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Relational Zapatista Economies:

Informal Solidarity Practices as Post-Developmentalist World-Making

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections between informal and solidarity economies through the lens of anti-capitalist practices supporting Zapatista autonomy. From a decolonial perspective, it challenges dichotomous frameworks of in/formality to examine how informal practices not only respond to state absences and failures but also actively critique capitalist structures. Drawing on a literature review and multiple fieldwork experiences in Chiapas and across Europe, the study investigates informal solidarities as practices of resistance, highlighting their role in building opportunities for action and alternative economic pathways. The paper examines how informal solidarity practices challenge simplified views of informality as a domain of self-serving action and instead recognize them as collective, organized efforts that challenge both state and market structures. This study reveals how relational economies surrounding the Zapatista experience constitute a form of everyday resistance that strives to build alternative frameworks for post-developmentalist lives. Ultimately, the paper explores the potential of informal economies as reservoirs for post-patriarchal alternatives, providing insights into the dynamic and relational boundaries between formal and informal practices and their role in creating new forms of non-capitalist world-making.

Keywords: Informal Solidarity, Zapatista Economies, Post-Development, Resistance, Alternatives.

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Introduction

Recent debates within informality studies aim to move past dualistic conceptualizations opposing state to non-state actors to delineate the limits of what can be considered acceptable (Polese 2021). Nonetheless, policy-oriented perspectives still view informal economic practices as a gray area needing to be eliminated, controlled, or channeled into compatible and foreseeable rules and policies. Such perspectives perceive informal economies as subordinate to formal institutions and advocate for a new type of modernization and progress corresponding to formalization. The precarity in which non-state actors find themselves is seen as hailing directly from the exclusion of the global capitalist system rather than its integration. Policy specialists and intergovernmental organizations see processes referred to as *transition to formality*[2] as valuable contributions to *governance strategies* and *sustainable innovations*. Informal economies can avoid official rejection when compatible with rulers' interests and power dynamics and when capable of providing politically correct business opportunities: their existence is allowed as long as it is possible to subsume them within neoliberal logics.

Theories on informal economies are based on studies conducted mainly within post-Soviet states and territories recently categorized as the *Global South*, compared with supposedly "developed" regions that historically dominated the world. State and policy-oriented perspectives are based on an idealization of Western ideals such as (individual) freedom and progress. Anthropology broadly discussed the evolutionary inheritance of these notions, radically rethinking the way we conceptualize modernity and otherness (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Wolf 1982). New challenges within informality studies are researching the contributions that informal economies could bring to Western countries, constructing informality as a non-modern phenomenon. In the attempt to recognize and channel its positive sides, informal economies come to be celebrated as more humane, supportive of social and solidarity economies, and even fostering civic engagement (Polese 2015). However, this notion of civic participation is frequently grounded in liberal-democratic ideals of individual empowerment, framing citizenship as a matter of inclusion in decision-making rather than the collective construction of autonomous political structures. Participation becomes synonymous with representation—being granted a voice—rather than with challenging or transforming the hegemonic frameworks that structure power. Citizens remain governed, even when actively engaged, embedded in a system whose logic escapes their actual control and where participation continues to be mediated by verticalist structures. In policy discourse, individuals are reduced to *stakeholders* (ILO 2015), their political agency risks being diluted into technocratic negotiations, where asymmetrical power relations are masked by the language of interest representation. The neoliberal shift from citizen to client or consumer reinforces this logic, substituting collective struggle and antagonistic subjectivities with

[2] See for exemple the EU statement at the International Labour Conference in Geneva in June 2025, dedicated to "Promoting Transitions towards Formality"**:**
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/eu-statement-113th-ilc-general-discussion-committee-promoting-transitions-towards-formality-opening_en?utm
A recent UN policy brief (2024) states that "transforming the informal economy" is necessary "to leave no one behind":
https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2024/04/unen_policy_brief_march_2024.pdf?utm.
The report concludes with an invitation to follow the ILO Recommendation R204 – "Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation" adopted in 2015:
https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R204.

depoliticized forms of governance. As a result, citizenship becomes a managerial issue of balancing competing interests, rather than a space for radical democratic transformation.

This study draws on an extensive literature review and multiple ethnographic experiences conducted between 2015 and 2025 across Chiapas (Mexico) and various European countries, including Spain, Italy, and Germany. The literature review focused on texts addressing decolonial perspectives, informal economies, and alternative economic practices, complemented by the analysis of grey literature produced by the EZLN and activist networks, as well as a Horizon Scanning report (Fradejas García et al. 2024) to which I contributed to in the broader context of an ongoing research project[3] on informality in the Global South. Fieldwork included more than 18 months in Chiapas (over 4 stays ranging from 1 up to 9 months) and 10 years of active engagement within the European network of solidarity collectives. Data collection methods included open and semi-structured interviews—both individual and collective—informal conversations, and participation in shared spaces of dialogue with activists and Zapatista support bases, alongside participant observation in political solidarity initiatives. As a working paper tied to an ongoing investigation, it does not aim to provide final conclusions or present scientific results in a definitive manner but instead seeks to foster dialogue around the role of informal solidarity practices as potential sites of political transformation.

Rather than viewing informality merely as the avoidance of taxes or a symptom of exclusion from formal trade systems[4], this paper approaches this complex category as a relational, contested, and strategic space where economic practices are mobilized to resist and reconfigure dominant economic and political orders. Informality is defined here as a heterogeneous field of action and production of meaning that challenges the in/formal binary, encompassing deliberate practices of autonomy, care, and collective organization that reject state mediation and capitalist markets as indissoluble elements of a single system of dispossession. By examining the shifting boundaries between formalization and informalization as lived and negotiated processes, the paper explores how actors position themselves inside, beyond, or against dominant regimes, revealing informality as both an analytical lens and a political tool for reimagining the common.

Informal Economic Practices and Economic Solidarities

In recent decades, the study of informal economies has gained attention for its ability to illuminate how communities navigate state inefficiencies and global neoliberal structures. Informality – once dismissed as chaotic or backward – has increasingly been reframed as a domain of resilience and creativity (Ledeneva et al. 2018; Polese 2021). Informal economic practices, ranging from small-scale trade to complex networks of solidarity, challenge dominant capitalist logics by proposing alternative ways of organizing economic life. Solidarity economies, meanwhile, have emerged as a response to the limitations of both capitalist and state-centered socialist models. Rooted in principles of reciprocity, cooperation, and social justice, these economies strive to prioritize collective well-being over individual profit.

[3] PRESILIENT: *Post-pandemic resilient communities: is the informal economy a reservoir for the next generation of digitalized and green businesses in the Global South?*

[4] The previously mentioned UN policy brief (2024) clearly lists “informal employment, informal work, informal sector, informal enterprises, and informal transactions” as the “concepts” associated with informality.

The intersection of informal and solidarity economies offers a fertile ground for exploring how grassroots movements resist hegemonic systems while fostering humanized economic relations. The intersections between informality and solidarity economies challenge the rigid categorizations often imposed by state and policy-oriented perspectives. These categorizations frequently overlook the fluid and situated ways in which communities combine formal and informal practices to sustain livelihoods and resist exploitation. This paper investigates experiences that confront hegemonic systems while cultivating alternative forms of economic organization. Applying an anthropological perspective and approaching these intersections from the perspectives of local actors, the paper aims to highlight ambiguities and challenge Western-centric frameworks, contributing to critical debates on autonomy, solidarity, economic relationality, and collective resistance.

The Ambiguities of Informality

The concept of informal economies was first popularized in the 1970s through studies conducted in the Global South. Scholars such as Hart (1973) and De Soto (1989) highlighted the economic activities occurring outside formal regulatory frameworks, often in response to state absence or inefficiencies. While early studies emphasized informality as a survival strategy, contemporary approaches have broadened the scope to include its political, cultural, and social dimensions. Recent debates on informality try to challenge the dichotomy between legality and illegality, as well as the binary distinction between formal and informal sectors. Polese (2021) describes it as "the art of bypassing the state," encompassing practices that range from subsistence-level activities to sophisticated strategies employed by corporations to avoid taxes. This ambiguity is increasingly pointing to the need for a deeper and more complex analysis that is able to account for diverse manifestations and implications of informal economic practices.

> "Since the late 1960s, the study of informality, originating from urban development discourse (ILO 1972; Turner 1968), has determined the dwelling and economic activity of the marginalised as a threat to progress and modernisation." (Müller 2019: 65)

Business-oriented perspectives consider economic categories such as "efficiency", "competition" and cost reduction among the "bright sides" of informality, possibly including social cohesion as a plus. The opportunity to avoid bureaucratization and not having to depend too much on state rules is also positively valued, as it frees Smith's *invisible hand* (1776) from limitations, giving companies and corporations the flexibility to do whatever it takes to increase productivity and profits. Contemporary financial markets, in this context, can also be perceived as a force able to "bypass the state", as demonstrated by tax havens and delocalization processes of the labor force or companies' HQ to reduce costs and avoid taxes.

Those practices are not problematized in the same way as forms of corruption or other characteristics attributed to informal economies from the "Global South", mostly because they usually play on the verge of legality beyond state borders, counting on such economic power to be able to influence laws and politics worldwide according to their interests. As Polese (2021) notes, such double standards reveal the biases in how informality is framed depending on its geographic and economic contexts. Additionally, informality has been represented as a rational response to uncertainty and institutional ineffectiveness. In Ledeneva's study of "economies of favor" (2018), informal practices are seen as strategies to navigate short-term needs while fostering long-term social cohesion.

However, these practices are not free from contradictions: tensions often arise between collective values rooted in reciprocity and individual aspirations for advancement, reflecting broader societal conflicts between mutuality and liberal ideologies.

Our ongoing research project contributed to understanding the role of informality in navigating global crises, such as economic recessions and pandemics (Fradejas García et al. 2024). Informal economies often emerge as adaptive mechanisms that provide essential goods and services when formal systems falter. This adaptability highlights their resilience but also raises questions about the structural inequalities that necessitate such practices in the first place. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, informal networks in marginalized communities played a critical role in distributing resources and sustaining livelihoods, revealing their importance as social safety nets (Fradejas García et al. 2024). These dynamics underline the ambivalence of informality, simultaneously serving as a mechanism for survival and a critique of formal economic systems. By reframing informality as a space of negotiation and resistance, it is possible to better understand its potential to challenge and transform dominant economic paradigms.

Economic Solidarity as Relationality

Solidarity economy (Coraggio 2011; Razeto 1990; Singer 2002) refers to practices aimed at creating economic systems based on values such as cooperation, reciprocity, and social justice. Coraggio (2011) and Svampa (2019) emphasized the role of solidarity economies in resisting neoliberalism and fostering collective autonomy. In Mexico, López-Córdova and Marañón-Pimentel (2023) highlight how indigenous and rural communities have developed insurgent and anti-hegemonic economic practices as part of broader struggles for sovereignty and justice. These economies often intersect with categories such as popular or informal economies, creating hybrid systems that challenge dualisms between so-called traditional and modern practices. In this sense, solidarity economies have represented references for sustainable development that strive to prioritize community care over individual gain.

López-Córdova and Marañón-Pimentel (2023: 33) argue that such practices in Mexico reflect a "peculiar and underrecognized approach to insurgent and anti-hegemonic economies". Activist networks supporting Zapatista communities illustrate how economic solidarity can transcend local contexts to foster transnational alliances for economic justice. These networks provide material support and also create spaces for dialogue and mutual learning, reinforcing the collective aspirations towards a common struggle that challenges the epistemological foundations of neoliberal rationality and proposes concrete pathways of non capitalist world-making. While solidarity economies aim to represent transformative alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, their increasing visibility and integration into public policies have raised concerns about the potential reappropriation and dilution of their original values. Institutions often co-opt social and solidarity economy (SSE) frameworks, embedding them into state-driven development agendas that prioritize measurable outcomes and bureaucratic standardization over grassroots autonomy. This process risks reducing SSE to a set of technical tools for poverty alleviation or social inclusion, stripping away its political and emancipatory dimensions. In the anti-systemic perspective shared by most of my interlocutors, the progressive institutionalization of values belonging to the heterogeneous field of solidarity economies is strongly problematized, representing an alignment with market logics and neoliberal governance that undermines the potential to build actual alternatives. The danger is to perpetuate the systematic marginalization of those communities that originated these practices, privileging institutional actors over grassroots

decision-making. This dynamic not only compromises the values of reciprocity and collective autonomy but also risks transforming SSE into a depoliticized mechanism for softening the inherent contradictions of capitalism, rather than facing its roots. Recognizing these tensions is essential for understanding current debates (within and beyond the academic context) and safeguarding the transformative aspirations of solidarity practices.

Revisiting Informality: A Decolonial Critique

Whereas "so-called modern societies, according to social sciences' mainstream theoretical paradigms, should essentially be founded on Emile Durkheim's organic solidarity, thus on formal structures" (Giordano in Ledeneva et al. 2018: 314), informality studies have shown that numerous common human behaviors are legitimated by other criteria. As an answer to state inefficiency, for instance, informal practices can become a perfectly rational response in the eyes of a society, even when they exclusively follow self-serving interests. The dichotomic distinction operated by Durkheim between "mechanical solidarity" as constitutive of so-called "pre-modern" societies and "organic solidarity" characterizing "modern" and "complex" societies through a formal social pact, has proven to be obsolete and colonially biased. Furthermore, it does not account for the ambiguity of informal economic practices that escape binarisms, strict categorizations, and simplistic theorizations.

From a decolonial perspective, informality must be understood as a response to colonial legacies and ongoing structural inequalities. López-Córdova and Marañón-Pimentel (2023) argue that informal practices in Mexico represent not merely adaptations to exclusion but deliberate rejections of neoliberal rationality. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, a decolonial approach challenges the notion that formality is inherently superior or more rational. A decolonial critique emphasizes the need to disentangle informality from the deficit narratives often imposed by global policy frameworks. These narratives frame informal economies as failures of governance rather than as spaces of agency and innovation. Reframing informality as a site of resistance and transformation shifts the focus from its perceived shortcomings to its potential as a source of alternative economic models.

Informality is inherently ambiguous, encompassing practices that range from nepotism and corruption to solidarity and resistance. Ledeneva (2018: 40) describes it as a "regime of affection, regime of status, or regime of equivalence [...] as well as the wider set of political, economic and cultural constraints" that blurs the boundaries between personal and impersonal relationships. This fluidity allows informality to adapt to diverse contexts but also complicates efforts to theorize its transformative potential. These ambiguities highlight the need for context-specific analyses that account for the diverse motivations and outcomes of informal practices. While some forms of informality may perpetuate existing inequalities, others serve as catalysts for collective action and systemic change.

Informality as Resistance? Lessons from Zapatista Communities

Zapatista communities provide a unique example of how informal economic practices can serve as tools for resistance. Through autonomous governance structures and collective economic initiatives, they created spaces that strive to operate outside the control of both the state and the market. These practices challenge the assumption that formality is necessary for fairness and justice, instead

emphasizing values such as autonomy, reciprocity, and solidarity. Zapatista political economy includes cooperative organization, collective work, land reappropriation, and solidarity networks of exchange. By resisting the commodification of land, labor, and resources, Zapatista economic practices challenge the core elements of capitalist accumulation by dispossession. Principles of mutuality, horizontality, and collective decision-making are claimed by Zapatista spokespersons and solidarity activists in sharp contrast with the profit-driven logic of dominant markets. Economic solidarity with Zapatista communities extends beyond Chiapas, involving transnational networks of activists. These networks are representative of the dialectical intersection of informality and solidarity economy, as they rely on trust and shared political commitments. Transnational solidarity networks also highlight the potential for informal economies to transcend local contexts and engage with global movements. By linking localized grassroots initiatives to broader struggles for social and economic justice, these networks amplify the impact of informal practices and create opportunities for change beyond borders.

For the Zapatistas, a certain level of informality is not merely a necessity of historically marginalized indigenous communities but a deliberate strategy to resist co-optation and maintain autonomy. By striving to operate outside formal frameworks, they can avoid the bureaucratic and political constraints that often accompany state support through developmentalist programs that generate dependence on institutions and their interests. This strategic use of informality allows communities in resistance to preserve their values and sustain autonomous structures while engaging with international economic networks. This perspective emphasizes the potential of informal economic practices to challenge and transform dominant economic and political systems. By framing informal practices as acts of defiance rather than compliance, the Zapatista experience offers valuable grounds for rethinking the role of informality in building alternative futures.

Informality as a Post-Developmentalist Alternative: Beyond Neoliberal Rationality

The boundaries between formal and informal economies are not fixed but fluid, constantly renegotiated by individuals and groups navigating the complexities of global economic systems. Informal practices often coexist with formal structures, creating hybrid systems that challenge binary categorizations. This dynamic reflects the reality that informality is not merely a residual category but an integral part of economic life, shaped by the interdependence of social, cultural, and political factors. Informality can serve as both a reaction to state inefficiencies and a critique of neoliberal rationality, highlighting its dual role as a survival strategy and a form of resistance. This duality becomes evident in contexts where formal structures fail to address the needs of marginalized communities, compelling them to adopt informal practices as an adaptive mechanism. At the same time, these practices often challenge the legitimacy of formal institutions by exposing their inability to ensure fairness and equity.

The risk of co-optation by neoliberal logic is ever-present, as states and corporations seek to subsume informality within formal frameworks. This process of formalization often entails the imposition of regulatory mechanisms that undermine the autonomy of informal practices. The tension between informalization and formalization is also evident in the increasing commodification of solidarity initiatives. Efforts to institutionalize economic solidarity risk diluting its transformative potential by aligning it with market-driven imperatives. This highlights the importance of maintaining a critical perspective on formalization processes and their implications for grassroots movements. Despite these challenges, informality remains a fertile ground for innovation and experimentation. By operating outside the constraints of formal systems, informal practices can explore alternative models

of economic organization that prioritize collective well-being over profit. This potential is particularly evident in the realm of solidarity economies, where informal networks play a crucial role in fostering cooperation and mutual aid. In the case of the Zapatistas, informalization processes of economic practices reflect a deliberate strategy to resist co-optation and maintain autonomy. By leveraging informal solidarity channels, these communities try to bypass bureaucratic obstacles and engage directly with international allies, creating spaces for collective action. Such practices demonstrate the potential of informality to challenge dominant paradigms and envision new possibilities for economic and social organization. In this context, informality offers a lens for understanding the interconnectedness of local and global struggles. As activists and communities engage in informal practices to resist neoliberal policies, they contribute to a broader movement for economic justice that transcends geographic boundaries, building on the transformative potential of informal economic practices as a path toward autonomy and a tool for reimagining economic systems and fostering solidarity across diverse contexts.

Informal economies revisited from the perspective of collectivities fighting for autonomy align with post-developmentalist critiques of modernity (Acosta 2012; Escobar 2018) by emphasizing relationality, reciprocity, and ecological reproduction. The Zapatista experience challenges the commodification of nature and human relations as it integrates economic practices with a political ethics of life. By prioritizing the common and ecological balance, informal solidarity practices provide a counter-narrative to the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency and profit. Post-patriarchal visions embedded in these practices also challenge traditional gender roles and hierarchies, disrupting the association of economic productivity with patriarchal ideals of competitiveness and dominance. These visions advocate for a relational understanding of the economy that situates human activity within broader social and ecological systems of mutual care. By integrating these holistic frameworks, post-developmentalist alternatives offer a pathway to reimagine economic systems that respect both human and non-human forms of life, moving beyond the anthropocentric focus of neoliberal models.

> "Informality functions as a terrain of both exploitation and self-management, where the boundaries of economic domination and popular innovation are constantly negotiated." (Gago 2017: 18).

Neoliberalism often frames informal economies as deviations from a supposed ideal of efficiency. However, Gago's critical perspective argues that informal practices can simultaneously exist within and challenge neoliberal systems. Gago emphasizes how informal economies create opportunities for survival and spaces of autonomy, particularly for marginalized groups, by repurposing neoliberal tools for collective benefit. By rejecting neoliberal logics, informal solidarity practices can open spaces for alternative ways of organizing economic life.

In Zapatista critical thought (EZLN 2015), this negotiation takes the form of rejecting state-centered solutions while constructing autonomous governance and economic systems. Zapatista communities articulate a vision of resistance that is not confined to oppositional politics but is rooted in building alternatives to the commodification of life. Historically, the organization of Zapatista communities prioritizes the collective over the individual, embedding economic practices within relational frameworks. Recently, they decided to completely revisit their political structure to further ensure the construction of the common (*el común*) within autonomous territories (EZLN 2023). Informalization, in the context of economic practices surrounding the Zapatista experience, embodies a rejection of universalist frameworks in favor of locally situated efforts to escape the reductionist logic of neoliberal rationality.

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Conclusion: Towards Collective Informality

Informal economies are far more than adaptive mechanisms for navigating systemic inefficiencies; they are dynamic spaces where resistance and transformation converge. When intersecting with solidarity practices, they create opportunities for collective action that contest dominant economic regimes. Informal practices do not merely evade state control but also reconfigure neoliberal spaces of action, turning them into political tools. The Zapatista experience shows the potential of these practices to challenge hegemonic power structures without losing sight of the need to build concrete alternatives in the present. At the same time, the fluidity and ambiguity of informality present significant challenges. The risk of co-optation remains a persistent threat, as developmentalist programs, state-centric policies, and corporative interests seek to subsume informal solidarity practices into formal regulatory systems. This tension is particularly evident in the processes of formalization, which can dilute the transformative potential of solidarity economies by aligning them with market-driven imperatives. Sustaining collective struggles in the face of power asymmetries and resource disparities requires a constant and shared commitment to anti-capitalist principles and praxis. Addressing these tensions entails a deep understanding of the relational dynamics between formality and informality, as well as the willingness to center the voices and experiences of collectivities fighting for autonomy and self-determination.

In the Zapatista perspective, resistance is not merely about opposition but about constructing viable alternatives to a destructive and widespread commodification of life. Informal economies, when rooted in collective rationality and territorial specificity, challenge Eurocentric assumptions about economic progress. Post-patriarchal and post-developmentalist visions embedded in collective care highlight the transformative potential of informal economies to address systemic inequalities. By disrupting traditional gender hierarchies and emphasizing ecological co-existence, these economies provide a counter-narrative to the exploitative logic of capitalism. The Zapatistas' integration of indigenous knowledges into their economic and political practices demonstrates the power of relational frameworks to transcend anthropocentric models. These approaches not only reimagine economic systems but also offer pathways for the reconfiguration of life itself.

This paper highlights the potential of informal solidarity practices to transcend neoliberal rationality by integrating principles of solidarity, relationality, and decommodification. However, realizing this potential requires ongoing critical engagement, both in theory and praxis, to deal with the complexities and contradictions inherent in the conflictual spaces generated by capitalist polycrises. Through a multitude of voices and making visible the relational dynamics of informality, we can prefigure economic systems that prioritize the common over individual profit. Understanding informal economies as reservoirs for post-patriarchal and post-developmentalist alternatives calls for continued exploration of their potential to inspire non-capitalist futures.

> "Informality could, and should, be used for the conceptualization of alternative economic and socio-economic systems that go beyond neoliberal approaches putting economic profits as the ultimate goal. Informality has the potential to become a framework allowing us to bring back into the spotlight the social, cultural and environmental needs of segments of the population that have been neglected by orthodox economic and economic policy approaches." (Polese 2021: 324)

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