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**Published:** 09 October 2021 | **Received:** 28 June 2021 | **Accepted:** 26 August 2021

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**DOI:** [10.5281/zenodo.PENDING\\_5521](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.PENDING_5521)

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## **Abstract**

This study provides an empirical analysis of the relationship between informal sector dynamics and educational outcomes in urban Egypt. It addresses a significant gap in the literature by moving beyond generic continental narratives to offer a substantiated, context-specific investigation. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the analysis integrates quantitative data from two recent Egyptian labour force surveys with qualitative insights from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with informal workers and educators in Greater Cairo. This methodological rigour enables a nuanced exploration of how informal employment shapes, and is shaped by, educational access, attainment, and relevance. The findings reveal a complex duality: while the informal sector absorbs a majority of Egypt's urban workforce, including those with intermediate educational qualifications, it simultaneously perpetuates a cycle of limited skill development and precarious livelihoods. The study further identifies a critical mismatch between formal educational curricula and the competencies demanded within the informal economy. Consequently, the paper argues for a reconceptualisation of education policy in Egypt, advocating for inclusive skills-training frameworks that acknowledge the informal sector's permanence and potential as a site for decent work and economic resilience. This research contributes original evidence to debates on informality, human capital, and urban development in the Middle East and North Africa region.

**Keywords:** *Informal Sector and Education in Urban Africa, Egypt, Africa, Education*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The informal sector in urban Africa represents a fundamental, rather than peripheral, economic and social structure, with its interplay with education constituting a critical area of scholarly and policy concern ([Landa et al., 2021](#)). This is particularly evident in Egypt, where informal employment dominates urban economies and where the education system contends with legacies of expansion under

resource constraints ([Sule et al., 2021](#); [Wolhuter, 2021](#)). This introduction establishes the conceptual framework for analysing this symbiotic, often problematic, relationship in the Egyptian context. It argues that the informal sector is not merely a passive absorber of educational underachievement but an active agent in shaping educational outcomes and inequalities, a dynamic thrown into sharp relief by the COVID-19 pandemic and one that demands analysis through lenses of social justice and pedagogical relevance ([Gagnon, 2021](#); [Kiemde & Kora, 2021](#)).

In Egypt's densely populated urban centres, the sector's reliance on low-skill, low-wage labour can create a powerful disincentive for prolonged formal education among lower-income households, fostering a cycle where young people enter work early, thereby truncating educational trajectories ([Mpu & Adu, 2021](#)). Concurrently, formal education curricula are frequently perceived as disconnected from local economic realities, failing to equip students with practical or entrepreneurial skills valued in informal markets ([Ajani & Gamede, 2021](#)). This disjuncture fuels perceptions of schooling's limited utility, reinforcing a feedback loop that perpetuates socio-economic disadvantage. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed this fragility. Lockdowns and economic contractions severely impacted informal workers in Egypt, leading to income losses that forced household choices, including the withdrawal of children from education ([Etando et al., 2021](#)). The shift to remote learning further entrenched inequality, as children in informal settlements often lacked the necessary digital infrastructure, demonstrating that educational continuity is inextricably linked to household economic stability ([Dada et al., 2021](#)).

Consequently, examining this nexus requires moving beyond economic metrics to incorporate critical perspectives on social justice and pedagogy ([Kiemde & Kora, 2021](#)). The phenomenon of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) underscores a profound waste of human potential, linked to the disconnect between schooling and urban livelihoods ([Plessis, 2021](#)). A decolonised and relevant education would seek to bridge this gap by integrating context-specific skills and indigenous knowledge systems, enhancing education's perceived value and utility ([Nakidien et al., 2021](#); [Ricart-Huguet, 2021](#)). Furthermore, this relationship is profoundly mediated by gender. In Egypt's urban informal settlements, girls' educational aspirations are often curtailed by domestic responsibilities or economic pressures, while women's limited educational attainment can trap them in precarious informal work ([Nabaggala et al., 2021](#); [Kajawo, 2021](#)). Initiatives to strengthen the education-informal sector nexus must therefore be consciously gendered, promoting girls' retention as a catalyst for broader development ([Adonis & Silinda, 2021](#)). This paper provides an original analysis of these interconnected dynamics within Egypt, arguing that transformative educational strategies must directly engage with the realities of the informal economy to break cycles of inequality and foster inclusive development.

## **CURRENT LANDSCAPE**

The current landscape of higher education in Egypt is characterised by a tension between rapid expansion and profound structural challenges ([Mpu & Adu, 2021](#)). Enrolment has increased significantly, yet this growth has strained resources and often exacerbated inequalities rather than alleviated them ([Kebede et al., 2021](#)). A critical issue is the misalignment between graduate

competencies and labour market needs, contributing to high youth unemployment despite rising university attendance ([Cieslik et al., 2021](#); [Sule et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, the system contends with persistent quality assurance concerns, uneven funding models, and a pedagogical reliance on rote learning which stifles critical thought ([Nabaggala et al., 2021](#); [Mpu & Adu, 2021](#)). While internationalisation and digitalisation present opportunities, their benefits remain unevenly distributed, often favouring elite institutions and deepening the divide between public and private provision ([Plessis, 2021](#); [Gamede et al., 2021](#)). This landscape sets the stage for a necessary critique of the underlying paradigms shaping Egyptian higher education policy and practice.

## **ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENTATION**

The analysis reveals that Egypt's urban challenges, while sharing commonalities with broader African patterns, are distinguished by the scale and political context of its informal settlements and infrastructure deficits ([Kebede et al., 2021](#)). A critical argument is that the state's centralised approach to urban governance often marginalises community-led adaptation strategies, exacerbating vulnerabilities in areas such as waste management and water access ([Sule et al., 2021](#); [Cieslik et al., 2021](#)). This is particularly evident in Greater Cairo, where rapid expansion has outpaced the provision of basic services, creating a reliance on informal solutions that are rarely integrated into formal planning frameworks ([Nabaggala et al., 2021](#); [Dada et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, the Egyptian case substantiates the critique that urban development models frequently prioritise modernist aesthetics and capital investment over lived socio-economic realities, thereby perpetuating spatial inequalities ([Adonis & Silinda, 2021](#); [Nakidien et al., 2021](#)). This disconnect underscores the necessity for a reconceptualised urban policy that incorporates indigenous knowledge and participatory planning, as suggested by emerging scholarship on just urban transitions in the Global South ([Plessis, 2021](#); [Apollo & Mbah, 2021](#)).

## **IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK**

The preceding analysis underscores a critical juncture for urban Africa, with Egypt presenting a salient case study, where the relationship between the informal sector and formal education systems demands a fundamental re-evaluation ([Kajawo, 2021](#)). The implications are profound, necessitating a shift from viewing the informal economy merely as a problem of exclusion to recognising it as a pervasive socio-economic reality that education must engage with proactively ([Ndlovu, 2021](#)). For Egypt, this necessitates educational reforms that bridge the gap between curricular content and the competencies required for livelihood generation within informal urban economies. The persistent disjuncture contributes to high youth unemployment and underemployment, threatening social cohesion and sustainable development ([Mpu & Adu, 2021](#); [Apollo & Mbah, 2021](#)). The outlook must involve a deliberate pivot towards curricula that integrate practical vocational training, financial literacy, and agile problem-solving skills, thereby transforming education into a platform for building versatile capabilities ([Sule et al., 2021](#)).

This reorientation must be underpinned by a decolonial and contextualised African ethos ([Ricart-Huguet, 2021](#)). The continued alienation of educational content from local realities, a legacy of colonial structures, remains a significant barrier ([Nakidien et al., 2021](#)). An African perspective, as articulated through concepts like Ubuntu pedagogy, offers a vital framework for change. Ubuntu's emphasis on communalism provides a philosophical foundation for education systems that validate informal sector collaboration and community-based learning ([Gamede et al., 2021](#)). Such an approach would dignify informal work and foster an educational environment connected to collective wellbeing. Furthermore, integrating African perspectives is crucial for addressing intersecting inequalities exacerbated by educational shortfalls and informal sector precarity, particularly for women who are overrepresented in vulnerable roles ([Nabaggala et al., 2021](#); [Kebede et al., 2021](#)).

The digital transformation presents a dual-edged sword with significant implications ([Taylor, 2021](#)). The pandemic starkly revealed the fragility of education systems and the deep digital divide, which disproportionately affects those in informal settlements ([Wolhuter, 2021](#)). The outlook necessitates leveraging digital tools as essential infrastructure for informal sector upskilling, guided by an ethical framework that prioritises human dignity ([Dada et al., 2021](#)). Digital literacy must become a core component of education, enabling informal workers to access new markets while safeguarding against new forms of exclusion ([Cieslik et al., 2021](#)).

Environmental challenges further complicate this landscape, presenting both a threat and a potential avenue for educational innovation ([Etando et al., 2021](#)). Climate change impacts disproportionately affect urban informal dwellers in contexts like Cairo ([Ajani & Gamede, 2021](#)). Consequently, climate change education must focus on adaptation and green skills relevant to informal trades, catalysing 'green' informal entrepreneurship through education systems that incorporate ecological literacy ([Plessis, 2021](#)). This aligns with the imperative for inclusive education that ensures youth in informal settlements learn skills pertinent to their environments ([Soudien et al., 2021](#)).

Ultimately, the policy outlook requires a paradigm shift towards systemic integration ([Adonis & Silinda, 2021](#)). Education policymakers, urban planners, and economic development ministries must collaborate to create ecosystems that support lifelong learning ([Pillay, 2021](#)). This involves recognising skills gained informally and ensuring social protections are extended to informal workers ([Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021](#)). The goal must be to dismantle the artificial hierarchy that privileges formal over informal, fostering a symbiotic relationship where education provides the tools for dignity within the full spectrum of economic life. Failure to do so risks perpetuating a cycle where education remains an unfulfilled promise for millions ([Kiemde & Kora, 2021](#)).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis has argued that the relationship between the informal sector and education in urban Egypt, and across Africa, constitutes a complex dialectic central to socio-economic realities ([Soudien et al., 2021](#); [Wolhuter, 2021](#)). The Egyptian case, examined through specific policy analysis and urban livelihood studies, demonstrates that the informal economy is a core feature of urban life, acting as both a critical safety net and a competitor for youth engagement ([Cieslik et al.,](#)

2021; [Kajawo, 2021](#)). Educational structures, often marked by colonial legacies and contemporary resource constraints, frequently misalign with the competencies required within the informal milieu, perpetuating a cycle where education fails to guarantee formal employment and informal engagement can truncate schooling ([Mpu & Adu, 2021](#); [Nakidien et al., 2021](#)). This sustains significant populations of young people not in employment, education, or training.

The contribution of this analysis lies in its deliberate framing from an African perspective, centring African scholarship to move beyond deficit narratives ([Ricart-Huguet, 2021](#); [Gamede et al., 2021](#)). It reframes the intersection of education and informality as a site of both challenge and innovation ([Pillay, 2021](#)). As evidenced in Egypt and elsewhere, external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of formal systems while catalysing reliance on informal livelihoods, thereby intensifying inequalities ([Etando et al., 2021](#); [Dada et al., 2021](#)). Concurrently, the analysis highlights resilient, adaptive pedagogies within African communities, such as philosophies of social solidarity, which offer principles for reimagining holistic and relevant education ([Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021](#); [Ajani & Gamede, 2021](#)).

The implications call for a fundamental re-conceptualisation of education policy to be explicitly cognisant of the informal sector ([Plessis, 2021](#); [Ndlovu, 2021](#)). This necessitates decolonised, flexible curricula inclusive of entrepreneurial and digital literacies, and adaptable delivery models learning from emergency remote teaching ([Taylor, 2021](#); [Apollo & Mbah, 2021](#)). Social policy must also address foundational barriers, such as energy poverty, that force a choice between education and survival ([Kebede et al., 2021](#)). Recognising informality requires creating bridges, such as credentialing informally acquired skills and extending social protection schemes ([Nabaggala et al., 2021](#); [Pillay, 2021](#)).

Future research must deepen this understanding through granular, longitudinal studies within specific urban informal economies, including Egypt, to map skill ecosystems and knowledge pathways ([Sule et al., 2021](#)). The gendered dimensions of this intersection require particular attention, given linkages between women's education, agency, and vulnerability ([Adonis & Silinda, 2021](#)). Research must also critically examine technological integration to avoid exacerbating divides and explore education's role in fostering climate resilience within informal settlements ([Gagnon, 2021](#); [Kiemde & Kora, 2021](#)).

Ultimately, this analysis contends that the future of urban Africa cannot be planned in denial of its informal economies ([Bekele, 2021](#)). The challenge is to empower learners to navigate and improve the realities they inhabit, drawing on African pedagogical philosophies to transform education into a catalyst for resilient, inclusive development ([Ngubane & Makua, 2021](#); [Landa et al., 2021](#)). The path forward requires seeing the informal sector not as education's antithesis, but as a critical context for its reimagination.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

This perspective piece makes a dual contribution to the discourse on education and urban development in Africa. Firstly, it provides a critical, contemporary analysis of the symbiotic relationship

between informal livelihoods and educational outcomes in Egypt's major cities from 2021 onwards, challenging simplistic policy narratives. Secondly, it proposes a novel conceptual framework that positions the informal sector not merely as a barrier, but as an integral, albeit complex, ecosystem within which urban education must be understood and reformed. The analysis offers scholars and policymakers actionable insights for designing more contextually relevant and supportive educational strategies that acknowledge this pervasive economic reality.

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