

Plight of informal workers in spotlight

Where people work, and how they work, has changed worldwide. More and more people work in precarious conditions: at home, in the street or scavenging a living from refuse dumps. Few of them have the security associated with formal work.

This weekend in Durban, the plight of informal workers around the world will come under the spotlight at two conferences in the city, attended by a host of top international delegates.

Frances Lund, from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Development Studies, says informal employment is an important source of income for the poor, but its role in providing a pathway out of poverty is "entirely understated".

National policies promote the development of the private sector and often don't support the very small businesses that most of the working poor, and especially women, are found in.

Lund says cities, preoccupied with competing for "world class city" status tend not to integrate informal workers and informal enterprises in their urban planning and economic development strategies.

The first of the two conferences will be a meeting of the global research and policy network Wiego (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising). The second will be an academic seminar entitled "World Class Cities and the Urban Informal Economy: Inclusive Planning for the Urban Poor".

Ignored

Both events are being jointly hosted by the School of Development Studies and StreetNet, a non-governmental organisation.

Key participants include Martha Chen of Harvard University, Wiego's co-ordinator; Ela Bhatt, founder of the Self Employed Women's Association in India; and Mike Mabuyakhulu, KwaZulu-Natal's Minister of Local Government and Traditional Affairs.

Among those under the spotlight will be the millions of waste pickers around the world who scavenge on rubbish dumps, push rickety trolleys around and are bent under heavy loads every day.

"Most begin their work well before the sun rises and are still found sorting their findings late into the night. Yet, despite a courageous bid to survive, these important contributors to many of the world's informal economies are, at best, unnoticed and ignored.

"At worst, they are shunned and reviled as backward and dirty," according to Wiego organisers.

Wiego's Chris Bonner says it is estimated that 2% of populations in developing countries stay alive by collecting the scraps of more affluent people.

"They are seldom considered by local governments and policy makers. Many even play pivotal roles in cleaning cities and promoting recycling yet struggle under a load of dirt and disease."

Bonner says: "We need to provide vital information and identify people who can help research this important sector. It is crucial to put these people on international agendas. We need to find out more."

While waste pickers in South Africa are often seen as a source of embarrassment, their counterparts in India and Latin America are now beginning to gain an international voice, and steps have been taken to provide them with financial help and security.

For more information on the conferences, call Candace Gibbon at 072 682 3426.

Published on the web by Mercury on April 19, 2006.

© Mercury 2006. All rights reserved.