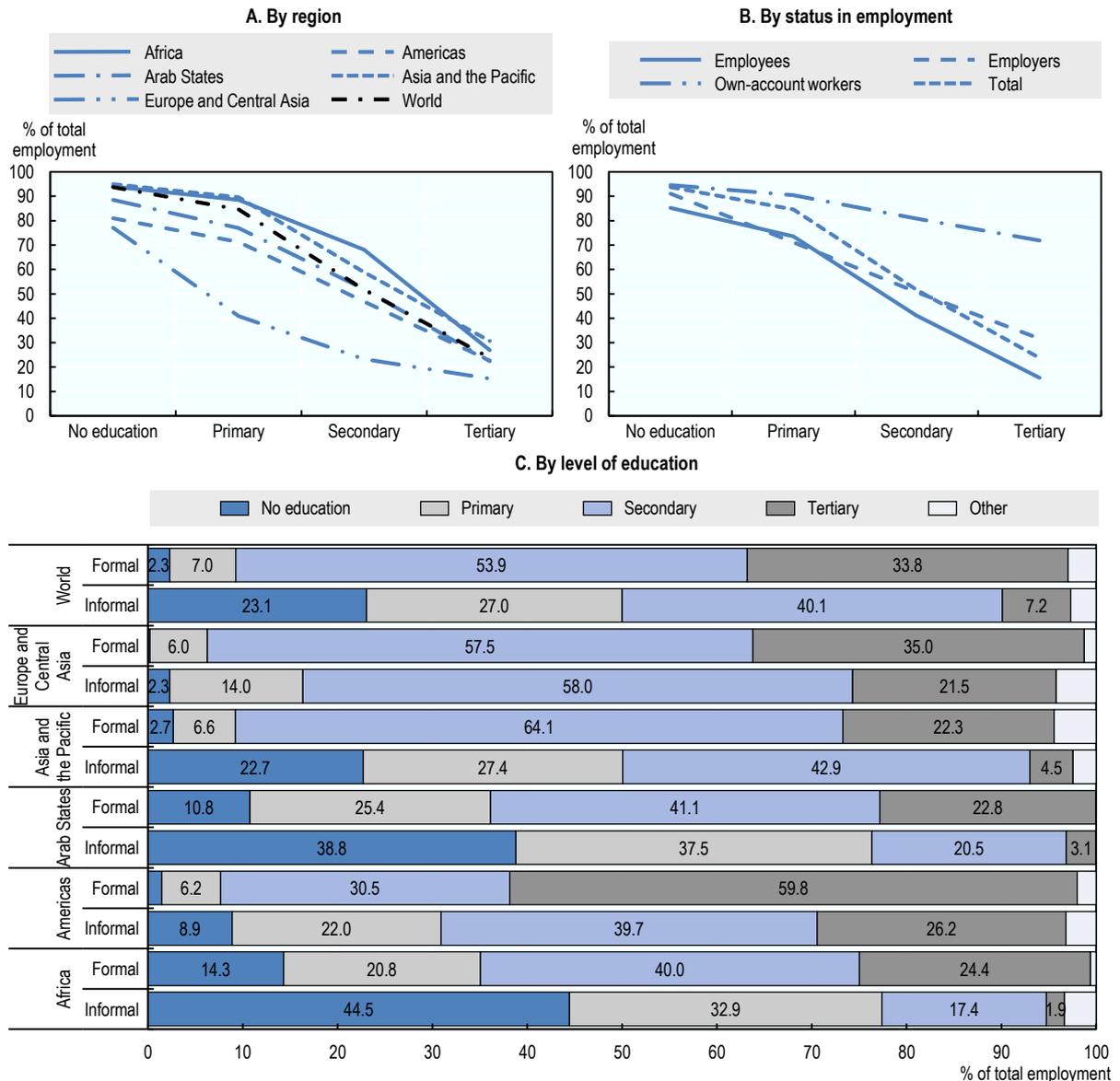
Notes: Global and regional estimates based on data for 110 countries representing 85% of the world's employed population and on country data for the latest available year. Contributing family workers are in informal employment by definition, independently of formal or informal nature of economic units and of age. *Source:* ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Informal employment absorbs less-educated workers

Higher levels of education do not guarantee access to formal employment but are an important factor. Low education levels can be among the personal and socio-economic characteristics that make access to formal employment difficult. The majority of workers with no education (93.8%) are in informal employment, declining to 84.6% with primary education, 51.7% with secondary education and 23.8% with tertiary education. The pattern is largely influenced by developing and emerging countries, where the highest share of workers in informal employment is concentrated (Figure 1.7A). The positive effect of higher education levels on access to formal employment is evident among employees and employers but far less clear among own-account workers, whose exposure to informal employment remains high (above 60%), regardless of education level (Figure 1.7B).

Figure 1.7. Informal employment absorbs less-educated workers

Informal employment and highest level of educational attainment (2016)



Notes: Global and regional estimates based on data for 107 countries representing 86% of the world’s employed population. Harmonised definition of informal employment and employment in the informal sector.
Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Notably, workers in informal employment are less educated than formal workers in all but developed countries (Figure 1.7C). Half of all workers in informal employment have no or primary education. The proportion reaches above 80.0% in developing countries, more than three-quarters in Africa. Just above 7.0% of workers in informal employment have obtained a tertiary level of education. Among workers in formal employment, 9.3% have no or primary education, and 33.8% have tertiary education. In Europe and Central Asia, and in developed countries generally, secondary and tertiary educational attainment

is the norm, and a significant proportion of workers in informal employment (44.0%) or in informal sector units (41.4%) have tertiary education. However, those proportions are still lower than proportions among workers in formal employment or in formal economic units (above 50.0%).

Informal jobs have distinguishing characteristics

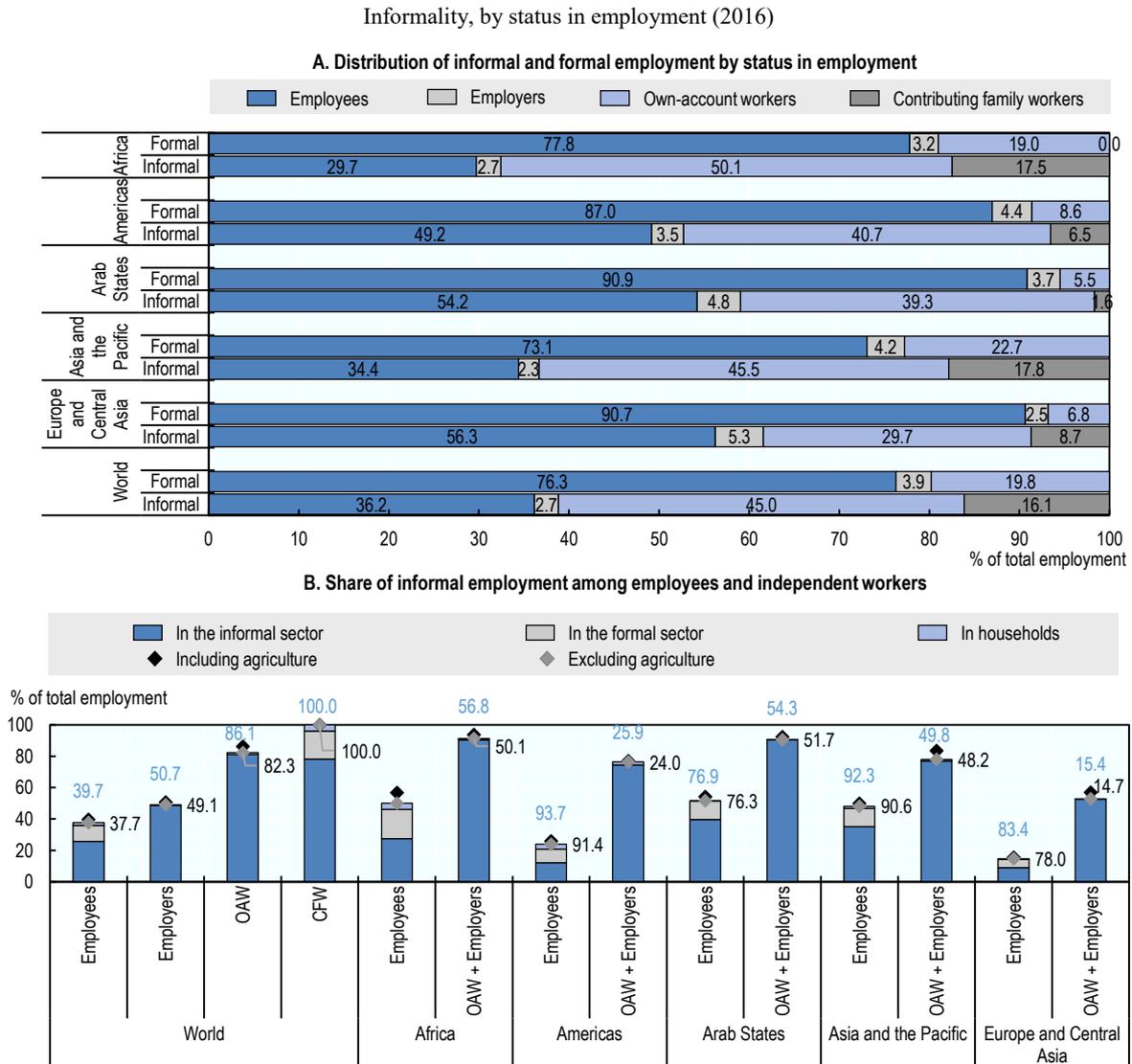
A number of job characteristics differentiate employment in the formal and informal economy. Employment status, full or part time, permanent or temporary and firm size influence the likelihood that a job will be informal.

Own-account workers are most at risk of informality, but employees are most represented in informal employment in developed countries

Globally, own-account workers represent the majority of informal workers (45%), followed by employees (36%), contributing family workers (16%) and employers (below 3%) (Figure 1.8A). Taken together, own-account workers and contributing family workers, both vulnerable statuses, comprise 61% of informal employment and below 20% of formal employment worldwide. They represent above 75% of total informal employment in developing countries, 68% in Africa and 63% in Asia and the Pacific. The proportion decreases with increased country development to the benefit of employees, who represent the majority of those holding informal jobs in developed countries (51%).

In terms of the share of informal employment among employment statuses, nearly 40% of all employees are in informal employment (Figure 1.8B). The proportion of informal employees ranges from 15.4% in Europe and Central Asia to 56.8% in Africa. Among informal employees, 67.4% work in informal sector units, 27.3% work in fully formal enterprises and 5.3% are domestic workers. The vast majority (86.1%) of own-account workers and about half of all employers (50.7%) are in informal employment, operating as informal sector units. Out of all contributing family workers that are by definition in informal employment, almost 80% of contributing family workers are in informal sector units.

Figure 1.8. Own-account work and wage employment are the dominant forms of informal employment



Notes: OAW = own account workers. CFW = contributing family workers.

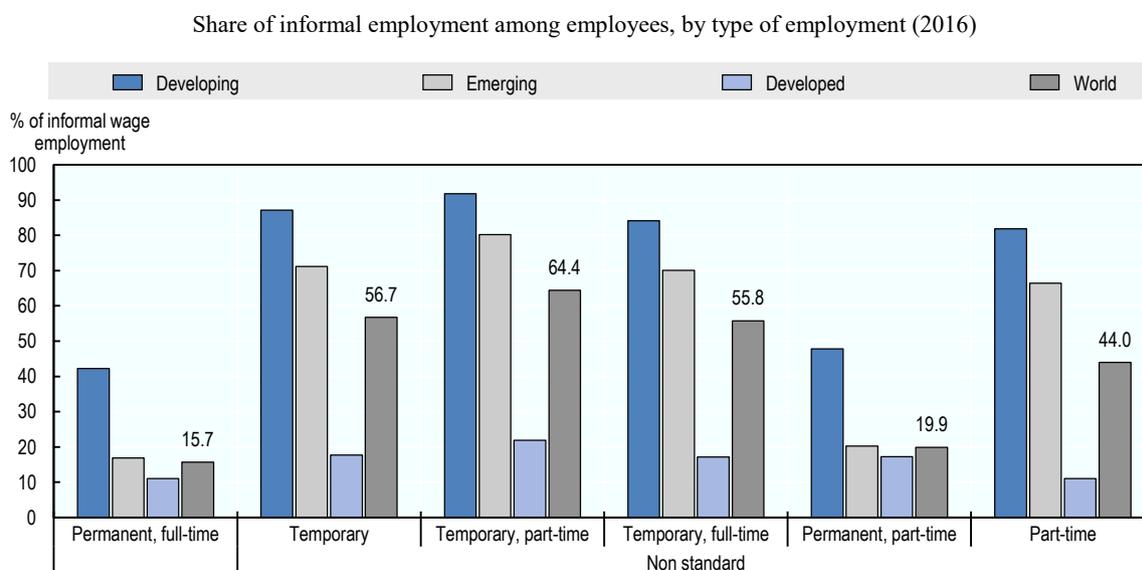
Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang-en/index.htm.

Workers in non-standard forms of employment are particularly exposed to informality

Not all employees in non-standard forms of employment⁶ are in informal employment, but compared with workers in open-ended full-time employment, non-standard employment is significantly more likely to be informal, particularly regarding temporary employment (ILO, 2018^[5]) (Figure 1.9). While below 16.0% of employees in permanent full-time jobs are informal, the proportion of informal wage employment is 44.0% among those in part-time employment, 56.7% among those in temporary employment and 64.4% among those in temporary part-time employment.

Temporary and part-time workers are sometimes explicitly excluded from legal social security or face indirect exclusions resulting from eligibility based on minimum weekly or monthly hours of work or earnings levels. Non-explicit indirect exclusions resulting from inability to meet minimum qualifying conditions are more numerous but not as widespread as ineffective implementation of legal coverage for reasons that include the lack of employment contracts, employer financial constraints, heavy or inappropriate compliance modalities, lack of awareness, or deliberate non-compliance (ILO, 2015^[10]).

Figure 1.9. Informal employment is widespread in non-standard forms of employment in emerging and developing countries



Notes: Estimates based on data for 96 countries representing above 78% of the world's employed population. Harmonised definition of informal employment and employment in the informal sector.

Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

Most employment in small enterprises is informal, but informal employment in large formal enterprises is significant

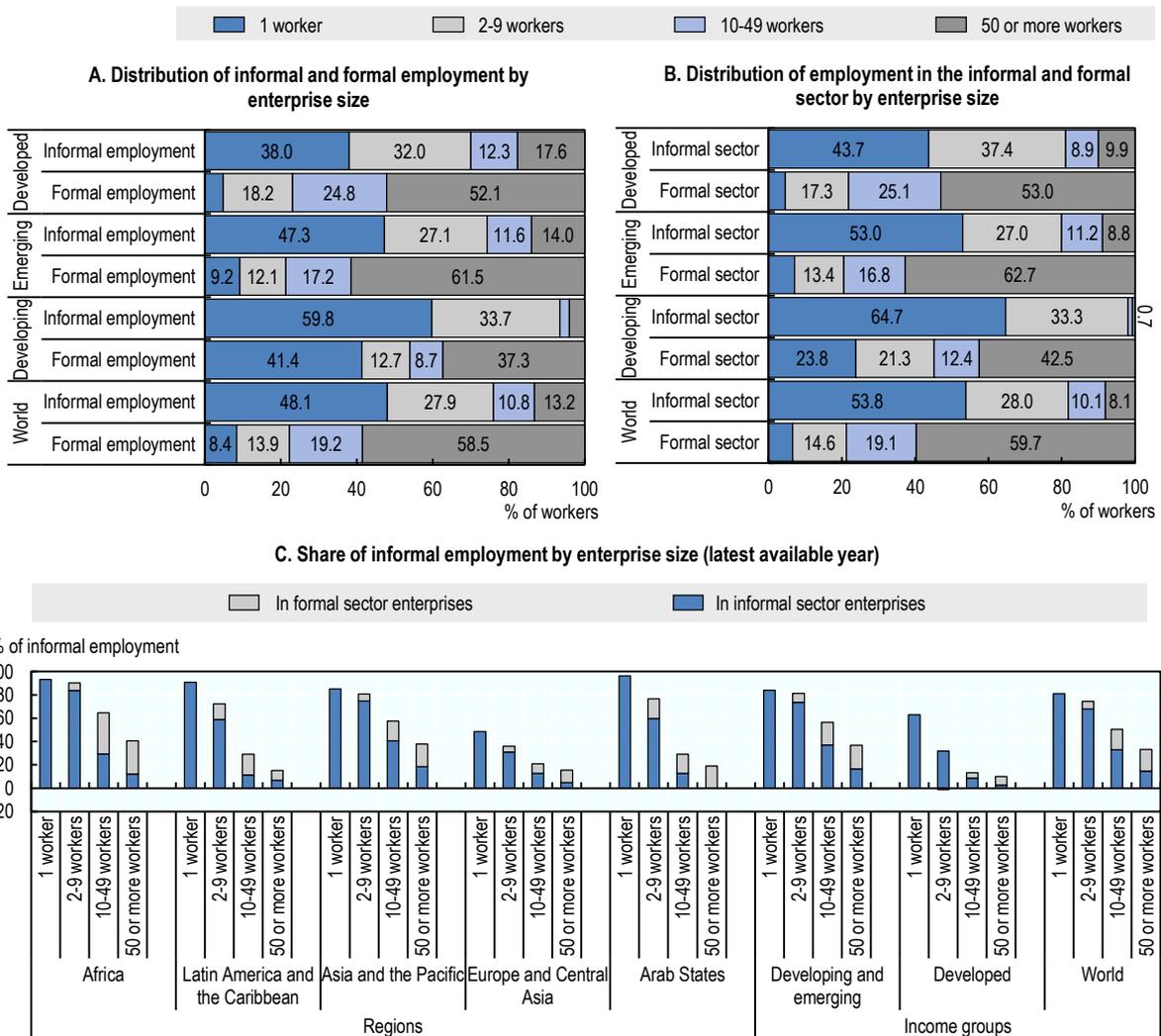
By and large, work in small economic units is informal across developing, emerging and developed countries. About 75% of informal employment and 80% of employment in the informal sector is concentrated in economic units of fewer than ten workers (Figure 1.10A, 1.10B), compared with 22% of formal employment.

The share and composition of informal employment by size of economic unit (Figure 1.10C) highlights three important results. First, employers of larger units are less likely to operate informally. The decrease in share of employment in informal sector units with an increase in the size of economic units is particularly pronounced: while above 80% of one-worker units are in the informal sector, the proportion reaches 15% among units of 50 or more workers. Second, the share of total informal employment decreases with increased size of enterprises, from 81.1% among own-account workers to 33.2% among enterprises of 50 or more workers. Third, there is a significant share of informal employment in medium-sized (10-49 workers) and large (50 or more workers) formal sector enterprises.

Despite the greater ability of large enterprises to cover formalisation costs and more easily interact with government administrations, including social security institutions, thanks to greater administrative capacities, the substantial share of informal employment in large formal enterprises may result from lack of recognition of the employment relationship or from contracts that provide no social protection and other benefits. These figures do not include the large number of informal economy workers with disguised employment relationships who are subcontracted by formal enterprises and misclassified as own-account workers (ILO, 2016^[11]).

Figure 1.10. Most employment in small enterprises is informal, yet informal employment in large formal enterprises is significant

Informal employment and employment in the informal sector, by size of enterprise (2016)



Notes: Estimates based on data for 93 countries representing 71% of the world's employed population. Harmonised definition of informal employment and employment in the informal sector. Source: ILO (2018^[3]), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang-en/index.htm.

The household dimension is key to better understanding vulnerability in the informal economy

A thorough understanding of the well-being consequences of informality requires going beyond the individual perspective to include a household dimension. This has so far received surprisingly little attention. A household perspective on informality is needed to capture the level of income poverty and income insecurity among informal workers, measure the capacity to pay for social protection, identify the possibility of accessing social protection through household members working in the formal economy, and assess the extent to which informal workers' vulnerability is passed on to their dependants (Chapter 4).

Informality takes different forms at the household level

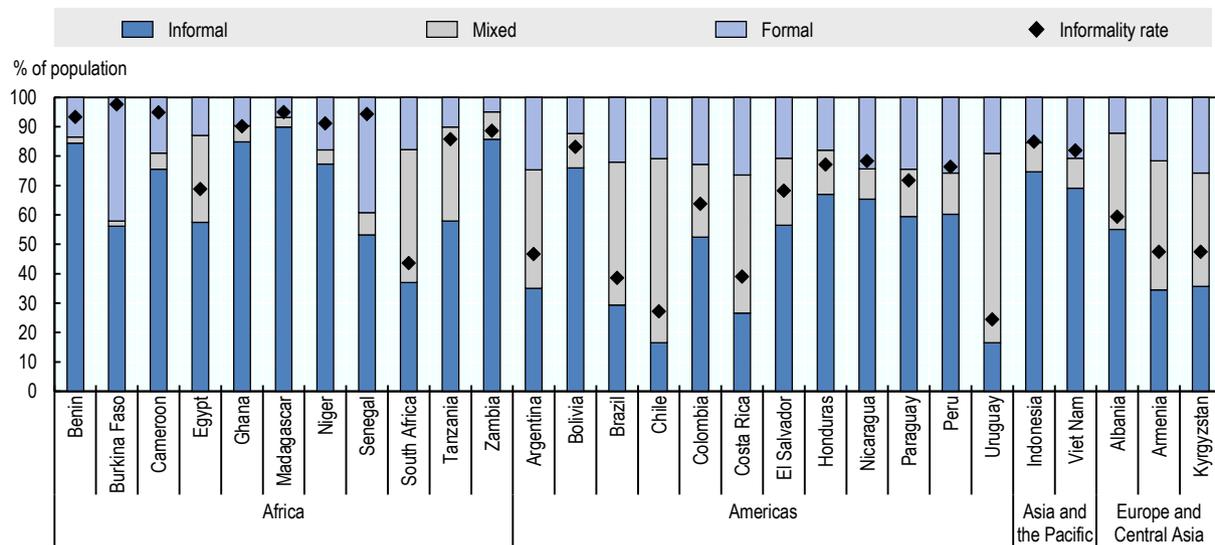
Working household members may be informally or formally employed; households with more than one employed member may therefore have varying levels of informality. Employees in formal employment are entitled to labour-based contributory social protection and/or have the right to employment-based benefits, such as paid sick and annual leave. For independent workers (employers and own-account workers), the legal recognition of their economic units and compliance with fiscal and social security obligations that define the formal nature of their economic unit and thus of their employment may or may not include social security coverage for themselves and their employees, depending on national legislation. Still, in a significant number of developing and emerging countries, independent workers are not included under social security laws or only on a voluntary basis. Independent workers in the formal sector are more likely to earn higher incomes and to contribute to social security. Social insurance benefits can protect dependents of formally employed household members (whether employee or independent worker), entitling them to, for instance, medical insurance. This is why it is critical to go beyond individual circumstances and propose new household-based monitoring indicators of informality.

The completely formal, completely informal or mixed households⁷ sampled for this analysis include only those with workers,⁸ which represent between 85% and 100% in most of the 27 countries covered (Figure 1.11, see Annex A for more information). Household-based indicators of informality reveal that, in 18 countries, the distribution is dominated by completely informal households, suggesting an incomplete form of informal-formal segmentation at the household level.

The degree of informality of households also varies across countries and regions. The share of completely informal households ranges from 3% in Chili to 92% in Burkina Faso; for mixed households, it ranges from 5% in the United Republic of Tanzania to 46% in Argentina. With the exception of South Africa, the vast majority of the population in African countries lives in completely informal households. Latin America is roughly divided between countries where a majority lives in completely formal or mixed households (e.g. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay) and those where a majority lives in completely informal households (most in Central America, as well as Paraguay and Peru). In Asia, the proportion living in informal households ranges from 72% in Indonesia to 35% in Armenia.

Figure 1.11. Degree of informality of households varies across countries

Distribution of overall population, by degree of informality of households (circa 2015)



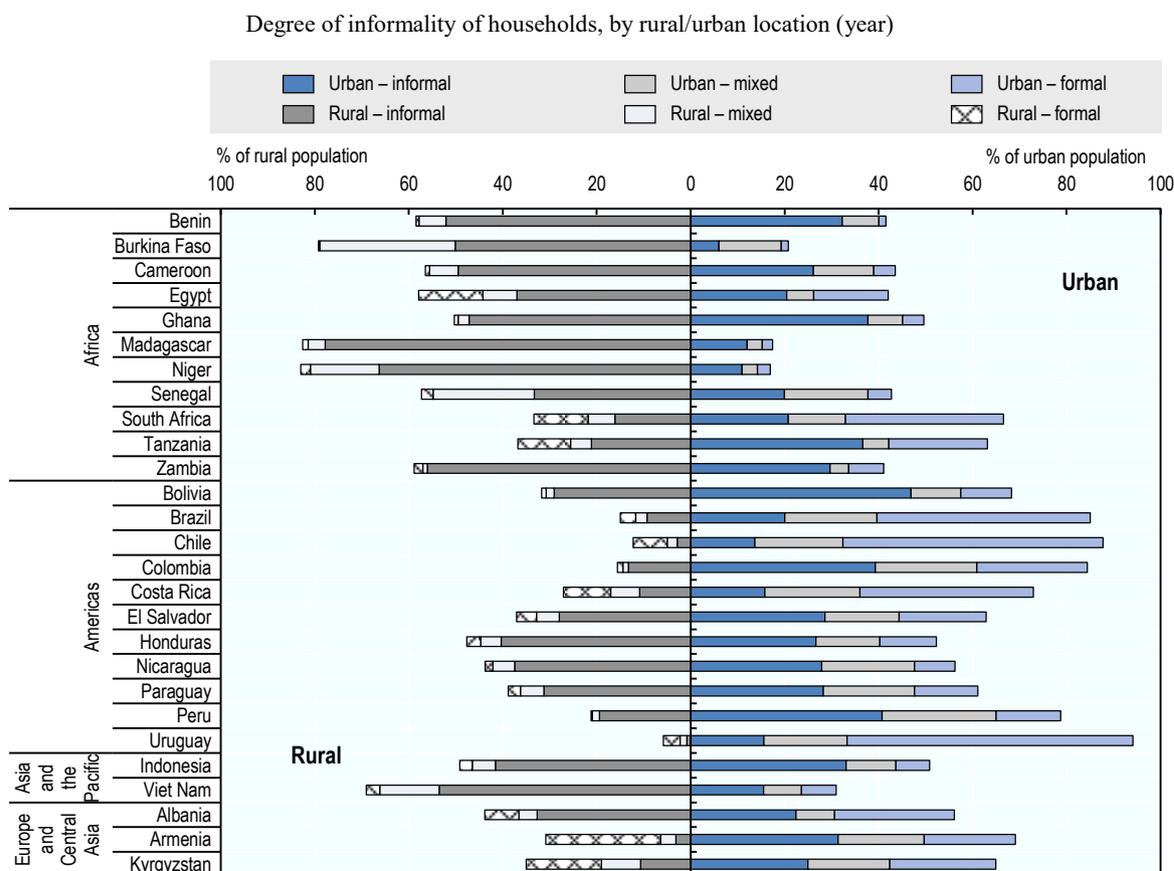
Notes: Includes all sampled households with at least one worker; as compared to informal or formal households, mixed households always have at least two workers. ◆ = overall rate of informality in total employment.

Source: OECD (2019), *Key Indicators of Informality based on Individuals and their Household* (database).

Distribution also varies disparately by location. With the exception of Armenia, rural households, which represent a much higher share of the overall population in Africa, are much more likely to be completely informal (Figure 1.12). Mixed households tend to be an urban phenomenon.

The location of informal workers and their households matters for social protection strategies. For instance, reduced public service infrastructure can be an important barrier to enrolment of rural populations, who may lack information or be unable to enrol due to isolation. At the same time, isolated but tight-knit rural communities may offer informal support mechanisms not available in urban areas. Urban households, however, exhibit greater diversity and may be an important entry point for the extension of social protection to informal economy workers.

Figure 1.12. Mixed households tend to be an urban phenomenon, while a vast majority of rural households are completely informal



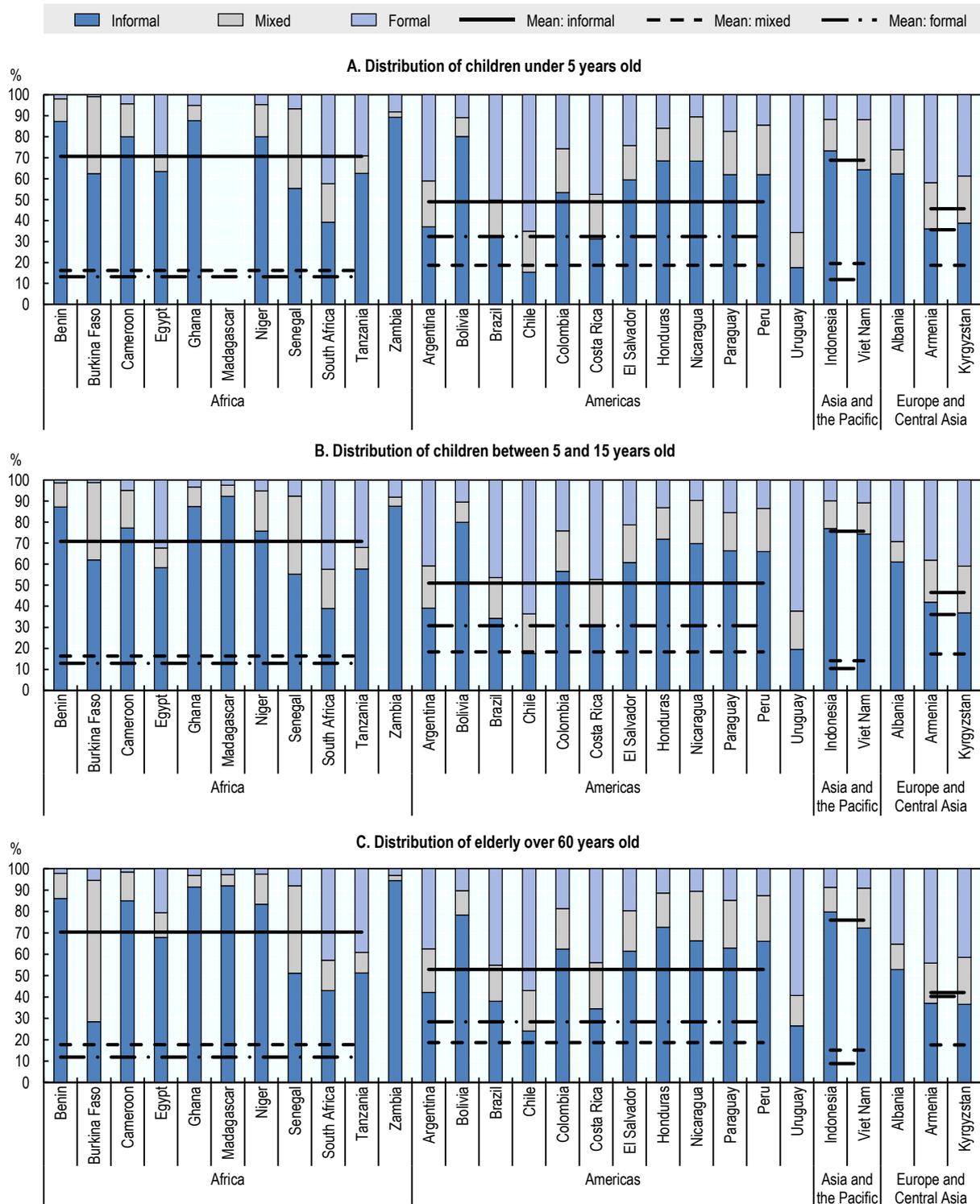
Note: Argentina excluded from figure as survey data only representative for urban areas.

Source: OECD (2019), *Key Indicators of Informality based on Individuals and their Household* (database).

Children and older individuals disproportionately live in informal households

The distribution of dependents in different types of households informs the extent to which adverse well-being implications of informality are passed on to other segments of the population. In most countries, a majority of children (below age 5 and aged 5-15) and of individuals age 60 and over live in completely informal households (Figure 1.13A, 1.13B, 1.13C). In the more advanced countries sampled, the proportion of children and older individuals in formal households increases, but a majority of dependents still live in completely informal or mixed households.

Figure 1.13. Children and older individuals disproportionately live in completely informal households



Notes: Includes all sampled households with at least one worker; mixed households have at least two workers. Information on children under age 5 not available for Madagascar. Regional averages are unweighted average across sample countries.

Source: OECD (2019), *Key Indicators of Informality based on Individuals and their Household* (database).

Notes

¹ Data are related to the concept of informal employment and employment in the informal sector, as defined by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (1993^[1]; 2003^[2]). In a recent effort to enhance comparability across countries, the ILO applied a common set of criteria to national labour force or household survey datasets from close to 120 countries. Details about the operational definitions of informal employment and employment in the informal sector are provided in Annex A.

² Operational definition of informal sector units is provided in Annex A.

³ Independent workers (employers and own-account workers, also called “independent workers without employees”) are considered to be informal when their economic units belong to the informal sector. The informal sector is a subset of household unincorporated enterprises (not constituted as separate legal entities independently of their owners) that produce for sale in the market, even if partly, and that do not have a complete set of accounts and/or are not registered under national legislation (ICLS, 1993^[1]).

⁴ Based on 2016 labour force survey data, applying the set of common criteria for the compilation of comparable estimates on informal employment. The result is slightly lower than obtained from the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) 2014/15 based on similar criteria. The joint analysis of informality and income level and distribution uses NIDS data.

⁵ Share of informal employment including agriculture is above 90.0% in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Madagascar, Niger, Senegal, the United Republic of Tanzania (which stood at 90.6% based on 2014 labour force survey data and 86.0% based on 2012/13 National Panel Survey data) and Togo.

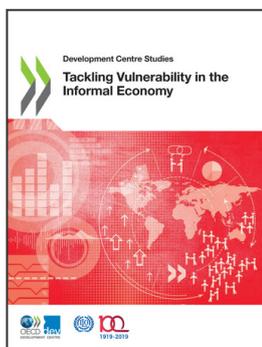
⁶ Non-standard forms of employment comprise four employment arrangements that deviate from the “standard employment relationship” (i.e. other than full time, indefinite and part of a subordinate relationship between an employee and an employer) (ILO, 2016^[1]).

⁷ Households with at least one working member. Mixed households have at least two workers.

⁸ See Annex A for share of households without any workers in each country.

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From:
Tackling Vulnerability in the Informal Economy

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/939b7bcd-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/International Labour Organization (2019), "Portraits of informality", in *Tackling Vulnerability in the Informal Economy*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ee0642f5-en>

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