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Working Paper Series

The Role of Microenterprises in Development Small-Scale
Enterprises: A Profile

By
MOA/MSU/UA Carl Liedholm and Donald Mead

Working Paper No. 14E
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NATIONAL DIRECTORATE OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Working Paper Series

The working paper publication series is designed to provide users with timely research results while refinements and longer term synthesis are completed, and final reports are available. The preparation of working papers and their discussion with those who design and influence programs and policies in Mozambique is an important step in the Directorate's overall analysis and planning mission.

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Small-scale Enterprises: A Profile

By Carl Liedholm and Donald Mead

Small-scale enterprises, whether formal and visible or informal and invisible, have grown in importance in developing countries as outlets for the entrepreneurial energies of people outside the mainstream economy, as providers of jobs for the unemployed and underemployed, and potentially as contributors to national economic growth and economic equality. The following five articles explore these and other aspects of the microenterprise phenomenon.

In this first article, the authors, on the basis of investigations in several developing countries, identify nine characteristics that typify small-scale industry. In their view, such industry can be helped by policy reforms and carefully tailored forms of assistance.

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The role of small-scale industries in providing productive employment and earning opportunities has emerged as a matter of special importance to policymakers concerned with economic development, as well as to international donor agencies and researchers. During the 1970s, heightened interest in these private sector activities paralleled the development community's increased concern for equity and employment objectives. There was also a growing realization that the large-scale, "modern" industrialization strategies of the previous decade generally had failed to solve the problems of global underemployment and poverty. More recently, enhancing small-scale industries (sometimes referred to as "microenterprises") has been viewed as an effective way of fostering the private sector's contribution to both the growth and equity objectives of developing countries.

Until recently, however, little has been known about small firms in most developing countries, particularly those at the lower end of the enterprise size spectrum. Most such firms elude the standard statistical nets and frequently exist unobserved in an underground economy, where they may become part of what is called the "informal sector." Informal sector enterprises often occupy a gray area between what is legal and what is illegal, but in many areas of world they have proliferated to the extent that they rival in size and importance the conventional formal sector. The "invisibility" of much of the informal sector has meant that government policymakers and donors charged with formulating policies and projects to foster small-scale enterprises have often been forced to make decisions "unencumbered by information."

In this article, we attempt to fill in some of the missing pieces of the small-industry mosaic. The article is drawn primarily on the findings of a set of studies conducted jointly by Michigan State University and host country scholars to uncover, describe,

and analyze small-scale industrial enterprises in a dozen countries. In six of these countries—Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Thailand, Honduras, Egypt, and Bangladesh—comprehensive, in-depth surveys and analyses of small industries were undertaken; in the remaining six—Haiti, Burkina Faso, Zambia, Botswana, Indonesia, and Kenya—less extensive studies were conducted.

The findings of these studies make clear that small enterprises are widespread and diverse in developing economies and—perhaps surprisingly—that they are efficient in their use of resources. In view of their contributions to income and productive employment, it is appropriate that they should be the target of policy and project-focused attention from governments as well as international donors.

Characteristics of small enterprises

What can be said about small-scale enterprises? Clearly, there is no such thing as the "typical" small enterprise, even within a single country. Yet our research and that of other analysts indicates that they do share many characteristics.

—First, small-scale industries—defined here as establishments with fewer than 50 workers engaged in manufacturing activities or related repair work—form a significant component of the industrial sector of most developing countries. Although these establishments are small—most have fewer than 10 employees—collectively they typically account for more than 50 percent of total industrial employment. They are generally engaged in the production of light consumer goods, primarily related to clothing, furniture, and food and beverages. Other small-enterprise activities include automotive, electrical, and bicycle repair, blacksmithing, and light engineering.

—Second, in most developing countries, most industrial firms are located in rural areas (that is, areas

Table 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SMALL-SCALE MANUFACTURING ESTABLISHMENTS BY SIZE
(percent)

| Size (number of persons) | Bangladesh 11 thanas 1980 | India | | Sierra Leone all 1976 | Zambia 1985 | Honduras 3 rural provinces 1980 | Egypt 2 rural governorates 1962 | Jamaica all 1979 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|--|--|------------------------|
| | | Punjab rural 1971 | Haryana rural 1971 | | | | | |
| 1 | 15 | 65 | 57 | 42 | 68 | 60 | 63 | 62 |
| 2 - 5 | 69 | 32 | 38 | 53 | 30 | 35 | 34 | 32 |
| 6 - 9 | 12 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| 10 - 50 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |

Source: Data for all countries except India from Michigan State University country studies. Data for India ("households" plus "establishments") computed from D.B. Gupta, "Rural Industrialization in the Punjab Region of Northern India," *Rural Small-Scale Industries and Employment in Africa and Asia*, Geneva: International Labor Organization, 1984.

having fewer than 20,000 inhabitants). These are the producers that are most frequently invisible since much enterprise activity takes place within the farm compound. Employment in these rural units frequently exceeds that generated by all urban industrial firms.

—Third, the overwhelming majority of the industrial firms are not just small, but are very small. Indeed, there is a plethora of one-person firms, and most employ fewer than five persons (table 1). In terms of their large numbers and relatively low incomes, they constitute a potentially important target group for policymakers concerned with the low end of the income distribution spectrum.

—Fourth, virtually all of these small firms are privately owned and are organized mainly as sole proprietorships. In many countries, significant numbers of the small-enterprise entrepreneurs are female.

—Fifth, proprietors and family workers generally form the largest component of the small-industry labor force, accounting, on average, for over 50 percent of small-enterprise employment. Apprenticeship labor, however, is also important in some areas, particularly West Africa. In these countries, the "informal apprenticeship system," in which a young person serves a proprietor or master for a given period to learn a craft or trade, plays a key role in skill formation. Hired workers typically form the smallest segment of small-enterprise employment in most developing countries. These workers

are frequently found in the more modern types of enterprises that operate on a somewhat larger scale, such as bricks and tiles, baking, repairs, and metalworking.

—Sixth, in most countries, the average person engaged in small-scale industry does not work full time (2,400 hours per year) in that activity over the entire year. Among the countries that we studied, the annual mean person-hours of employment ranged from 1,164 in Sierra Leone to 2,514 in Egypt. In many cases, these individuals also work part time in other activities, frequently farming. In fact, the very close relationship between agriculture and small-scale manufacturing activity is a noteworthy feature of the rural areas of many developing countries. Farm and nonfarm employment often move in opposite directions over the year and are thus quite complementary in terms of providing employment opportunities. Nevertheless, there is evidence that many small-scale workers spend significant periods of time simply "waiting for customers."

—Seventh, the amount of capital used by most small-scale industrial firms is modest, as is their initial capital stock (table 2). Fixed assets—buildings and equipment—form the largest components of small firms' capital stock, with equipment (tools, machines, and furniture) typically accounting for the greatest share. Although low, however, the capital entry barriers to small-scale industry are not

insignificant, especially when compared with the capital required for petty trading or unskilled service activities or with per capita income levels in those countries.

—Eighth, most of the funds for establishing or expanding the small firm comes from personal savings, relatives, or retained earnings. The paucity of funds obtained from the commercial banks, governments, or even informal financial sources such as moneylenders is striking. These results highlight the nascent state of the financial markets in many developing countries and indicate the limited extent to which small firms are directly reached by formal credit institutions.

—Ninth, small-scale industrial activity appears to be increasing in absolute terms in most developing countries. Although systematic information on growth is limited, the available evidence indicates that it has been growing at a faster rate even than large-scale industries in a few countries. Since small-scale industries account for such a large portion of total industrial employment, the absolute increase in employment absorbed by the small-scale private sector is substantial in virtually all developing countries. Among small producers, there is evidence that the slowest growing segment is the one-person firm. By enterprise type, many of the small-scale light consumer goods enterprises—particularly tailoring, dress-making, and furniture making—have grown rapidly, even after large-scale

domestic factory production in these subsectors has begun. Moreover, with the structural changes in manufacturing associated with increases in a country's per capita income, several newer types of small-enterprise activities—other metal products and machinery, along with bicycle, auto, and electrical repair—have also experienced rapid increases.

What drives small firms?

What are the main determinants of the existing and future patterns of small-scale industrial activity? Some illuminating insights can be obtained by focusing on the set of factors influencing the demand for and supply of small-industry goods and services.

Most of the items produced by small industries are light consumer goods sold directly to urban and rural households. Consequently, a key issue is whether or not the demand for these goods and services increases as household income increases. Although some have argued that these are "inferior goods" (that is, the quantity demanded declines as income increases), recent studies have revealed without exception a strong positive relationship between changes in household income and changes in the demand for a range of small-scale industry goods and services.

A second source of demand for small-industry products stems from their backward and forward production linkages with other sectors of the domestic economy, particularly with agriculture and large-scale industry. Although empirical evidence on the linkages with agriculture is sparse, it appears that these linkages are often important. Their magnitude is related to the size distribution of farms and the type of agricultural strategy adopted. The capacity among small producers for "idiosyncratic design adaptation" to meet the equipment and tool needs of small farmers is particularly noteworthy. The evidence

Table 2: CAPITAL INPUTS IN SMALL-SCALE ENTERPRISES

| | Jamaica 1979 | Honduras 1980 | Egypt 1982 | Sierra Leone 1975 |
|--|-----------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Fixed assets indicators | | | | |
| Percent of enterprises producing in home | n.a. | n.a. | 84% | 84% |
| Percent of enterprises with machines | 32% | n.a. | 14% | 63% |
| "Excess capacity" | 35% | 24% | 18% | 35% |
| Initial capital stock | \$1,140 | \$354 | n.a. | \$49 |
| Stock of capital/firm | | | | |
| Buildings | \$1,022 | \$283 | n.a. | \$359 |
| Machinery and equipment | 1,985 | 445 | \$83 | 245 |
| Working capital | 1,217 | 81 | 28 | 50 |
| Total | \$4,224 | \$609 | n.a. | \$654 |
| Annual flow cost of capital/firm | | | | |
| Buildings | \$263 | \$ 57 | n.a. | \$ 63 |
| Machinery and equipment | 408 | 120 | \$17 | 47 |
| Working capital | 243 | 14 | 3 | 10 |
| Total | \$914 | \$191 | n.a. | \$120 |
| Conversion factors | | | | |
| Discount rate (percent) | 20% | 20% | 10% | 20% |
| Exchange rate (U.S. \$1.00 =) | 1.78 | 2 | 1.19 | .91 |

*Estimated based on responses of proprietors to question of how many additional hours they would operate their firms if there were no demand or raw material constraints.

Sources: Data for Jamaica and Honduras from Michigan State University country studies. Data for Egypt from Stephen Davies et al., "Small Enterprises in Egypt: A Study of Two Governorates," Michigan State University International Development Papers No. 16, 1984. Data for Sierra Leone from Enylnna Chuta and Carl Liedholm, *Employment and Growth in Small-Scale Industry*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.

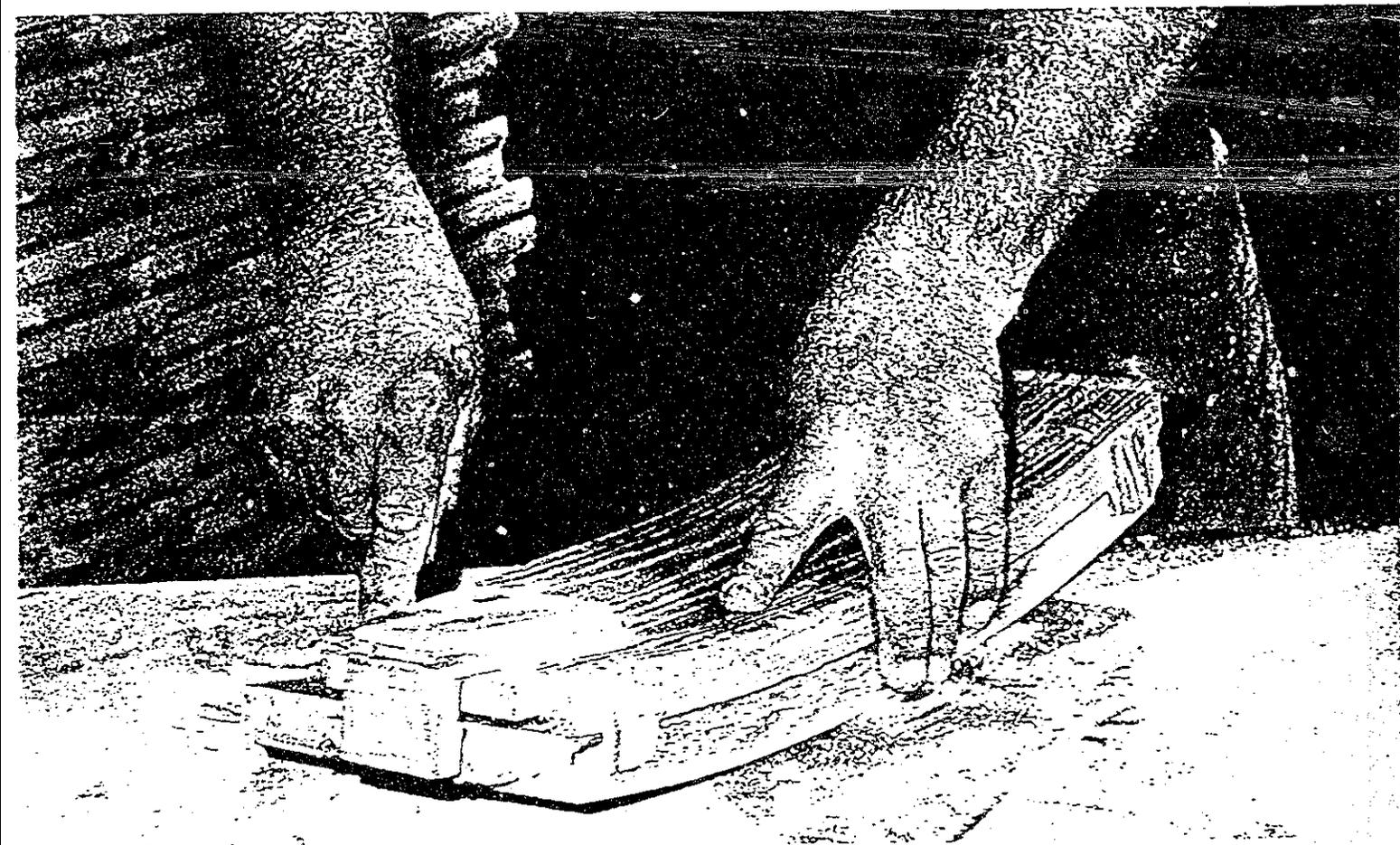
of linkages with large-scale industry is also limited and is usually discussed in terms of subcontracting arrangements between large and small firms. Subcontracting is particularly prevalent in Asia, where it tends to be concentrated in a limited range of product types.

Government and foreign customers provide the final source of demand for small-industry goods and services. Although sometimes important for particular product groups or for individual firms, overall these sources of demand are relatively minor.

With respect to supply, the key issue is whether or not small-scale industrial firms in developing countries are efficient users of economic resources, particularly when compared with their larger-scale counterparts. Both partial and comprehensive measures of economic efficiency have been used in attempting to answer this question.

The labor-capital (labor intensity) and the output-capital (capital productivity) ratios are the economic efficiency measures most frequently used in empirical studies concerned with development. These partial efficiency measures are based on the assumption that labor is abundant and capital is the only scarce resource. Virtually all the aggregate and most industry studies reveal that small-scale industries generate more employment per unit of scarce capital than their larger-scale counterparts. The available evidence on relative capital productivities is somewhat limited and more mixed. Yet in the majority of countries where such comparisons have been made, the output per unit of capital among small producers is found to exceed that generated by large industry.

Only a few studies have used one of the analytically more correct comprehensive economic efficiency measures, in which all scarce resources



are included in the analysis and are evaluated at "shadow" or social prices that reflect their scarcity values in the economy. The findings of such studies are mixed. To assist in filling this void, we used a social benefit-cost analysis to compare the relative efficiency of small and large industries in three of the in-depth survey countries (Sierra Leone, Honduras, and Jamaica). A key finding from this analysis is that in 10 to 12 specific industrial groups examined, the social benefit-cost ratios of the small firms not only exceeded 1.0 but also were greater than the comparable ratios for the large-scale firms in those particular industries and countries. Consequently, there is now accumulating evidence that, at least for a significant range of products, small-scale industry is indeed economically efficient.

What types of small industries are

most efficient and what are their characteristics? A review of the findings from five countries where in-depth surveys were conducted yields some useful insights. Although the small-scale industries in the aggregate are shown to be economically efficient in all five countries, there are wide variations in this efficiency by major industry groups, as well as by more narrowly defined product types. Efficiency is also shown to vary by the firm's production characteristics, particularly firm size, input composition, and location. Some important patterns emerge in this regard. Small firms most likely to be economically efficient tend to possess a number of characteristics, many of which can be discerned on the basis of visual evidence. Such firms generally use hired workers, operate in workshops away from home, operate in localities with more than

2,000 inhabitants, and are involved in selected product lines with better economic prospects, such as tiles, furniture, baking, and repair activities. A particularly striking finding is that the one-person firms are frequently on the margin of economic viability. Judiciously and cautiously applied, such indicators can provide the analyst with useful insights into those types of small-scale industries most likely to be economically viable.

The policy environment

In light of the many favorable characteristics of small-scale industries and the potential contributions they can make to the growth in income and employment in developing countries, what can governments and donor agencies do to further enhance the



role of small producers? Two major avenues are available. The first is through seeking changes in the general policy environment that broadly affects small private enterprises, while the second is through the implementation of specific projects designed to provide direct assistance to individual firms.

Past governmental efforts to encourage the growth of small enterprises have generally concentrated on project interventions aimed at providing specific assistance to particular target groups. Yet such efforts have often been frustrated by a policy environment that is detrimental to the development of small producers. A recent publication of the World Bank has stated this clearly: "Until realistic exchange regimes were established and until changes took place in trade, investment and financial policies...it was difficult to effect a substantial development of SSEs (small-scale enterprises) along healthy economic lines. It is hardly feasible to press for the use of appropriate technologies and maximum employment creation in a situation where subsidized finance for equipment purchase is offered and

where it is possible to operate in a protected market where profits are high enough to justify equipment used for only a small part of the time."

There are two major ways that the general policy environment can be made more supportive of small producers in developing countries. The first is through instituting a policy environment that is at least "neutral" with respect to enterprise size. In most developing countries, general policies are biased against small firms. Frequently, these biases result from the unintended side effects of investment, trade, credit, and other policies implemented with the goal of promoting an expansion of large-scale industries. Investment incentive laws frequently formally restrict the special tax concessions to large-scale firms; where such overt restrictions do not occur, small firms are often ignorant of the concessions available or are unable to undertake the protracted bureaucratic procedures required to obtain them.

The credit policies of most developing countries have also tended to discriminate against small firms. Governments have often imposed interest

ceilings or other types of credit controls that have tended to keep interest rates artificially low. Faced with excess demand for funds, the banks have responded by rationing the scarce funds to their traditional large-scale clients. Consequently, small enterprises have been forced to obtain funds either from family members or from the informal market, where interest rates frequently exceed 100 percent per year. The removal of interest rate ceilings can constitute a step toward ensuring that interest rates for borrowers of all sizes approximate the opportunity cost of capital.

The second major way that general policies can effectively be used to support small-scale enterprise growth is through enhancing the demand for their products. Studies have made clear that one of the key constraints facing small enterprises, particularly those located in rural areas, is the limited demand for their products. A significant share of the low-cost consumer goods sold in rural markets is produced by small firms in that same area. Furthermore, the demand for these products, as well as for agricultural inputs, is particularly high among the small-scale farming households. As a result, policies that promote rapid increases in agricultural income can provide a powerful stimulus for small-scale enterprises. Agricultural policies such as pricing and other measures aimed at increasing the income of small farmers are important not only in their own right but also because they can contribute in a major way to the growth of small-scale nonagricultural activities. This fact also demonstrates that in reviewing the general policy environment for small firms, it is important to transcend the traditional sphere of industrial policy and include agricultural, trade, foreign exchange, and other policies as well.

As noted earlier, projects rather than policy reforms have been the primary vehicles used by governments

and international donor agencies for fostering small-enterprise growth. Small enterprises are difficult targets to reach through direct project assistance, however. The firms are numerous, widely dispersed, and not easy to assist in a cost-effective manner. Indeed, virtually all small enterprise surveys reveal that only a tiny fraction of the entrepreneurs have heard of the programs intended to help them, and even fewer have been aided by them. These same studies indicate that the constraints facing these small firms, and thus the types of direct assistance needed, vary from industry to industry and from country to country.

Finance projects have been the most commonly used category of direct assistance to small industries. Although special credit programs have been designed specifically to reach small and medium-sized firms in several developing countries, the smallest firms generally end up receiving very little of the funds. Moreover, the administrative costs in such projects have often turned out to be quite high.

Innovative credit schemes

Several innovative credit schemes, however, appear to have been quite successful in providing financial resources to even the smallest private enterprises. There are several common characteristics of such schemes. First, loans are provided primarily for working capital rather than for fixed capital. Second, loans are screened in locally based institutions on the basis of the borrower's character. Third, loans are initially made for small amounts and for short periods to encourage and facilitate high repayment rates. Since these lending practices are closely akin to those of the informal credit institutions, it would appear that the nearer banks and other formal institutions can come to the operating procedures of informal lenders, the more likely they will be

successful in making loans to small producers.

Nonfinancial direct assistance to small enterprises involves the delivery of such things as technical, managerial, marketing, and infrastructure inputs. It is frequently argued that the small firm's demand for such service is generally quite small and that a large volume of resources end up being concentrated on a relatively limited clientele.

A review of the limited number of nonfinancial assistance projects indicates that most were not particularly successful in terms of benefit-cost analysis. Nevertheless, some were successful, and these possessed several common characteristics. First, the project addressed situations in which a single "missing ingredient," rather than an integrated set of multiple ingredients, needed to be supplied to the firm. An implication of this finding is that projects assisting existing firms are more likely to be successful than those attempting to establish new firms. Second, the successful projects were industry and task specific. Third, before these projects or schemes were launched, surveys were undertaken to uncover the demand for the activity and the number and type of missing ingredients. Finally, successful projects tend to be built on proven institutions, even informal ones.

Empirical evidence indicates that small-scale industry can be an important vehicle for meeting the growth and equity objectives of developing countries. Improved policies and carefully crafted projects can play an important role in ensuring that the potential contribution of small enterprises to the development process is fully realized. ■

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