

Informal Employment Statistics

Some Issues

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This article discusses issues of measurement of informal employment. It briefly traces the evolution of the conceptual framework on the informal sector, what defines the sector and informal employment, and the new questions that have been introduced in surveys to help capture informality. A snapshot of the findings on informal employment from National Sample Survey Office reports of the 61st (2004-05), 66th (2009-10) and 68th (2011-12) rounds is presented in the article.

1 Introduction

Informal employment engages a majority of India's workforce. The absence of systematic and periodic statistics on informal employment and their characteristics until recently has been glaring. Some statistics are now available, for instance, according to the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) 68th round (2011-12), 79% of the informal workers¹ do not have a written job contract; 71% are not eligible for paid leave; and 72% are not eligible for any social security benefits.² All these features have recorded an increase over time since 2004-05, indicating a worsening of the situation. Among informal workers, 42% were temporary in 2011-12. Considering all the sectors, the report also highlights that 80% of the workers are engaged in activities which have no union or association. Most of these dimensions are discussed in a subsequent section of this article, which presents a snapshot of informal employment statistics.

The introduction of new questions pertaining to the types of enterprises and conditions of work, which help in elucidating information on the informal sector and informal employment, was initiated in the NSSO's 55th round of 1999-2000.³ Over the last three rounds of 2004-05 (61st), 2009-10 (66th) and 2011-12 (68th), separate reports on comparable estimates have been published by the NSSO, titled *Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment in India*. However, it appears as if researchers have not made much use of these reports. Why? Is it due to a lack of awareness about these reports or something else associated with the definitions and conceptual framework used to measure informal employment that excludes certain activities and types of enterprises? The use of unit-level data

from the employment-unemployment rounds, which forms the basis of these reports, may be another reason. In spite of some of these perceived shortfalls, the reports provide detailed statistics on informal employment for the proprietary and partnership (P&P) enterprises within agriculture, excluding growing of crops (AGEGC)⁴ and non-agriculture sector activities, which is defined as the informal sector. The significance of measuring the informal sector and informal employment has been debated for several decades, especially with regard to what defines informality, how one should measure it, and whether data can be compared across locations, as also in terms of gender, sectors, and activities that can be observed over time. Several of these concerns are being addressed through the publication of these reports on the informal sector at regular intervals. The information provided therein is a rich source for researchers, especially those who cannot access unit-level NSSO data with ease.

This article covers the evolution of the conceptual framework to measure informal employment briefly in Section 2. Section 3 delineates how informality is defined. Section 4 provides details on the new questions that have been introduced on the types of enterprises and conditions of employment. A snapshot of informal employment statistics from the NSSO report no 557 is provided in Section 5. The article concludes by highlighting a few of the limitations in coverage and their consequences.

2 Evolution of Concepts

For several decades, the only approach available for measuring the informal, or what is also referred to as the unorganised sector, was the residual one. A proxy, of deducting formal employment as provided by the Directorate General of Employment and Training (DGET) or the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) from total employment, for instance, was used by researchers to obtain an estimation of the informal sector workforce (also see ILO 2002; Bhalla 2009; Vanek et al 2014). This kind of a residual

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approach was the basis for the long-standing estimate of close to 92%-93% of workers in informal employment that has been made over several decades. This was, however, restrictive and problematic when reduced to a residual in spite of being a major category of the Indian economy. Convincing mainstream economists that this is not a segment of the labour market which is transitional, which would dissolve or convert into formal employment, proved difficult.⁵ Even without adequate information, it was noted that the informal sector and employment therein had been growing rather than declining over the years across several countries in the world (Kundu and Sharma 2001; ILER 2014). This is established more firmly when the informal sector is measured by using a combination of the enterprise and employment criteria together as has been done in the NSS reports.

The persistence of informal sector employment has renewed interest in understanding the informal economy better, which, in turn, has led to a direct demand for more systematic data on these segments of the economy. In 1993, the adoption of the resolution during the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) concerning statistics of employment in the informal sector represented the first and perhaps the only attempt to introduce international statistical standards on the topic (ILO 2000, 2013). While defining the informal sector, the 15th ICLS, rather than focusing only on the statistical aspects, considered it an analytical and political concept. Paragraph 5 (i) of the resolution states,

The informal sector may be broadly characterised as consisting of units engaged in the production of goods or services with the primary objective of generating employment and incomes to the persons concerned. These units typically operate at a low level of organisation, with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production and on a small scale. Labour relations – where they exist – are based mostly on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than [on] contractual arrangements with formal guarantees.

The contributions made by the Delhi Group,⁶ the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector

(NCEUS) and the National Statistical Commission (NSC) are a few of the critical ones in the evolution of the conceptual and methodological ideas on the informal sector. The formation of the Delhi Group by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) in 1997, to examine the methodological issues concerning the treatment of the informal sector, provided an international forum for the exchange of country experiences. The discussions in the Delhi Group focused on estimations of informal sector employment, the measurement of its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP), the statistical standards used by different countries and its improvement, and refinement and harmonisation to facilitate international comparability. The suggestions made by the Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics (Delhi Group) and others informed the 17th ICLS, which endorsed the guidelines concerning a statistical definition of informal employment that complemented the 15th ICLS resolution.

Different reports and researchers have used unit-level NSSO data on employment

and unemployment to estimate informal employment and even the informal sector directly as per their own specifications rather than using or looking at the NSSO report *Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment in India*.⁷ However, the methods and estimation procedures/steps are not always the same, leading to varied estimations with slight variations or multiple observations and inferences. Such measures may not be comparable with international estimates due to variations in the definitions and calculations. As the report specifies, informal employment in the country is “the estimate of workers by characteristics of enterprises and conditions of employment (taken together)” (NSSO 2014: 2).

3 What Defines Informality?

The definition of the informal sector follows the enterprise approach, and bases the categorisation on the characteristics of the production units rather than in terms of the employment generated therein. While doing so, it lays down a distinction which was hitherto not as clear as that between the enterprises and

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employment approaches. The informal sector enterprises constitute a sub-set of unincorporated household enterprises, which are engaged in the production of goods or services for sale or barter, irrespective of their location of operation, or whether these are self-employed or hire workers. The three basic criteria adopted for defining informal sector enterprises by the 15th ICLS relate to ownership, that is, they should be: (a) proprietary or partnerships lacking complete sets of accounts, (b) be producing at least some goods and services for sale or barter (which thereby implies the exclusion of households producing for their own final use), and (c) should be engaged in non-agricultural activities, including secondary non-agricultural activities of enterprises in the agricultural sector. The last criterion was taken into consideration more as a matter of convenience in data-gathering rather than as a matter of principle (Bhalla 2009; Hussmans 2004). The concept of the informal sector remains restricted to activities as per the System of National Accounts (SNA) production boundary. Other criteria, which are flexible, relate to the number of workers, registration status, and so on.

Is informality an outcome of a residual mechanism? Does it allude to something that attempts to be formal but misses out or loses out on doing so for certain reasons and, therefore, remains informal? The lack of regulation or registration has come to be a common form for defining informality. It is an outcome of the fact that enterprises and units which are registered or fall within the purview of regulation are defined as organised, and therefore anything that is not, tends to be informal. In other words, even the definition of what constitutes informal enterprises was derived as an offset category of what has always been the main focus of mainstream economists, who still appear reluctant to accept the significance of the informal sector for development and growth.

A conceptual framework matrix of informal enterprises and jobs by employment status has been considered for measuring informal employment (see Box 1).

Box 1: Conceptual Framework – Informal Employment

Production Units by Type	Jobs by Employment Status									
	Own Account Workers		Employers		Contributing Family Workers		Employees		Members of Producers Cooperatives	
	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	
Formal sector enterprises					1	2				
Informal sector enterprises (a)	3		4		5	6	7	8		
Households (b)	9						10			

(a) As defined by the 15th ICLS (excluding households employing paid domestic workers). (b) Households producing goods exclusively for their own final use and households employing paid domestic workers.

Cells shaded in black refer to jobs that do not exist, by definition, in the type of production units in question. Cells shaded in grey refer to formal jobs. Unshaded (white) cells represent the various types of informal jobs.

Informal employment: Cells 1 to 6 and 8 to 10.

Employment in the informal sector: 3 to 8.

Informal Employment outside the informal sector: Cells 1, 2, 9, and 10.

Source: 17th ICLS; reproduced in Annexure III NSSO (2014: 39).

4 New Questions

The introduction of questions relating to enterprises and conditions of employment, which can elicit some insights into the informal sector, is as recent as the 61st round (2004-05). The previous 55th NSSO round (1999-2000), for the first time covered various characteristics of enterprises in the employment and unemployment survey. The information thus collected, however, pertains only to workers engaged in non-agricultural enterprises. The various aspects of enterprises on which information was collected included (i) location of the workplace, (ii) type of enterprise, (iii) number of workers in the enterprise, (iv) whether the enterprise keeps a written account, and (v) whether the enterprise uses electricity. The survey findings of this round are available in the NSSO (2001) report no 460, which classifies these characteristics of non-agricultural workers in the informal sector.

From the 61st NSS round (2004-05) onwards, the coverage of activities expanded from non-agriculture to also include some parts of agriculture, excluding the growing of crops, plant propagation, and the combined production of crops and animals without specialised production of crops and animals (for which the report uses the acronym AGEGC activities). The industry groups/divisions within the agriculture sector, which have been considered in this report to measure the informal sector pertain to 014, 016, 017, 02 and 03, subject to other aspects of informality.

Another additional dimension, which was included from the 61st NSSO

round,⁸ pertains to information on the conditions of employment along with the different characteristics of enterprises in which the usually employed persons (that is principal and subsidiary status workers) worked. This now constitutes the only set of information that provides any insight into the type of job contract, whether or not workers are eligible for paid leave, the availability of social security benefits, the method of payment of wages/salaries to casual labourers and regular employees. One would have expected this basic information for understanding labour markets to be available right since the beginning of these surveys. Earlier the emphasis was clearly on capturing the labour force and workforce to reflect the supply of labour and the demand for it, respectively. Any other sets of information that would facilitate any useful analysis of the functioning and operation of the labour markets did not exist, except in the case of primary surveys conducted by researchers and institutions. Some sectoral studies were conducted periodically by the NSSO which provided a few valuable insights. The relatively recent NSSO reports on the informal sector and conditions of employment, however, provide quite a lot of detail on informal workers.

5 A Snapshot of Statistics

The share of workers in the informal sector (defined as workers engaged in AGEGC and non-agriculture sectors) has increased over time from 48% in 2004-05 (61st round) to 55% in 2011-12 (68th round). The increase over this period of 2004-12 for both males and

Table 1: Percentage of Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (UPSS) Workers Engaged in AGEGC and Non-agriculture Sectors during NSS 61st (2004-05), 66th (2009-10) and 68th (2011-12) Rounds

Round/Category	Rural	Urban	Rural + Urban
Male			
61st	37	95	52
66th	40	95	55
68th	43	96	58
Female			
61st	31	87	39
66th	31	90	40
68th	35	92	46
Persons			
61st	35	93	48
66th	37	94	51
68th	41	95	55

Source: Statement 3.5 of NSSO (2014: 48).

females is almost equal to 6-7 percentage points (see Table 1).

Agriculture sector activities (such as the growing of crops, plant propagation, and the combined production of crops and animals without a specialised production of either crops or animals) that is, the AGGC, engaged 45% of all usual principal and subsidiary status (UPSS) workers as per the 68th round data (2011-12) of the NSSO (2014). The AGEGC (that is, agriculture excluding AGGC) engaged only 4% of the UPSS workers, while the non-agriculture sector employed 51% of the UPSS workers. *Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment in India* covers only the AGEGC and non-agriculture sector activities, that is 55% of the UPSS workforce.

In rural areas, the AGGC engaged 60% of the UPSS workers, with a slightly higher proportion of female rural workers, that is, 65%. This implies that the informal sector report covers only 35% of the female workers in rural areas.⁹ The shift in rural areas from agriculture to non-agriculture that has been noted over this period is also substantiated by the growth in informal sector employment from 35% to 41% of the UPSS workers over the period 2004-12. In urban areas too, the informal sector registered an increase from 93% of UPSS workers to 95% during the same period.

The proportion of female workers engaged in AGEGC and non-agriculture (or the informal sector) in urban areas increased from 87% to 92% – signifying a five-point rise as compared to only

a one-point change for males over the period 2004-12.

Informal sector enterprises, according to the 15th ICLS conceptual framework, include all unincorporated enterprises owned by households, that is, P&P enterprises, including the informal producers cooperatives. However, in the NSSO report no 557, only P&P enterprises have been considered. Since informal producers' cooperatives could not be identified separately, workers engaged in the enterprise type “cooperative societies/trust/other non-profit institutions” have been excluded from the coverage of the informal sector. The other category that has been excluded pertains to employers' households, which includes those who hire domestic workers, who are definitely in informal employment.

In all, the proportion of workers in the informal sector has only about 1% in cooperatives/trusts/non-profit organisations and 1.5% in the case of employers' households (Table 2). The proportion of urban females engaged in employers' households is reported to be 9.1%. All relevant information by type of enterprise is provided in the report for these categories also, though this is considered to be outside the informal sector.

Table 2: Percentage of Workers in AGEGC and the Non-agriculture Sectors by Select Type of Enterprise (2011-12)

	Male	Female	Total
Engaged in cooperative societies/trust/non-profit institutions			
Rural	0.8	1.1	0.9
Urban	1.0	2.5	1.3
Total	0.9	1.6	1.1
Engaged in employer's households			
Rural	0.4	1.5	0.7
Urban	0.9	9.1	2.5
Total	0.6	4.3	1.5

Source: Statements 3.6 and 3.7 of NSSO (2014: 49-50).

Informal employment is identified on the basis of the type of enterprise in which workers are engaged or the nature of work they perform. The proportion of workers engaged in the informal sector – both P&P enterprises engaged in AGEGC and the non-agriculture sectors over time – provides interesting information across location and by gender.

The fact that female proprietary enterprises appear to hire largely female

workers, with very few (less than 1%) male workers, is one noteworthy observation (Table 3). This is also linked to the labour market segmentation with female entrepreneurs being involved in certain activities for which female workers are hired. Another marginal change noticeable is with regard to urban female employment in both partnership enterprises and female proprietary units over the period 2004-12.

Table 3: Percentage of Workers Engaged in Proprietary and Partnership (P&P) Enterprises in the Informal Sector (2004-12)

Category of Workers	Proprietary		Partnership		
	Male	Female	Within Same HHS	From Different HHS	P&P
61st round (2004-05)					
Rural males	75	0.8	1.7	1.5	79
Rural females	46	38	2.1	0.5	86
Rural persons	66	13	1.8	1.2	82
Urban males	68	0.5	3.1	2.3	74
Urban females	34	28	2.0	1.4	65
Urban persons	61	6	2.9	2.1	72
Total males	72	0.7	2.4	1.9	77
Total females	42	35	2.1	0.8	80
Total persons	64	10	2.3	1.6	78
68th round (2011-12)					
Rural males	73	0.5	1.4	1.2	76
Rural females	32	39	1.9	0.5	73
Rural persons	62	11	1.5	1.0	75
Urban males	66	0.4	2.2	2.1	70
Urban females	30	30	2.1	1.6	64
Urban persons	59	6	2.2	2.0	69
Total males	70	0.4	1.8	1.6	73
Total females	31	35	2.0	0.9	69
Total persons	61	9	1.8	1.4	72

HHS: Households

Source: Statement 3.8, NSSO (2014: 51).

The information made available in this report enables one to examine the employment status of workers in AGEGC and non-agriculture as opposed to all enterprises.¹⁰ The distribution of self-employed workers is expectedly higher

Table 4: Distribution of UPSS Workers in AGEGC and Non-agriculture Sectors Engaged in Informal Sector (P&P) Enterprises and 'All' Types of Enterprises by Employment Status in 2011-12 (percentage in rural and urban, for males, females and all separately)

Employment Status	P&P		All			
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
Rural						
Self-employed	50	77	57	39	57	44
Regular	13	6	11	23	15	21
Casual	37	17	32	36	28	35
Urban						
Self-employed	56	66	58	40	43	41
Regular	28	22	27	45	46	46
Casual	16	12	16	14	11	14

Source: From Statement 3.9, NSSO (2014: 53).

in the P&P segment, irrespective of whether they are males or females. The incidence of casual employment also tends to be higher in the P&P segment, while the proportion of regular workers is significantly lower in this segment as compared to all enterprises (Table 4, p 70).

The share of the informal sector dominates the self-employed and casual work statuses, irrespective of location and gender. The share of regular workers is a little over 40% in the informal sector (table not provided).¹¹

The report also provides National Industrial Classification (NIC) 2008 industry group and sectors, that is, AGEGC and the non-agriculture. Almost three-quarters of informal workers in both rural and urban areas are employed in manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, transportation, and storage industries. The sectors that report a much lower share of informal workers include education, information and communication, financial, and insurance activities.

A major segment of informal workers, that is, close to 75% in rural and 70% in urban areas are engaged in smaller enterprises that employ less than six workers. The conditions of employment reveal the severe vulnerability and insecurity of a substantial proportion of these informal workers with no written job contract (79% of employees in AGEGC and non-agriculture). Almost all the casual labourers report this as expected, but even among the regular/salaried employees, 65% of them have no written job contracts. Further, the proportion of workers with no written job contracts is increasing over time.

A similar scenario is prevalent for eligibility for paid leave, with 71% of informal workers being ineligible. The fact that 98% of casual labourers are not eligible for paid leave does not come as a surprise under the prevailing labour market conditions, but it is noteworthy that 50% of the regular/salaried employees are also not eligible for paid leave.

This is partly explained by the fact that 42% of the employees in AGEGC and the non-agriculture sector are temporary employees. This is defined by the nature of employment to categorise permanent employees as those who, under the

normal course, would be found to continue in the same employment. This loosely defined concept forms the basis for the identification of temporary employment. While the overall share of temporary employment increased from 2004-05 to 2009-10, it declined in 2011-12. These NSSO reports also provide the state-wise estimates with the share of temporary workers being relatively higher (more than 50%) in Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Punjab, and so on.

The involvement of employees in jobs which do not provide written contracts and are not eligible for paid leave increased over the period 2004-05 to 2011-12. The percentage of workers without job contracts and not eligible for paid leave was 63% in 2004-05, which increased consistently up to 66% in 2009-10 and later to 68% in 2011-12 (Table 5).

The last issue to be discussed relates to workers who are engaged in activities

Table 5: Percentage of Employees Engaged in AGEGC and Non-agriculture without Written Job Contracts and No Eligibility for Paid Leave

Rural	Male	Female	Person
2004-05 (61st round)	72	70	71
2009-10 (66th round)	77	65	75
2011-12 (68th round)	78	74	77
Urban			
2004-05 (61st round)	55	55	55
2009-10 (66th round)	57	54	56
2011-12 (68th round)	57	55	57
Rural + urban			
2004-05 (61st round)	63	62	63
2009-10 (66th round)	67	60	66
2011-12 (68th round)	68	65	68

Source: Statement 3.26, NSSO (2014: 88).

Table 6: Percentage of UPSS Workers Aged 15 Years and Above, Engaged in Activities with Non-existence of Union/Association (2011-12)

Rural	Male	Female	Person
Self-employed	84	90	86
Regular	55	56	55
Casual	86	92	88
UPSS workers	82	89	84
Urban			
Self-employed	71	84	73
Regular	61	66	62
Casual	81	86	82
UPSS workers	68	77	70
Rural+urban			
Self-employed	81	89	83
Regular	59	59	59
Casual	86	87	87
UPSS workers	78	80	80

Source: Statement 3.28, NSSO (2014: 90).

characterised by the non-existence of unions and association. Again as expected, four-fifths or nearly 80% of them are working without any membership/association (Table 6).

6 Concluding Remarks

There have been commendable gains in terms of the evolution of the conceptual framework to measure informal employment which has moved from a primarily enterprise-based approach to one that also considers the labour-based approach, over the decade from the 15th ICLS in 1993 to the 17th ICLS in 2003. By incorporating information on the location and type of enterprise, temporary workers, written job contracts, paid leave, social security and the existence of union/association in their activities across the broad AGEGC and non-agriculture sectors as well as industry classification, these NSSO reports on informal employment provide state-wise and industry-wise details, which, however, beg further analysis.

The limitations, as pointed out by the NSC (GoI 2012), among others, need to be addressed for the coverage of the informal sector and employment so that the reports can also provide insights into the qualitative dimensions of informal workers and occupations. Bhalla (2009) has recommended that NSSO should make efforts to identify informal agricultural workers by modifying schedule 10 of the employment-unemployment survey.

The existing exclusions of AGGC or cooperatives/trusts/non-profit institutions, and employers' households constrain the utility and comparability of informal sector statistics with other employment-unemployment statistics. The fact that some segments of what ought to be part of the informal employment are left out implies that the statistics referring to P&P or AGEGC and non-agriculture are at best stand-alone estimates, which cannot be easily compared with the other estimates as the remaining proportion is not necessarily formal. Some of the exclusions are due to matters of convenience or limitations emerging from practical considerations of personnel, time, effort and resources. This unfortunately skews

the widespread utility of such reports. Thus, in order to undertake a formal-informal comparison, most researchers who have access to unit-level NSSO data would resort to using this for their own estimates with clearly defined criteria of classification based on what the data sets allow.

While registration, account keeping, and being covered by formal arrangements may be critical for the classification of enterprises, informal employment can be approached more directly through conditions of employment. The terms of the job contract under which a worker is employed, the availability of a written contract, the mode and periodicity of wage payments, eligibility for paid leave and various social security provisions, and the number of hours of work constitute the primary set of parameters in identifying the extent of informality in employment. Engagement in the government or private sector or the household, and in the formal or informal sector does affect the conditions of employment and, therefore, it is appropriate to use a combination of enterprise and employment criteria. However, the concern over the coverage in these reports is with the way NSSO defines and measures informal employment. The exclusion of paid domestic workers engaged by employer households is one particularly noteworthy instance. Similarly, the exclusion of certain segments or types of enterprises, for convenience in terms of data-gathering, appears arbitrary. The consequence of such an approach for informal sector policymaking is the focus on enterprises, as opposed to a focus on employment or improving the conditions of employment.

NOTES

- 1 These informal employment statistics refer to the proprietary and partnership enterprises in agriculture excluding growing of crops (AGEGC) and non-agricultural activities.
- 2 The survey considers social security benefits as provident fund (PF)/pension, gratuity, health-care and maternity benefits.
- 3 This was initially restricted to only the non-agriculture sector but was later expanded to include agriculture partially, excluding the growing of crops and other segments (AGEGC) considered to be largely carried out for own consumption.
- 4 The industry groups within the agricultural sector that are excluded include industry groups

- 011 (growing of non-perennial crops), 012 (growing of perennial crops), 013 (plant propagation) and 015 (mixed farming) of NIC-2008.
- 5 The current Item 5 on the agenda of the International Labour Conference 2014 on *Transitioning from the Informal to the Formal Economy* is perhaps a reflection of this, though efforts to ensure social protection and basic minimum workers' rights would also be viewed as a part of this initiative.
- 6 The discussions held by the Delhi Group so far have culminated in the preparation of a manual on measuring informality (ILO 2013).
- 7 For example, the NCEUS and the first *India Labour and Employment Report* (ILER), published by the Institute for Human Development (IHD). The general method followed is similar to the one followed by the *NSS Report on Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment in India*, which involves the classification of units/enterprises into the formal and informal sectors, and then categorising workers based on their characteristics. Both these reports emphasise the growing share of informal employment in the formal sector.
- 8 This is also the round in which the existence of unions or workers' associations in all the industry divisions from codes 01 to 99 as per the NIC-2008, have been provided.
- 9 Of this figure, another 2% are engaged in cooperative societies/trusts/non-profit institutions and employers' households, both of which are also excluded.
- 10 The fact that the non-P&P segment of enterprises also consists of informal employment makes strict comparison a little difficult.
- 11 See statement 3.11, NSSO (2014: 56).

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