



Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing

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**Solidarity Center 'Global Labor Program'**

**WIEGO Research Project:  
Informal Workers' Organizing**

**Research report**

**by**

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## 1. Introduction – the research brief

As part of its Global Technical Programme, the Solidarity Center, USA, asked Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) to provide some research on workers' organizing in the informal economy. This paper is part of WIEGO's initial contribution to the programme.

The brief was to provide an overview specifically from the perspective of informal workers' own self-organization, as well as to help identify research needs. I took as a base recent articles/papers written by WIEGO and others, as identified by WIEGO. These were complemented by a series of interviews with WIEGO Board members and staff as well as senior figures in other informal workers' organizations and networks around the world. Also providing advice and guidance was Chris Bonner of WIEGO's Organizing and Representation Programme. I would like to give my grateful thanks to all of them for their knowledge, advice and inspiration.

The initial stage of the research was done during the period July to November 2011, resulting in a draft report, which was used as a basis for discussion at the Solidarity Center's International Labor Programming Conference, in Cape Town, South Africa, on 2-3 December 2011. It was then finalised in the first weeks of 2012, incorporating the results of those discussions and feedback on the draft by the Solidarity Center.

The brief I was given is very broad and in the time available it was not possible to produce anything like a comprehensive account. However, my report is complemented by other work being done by WIEGO:

- An updating and analysis of the information on organizations organizing in the informal economy from the **WIEGO Organization and Representation Data Base (WORD)**. The data base contains information of varying quality on informal worker organizations across the globe, particularly agricultural workers, construction workers, domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, transport workers, sex workers, and waste pickers.
- **'Law and Informal Economy: Law and Policy Demands. Lessons from the WIEGO India Pilot Study'** by Kamala Sankaran and Roopa Madhav. This paper looks at labour and other laws impacting on informal workers in India. It notes the complexity of employment arrangements that constitute informal employment, which therefore questions the traditional concepts of 'worker' and 'workplace', and provides a huge challenge for the legal regulatory framework.
- **An annotated bibliography** of organizing in the informal economy which expands on the bibliography in this report.

as well as by the literature review being done by Rutgers University at the same time. Hopefully together they provide a useful basis for further research and discussion to help strengthen the self-organization of informal workers.



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## How the report is structured

**Section 2** gives a summary of key findings.

**Section 3** analyses informal economy workers' self-organizing, across all the sectors.

**Section 4** goes sector-by-sector to highlight the special characteristics of each one, and the differences between them. There is more detail for the sectors on which WIEGO currently focuses: domestic workers, home-based workers, waste pickers and street vendors, plus some analysis of others such as transport, construction, agriculture/fish and sex workers.

Throughout there are some illustrative case studies.

## 2. Key findings

There are many similarities but also very significant differences between the ways in which informal workers organize in the different sectors.

There are also important differences between those who are 'dependent' and those who are 'self-employed/own account' workers. However, where they share an 'informal' status, there are many similarities too.

There is no clear distinction between the 'formal' and the 'informal', but rather it is a continuum. This is the case for individual workers across their working lives, or even within the same working day, and certainly within families and communities of the working poor.

Distinctions of class, gender, race/community, and so on often continue to impact negatively on building true membership-based organizations, though to different degrees in different situations. However, by contrast, sometimes organizing around such an identity can be of significant benefit to building the confidence and capacity of previously excluded informal workers.

Factors such as these mean that no one model of organizing fits all the situations of informal workers. It also suggests an approach to organizing which is inclusive rather than exclusive.



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- **Where we know more / less**

The lack of reliable data has been and still often is a hindrance to being able to support the organizing efforts and achievements of informal workers, particularly in lobbying and negotiating with authorities. The data which we do have is extremely patchy. Therefore, the collection of reliable data is an on-going, major focus for WIEGO.

Identifying where we know less provides suggestions for areas of future research.

- In terms of geographical scope, we know much more about South Asia (particularly India) and Latin America, along with some countries in South-East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern/Central Europe, Western Europe and North America. We know far less about East/Central Asia, some parts of Africa (especially the North of the continent), the Middle East, and the Pacific.
- Even within the countries and regions where we know more, this is mostly limited to specific sectors, which are different in each case. So, for example, that which we know about in Africa largely concerns the organizations of domestic workers and street vendors. In Latin America, we know more about waste pickers' organizing but virtually nothing about home-based workers. In Asia, we know more about home-based workers but very little about street vendors, for example. The overall map is therefore very patchy, although it is gradually being built up through mapping exercises by networks such as WIEGO, StreetNet International and the Latin American Waste Pickers' Network, and building the WIEGO database of organizations.
- In terms of sectors, we know more about organizing strategies and the organizations that exist of home-based workers, domestic workers, waste pickers, street vendors, and transport workers. We know much less about those of informal rural workers in agriculture, forest products, and fishing, as well as construction and sex workers, though there do seem to be opportunities for better liaison with organizations/networks that do exist in these sector.
- In terms of organizational forms, we are now starting to understand more about the types of organizations that tend to be formed by informal workers in different circumstances / by different sectors, at the different levels - local, national and international - and why. We know less about the early stages: what lessons have been learned about which mobilization/recruitment activities work best in which situations, and which activities do not, and why.
- Of the types of organizations formed by informal workers, we know more about associations and trade unions, but less about other forms of collective organization as producers of goods or services such as cooperatives, especially about the dual economic and political role that cooperatives of informal workers can play.
- We now know more about the general compositions of different informal workforces, in different sectors as well as in different locations/cultures. We also have a greater knowledge of the discrimination in pay and conditions, etc., that the majority of informal women workers face compared to men. We also know more about the potential for



informal women workers to organize themselves, through the extensive experience of various organizations, though there is much to do to share this experience more widely. We also know more about the strategies and arguments that can be used to persuade more men to support gender equity in organizing, though we are a long way from seeing the theory put into practice in many situations and, again, there is much more to do to share this knowledge more widely.

- In many countries, there is an understandable focus on the organizing and representation of informal workers who are from migrant or minority communities. In some countries, for example in Europe and North America, we know much less about informal workers who are not from those communities.
- There is now more knowledge about legislative frameworks and how they impact on informal workers. There is less known about collective bargaining/negotiations, and consultative forums that informal workers might or do engage in, in the different sectors and at different levels: where the successes have been, where not, and why. There is much more that can be done to document, and then make widely available information on good practice on gains, for example policy analysis tools, the arguments that win over governments, and collective bargaining systems that work. This is area of focus by networks such as WIEGO and StreetNet International.
- We know a lot about the difficulties - financial, political, legislative, etc. - that informal workers face in building membership-based organizations that can be sustained long-term. We know less about the solutions to these problems, and there is much to do to enable informal workers' MBOs to share their positive experiences to help each other build sustainable organizations.

### **3. Organizing informal workers – non-sector-specific**

#### **3.1 Some general issues**

When looking at the organization of informal workers, some questions apply to all sectors, though to a greater or lesser degree, influenced by a wide range of local factors.

Below are some key themes which seem particularly relevant when trying to understand the organization of informal workers. It is by no means an exhaustive list.<sup>1</sup>

##### **3.1.1 Employment status: 'wage employed' and/or 'self-employed'**

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<sup>1</sup> More analysis can be found in Pat Horn, Chris Bonner and Elaine Jones, 'Lessons from practical experiences of organizing workers in the informal economy in Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond: the world of work, livelihoods and socially and environmentally sustainable development', WIEGO/StreetNet, paper for the Global Labour University conference on 'Global Development: Challenges for Union Strategies', Campesinas, Brazil, April 2008: [www.global-labour-university.org/fileadmin/GLU\\_conference\\_Unicamp\\_2008/Submitted\\_papers/Pat\\_Horn.pdf](http://www.global-labour-university.org/fileadmin/GLU_conference_Unicamp_2008/Submitted_papers/Pat_Horn.pdf) accessed 6 February 2012.



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The distinction between those who are waged (or 'dependent') workers in an employment relationship, on the one hand, and those who are self-employed, on the other, is a key one. However, its relevance is greater in some circumstances than in others.

The difference is particularly relevant when it comes to the kinds of economic demands which the workers themselves express and organize around. Waged/dependent workers seek improved wages and better terms and conditions of employment, even if it is not always clear who actually is their employer (as in the case of workers who get work through agents/labour brokers). Meanwhile self-employed workers want to be able to operate better within the competitive marketplace, and so they tend towards such issues as skills training, support for marketing their products/services, or access to micro-credit. Therefore, this area of focus for their organizations is different. Many informal workers' organizations straddle these two approaches.

In other respects, the distinction between employed and self-employed can be much less significant. Both types of workers can and do often share similar situations and demands. Their employment status does not, for example, indicate the extent to which they are integrated into social security systems. Both types do organize so as to negotiate and bargain collectively: with employers in the case of waged workers, with local authorities and others in the case of self-employed street vendors and waste pickers. Nor can we assume from their employment status the nature of their political orientation and engagement in the 'progressive' social/political movement.

The distinction in employment status can tend to be viewed as very significant by others, however. The trade union movement in many parts of the world, for example, sees the 'self-employed' as 'entrepreneurs' rather than 'workers', according to their version of class differences. However, a different interpretation of class leads others to interpret the distinction differently.

For the **Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)** of India, many self-employed people (particularly 'own account' workers) are 'working poor', not entrepreneurs, and they are similarly excluded from conventional forms of 'economic development'. Therefore, SEWA organizes both 'dependent' workers and the poor self-employed. SEWA struggled for and won the right to be established and recognized as a trade union – for and by poor, working women in both categories.

Also, whether or not someone is 'wage employed' or 'self-employed' has become deliberately blurred in many cases as, during this period of neo-liberalism, employers have increasingly side-stepped their employment responsibilities.

An example of blurred employment status comes from homeworkers at the end of long supply chains. There are many home-based garment workers, for example, making products for global clothing corporations. The work is supplied through contractors, sub-contractors, and finally local agents (who may well be family members or close neighbours), in such a way that no contract of employment exists, and no working terms and conditions are specified. The homeworkers often see themselves as small producers rather than 'workers', and those further up the chain also often try to classify them as 'self-employed' operating under a sales-purchase



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arrangement. They have been clearly identified as 'dependent' homeworkers in the ILO Home Work Convention C177 of 1996, but few countries have ratified this Convention yet, very few homeworkers know about it, and few unions take up the cause.

An added factor is the way that individual people often move between the categories, even on a daily basis (being employed by someone for part of the day, and supplementing those earnings with 'own account' activities to make ends meet). This leads some to argue it is better not to see this as an 'either / or' distinction in each and every case, and to build workers' organizations that have an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to the 'working poor'.

### 3.1.2 Early stages of organizing

How informal workers come together in the first place is a critical issue, and is not sector-specific as such.

Where the work takes place seems a particularly important factor in the early stages of informal workers' organizing. One key factor is whether the workplace is a public or private space. Another is whether workers are in one location or scattered.

Street vendors and waste pickers operate in public spaces. Some work in locations where there are a number of them, sharing (or competing for) the same space, such as informal marketplaces or dumpsites. An important experience in organizing these workers is that, while they may be competing with each other economically, they do tend to come together when facing a common threat such as harassment or eviction from that location. Seizing such a moment to bring these workers together to fight that common threat is said to be the key moment for starting to build an organization of such workers<sup>2</sup>.

Other informal workers, notably homeworkers and domestic workers, are operating in private places - their own or other people's homes - and they are isolated from each other. This leads to a very different method of organizing in the early stages. Organizers speak of having to return repeatedly to neighbourhoods, to approach workers as they go shopping or attend religious services, or to knock on doors in the case of homeworkers (not domestic workers as this would most likely pose a threat to their relationship with their employer). Organizations such as SEWA in India have found it in fact best to develop organizers who live in the same neighbourhood as the workers concerned. These organizers express the perseverance and patience needed for the early stages of bringing such workers together. Also the strategy that seems to work best in order to get these workers interested in the first place and earn their trust is to listen carefully to the needs they express and to take those up, even though they may not be employment-related issues. This, according to organizers of homeworkers in the slums of Delhi<sup>3</sup>, for example, works much better than being too insistent on promoting a particular agenda to the workers.

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<sup>2</sup> Pat Horn, Coordinator, StreetNet International, by telephone interview, 28 September 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews in May 2009 for 'We Are Workers Too! Organizing Home-based Workers in the Global Economy', by Celia Mather, WIEGO Organizing Series, 2010.



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Such experiences seem very important for understanding how to begin building organizations. However, there seems much less research on these early stages than the later stages of developing sustainable organizations (see 3.1.3 below).

### 3.1.3 Different forms of organizing/organization

Associations, trade unions, cooperatives – the kinds of organizations built at the base by informal workers can vary greatly. One strong factor is the type of economic demand that they have (see 3.1.1 above). Own-account workers tend more towards cooperatives or cooperative-like organizations, while dependent workers tend more towards trade unions or other forms of workers' associations. Some, like SEWA, combine both.

But there are many factors at play. Very significant is the political context in any particular situation: for example, the extent to which civil society is free to organize, or the culture and history of organization in the country. In some places informal workers may see trade unions as too dominated by men who are not prepared to engage with women workers, or too preoccupied with formal workforces, or tied to particular political forces, or too bureaucratic to be of much use to them. In some countries there is little or no established system of cooperatives: this may be, for example, because the legislation on cooperatives is too bureaucratic or unfavourable (for example, discriminating against women's organizations, or a tax regime which is less favourable to cooperatives) and so discourages the formation of registered cooperatives. Or the government has promoted cooperatives as a vehicle for its own programmes, thereby giving cooperatives a bad name. In response, workers often form what is formally called an 'association' but in fact operates as a cooperative.

Another factor is the origins and early stages of the organization (see 3.1.2 above). Where a concerned and supportive NGO or religious association has been highly instrumental in bringing informal workers together, their leadership will have a great impact on the nature of the organization as it develops. It may well remain an association led by professionals, even where these supporters are genuine in wanting it to become an organization of rather than for informal workers.

The basis on which informal workers are brought together also varies. Often it is on a sector basis, for example SEWA bringing homeworkers together in the slums of Delhi (see page 30), and street vendor associations in many countries of Latin America. Elsewhere, organizing may be initially on a local area basis, only later developing 'trade' or sector-specific activities, for example ZCIEA in Zimbabwe<sup>4</sup> (see also page 20). In the case of migrant workers in a particular host country, they may choose to organize according to their national identity (see page 16).

It is worth noting that this variety does not only apply to informal workers' organizing. Across the world, trade unions of formal workers are actually organized on various bases: by sector/craft/industry, by political affiliation, by individual employer, and/or by area/location.

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<sup>4</sup> Wisborn Malaya, Secretary, Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA), by telephone interview, 28 October 2011.



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Then there is the question of linking these organizations – and building structures - from the local to the national, to the regional and the global levels.

Linking organizations at the international level can be an especially complicated process. International or regional networks of informal workers' organizations are largely on a sectoral basis (waste pickers, home-based workers, domestic workers, etc.). They are often attempting to unite very different types of organization (trade unions, informal workers' associations, etc.), some of which are democratic member-based, and others dominated by individual interests. They may come from very different political cultures of organization. They may be attempting to include both 'employed' and 'self-employed' workers (as, for example, in the case of the HomeNets for home-based workers). Knitting together such a disparity to agree a shared vision, common goals and ways of working, etc., can be very challenging.

## International / regional networks of informal workers

### 1. International Coordinating Committee (ICC)

Following the success in achieving a Resolution on 'Decent Work and the Informal Economy' by the International Labour Organization in 2002, a number of organizations from around the world formed a working group to build on it. They were the *Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos* (CROC) or Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (Mexico), Ghana Trades Union Congress, HomeNet South-East Asia, Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), ORIT (the former Inter-American regional organization of ICFTU), SEWA, and StreetNet International.

As a result of their efforts in the following year, 2003, SEWA hosted an international conference 'Combining our Efforts' in Ahmedabad, India, bringing together 60 participants from 35 organizations directly involved in organizing informal workers. They were from both trade unions and informal economy organizations outside the trade union movement. The conference asked the working group to continue as the **International Coordinating Committee (ICC)** on Organizing Workers in the Informal Economy, to promote further the organization of informal workers, in particular within the trade union movement internationally. The ICC was instrumental in linking unions with other informal worker organizations and was involved in strategy discussions and a number of activities, with the support of WIEGO:

- In 2005, a first Africa Regional Conference was held jointly with the ILO in Senegal.
- In 2006, a second international conference was held in Accra, Ghana.<sup>1</sup>
- Education materials for organizers were commissioned, jointly published by WIEGO and StreetNet.<sup>1</sup>

The ICC members also hosted side meetings with unionists gathered at the annual International Labour Conference (ILC) on several occasions.

Due to a change in strategy, the ICC no longer operates. However, the unions involved are actively promoting informal worker organizing within the structures of the International Trades Union Confederation (ITUC).



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## 2. SEICAP, Central America

To date, the only regional network of informal workers not based on a single sector is **SEICAP** in Central America, with member organizations from Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. SEICAP brings together trade unions and associations of own-account workers (largely vendors). It expresses itself in language of political class and social justice. Its Coordinator is based at the CTCP Confederation of Informal Sector Workers in Nicaragua, which is affiliated to the FNT union confederation in that country. CTCP-FNT is a key actor in StreetNet International.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. StreetNet International

For more on **StreetNet International** for street/market vendors, see page 36.

## 4. International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN)

The **International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN)** has been particularly successful at forming an international network for that sector. Within a period of only five years, it has come together and united around some common goals, notably to win the new ILO Convention C198 for domestic workers' rights in June 2011. Domestic workers have benefited from the fact that they have an 'employed' status, which has made it relatively easy for the global trade union movement and International Labour Organization to recognize their demands and collaborate very constructively in the common effort. There are now discussions about whether and how to formalise the network into a more permanent structure. (See more on page 19 and section 4.1.)

It is worth noting that, at a regional level in Latin America, domestic workers' organizations have been united in the confederation **CONACTRAHO** for over 25 years (since 1988). There are also two structures in Asia, the Asian Domestic Workers' Network (ADWN)<sup>6</sup> and the Asian Migrant Domestic Workers' Alliance (ADWA)<sup>7</sup>. The IDWN is now encouraging better regional coordination through its coordinators in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe.

## 5. Waste Pickers

For information on **waste pickers'** international activities, see section 4.4.

<sup>5</sup> 'Que es la Red SEICAP' (What is the SEICAP Network): [www.ctcpnicaragua.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=5](http://www.ctcpnicaragua.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=5) (accessed 2 November 2011)

<sup>6</sup> <http://domesticworkerrights.org/?q=node/3>

<sup>7</sup> [www.mfasia.org/campaigns/international-labor-conference/192-international-campaign-for-the-recognition-of-domestic-work-as-work](http://www.mfasia.org/campaigns/international-labor-conference/192-international-campaign-for-the-recognition-of-domestic-work-as-work)



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In recent years, substantial analysis has been done on the forms of organization that tend to develop in the various sectors and at the different levels - local, national, regional and international - particularly by WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme (ORP), with the express purpose of supporting the growth and sustainability of true Member-Based Organizations (MBOs).<sup>8</sup>

The wide range of organizations of informal workers that are found around the world does mean that no one model of organizing fits all situations. Supportive organizations such as the formal trade unions need to be flexible in their approaches.

### 3.1.4 Gender and organizing

Different workforces have different gender profiles. Domestic workers, home-based workers and sex workers tend to be mainly women. Street vendors, waste pickers, transport workers, construction workers, agriculture/fish workers tend to be mainly men, though women are in the majority in certain areas, such as women street vendors in West Africa or women waste pickers in India.

For women, work in the informal economy is relatively more important than for men. 60% of women employed are employed informally, and they are more generally to be found in the occupations – by sector or within sectors - that offer the least security and income.

The actual gender profile of the workforce in any particular place is of course affected by local cultural interpretations of the respective roles of men and women. It will in turn impact on all aspects of organizing those workers, including:

- the likelihood and nature of organizing
- the issues around which the workers come together
- the forms that their organizations take and their sustainability
- the possibility/likelihood of women taking leadership positions (women in a minority position face a different situation from those where they are in the majority; a lot depends on men's attitudes and the prevailing/dominant culture)
- the possibilities for getting official recognition of the organization and much more.

Where women are in the minority in a workforce, for example in construction, transport, and fishing, this can mean that special efforts are needed to include them in organizing, otherwise they remain 'invisible', underrepresented, etc.

No situations are gender neutral, and understanding the gender aspects of any particular situation where informal workers are organizing is of course a key emphasis for WIEGO.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, WIEGO, 'Workshop Report: Organizing Informal Workers: Building and Strengthening Membership-Based Organizations', Bangkok, 3-5 March 2011; Christine Bonner and Dave Spooner, 'Organizing in the Informal Economy: A Challenge for Trade Unions', 2011: [http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-2/08\\_a\\_bonner.pdf](http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-2/08_a_bonner.pdf); Rhonda Douglas, 'Impact of Organizing Urban Informal Workers', WIEGO, February 2011; Christine Bonner and Dave Spooner, 'Organizing Labour in the Informal Economy: Institutional Forms and Relationships', article submitted to *Capital, Labour and Society*, 2012, forthcoming.



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## 3.2 SWOT – Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats

The 'SWOT' analysis is a well-known tool for analysing any particular situation, and seemed a useful framework to analyze organizing potential here too. I have, however, pared down the four elements into two, effectively into the positive and the negative. Also, it is usually a participatory process, but here it is the result of my own thinking.

The extent to which any of the individual factors mentioned is relevant may well vary from sector to sector, location to location, whether the workers are 'dependent' or 'own-account', and so on. But listing them in this way perhaps provides a useful checklist when trying to think strategically about the organizing potential of informal workers.

### 3.2.1 Difficulties / Blockages / Weaknesses

We know a lot about the difficulties that informal workers face in trying to build sustainable organizations for themselves, including (but not an exhaustive list):

- **Political systems that do not encourage civil society organizing**
- **Economic development policies**

Dominant neo-liberal economic policies have for the past three decades been largely focussed on big business, on attracting foreign investment for example, on the assumption that this will 'create jobs'. This is despite the fact that such policies have been shown not to lead to sustained employment growth and poverty reduction. There is a great ignorance and/or prejudice among economic policy-makers and those that influence them about the huge economic contribution of the working poor; and about how supporting these workers is key to 'anti-poverty' strategies.

- **The legislative/policy 'blind spot'** – this is what 'informal' means.

Governments often cannot or will not work with certain types of organization – especially those which are not officially 'registered', where sometimes there is actually no system for registering informal workers' organizations. This 'blind spot' leads to (and is fed by, in a vicious cycle), amongst others, a lack of official statistics/data gathering on the informal economy. Official authorities often have no idea of the size, scope, whereabouts, economic and other contributions as well as needs, etc., of informal workers. There is a lack of awareness among officials, a lack of communication, a lack of policy.

Informal workers and their supporters often have to kick-start the process of rectifying the data gaps, of communicating this information to the authorities, and of suggesting what kinds of policy should be possible. This is a role that WIEGO in particular has developed: encouraging official statistical services to gather better data, getting analysts to analyze



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this improved data, and then making it user-friendly for informal workers' organizations to use as part of their toolbox when lobbying and negotiating with government officials.

- **Existing policies/legislation/practice on workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively** are selective and inappropriate for many informal workers:

- They are based on particular notions of 'worker', 'workplace' and 'employer' which exclude the majority of the working poor.
- Where informal workers do collectively negotiate e.g. with city authorities, negotiations do not end in a legal agreement binding on both parties; instead they are dependent on the say-so of individual officials, and can easily be overturned.

- **Other existing laws or policies are often inappropriate for, or even exclude, informal workers**

For informal workers, other laws and policies may have more immediate importance than labour law. Urban laws and regulations, for example, restrict trading space and licences. Urban or environmental regulations may restrict access to natural resources or recyclable materials. Financial institutions exclude informal workers, and so on.

The extent to which existing policies and legal frameworks are inappropriate for informal workers, especially women, and what can and should be done to change this, is a major area of work for WIEGO and other international networks of informal workers' organizations.<sup>9</sup>

*"The most central issue for street vendors worldwide is the right to work in a public space without fear of harassment, arrest or confiscation of their goods. All other issues (access to financial & non-financial support, even social protection) tend to become secondary concerns as some of these cannot be effective in the absence of secure work space. As a result, regulation of street vending is a key concern – not whether or not there should be regulation, but putting in place appropriate regulation..."<sup>10</sup>*

- **Facing discrimination**

Cultural norms of class, gender, etc., are often used unfairly against informal workers, and can interfere with their ability to organize:

- **Gender:** women's work and economic contribution are undervalued the world over; in some societies, women have no/little freedom of movement; formal collective organization (e.g. unions, cooperatives) can be seen as something that men do rather than women; there is often a lack of confidence among women for themselves and for others as 'leaders'; and so on.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Martha Chen et.al., 'Women, Work and Poverty', in Progress of the World's Women, UNIFEM, 2005. Also, Kamala Sankaran and Roopa Madhav, 'Law and Informal Economy: Law and Policy Demands. Lessons from the WIEGO India Pilot Study', WIEGO, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Pat Horn, in Chris Bonner, Pat Horn and Elaine Jones, 2008, op.cit.



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- **Derogatory terms** are often applied to informal workers as if they are somehow 'the other', such as 'thieves', or 'scavengers', or 'unclean' (waste pickers), or 'out-of-date' (street vendors who are swept away in order to 'modernize' an urban area) or 'low caste' (in India), or 'immoral' (sex workers).

- **Negative attitudes from trade unions**

'Are they really workers?' 'They shouldn't exist / all work should be done in proper workplaces.' 'They risk undermining our gains.' 'They are too hard to organize.' Historically, there have been many such responses from formal trade unions towards informal workers and, while they are changing in many parts of the world, elsewhere they continue. This attitude is often bolstered by legal definitions.

Even when unions do develop collaboration with informal workers' organizations, for example accepting them as 'associates', the relationship may well not be easy. There are reports of unions using such a relationship opportunistically to bolster their own identity/position without actually giving the informal workers much recognition or voice. In many cases, gender politics may well be at play.

- **Lack of self-identity as 'workers'**

Being ignored, excluded, discriminated against by others contributes to many informal workers having little identity or esteem for themselves – it is a vicious cycle.

- **Isolation from each other**

This applies particularly to those who work inside private households, whether their own (home-based workers) or other people's (domestic workers).

Also, of course, competition between self-employed workers can interfere with them building sustainable collaboration between themselves.

- **Lack of time to participate**

Organization takes time, a lot of voluntary, unpaid effort and informal workers in particular tend to need all their time to earn a living. Plus, in the case of women workers, they need to carry out their domestic responsibilities to their family as well.

- **High level of support needed**

All those with experience say that it takes persistent, long-term efforts to assist informal workers to come together in the first place and then to build sustainable MBOs. Some supportive NGOs are guilty of a short-term project-based approach, but this usually leads to little that is sustainable and, in the process, not only wastes the precious time of informal workers but can also leave them dispirited.

- **Financial:** Members' dues are fundamental to building MBOs – for the democratic accountability that members then ask of the leaders. However, setting up and running consistent systems for collecting members' dues is not easy, especially where workers



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are not based in a defined location. It requires a team of committed and trusted collectors who are willing to go repeatedly from place to place to collect the money, as well as keep records and hand over the sums to the organization. For cooperatives, it requires a commitment on the part of members to contribute a portion of earnings towards the collective – something that informal workers may not wish, or be able, to do. The working poor can only afford dues that are set low – making it even more difficult for their organizations to subsist on dues alone.

The need for financial resources can often lead to dependency on outside funders. However, funders have their own agendas, and quite often this does not coincide with what the workers' organization actually wants to do, and it has to adjust to the funder's aims. Also, funding is largely project-based; after a certain period of time, the project ends and if, in that time, the organization has not built a more sustainable funding base, it is at great risk. As one of its supportive activities, WIEGO provides its partners with access to information on funders and training in fund-raising techniques such as proposal writing.

Sustaining organizations of informal workers is a major challenge, especially national and international organizations where it is likely that external funding will always be necessary.

- **Long-term organizational development / administrative training:** Those who are new to democratic organizing may know very little about such practices as running an election, the functioning of an elected committee, how to keep accounts, etc.
- **Education for organizing, and negotiating/bargaining:** challenges can include poor literacy levels among informal workers, as well as the (verbal, written, visual) communication skills of trainers where, for example, standard educational practice is based on formal lectures rather than engaging workers in dialogue, enquiry and active problem-solving.
- **Research and data gathering:** Filling in the huge gaps in information and knowledge about the informal economy (see page 11) is, of course, a daunting task for impoverished and hard-working communities, especially where literacy levels are low. They are often dependent on others with the necessary technical know-how. This is an area where such international networks as WIEGO, StreetNet, and the Latin American and Caribbean Network for recyclers (see page 39) are helping, and there has over the past decade been significant progress in producing and using information to persuade authorities. However, these activities are in turn dependent on there being the necessary funding, meaning that there are still many gaps to fill.
- **Domination by certain forces or individuals**

Well-meaning NGOs and professionals can play a genuinely supportive role in the early stages of building an organization; but their own identity/status can become tied to their leadership role and they fail to step aside for genuine workers' leaders. Individuals with a class-based sense of entitlement can dominate even if they do not mean to do so. There are also the gender dynamics where men tend to dominate over women. Plus, there are individuals who may wish to use the organization for selfish, corrupt purposes. Self-employed workers especially are used to an individualized, competitive environment, and



are often less familiar with collective action for the common good. This leaves them particularly vulnerable to opportunistic individuals. This syndrome is fed by the high need for long-term support. The only answer is strong and sustained efforts to foster true MBOs which can fight off such threats.

- **Leadership renewal**

Even where good, democratic leadership has been generated from within the membership, there can be problems renewing this. Those leaders who wish to step aside may be uncertain how to ensure the organization is passed into the hands of people whom they can trust to maintain its aims and democratic processes. Their dilemma is how to do this in a democratic way, i.e. rather than groom certain individuals for the role.

- **Difficulty of holding on to the gains**

*“Being organized is one thing. It is another to be able to create better conditions for the members.”* Pat Horn, Coordinator, StreetNet International<sup>11</sup>

Workers’ organizations need to be able to deliver something positive back to their members. However, operating in an economy dominated by capitalist competition which favours the strong over the weak, and having very few legislated rights such as to legally-recognized collective bargaining, it takes a lot of vision, perseverance, and commitment, particularly by leaders, to be able to do so.

For example, while a few homeworkers’ organizations have been able to use the ILO Convention on Home Work C177 (see page 32) to their advantage, low organizational strength among the majority has meant that it has only been ratified by a handful of governments in the 15 years since it was adopted.

- **Global North/South division in international solidarity**

Historically, the informal economy has been and still largely is seen as more a phenomenon of the Global ‘South’, with the ‘industrialized North’ seen as dominated by the formal economy. This separation fed into weak international linkages/solidarity between the formal trade union movement, particularly but not only of the North, and informal workers’ organizations, especially but not only in the South.

With the mass informalization of employment in the formal economy across the world in recent years, there are now more efforts to draw parallels and bring these separated elements together, both conceptually and organizationally. The debates about this are on-going (see also Appendix A). However, there do seem to be more opportunities for rapprochement within the global labour movement North-South, as well as formal-informal.

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<sup>11</sup> Telephone interview, 28 September 2011



### 3.2.2 Strengths / Opportunities

- **Growing awareness globally and officially of the informal economy**

Through the activities of informal workers' organizations and their supporters, over the past decade or so governments at local (e.g. city), national and international levels, have become much more aware of the informal economy and receptive to advocacy by informal workers' organizations and their supporters. This has led to some important gains in policy recognition.

At the international level, the first significant breakthrough was the ILO Convention on Home Work C177 in 1996, followed by the ILO Conclusions and Resolution on Decent Work and the Informal Economy in 2002, and the ILO Convention for Domestic Workers C189 in 2011. These instruments are not yet well recognized and implemented around the world but they provide very good opportunities for further organizing, lobbying and negotiating.

At national level, the reality varies enormously. Obviously, a most significant factor is the national political context – importantly, the extent to which the government has some positive attitude towards democracy and the role of civil society organizations, and to good governance through legislation, social provision, and so on.

In **India**, there is still a legislative approach and, though it may take huge effort, it is possible to influence the authorities. In that country, there is a large workforce of women who carry goods on their heads and backs, known as 'head loaders'. In 1956, the women head loaders of Pune went on strike for 8 days to demand higher pay, such that shops, warehouses and markets could no longer function. This first led to a written agreement with the head of Pune's Administration and then, along with other struggles by informal transport workers in the docks and elsewhere, to the Hamal Mathadi and Other Unprotected Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act of 1969. The law provides for negotiated wage rates between employers' associations and trade unions of head loaders and other workers. It set up local Boards which collect contributions from the workers on the one hand and those who use their services on the other, and then provide the workers with paid leave and other statutory benefits. Poornima Chikarmane of the KKPKP waste pickers' trade union in Pune calls it a "*historic and radical piece of legislation*".<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, at city level, street vendors and waste pickers in particular have been able to change the mind-sets of officials in some cities (see pages 35 and 38).

WIEGO and a range of partners internationally are currently collaborating in a project called **Inclusive Cities** which aims to ensure that the working poor – particularly waste pickers, street vendors and home-based workers - are recognized and included in municipal policy and urban planning. The main aim is to build the capacity of member-based organizations in policy analysis and advocacy so as to

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<sup>12</sup> Annexure C, StreetNet Conference Report, March 2007, op.cit.



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have their own voice heard, and ultimately to improve their situation. WIEGO plays a coordinating as well as an active research and support role. The main partners are StreetNet International, HomeNet South Asia, Latin American Waste Pickers' Network / AVINA Foundation. There are also many smaller partners and collaborators in Latin America, Asia and Africa at national and increasingly at city level.<sup>13</sup>

- **Informal workers can/do share and express a common identity**

As noted in 3.1.3, informal workers may well not identify themselves as 'workers' but they do often express a common identity (or a combination of identities) that brings them together. These can include (any combination of) the following:

- **Type of work**, a sector or craft, such as tailors, brick-makers, farm workers, embroiderers, head-loaders.
- **Employment status**, that is to say whether they are 'own account' or 'employee'.
- **'Precarious' or 'informal' status**: examples are the young 'freeters' in Japan<sup>14</sup>, and the Excluded Workers Congress in the USA.<sup>15</sup>
- **Gender**: for example the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India.<sup>16</sup>
- **Nationality / language / migrant status**: sometimes a special organization is set up for workers sharing national identity.

The **Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union of Hong Kong (IMWU HK)** brings together migrant workers of Indonesian nationality in the territory. It is one of several such organizations based on national identity there. They come together in the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers, for example, which is in turn supported by the Hong Kong Trade Union Confederation.<sup>17</sup> A similar trade union has recently been started by Indonesian migrant workers in the Netherlands, encouraged by the FNV Bondgenoten union there.<sup>18</sup>

Or it may take the form of an existing trade union developing organizers from a particular language group to organize workers who share that language. This strategy is sometimes termed 'Like Organizes Like'.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.inclusivecities.org](http://www.inclusivecities.org)

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, 'Youth Employment in Japan's Economic Recovery: 'Freeters' and 'NEETs'', by Kosugi Reiko, *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, [www.japanfocus.org/-Kosugi-Reiko/2022](http://www.japanfocus.org/-Kosugi-Reiko/2022), accessed 8 November 2011

<sup>15</sup> [www.excludedworkerscongress.org/](http://www.excludedworkerscongress.org/), accessed 8 November 2011

<sup>16</sup> [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org)

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sringatin, Chair, IMWU HK, 8 June 2010: [idwnilo.wordpress.com/2010/09/24/they-want-our-money-but-they-don%E2%80%99t-want-to-protect-us/](http://idwnilo.wordpress.com/2010/09/24/they-want-our-money-but-they-don%E2%80%99t-want-to-protect-us/)

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Slamet Heri, Chair, Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union Netherlands (IMWU NL), June 2011, published on-line by the Jakarta Globe: [www.thejakartaglobe.com/opinion/a-migrants-tale-in-his-own-words/457507](http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/opinion/a-migrants-tale-in-his-own-words/457507)



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In the UK, **Unite the Union** has developed Polish organizers for Polish migrant agricultural workers<sup>19</sup>.

- **Religion:** particularly in the case of the most vulnerable workers, religious institutions and groups can be highly instrumental in supporting them to come together for mutual support.

Priests and nuns in the Catholic Church were key to the early organizing of migrant domestic workers in London in the 1980s, as they have also been for domestic workers in parts of India.<sup>20</sup>

- **Based on common needs**

The initial needs expressed by informal workers may not always be directly economic, and in any particular situation it is difficult to predetermine what they may want. Apart from poverty and lack of income, informal workers commonly express the need for:

- Access to official social security schemes such as healthcare, pensions
- Rapid intervention to solve a particular crisis such as evictions or other harassment by authorities.

Listening and acting on those initial demands is what attracts informal workers to then be part of an organization. Of course, this means also then delivering some gains which do bring material improvements. For example, in some places like Thailand, occupational health and safety works well as an organizing tool for home-based workers, whereas this is apparently not the experience of Bulgaria (though the reasons for this are unclear at the time of writing).<sup>21</sup>

As their organization develops, informal workers often want access to skills training which has the potential to upgrade their existing work, or which even might move them out of the informal economy and into formal employment.<sup>22</sup>

- **Collective bargaining**

There has been a lot of rethinking about who might be the counterparts or targets for bargaining and negotiation by informal workers' organizations. SEWA in India, which is multi-sectoral, calls it identifying the 'control point'.<sup>23</sup> For street vendors and waste pickers facing harassment or eviction, it may be those in the local municipal authority responsible for urban policy, for example (see page 38). For dependent homeworkers, it may be the

<sup>19</sup> Svetlana Boincean and Celia Mather, 'Workers and Unions on the Move: Organizing and Defending Migrant Workers in Agriculture and Allied Sectors', IUF, 2008, page 24:

[www.iufdocuments.org/www/documents/IUFmigrantworkersmanual-e.pdf](http://www.iufdocuments.org/www/documents/IUFmigrantworkersmanual-e.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, IRENE/IUF, 'Respect and Rights: Protection for Domestic/Household Workers', report of the international conference held in Amsterdam on 8-10 November 2006, 2008, page 60:

<http://domesticworkerrights.org/sites/en.domesticworkerrights.org/files/RESPECT&RIGHTS.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Violeta Zlateva, President, Association of Home-based Workers, Bulgaria, and organizer for HomeNet South-East Europe, by email, 7 November 2011

<sup>22</sup> For example, the migrant domestic workers' organization Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW) in London, UK, provides computer skills training for its members each Sunday.

<sup>23</sup> Renana Jabhvala, National Coordinator, SEWA, by telephone interview, 12 September 2011



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company that dominates their supply chain, if they can identify it (see page 29). For informal construction workers, it may be the agency that supplies them on-site, and so on.

While there are great difficulties in achieving collective bargaining agreements that have any legal status, the process can be used as an organizing tool in itself. This is a particular area of focus for StreetNet International. It held a conference on collective bargaining in the informal economy in Senegal in March 2007<sup>24</sup>, and now has a new project to develop collective bargaining forum models so as to encourage street vendor organizations to struggle for such forums (see page 36).

- **Improving data**

Improving official statistics/knowledge helps to build greater awareness of and positive arguments about the economic contribution of informal workers, as well as their needs and rights. In some cases – such as the struggle between waste pickers and incineration corporations – it can also raise important questions of environmental sustainability.

It is not only a question of raising awareness among policy-makers, but the public at large, and indeed the workers themselves – increasing their self-confidence, and providing them with facts and arguments to use to promote their case.

Improving official statistics and making them available to organizations of informal workers is one of WIEGO's core programmes, with the express intention of bringing together those such as academics who have the capacity to produce in-depth analysis and those who can use such information for positive change.<sup>25</sup> Analyses of official data on the informal economy in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Brazil have recently been published, for example.<sup>26</sup>

In individual countries, informal workers' organizations and networks have also been building their own capacity in research and data analysis and using research findings and data to build their relationship to and status with, for example, municipal authorities.

The **Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT)** brings together organizations that represent some 400,000 street vendors, hawkers, and other informal workers across **Kenya**. It has been arguing with the Government that, as over 80% of the workforce there is informal and this creates 590,000 jobs annually, they should be taken seriously in economic policy and practice. It has, for example, been lobbying hard against delays in implementing the new Micro and Small Enterprise Bill, and for access by small traders to micro-credit from the MSE Fund. KENASVIT's arguments were backed up by mass demonstrations in August and September 2011 which gained wide press coverage.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> StreetNet report of the 'StreetNet International Meeting on Collective Bargaining in the Informal Economy and Laws and Litigation Strategies in Street Vending Sector', Senegal, March 2007, with Annexes on collective bargaining experiences from AZIEA (Zambia), KKP KP (India), KOSC (Korea), and SEWA (India)

<sup>25</sup> <http://wiego.org/wiego/core-programmes/statistics>

<sup>26</sup> <http://wiego.org/related/resources/33/18/15>

<sup>27</sup> KENASVIT, by email, 28 September 2011



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- **Education and Communications for Organizing**

A number of international organizations and networks have in recent years been producing education/training resources - manuals and DVDs – specifically to assist the development of member-based organizations of informal workers around the world. Some are non-sector specific, and some are for particular sectors such as waste pickers and home-based workers. A very useful ‘toolbox’ of such materials can be found on the Inclusive Cities website.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, in various countries, informal workers’ organizations have been developing their own educational methods.

In India, **SEWA** has found that video is a very useful tool for training in organizing, particularly where literacy levels are low. SEWA has developed its own Video SEWA unit, for which it has trained women from its membership in the skills of filming and production.<sup>29</sup>

For home-based and domestic workers who are isolated, organizers have found radio a particularly useful tool for initial awareness-raising, provided they can get access to the radio broadcasting system.

Where workers might have access to the Internet, such as migrant workers in Europe or North America, short films are now being placed on YouTube. One example is the FNV Bondgenoten supporting short films of migrant workers’ organizing in the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup>

### **Alliance-building**

Clearly, informal workers’ organizations are going to seek alliances with those who are most likely to provide concrete support. To whom they turn will depend on what they need at any particular stage.

- **Organizing at the grassroots:** there are many instances across the world of NGOs, women’s groups, religious groups, and so on, supporting organizations of informal workers; in some cases they even initiate such organizations - and in the best cases, they then ‘let go’ to become ‘just good friends’ to the workers who then run their own organization.
- **Campaigning / Public Awareness:** workers who were previously excluded will often need to turn to others for advice and contacts to promote their case more widely.

As the **International Domestic Workers’ Network (IDWN)** (see page 9) campaigned for an international ILO Convention, supportive organisations such as WIEGO and the IUF global union federation helped find further resources for a campaign leaflet,

<sup>28</sup> Christine Bonner, ‘Organizing In the Informal Economy: Resource Books for Organizers’, WIEGO/StreetNet, 2009: [www.inclusivocities.org/toolbox.html](http://www.inclusivocities.org/toolbox.html)

<sup>29</sup> [www.videosewa.org](http://www.videosewa.org)

<sup>30</sup> For example: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjEk2T1VTbc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjEk2T1VTbc) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieYU5nBNIWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieYU5nBNIWs)



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a 'Platform of Demands', and a 'Myths and Realities' booklet, translated in many languages, along with a website.<sup>31</sup> Then, as the global campaign gathered momentum and domestic workers' organizations across the world grew in confidence and public presence, they were able to gain more attention from the press and media in their own countries.

- **Legal and policy advocacy:** informal workers can sometimes call on solidarity from sympathetic experts such as 'pro-bono' lawyers or academics to help them win particular court judgements or advance a case for policy change.

Street vendors of Delhi, India, were supported by a pro-bono lawyer to take their case to the courts that they should not be swept off the streets and prevented from earning their livelihoods during the Commonwealth Games.<sup>32</sup>

For the longer term, however, it is important to develop more participatory research methods that use the know-how of legal/policy experts and at the same time empower MBOs.

WIEGO's 'Legal Empowerment of the Working Poor' project is currently being conducted in Thailand, Ghana and Peru, with partners HomeNet Thailand, Ghana Trades Union Congress, and the *Instituto Sindical de Cooperación al Desarrollo* (ISCOD), the Spanish Trade Union Institute for Development Cooperation. The project follows on from the India Pilot Project<sup>33</sup> and documents, analyses and engages with the legal situation, demands and struggles of the working poor in the informal economy in those countries, especially women. It focuses on selected occupational groups of informal workers, and promotes an interactive process involving membership-based organisations of informal workers, as well as a range of stakeholders and legal experts. It aims to identify and share 'better practices', and create model agreements, policies or instruments that can be useful for informal worker organizations in their engagement with authorities and to help build their 'legal' capacity to engage.<sup>34</sup>

- **Technical support:** including and especially training in how to run a membership-based organization democratically, to make the transition from an 'NGO' model to an MBO.

Training in how to form and run membership-based organizations is a key focus of WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme (ORP), including a special commitment to strengthening women's access to leadership.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> [www.domesticworkerrights.org](http://www.domesticworkerrights.org)

<sup>32</sup> Rhonda Douglas, Global Projects Director, WIEGO, by telephone interview, 13 September 2011

<sup>33</sup> Madhav and Sankaran, 2011, op.cit.

<sup>34</sup> See the WIEGO microsite on law and informality at: <http://wiego.org/law> accessed 7 February 2012

<sup>35</sup> <http://wiego.org/wiego/core-programmes/organization-representation>



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- **Resources support**, including in-kind resources such as office space and communications.

In Zimbabwe, informal workers were encouraged to start organizing by a project supported by the Commonwealth Trades Union Congress (CTUC), and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), with funding from the UK Government (DFID) and others. From the outset, they were in alliance with the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). Out of this, the **Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA)** was founded in 2002.

The Zimbabwean unions provided a lot of support. ZCTU regional focal points across the country helped to develop ZCIEA on-the-ground organizing through capacity-building in leadership skills, negotiating skills, and so on. Significantly, they also gave ZCIEA organizers office space, access to telephones, etc., which kept ZCIEA costs low.

This was important as it took the ZCIEA five years to develop a system of membership dues. Wisborn Malaya, Secretary General of ZCIEA, says that ZCIEA needed to introduce the concept of ‘true membership’ – i.e. not just something where people can “*come in and take*”. It took time to register each member and give each one a membership card. But this was also vital in the Zimbabwean political context where ZCIEA and its members needed to have their own identity, separate from the trade unions. The card is something members can show to the authorities when needed.

Wisborn Malaya also says that one of their continuing challenges is to find educational and funding support for “*what you want to do, not where you are told what you need to do*”.<sup>36</sup>

**“Nothing for us without us”**  
ZCIEA Slogan

- **Sectors helping each other to organize**

As mentioned, some organizing of informal workers is deliberately cross-sectoral, as in the case of ZCIEA in Zimbabwe and SEWA in India. However, sector-specific organizations also give each other assistance.

At the local level, there are clearly possibilities, for example, for home-based workers and vendors can support each other in the market-place. But cross-sectoral organizing can also draw on the multiple identities of many individuals, within families, across neighbours and within communities, with the potential to build powerful broad alliances.

The **Society of Urban Poor (SOUP)** is an alliance in **Nepal**, currently comprising 58 organizations of street vendors, domestic workers, construction and transport workers, and seasonal workers from rural areas. The consortium is attempting to

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<sup>36</sup> Wisborn Malaya, ZCIEA, by telephone interview, 28 October 2011



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form a National Federation of the Working Poor and, when launched, will represent 250,000 urban poor workers in that country.<sup>37</sup>

Supportive activities are happening at an international level too. WIEGO facilitates cross-sector exchanges, for example. StreetNet has been helping with waste picker organization mapping in Africa.

#### ○ **Greater international workers' solidarity**

While there is still much to do, particularly in some sectors such as home-based workers and rural workers, there is now much more liaison and active solidarity internationally in some other sectors.

Domestic workers' organizations have been able to mobilise internationally in their successful campaign for the ILO Convention C189, not only by liaising among themselves but also by calling for support from the formal trade unions, especially the global union federation IUF, as well as migrants rights' networks, anti-slavery groups, and so on (see section 4.1).

Organizations of street vendors (see section 4.3) and waste pickers (see section 4.4) now meet up to exchange experiences, knowledge and strategies, and are trying to push into new world regions.

Bringing together informal workers in the Global South and those in the Global North is being promoted by some in the global trade union movement, for example by the global union federation for transport workers, the ITF (see section 4.5).

#### ○ **Intergovernmental global bodies**

There is now much greater awareness and support for informal workers' organizing from some intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations.

The **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, especially the Actrav Bureau for Workers' Activities, as well as some of its offices around the world, have been supporting organizing activities by informal workers generally (see pages 35 and 36, for example), and domestic workers in particular.

**UN Women** (formerly UNIFEM) has been supporting particularly those informal sectors where the majority of workers are women – i.e. home-based workers and domestic workers - to gain a higher profile, by co-hosting and providing facilities for conferences, education/awareness-raising activities, and so on.

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<sup>37</sup> Dave Spooner, 'Organisation and Representation of Home-Based Workers – the *HomeNet Nepal* Story', based on an interview with Om Thapaliya, 23 July 2011, unpublished



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#### 4. Organizing informal workers – sector-by-sector

In the sector-by-sector analyses in this section, I have tried to bear in mind the following questions:

Running throughout:

- gender analysis
- emphasis on where the 'knowledge base' is better and where it is weak
- Issues of self-identity, and how these workers are seen by others.
- Who/where/why/what/how they come together in the first place; who takes the initiatives and persuades others; when and where this is most likely to happen; about which issues (immediate needs), etc.
- To whom they turn for support and why; whom they tend to avoid and why.
- How their issues/demands (have been known to) develop; distinctions between 'own account' and 'dependent' workers
- What types of organization they tend to form: including based on geographical locality, national identity (in the case of migrants), sector-specific / cross-sector 'of the poor'; the political and organizational history of their country; their employment status.
- How grassroots organizations have developed into national/regional/international networks.
- The forms of encouragement/support needed at different stages of developing MBOs and networks, including
  - education/training for organizers, members, administrators, facilitators/trainers
  - media and publicity.
- Geographical gaps and mapping.



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## 4.1 Domestic workers

For so long, those who do domestic work in the homes of others and the contribution they make, not just to individual families but the whole society and economy, have been invisible and under-valued. Many have even questioned whether it is 'really work', using such notions as 'helpers' or 'family members', or asking "*Isn't it just what women do?*", and so on. It has remained one of the main locations of slavery in today's world.

Now, there is a huge growth (locally and globally) in visibility, organizational strength, political gains, and knowledge. A lot has been achieved in the main demands of domestic workers for voice, visibility, and respect, even though there is still a long way to go.

In some places there is actually a long history of organizing domestic workers. For example, in Brazil and Chile the trade unions were defending household workers as far back as the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> At regional level too, Latin America has the longest experience, with a regional federation of domestic workers' organizations (CONLACTRAHO) existing for over 25 years (see page 9).<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, in individual countries across the globe, organizations of or for domestic workers have been in existence, sometimes for many years. However, little experience and knowledge was shared regionally, let alone globally, until the past decade.

For Europe and Scandinavia, the first conference to look at trade union approaches to domestic and care work in private homes was hosted by the European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC) in Brussels, in April 2005.<sup>40</sup> This showed the wide differences between countries in that region in how the work is organized, the role of the public sector, the policy/legislative environment, and the activities of the trade unions and other associations of domestic workers, including migrant workers. However, the conference did not lead to any sustained regional activity.

A year later, in November 2006, the first ever global conference of domestic workers and supporters was held. They came from all regions of the world, initiated by an alliance of different types of support organizations and networks, coordinated by the International Research and Education Network Europe (IRENE), and hosted by the FNV trade union federation in the Netherlands.<sup>41</sup>

It was from this conference that the demand for an international network of domestic workers' organizations and a special ILO Convention for the rights of domestic workers took off, with Convention No.189 on Domestic Work being won in just five years (June 2011). This success was due to an unusual but very constructive form of collaboration and organizational integration at the global level. The domestic workers' demand to put forward their own voice and be visible in this international effort was taken seriously by supportive organizations and professionals.

<sup>38</sup> Marcelina Bautista, Coordinator, CONLACTRAHO, quoted in IRENE/IUF, 2008, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> See also Mary Rosaria Goldsmith Connelly, Rosario Baptista Canedo Ariel Ferrari, and María Celia Vence, 'Hacia un Fortalecimiento de Derechos Laborales en el Trabajo de Hogar: Algunas experiencias de América Latina', FES, Uruguay, May 2010

<sup>40</sup> ETUC, 'Out of the Shadows: Organizing and Protecting Domestic Workers in Europe: the role of trade unions', report of a conference, Brussels, April 2005: [www.etuc.org/a/2026](http://www.etuc.org/a/2026) accessed 1 February 2012

<sup>41</sup> IRENE/IUF, 2008, op.cit.



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The International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) (see also pages 9 and 19) was formed in 2008, with a Steering Committee of representatives of domestic workers' organizations (union and non-union) from all continents. Plus, in a unique way for the global union movement, the global union federation for food and allied workers, IUF, agreed to house the IDWN within its structures. As mentioned earlier, domestic workers' status as 'employees' was significant in being able to get this kind of support from the trade unions, and in being able to push their demands into the ILO.

From the start, the IDWN conceived of the ILO Convention as something to campaign for in itself, but also as a focus for mobilizing and organizing across the world. The need to get governments across the world now to ratify the Convention and put its contents into their own employment legislation provides a continuing focus for organizing activity in each country. Attitudes among many government officials have been shifted through this process. However, there are still huge blockages among others who seem unable or unwilling to accept that the private home can be a workplace, and therefore that employment legislation should apply here too. The IDWN through its regional coordinators will continue to enable the sharing of experience across countries to help overcome such difficulties.<sup>42</sup>

Now, very much more is known about organizing domestic workers at micro and local as well as national levels.<sup>43</sup> They are very differently organized across the world, with many different social/political/cultural factors coming into play in any one place. There are trade unions which include domestic workers as one of their sectors, trade unions specifically of domestic workers, community-based member organizations (such as those of migrant workers), associations led by NGOs or religious groups, and in some places there are now cooperatives of domestic workers supplying their services to households, though this is a relatively unexplored area.

Domestic work is a main location of child labour in the world, and those who have worked since a child can have very little awareness about such concepts as 'rights'.<sup>44</sup> However, many domestic workers do develop a very deep sense of the injustice they face from their employers, including verbal, physical and sexual harassment and abuse, restriction on their freedom of movement, extraordinarily exploitative working hours, and so on. One early challenge of organizing is how to channel this legitimate sense of injustice into positive, constructive action for change.

Getting domestic workers together to meet regularly is another very big challenge. In some places, the fact that they are allowed out to attend religious services or buy supplies in the local market is used as an opportunity to meet domestic workers, win their trust, and encourage social interaction, sowing the seeds of organization. But to build a lasting membership-based organization out of this can be a long and difficult process.

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<sup>42</sup> [www.domesticworkerrights.org](http://www.domesticworkerrights.org)

<sup>43</sup> For a fuller analysis, see Christine Bonner, 'Domestic Workers Around the World: Organizing for Empowerment', paper prepared for the conference 'Exploited, Undervalued – and Essential: the Plight of Domestic Workers', Social Law Project, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 7-8 May 2010

<sup>44</sup> Albert Njeru, General Secretary, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), ITUC Spotlight interview by Sam Grumiau, [www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-albert.html](http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-albert.html) accessed 1 February 2012



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Migration, within countries and across borders, is an important phenomenon in domestic work. In today's world, millions of women migrate to work in the households of others thousands of miles away; the true scale is only just being understood. Being a migrant or from an oppressed minority can increase the isolation for many domestic workers but it can also provide an identity for organizing. Migrants' support networks in Europe, Hong Kong, Singapore, North America, and elsewhere have been particularly instrumental in providing a space for domestic workers to meet and voice their common concerns. Rescuing migrant domestic workers who have fled abusive employers and have nowhere to go but the streets has been one activity developed by churches and mosques. Supporters also pursue advocacy for fair work permit systems, regularization of labour agencies, etc. Meanwhile, in some places there are now migrant domestic workers' associations, some supported by trade unions, such as Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW) in London supported by Unite the Union in the UK. And there are trade unions for migrant workers whose members are largely domestic workers, such as the IMWU HK (see page 16).

Meanwhile, there are plenty of domestic workers around the world who are not migrants, or from historically oppressed ethnic or racial communities. They will, however, share a class (or caste in the case of India) identity. Interestingly, in some countries, especially in Europe and the USA, there seems relatively less focus on or organizing of such 'non-migrant' or 'non-minority' domestic workers. Elsewhere, by contrast, hostility to migrants may cause them to be excluded from organizing efforts by domestic workers from the resident population.

Clearly there is not one single organizing model or strategy that will fit all such situations, hence the variety in forms of organization.

The relationship between organized domestic workers (within unions, or in other types of organization) and the trade union movement also varies greatly from country to country. It can even vary greatly within a single region, as in the case Europe.

The global campaign for the ILO Convention has generated very much greater awareness among trade unions of domestic workers' rights and their demands. Because of domestic workers' demand to represent themselves, the IDWN made it a specific goal to get as many domestic workers' representatives as possible to have official status in the Workers' delegations to the International Labour Conference in Geneva in June 2011 when the proposed Convention would be negotiated and voted on. This led to many more unions engaging positively with organized domestic workers, and an unprecedented number were given that historic opportunity.

**KUDHEIHA** in Kenya is a recent success story for organizing domestic workers. Supported by a number of international organizations, including the Solidarity Center, WIEGO, the IDWN, the IUF global union federation, and the ILO, as well as the trade union movement in the country, the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) has been on a



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very active recruitment drive since 2009. It now claims to represent some 40,000 domestic workers out of the one million in the country.<sup>45</sup>

Evaline Mulo is one such domestic worker, who heard about KUDHEIHA's efforts through a friend. She joined, became active, and within just a few years was a member of the workers' delegation from her country to the International Labour Conference of the ILO in Geneva in June 2011, and had the right to vote when the new ILO Convention 189 was adopted. A few days prior to the vote she was interviewed by the IDWN<sup>46</sup>, and soon afterwards by the SC about the whole experience.<sup>47</sup>

The KUDHEIHA union has continued to undertake many activities to attract domestic workers and raise public awareness. In December 2011, they made a documentary film and went on Christmas visits to children's homes where they promoted a positive image of themselves, to encourage the children (and their carers) to value their domestic workers as well as teachers and elders. There were also demonstrations by several hundred domestic workers in the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa on 18 December to lobby their Government for ratification of C189, supported by the COTU union federation. The Kenyan Government has indicated it will soon do so.<sup>48</sup>

A key activity across the world will now be to ensure that domestic workers are not returned to the sidelines. They will be looking to established unions to give practical and sustained support, not only to lobby for ratification of the Convention into national laws which are then properly implemented, but mostly importantly to build the organization of domestic workers. The experience of the IDWN has been to do this in a way that empowers domestic workers to represent themselves, give voice to their own demands, as well as to play an equal role alongside others, i.e. to give support rather than leadership. Unions will need to provide human and financial resources, including cross-subsidization and assistance with fund-raising, for example. It also means assisting with education, training and leadership development, and including domestic workers as equals in structures, activities and in collective negotiations.

*"It requires a non patriarchal, non patronising approach and a more open and flexible approach to working with informal and other 'difficult to organize' workers currently marginalized by the trade union movement."<sup>49</sup>*

<sup>45</sup> [www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=1355](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=1355) accessed 1 February 2012. KUDHEIHA's organizing strategies and activities are described at: [www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=984](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=984) accessed 1 February 2012, and in the ITUC Spotlight interview with Albert Njeru, op.cit. See also KUDHEIHA, 'Organising Domestic Workers in Kenya: a Success Story and a Call to Action', 2011, produced with support from the SC, WIEGO and IDWN/IUF.

<sup>46</sup> [idwnilo.wordpress.com/2011/06/07/evalyn-mulo-brings-kenyan-experience-to-the-discussions/](http://idwnilo.wordpress.com/2011/06/07/evalyn-mulo-brings-kenyan-experience-to-the-discussions/) accessed 1 February 2012

<sup>47</sup> [www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=1257](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?contentid=1257) accessed 1 February 2012

<sup>48</sup> KUDHEIHA report on activities 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter of 2011, by email, 6 February 2012

<sup>49</sup> Christine Bonner, May 2010, op.cit., page 21



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For many trade unionists, and government officials, who have a particular interpretation of collective bargaining, the domestic work sector poses a problem. Even when domestic workers can act collectively, how can they bargain with employers who are multiple, isolated individuals? What about part-time domestic workers working for multiple households?

To tackle such problems, there have been some very interesting initiatives in various countries to develop employers' associations - in Italy, Geneva, Uruguay and USA, for example<sup>50</sup>. Largely, they involve people who wish to employ their own domestic worker on a fair basis (seeing this as healthy and constructive for their own family's well-being too) as well as wishing to foster such practices more widely in society by, for example promoting model employment contracts. This is another example of how imaginative thinking can lead to progress in organizing in the informal economy. There is potentially much more that can be done to encourage trade union members who are also employers of domestic workers to take their role as employers seriously.

In some countries too, domestic workers have been excluded from formal union organizing because important labour legislation does not apply to them. This has not, however, necessarily stopped them organizing, and forming alliances with the formal union movement.

In the **USA**, the National Labor Relations Act in the USA has excluded domestic workers from organizing into unions. However, domestic workers there have been organizing for many years – largely in migrant and minority workers' associations. In 2007, they came together in the **National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA)**<sup>51</sup>. This in turn forged a relationship, formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding, with the AFL-CIO union federation, particularly for the ILO Convention campaign.

Domestic workers have also been receiving a lot of attention and support across the world from migrant rights networks, human rights' NGOs, religious groups, women's associations, advocacy professionals, academics, and so on.

Research on domestic workers is now of great interest to feminist academics, and a new international Research Network for Domestic Worker Rights, was launched in June 2011, in collaboration with the IDWN. It is based at the University of Kassel in Germany, and should be an important source of knowledge in the coming years.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For example, the Hand in Hand Domestic Employers' Association, USA: <http://domesticemployers.org> accessed 1 February 2012, the Liga de Amas de Casa, Consumidores y Usuarios in Uruguay, and the FIDALDO and DOMINA federations of private householders in Italy (see ETUC, 2005, op.cit. page 28)

<sup>51</sup> [www.domesticworkers.org](http://www.domesticworkers.org)

<sup>52</sup> <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/research-network-domestic-worker-rights>



## 4.2 Home-based workers

There are two types of workers using their own homes, or sometimes an adjacent building, as their workplace:

- **'Own-account' workers** who are producing goods/services for themselves to sell, for example in the local neighbourhood, in the market-place or on the streets. These workers therefore have more visibility, more opportunity to interact, though they are often in competition with each other.
- **'Dependent' workers** or 'industrial outworkers' who are producing goods/services for others. This second group, we tend to call 'homeworkers'. They may be producing for local entrepreneurs or they may be at the very end of long supply chains providing goods for global corporations, though they may well not themselves know where their goods are going. They receive work via local agents, perhaps even neighbours or family members. They are especially hidden (some are in communities where women rarely leave the home) and isolated from each other. As individuals they have virtually no bargaining power and so are very vulnerable to exploitation: very low pay even for high quality work, delayed payment, huge demands on turn-around time, etc. They may also be scared of being 'found out' by the authorities, if they know that they and their agents are 'not officially registered', implying they are somehow 'illegal'.

Both categories of home-based workers tend to have very little identity as 'workers'— by themselves as well as others. Many see themselves first as carrying out traditional activities – such as craft-based artisan production - rather than generic 'workers' as such. They may also see themselves – or be seen by others - as women 'doing just what women do', 'earning a little extra income' for the household, rather than having their economic contribution taken seriously.

There is a long tradition around the world, shared by many in trade unions, of finding it difficult to consider the home as a 'workplace' and anyone who works there as a 'worker'. Some unions are hostile to homeworkers because they see them as 'undercutting' factory-based employment standards. Others who are more sympathetic may argue that homeworkers are too hard to organize and will be a drain on hard-won resources, and so cannot be a priority.

Organizers do confirm the difficulty of organizing home-based workers, of both kinds. It requires many return visits to the same neighbourhoods, to listen for the noise of machines inside houses and knock on door after door<sup>53</sup>, frequenting local markets where home-based workers go to buy food or sell goods, or local government offices where they get particular services<sup>54</sup>, or identifying local community-based organizations and asking them what they know of home-based workers in the locality.<sup>55</sup>

It requires a lot of return visits and persistence then to build up a relationship of trust with each woman worker, and gradually to bring them together, in small numbers at first, and

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with SEWA organizers of home-based workers in Delhi, India, May 2009

<sup>54</sup> Poonsap Thulapan, Coordinator, HomeNet Thailand, by telephone interview, 15 October 2011

<sup>55</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, op.cit.



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build on that. Once the small groups coalesce, they can then be encouraged into local 'clusters' of groups.

Organizers also report that it is best to focus first on the women workers' own expressed needs, which may or may not be work-related. They may want help with access to social security or healthcare, for example. As mentioned earlier (see page 17), in some countries occupational health and safety has been found to be a good organizing tool.

In the close-knit slums of Jakarta, **Indonesia**, in the early 1990s, occupational health and safety expert Melody Kemp found that finding practical solutions to hazards faced by home-based workers worked well, including how to contain flammable or toxic materials away from children, and other fire prevention activities, working not just as individuals but as teams.<sup>56</sup>

It is when the demands turn more specifically to raising income levels that the difference between the two types of home-based workers becomes more prominent. Own-account workers want their organization to promote their 'economic empowerment' as producers and traders within the market, through such things as skills training in marketing, access to micro-finance, upgrading technology for better productivity, and the development of producer cooperatives and even brands and retail outlets, as in India and Bulgaria.

Meanwhile, those who are outsourced industrial workers are often paid piece rates, with harsh deadlines. So their economic demands are for decent pay and turn-round times. To bargain for this means gaining an understanding of who are their real employers – who may well not be the agents who supply the work. This can entail a lot of detailed education and support to do the 'mapping' of the supply chain they are in, especially if they are in one that is global. It also means learning what legal responsibilities those employers should have, such as to pay the equivalent of at least the legal minimum wage and to respect decent working hours.

There is now quite a body of experience of such 'supply chain' work at the international level, among homeworkers' international networks and 'ethical trade' initiatives. A key element is of course identifying the key pressure points, and who the allies might be. Brand corporations are susceptible to market pressure from concerned consumers, and over the past two decades this pressure has grown, particularly in the Global North<sup>57</sup>. However, this campaigning is largely run by NGOs (with some union involvement) rather than organized homeworkers. Importantly, it is limited to certain products, such as clothing and sportswear items. There are millions of homeworkers around the world who are not producing these goods and/or they did but the corporations shifted the production elsewhere, and/or they have never been part of an international chain supplying goods to consumer markets of the North. Such workers cannot benefit from these forms of pressure.

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<sup>56</sup> Melody Kemp, 'Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and Fair Trade Advocacy to Strengthen Membership-Based Organizing', Homenet South East Asia Sub-Regional Workshop, 2007, and personal communication, 1 October 2011

<sup>57</sup> Labour-support consumer campaign organizations include the Clean Clothes Campaign in Europe/Scandinavia: [www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org), the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) in Canada: [en.maquilasolidarity.org](http://en.maquilasolidarity.org) and United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) in the USA: <http://usas.org>



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In East Delhi, India, the **Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)** has effectively stepped into the supply chain, in an attempt to provide a better living for homeworkers there. It has established three embroidery centers and several sub-centers, and encouraged about 500 women workers to take work from them rather than the usual agents. At the same time, the women get the opportunity to meet each other outside their homes, discuss common issues and find solutions. In the initial few years, SEWA had to subsidize these activities with funding from elsewhere. In December 2010, they registered a producers' company, Ruaab SEWA Artisans Producer Co. Ltd., which is owned and managed by the women workers with technical assistance from SEWA. They are now supplying 25 international brands with their work, and hope to make this a sustainable model.<sup>58</sup>

To organize home-based workers on a sustainable basis is very difficult. Their capacity in terms of time, money, organizational experience, and so on, can be very low. So their need for support is very high, making them dependent on professionals, NGOs, etc. (well-meaning or otherwise). Their lack of self-identity as 'workers' may lead them to think of unions as inappropriate for themselves, or they (especially women) may find unions hard to relate to and/or likely to be of not much help, seeing them for example as too 'political' or too 'bureaucratic'.

However, there are attempts to build sustainable member-based organizations (MBOs) of home-based workers. These developments are further advanced in some countries of South and South-East Asia than in other regions.

In October 2000, a '**South Asian Meeting on Women Workers in the Informal Economy Sector**' was held in Kathmandu, Nepal. It was organized by WIEGO, SEWA, and UNIFEM, amongst others, and attended by government representatives as well as trade unions and NGOs. The 'Kathmandu Declaration' adopted there laid the basis for the creation of the regional network HomeNet South Asia (HNSA).<sup>59</sup>

That regional meeting led to the first efforts to establish an organization for home-based workers in **Nepal**. At the outset there was reportedly little understanding there of the difference between dependent and own-account home-based workers and disagreements about the type of organization to form. Some argued strongly for a trade union, whereas others felt this would immediately lead to party politicization and internal disputes and so wanted a broader strategy, something more akin to an NGO. When a constitution was finally submitted to the Government in March 2002, it took many months to register because officials were themselves confused as to the nature of the organization.

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<sup>58</sup> Celia Mather, 'We Are Workers Too! Organizing Home-Based Workers in the Global Economy', WIEGO Organizing Series, August 2010: [http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Mather\\_We\\_Are\\_Workers\\_Too.pdf](http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Mather_We_Are_Workers_Too.pdf), with update from Archana Toppo, CEO, Ruaab SEWA Artisans Producer Co. Ltd., personal communication, 2 October 2011

<sup>59</sup> Kathmandu Declaration: [www.homenetsouthasia.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=72&Itemid=75](http://www.homenetsouthasia.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=72&Itemid=75) accessed 6 February 2012



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The form of the new **HomeNet Nepal (HNN)** was also affected by policies developed by the regional HNSA as to the preferred nature of the organizations in that network. Some in HNN feared this would lead them too far towards fostering unrepresentative NGOs, whereas they wanted to focus on true member-based organizations. But this in turn caused the major union federations in Nepal to be somewhat suspicious of HNN. One solution that eventually proved effective was to form a special alliance in Nepal, separate from the HNN, especially to focus on lobbying the Nepalese Government to ratify C177, the ILO Convention on Home Work (1996).

More recently, supported especially by the Inclusive Cities project, HNN has been able to undertake the first serious mapping and analysis of membership-based organizations of home-based workers in Nepal. It has developed five criteria for organizational membership of the HNN network, all based on principles of democratic governance. By July 2011, the 61 member organizations of HNN (with a total of 25,000 home-based workers) were classified according to these criteria. It is promoting democracy through, for example, a rule that member organizations must collect members' dues, and has also drafted a new Constitution for the HNN itself to reflect this commitment to member-based democracy.<sup>60</sup>

Policy advocacy for home-based workers takes a lot of time and effort as governments tend to know very little about home-based work and/or show little interest. This is another sector which is very much absent from data-gathering or understanding of the economic contribution these workers make. There was a significant step forward when the ILO Convention C177 on Home Work was adopted by the International Labour Organization in 1996. However, to date it has still only been ratified by seven countries. This fact also indicates the low organizational strength of homeworkers' organizations to lobby for ratification.

There are advances in individual countries through the hard work of home-based workers and supporters.

**HomeNet Thailand** has succeeded in getting home-based workers accepted in social protection coverage. After many years of advocacy and struggle, the Home Workers Protection Act was passed, coming into force in May 2011. The WIEGO law project is supporting HomeNet Thailand's efforts to ensure that the law is implemented and to do the research to produce relevant policy recommendations.<sup>61</sup>

Overall, home-based work is still a relatively under-researched sector worldwide, and is one focus of WIEGO research.<sup>62</sup> Some other academic research, however, is reported to be of little use for strengthening organizations or policy advocacy. Most emphasis is currently in South Asia and South-East Asia, with some work in Australia, Western Europe

<sup>60</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, op.cit.

<sup>61</sup> Poonsap Thulapan, Coordinator, HomeNet Thailand, by telephone interview, 15 October 2011

<sup>62</sup> <http://wiego.org/related/publications/51/26/16%2B15> has a list of research documents produced by WIEGO and partners on home-based work, largely in South Asia. The most recent is Ratna M. Sudarshan and Shalini Sinha, 'Making Home-Based Work Visible: A Review of Evidence from South Asia', WIEGO Urban Policies Research Report, No.10, January 2011.



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and recently Eastern Europe. WIEGO is about to start some mapping of home-based workers' organizations in Latin America.

International solidarity is important because it is a means to learn from each other's experiences in confronting these challenges. It is also important because some work in supply chains can be moved from one country where higher standards have been achieved to another where conditions are still low. However, solidarity between home-based workers' organizations has been hindered in recent years by a split between the Federation of HomeWorkers WorldWide, launched in 2006 and in which HomeWorkers WorldWide (HWW) based in the UK plays a key role<sup>63</sup>, and HomeNets which are supported by SEWA and WIEGO, amongst others. HomeNets are strongest in South Asia<sup>64</sup> and South-East Asia<sup>65</sup>, with a new HomeNet South-East Europe in process of being established. There is no network with a strong global reach yet, however.

In **Bulgaria** in South-East Europe, organizing of home-based workers started in 2000 and, in just two years, two organizations were registered with the authorities, with a total of 2,000 members. Today, they have about 40,000 members, about half the estimated total of home-based workers in the country.

The **Association of Home-Based Workers** has 22 elected coordinators, only one of whom is not currently a homemaker. For the most part, they work on a voluntary basis, using their own funds. They have received some external funding, for example from the US and Dutch embassies in Bulgaria, the European Social Fund, and the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung of Germany. However, no funding is available from their own government because it goes only to NGOs, not member-based organisations; this means that it is short-term project-based, rather than helping to build sustainable civil society organisations.

The Association has an 'associate' membership status with the CITUB trade union center in the country, which helped get the ILO Convention on Home Work C177 (see page 32) ratified there in 2009, and legal changes for dependent homeworkers brought in at the end of 2010.<sup>66</sup> The Association feels that there remains much to do, however, to make its relationship with the unions more concretely useful to the homeworkers and their organization. Plus, self-employed home-based workers are not covered by protective legislation.

Now, assisted by WIEGO, SEWA, HomeNet South-East Asia, and the Global Labour Institute, and others from their region, they are attempting to establish a Balkan center of homeworkers, a **HomeNet South-East Europe**. They have had contacts over the years with others in countries such as Romania, Serbia, and Macedonia, but little concrete collaboration. Funding was recently granted for activities starting in October 2011, and they will now be identifying any more organizations that already

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<sup>63</sup> [www.homeworkersww.org.uk/about-us/international-federation](http://www.homeworkersww.org.uk/about-us/international-federation)

<sup>64</sup> [www.homenetsouthasia.net/](http://www.homenetsouthasia.net/)

<sup>65</sup> [www.homenetseasia.org/new.html](http://www.homenetseasia.org/new.html)

<sup>66</sup> Violeta Zlateva, 'Employment conditions of homeworkers in Bulgaria', Institute for Social and Trade Unions Research (ISTUR) and the European Working Conditions Observatory, 2010: [www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/2011/01/BG11010211.htm](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/2011/01/BG11010211.htm)



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exist, mapping homeworkers 'horizontally' (in particular locations) and 'vertically' (the interconnections from local to national to regional, etc.), exchanging experiences with HomeNet South-East Asia, and so on.

*"Homeworkers organize themselves once they realize the need for a common struggle... They are abandoned by all and when the exploitation of their work becomes impossible they unite and seek salvation".*

**Violeta Zlateva, Coordinator, Association of Home-Based Workers, Bulgaria**<sup>67</sup>

### 4.3 Street/market vendors

Those who sell on the streets and in other public spaces clearly number millions and are a large proportion of the working poor, especially in the global South. Some hawk merchandise from place to place, including across borders. Others repeatedly use particular locations to sell their goods or services, even establishing informal market areas.

It is very difficult to get an accurate picture of how many street traders there are, however. They are usually absent from official data because surveys rarely ask 'what is your place of work?'. Or they may not want to say they are 'street vendors' because of the risks they face from the authorities for working in public spaces. Also, many vendors see it as an extra way to earn income rather than an 'occupation' as such.<sup>68</sup>

There are many women involved. In many countries, they are the majority of street traders. It is a good option because they can fit this form of income-earning around their domestic responsibilities. In West Africa, for example, women are the majority of street vendors, and they also have a long tradition of cross-border trading. Women do, however, face a higher risk than men of harassment.

The biggest risk for all street vendors is that local government authorities will forcibly remove them from the streets or confiscate their goods or demand bribes. City authorities often see them as 'untidy', not fitting into their concept of a 'modern' city. These traders are usually excluded from urban planning, despite their high level of economic activity. Where they have, say, established an informal market area, they can be swept aside when the area is deemed to need 'modernization' or 'beautification'.

It is when they are facing a crisis such as a mass eviction that street vendors are most likely to come together. This is more likely to be the trigger than a common wish to upgrade livelihoods through access to micro-credit and so on, which they tend to see as an individual affair.<sup>69</sup>

Turning the initial fight against an attack on their rights into sustainable, democratic organization, with a programme of activities, is of course not easy. The next stage is to try

<sup>67</sup> Violeta Zlateva, by email, 7 November 2011, op.cit.

<sup>68</sup> Data from surveys by WIEGO and others can be found at: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/street-vendors>

<sup>69</sup> Pat Horn, Coordinator, StreetNet International, by telephone interview, 28 September 2011



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to move into negotiations, to do what is effectively collective bargaining with the authorities. For that to happen, many street vendors first need training in negotiating. Then they have to get the municipal authorities to recognize the extent of the sector in their area (typically there is no data), then to recognize the vendors' association, then to listen and appreciate their economic role as well as their needs and rights to a livelihood, and then to integrate this into urban planning.

However, this process is all too often dependent on finding sympathetic officials. Unlike collective bargaining in the formal economy, such negotiations take place without any statutory rights, and any agreement reached does not have legal status and can easily be over-turned by unsympathetic officials.

For this reason, street vendors associations in some places have turned their attention to trying to achieve legislative change. This is usually a difficult, protracted process, even more so in a period of neo-liberal de-regulation. Plus, for so long, any 'regulation' for this sector meant the removal of street vendors to 'clean' the streets in favour of small formal businesses. There is, however, some success in Brazil, and on-going attempts in India.

The **National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI)**, established in the late 1990s, brings together some 540 trade unions, community-based organizations and NGOs, representing 350,000 street traders across the country.

As well as building the capacity and democracy of member organizations, NASVI has been focusing on winning supportive policy at state and municipal levels. A national policy was agreed in 2004, revised in 2009, but NASVI continued to argue for laws that protect the fundamental rights of street vendors to a livelihood. The Supreme Court of India did issue a ruling requiring the Government to pass a law on street vending no later than June 30, 2011. However, by November 2011, the Government had still not yet passed such a law, and the Attorney General of India reiterated the view that there should be such a comprehensive central law to protect the right of street vendors to a livelihood.<sup>70</sup>

When it comes to internal development, building member-based democracy is not easy in vendors' organizations. They are reported to be susceptible to 'hi-jacking' by individual entrepreneurs, particularly by richer ones using their class 'entitlement', and by men using their 'gender' entitlement.

The relationship of street vendor organizations to other organizations in civil society depends very much on the local political landscape. Overall, when unions are known for their actions to defend rights, they are approached; where they are weak or ineffectual, they are not.<sup>71</sup>

In **Latin America**, street vendor organizations tend towards the social movement because of parallels with farm workers in the struggle to 'occupy territory'.

<sup>70</sup> <http://wiego.org/news/g-law-protecting-right-livelihood-street-vendors> , accessed 9 November 2011

<sup>71</sup> Pat Horn, Coordinator, StreetNet International, by telephone interview, 28 September 2011.



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In **South Africa**, evicted vendors went to the national union federation COSATU for help in negotiating with the authorities because unions have a strong, positive presence in that country.

In **West Africa**, the tendency is for street vendors themselves to form unions because in countries of that region governments can easily close down associations. In Senegal, ILO/Actrav, the workers' programme of the International Labour Organization, has been actively encouraging street vendors' associations to register as unions.

How street vendors come to identify themselves can be strongly influenced by those from whom they receive support: if small business federations, then they are more likely to see themselves as 'entrepreneurs'; if trade unions, then 'workers'. The international network StreetNet has an explicit policy of identifying street vendors as 'workers' and of encouraging this among them and others.

**StreetNet International** was launched in Durban, South Africa, in 2002, to bring together organizations of street and market vendors across the world. NGOs are encouraged to support street vendors, but are not allowed to be StreetNet members.

- Most StreetNet affiliates are from Africa and Latin America.
- Its President is from the Street Vendors' Trade Union of Argentina (SIVARA); it has an organizer based in Guatemala (Central America) and the CTCP in Nicaragua acts as a Regional Focal Point.
- In Africa, it has an organizer based in Cote d'Ivoire (West Africa) and the ZCIEA in Zimbabwe acts as a Regional Focal Point for Southern Africa.
- In Asia, StreetNet only has five affiliates from four countries (India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Korea). The Indian association NASVI is the Regional Focal Point for Asia, and an Asian regional workshop is being held in November 2011 to develop contacts and a programme of activity.
- In Eastern Europe/Central Asia, StreetNet will soon have an affiliate from Kyrgystan; in July 2011 it co-hosted a conference with the ITUC, and other partners including ILO/Actrav and the Clean Clothes Campaign, on informal workers' organizing in the region, part of a joint programme to encourage more organizing there.
- In late 2010, StreetNet welcomed its first affiliate in Western Europe, the Union of Professional and Autonomous Workers (UPTA) of Spain.

StreetNet encourages democracy and actively discourages class and gender discrimination in its member organizations, promoting leadership by poorer vendors and women. It has very clear policies about gender participation in StreetNet structures and activities such as exchange visits, and reports that this does influence its member organizations. For example, certain women leaders whom StreetNet has been encouraging now gain widespread respect.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid



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Among StreetNet's activities is highlighting the discrimination in urban planning faced by street vendors the world over. It is a key partner in the Inclusive Cities project.<sup>73</sup> StreetNet's 'World Class Cities for All' campaign has also taken up the situation where, during global sports events, street vendors are banished from areas surrounding stadiums, such as for the FIFA World Cup in South Africa and the Commonwealth Games in India in 2010. Lessons from those struggles are now being passed on to Brazil for the FIFA World Cup in 2014.

To find ways of overcoming such official discrimination, StreetNet has been developing methods of gathering data about the sector in particular locations. A census project with its affiliate KENASVIT in Kenya has enabled them to assert their presence with the Nairobi and other city authorities, as well as the national government (see page 18). However, this is a rare achievement. So StreetNet has been turning its attention to how street traders' organizations can gain statutory rights to negotiate and reach legal agreements. A conference on collective bargaining in the informal economy and laws/litigation in the sector was held in Senegal in March 2007<sup>74</sup>. From late 2011, StreetNet, in partnership with others including WIEGO and the CUT union federation in Brazil, has a project to create a bargaining forum model, drawing on experiences in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the eThekweni municipality in Durban, South Africa.

#### 4.4 Waste pickers

Waste pickers collect and sort waste materials thrown out by the public, and sell that which is recyclable. In some areas in the Global South, they are the ones who do much of the solid waste collection and redistribution, and at no cost to municipal budgets.

However, they are another sector of informal workers whose global presence and worth were little known or recognized until very recently. In the past, and still in many places today, waste pickers are subject to social stigma, called 'scavengers', seen as 'unclean' for picking over 'trash'. Most live and work in terrible conditions, facing many health hazards and harassment but receiving little support from civil society or local governments. It may appear to outsiders as if their work is chaotic, but actually it is usually organized, with middle men controlling the market for recycled goods.

Still today not much is known statistically about waste pickers. They seldom feature in official data, and the data that does exist often seems to be an undercount. Many waste pickers move around a lot, working the streets; many are temporary migrants; some migrate as part of their livelihood (such as those who operate across the US-Mexico border). Meanwhile, thousands of others live near and work on particular dumpsites (20,000 in Kolkata, India, for example – in a country where 1.5 million people are thought to work in this sector). The lack of reliable data may well be due to the social exclusion that waste pickers face. However, the workforce is huge. The World Bank has estimated that 1% of the global urban population, 15 million people, earn a living in this way.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> [www.inclusivocities.org](http://www.inclusivocities.org)

<sup>74</sup> StreetNet Conference report, March 2007, op.cit.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Bonner, 'Waste Pickers Without Frontiers', South Africa Labour Bulletin, Vol.32, No.4, October/November 2008.



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**Brazil** is the only country which systematically includes waste pickers in official data gathering. There, waste pickers have been organized into workers' cooperatives for many years, and they achieved official recognition and integration in 2002.<sup>76</sup>

Women can often be the majority of waste pickers, as in India for example, perhaps because the work is not seen as a 'proper' way of earning a living. In fact, there is some evidence that, when the work is formalized and upgraded, women waste pickers are displaced by men. So, organizing has to take this into account, to prevent the situation that where the work is upgraded it gets shifted away from women.

Across the world, established trade unions tend to show little interest in this sector. They see waste pickers as dispersed individuals, working for themselves, rather than 'workers' as such, and so not appropriate to organize or too difficult to do so.

In fact, waste pickers – whether on the streets or on dumpsites - often do have a collective approach to their work, and also their demands. In some parts of the world, they are successfully organizing themselves, claiming for themselves a higher profile and value for the work they do.<sup>77</sup>

However, the map of organizations across the world has many gaps, and the forms of organization vary greatly from region to region. This was revealed particularly at the first world conference of waste pickers, in 2008, organized with the support of WIEGO and the AVINA Foundation.<sup>78</sup> It was held in Colombia, another country where waste pickers have been organized for some time and have gained a degree of official recognition, though this is subject to challenges from the private sector and government bodies.<sup>79</sup>

In Latin America, waste pickers tend towards forming registered cooperatives (or associations that operate as cooperatives), seeing this as the best way to improve their living and working conditions, getting rid of middle men and becoming part of the official solid waste management system. They place themselves within the broad 'social movement' and the 'social economy', but seem to regard trade unions as too linked to particular political parties to be of use to themselves.

The **Latin American and Caribbean Network of Recyclers** brings together waste pickers' organizations in 15 countries, including some in Central America such as Mexico, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic.<sup>80</sup> At the time of writing, the Network has a delegation visiting Central America to map the waste pickers' organizations there.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> WIEGO Fact Sheet 'Informal Workers in Focus: Waste Pickers in Brazil':

<http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Fact-Sheet-Waste-Pickers-Brazil.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> Melanie Sampson (ed.), 'Refusing to be Cast Aside: Waste Pickers Organizing around the World', WIEGO, 2009

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, 'A Huge Victory for Waste Pickers in Colombia', Global Alliance of Waste Pickers,

21 December 2011: [www.globalrec.org/2011/12/21/a-huge-victory-for-waste-pickers-in-colombia/](http://www.globalrec.org/2011/12/21/a-huge-victory-for-waste-pickers-in-colombia/)

<sup>80</sup> [www.redrecicladores.net/](http://www.redrecicladores.net/)

<sup>81</sup> Lucia Fernandez, WIEGO Coordinator for waste pickers, by telephone interview, 29 September 2011



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Meanwhile in Asia, most is known about the organization of waste pickers in India, where there is a wide range of formations. There are NGOs that help to organize waste pickers, but some have been known to turn into service providers that employ the workers. However, there are also worker-controlled companies (which in the Indian context can be more appropriate to register than a cooperative), as well as trade unions (and recognized by other unions).

**NIDAN** was an NGO, formed in 1996 to support the working poor in India. In the mid-2000s it tried to register a workers' cooperative of waste pickers but was unable to do so because many do not have formal addresses. So, in 2008, it registered a company with some 400 waste pickers as shareholders. By the following year, it already had five contracts in three municipalities, collecting waste from 68,000 households. NIDAN workers' income significantly improved, and they got access to micro-insurance covering health, accidents and death.<sup>82</sup>

The **Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP)** is a trade union in Pune, India, which first had to persuade the waste pickers (mostly women) to see themselves as 'workers' performing a valuable service for the community. Then, through mass rallies and demonstrations, it won municipal recognition in the mid-1990s, along with official authorization to collect waste and the provision of identity cards. After further research and lobbying, they persuaded the authorities to provide waste pickers with a special medical insurance system, and to help end the discrimination that prevented children from waste picker families from being accepted into school. Later, the KKPKP realized it had to fight privatization which might well take the work away from its members. So it established a cooperative, called SWaCH, of over 1,500 members (75% women), and won the contracts to do door-to-door waste collection for 200,000 households. The cooperative has rules to retain women's control.<sup>83</sup>

The **Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers** (formerly called **SWACHH**) in India was formed in 2005 and brings together some 35 organizations of different types.

The KKPKP of India is currently helping to map waste picker organizations in the rest of Asia and hosting exchange visits by new contacts from Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, amongst others.

As for Africa, at present little is known, outside of South Africa, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Egypt. StreetNet organized a waste pickers' organizing conference in Senegal in September 2010, with the participation of WIEGO and its waste picker organization partners KKPKP and the Latin American and Caribbean Network for recyclers. WIEGO is currently engaged in efforts to map the organizations that exist elsewhere in the continent, and StreetNet is encouraging its affiliates in Africa to help organize waste pickers. WIEGO actively supports the South African Waste Pickers' Association, organized by the environmental justice NGO GroundWork. This is still a loose association but is working towards developing its constitution. WIEGO is providing support in capacity-building and strategy, policy analysis, research, etc. WIEGO is also supporting capacity development

<sup>82</sup> Arbind Singh and Rakesh Saran, 'NIDAN Swachdhara Private Ltd – Forming a Company with Waste Pickers in India' by, in Samson, 2009, op.cit.

<sup>83</sup> See various articles on the KKPKP in Samson, 2009, op.cit.



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and networking in Kenya where, through research and mapping and follow-up workshops, national networking is now in process. In West Africa, a francophone workshop is planned. However, it is reported that unions in many countries are still unwilling to be involved.

These differences between continents/regions do mean that developing a global movement faces some big challenges. There is an international waste pickers' Interim Steering Committee which meets once a year, but there is still a lot of work ahead to consolidate this into an established global network. For now, the focus is on networking and joint activities rather than formalization into a global organization.

Meanwhile, around the world, many waste pickers are facing a particular crisis. Local authorities are under pressure to privatize the collection and handling of waste, and are giving the contracts to global corporations for collection and often for incineration. These companies collect and burn the waste in huge incinerators. The result for waste pickers is further harassment from the police and municipal authorities, eviction from dumpsites, and displacement from collecting, sorting and recycling, thereby increasing the poverty and exclusion of these communities.

However, this is also turning into an opportunity for organizing and advocacy. Waste pickers are mobilizing to demand a better solution to the management of solid waste which includes the valuable role that they play.<sup>84</sup> They are building links to anti-privatization and social movements in some places, and to environmental justice/anti-incineration NGOs/networks such as the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA).

This is taking place at the same time as a massive increase in solid waste around the world, but also far higher environmental awareness, particularly concerning CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and climate change and the need to deal with consumption and waste sustainably. There is more public/official awareness of need to recycle. This gives waste pickers the opportunity to put themselves center-stage. Indeed, in Latin America in particular, waste pickers now call themselves 'recicladores' (recyclers). There is great potential for waste pickers to raise their own self-esteem and demand more recognition for the valuable role they play. At the international level, waste pickers are now, for example, attending the COP discussions on climate change<sup>85</sup> most recently at COP 17 in Durban in early December 2011. They are supported by global environment movements such as GAIA to put forward the case that waste pickers are part of the sustainable solution.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, reports from Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and India at: [http://www.inclusivocities.org/newsletter/July\\_2010/Waste\\_Pickers.html](http://www.inclusivocities.org/newsletter/July_2010/Waste_Pickers.html)

<sup>85</sup> [www.inclusivocities.org/climatechange.html](http://www.inclusivocities.org/climatechange.html)

<sup>86</sup> Neil Tangri, 'Respect for Recyclers: Protecting the Climate through Zero Waste', GAIA, October 2010: [http://www.inclusivocities.org/pdfs/Respect\\_for\\_Recyclers\\_EN.pdf](http://www.inclusivocities.org/pdfs/Respect_for_Recyclers_EN.pdf)



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## 4.5 Transport workers

There are millions of informal transport workers in the world: operating rickshaws, tricycles and pedicabs, driving goods vehicles, working on the docks, portering in markets, ferrying passengers across rivers and lakes, and so on. There are taxi drivers, passenger 'touts', car wash operators, dock workers, who appear to be 'self-employed' but are actually tied into a relationship which is akin to employment. Some 50,000 informal passenger transport vehicles are estimated to work on the streets of Bangkok, Thailand, every day, for example.<sup>87</sup>

However, this is another sector where there is an extreme paucity of data collection and analysis across the world.

*"There are no comprehensive statistics on the extent of informal transport work, and most of those that are available were compiled in the 1980s and 1990s, and not always based on the same criteria. Nevertheless, indications are that informal transport and related services are a significant source of employment, especially for male workers, and an important contributor to the GDP of many countries."<sup>88</sup>*

The global union for transport workers, the ITF, has been actively researching the informal transport sector with the aim of providing educational support to its affiliated unions to understand the issues and bring these workers more into the trade union movement.

Recent research commissioned by the ITF focussed on bringing together that data which does exist on transport workers in the urban informal economy (both passenger and freight transport). As a proportion of all informal workers, in individual countries transport workers comprise 6-12%. As a proportion of transport workers, informality can apply to the vast majority.

Philippines: 83% of all transport workers, and 96% of land transport workers.<sup>89</sup>

The ITF research also stresses the value that informal transport services bring to the lives and livelihoods of other informal workers, and therefore the wider economy.

*"In many areas, informal transport services are the only bona fide means of mobility available to the poor. They allow car-less, disadvantaged individuals to reach jobs, buy and sell produce, and access medical care. Pedicabs, tri-wheelers, and micro-vans are also an integral part of the distribution networks of many third world cities, ferrying raw materials, furniture, equipment, and other goods in and out of neighbourhoods."<sup>90</sup>*

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Cervero and Aaron Golub, 'Informal Transport: A Global Perspective', *Transport Policy*, Vol.14, No.6, November 2007, quoted in Dave Spooner, 'Transport Workers in the Urban Informal Economy: Livelihood Profile', Global Labour Institute, January 2011; see also: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/transport-workers>

<sup>88</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, *ibid*, page 3. Also see: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/transport-workers-data-constraints-gaps>

<sup>89</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, *ibid*, page 5

<sup>90</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, *ibid*, page 4



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Previous research was commissioned by the ITF in 2006<sup>91</sup>, following a resolution passed at its 40<sup>th</sup> Congress in Vancouver in 2002. The resulting extensive report explores the nature of and reasons for informal transport work, and the particular problems faced by informal transport workers. It investigates where and how ITF affiliated unions and other forms of association, including cooperatives, are already organizing informal transport workers, along with an analysis of challenges and strategies. Also included are detailed case studies from three countries, Zambia, Benin and the Philippines, plus suggestions for ITF policy-making structures to consider.

The results show that such union organization as exists is primarily in the road passenger transport sector, mainly taxis of varying types (mini buses, rickshaws, motorcycles, bicycles etc) and sometimes buses. It was also found that the large majority of union members are men.

The ITF research goes into the benefits of organization, as concretely experienced by some informal transport workers, including inclusion into labour law, and negotiated access to public space.<sup>92</sup> For example:

In **Nepal**, following effective union organization, the government amended the labour law to recognise and negotiate with both waged and own-account workers, including taxi drivers, rickshaw-pullers and trekker and mountain guides.

In Phnom Penh (**Cambodia**), tri-motor taxis were barred by the municipality from entering the city. The union managed to hold negotiations with the municipal authorities, and convinced them to reverse the decision.

A major challenge faced by informal transport workers in some cities is the demand for bribes by police and other officials. Organization has helped curb this too.

In **Pakistan** and the **Philippines**, when organized informal transport workers show police officers their union / association membership card, demands for a bribe are often dropped. In Quezon City, Phillipines, the local association of jeepney drivers was even able to secure the dismissal of corrupt police officers.

The ITF research also sets out the benefits of organizing informal transport workers that relate to the wider urban economy and environment, and even further to the global climate crisis. It highlights the great potential for alliance-building with other informal economy workers, and implicitly others in the social and environmental movements:

- “Informal transport workers are a significant proportion of the urban working poor.
- Informal transport workers play an essential role in supporting the livelihoods of other urban working poor, providing cheap and flexible transport to and from their workplace, markets, customers etc.

<sup>91</sup> Chris Bonner, ‘Organizing Informal Transport Workers: Global Research Project Overview Report’, ITF, July 2006: [www.itfglobal.org/files/publications/7984/08E\\_Report.pdf](http://www.itfglobal.org/files/publications/7984/08E_Report.pdf) A summary of the ITF research, and some case studies can be found at: [www.itfglobal.org/education/2007.cfm](http://www.itfglobal.org/education/2007.cfm)

<sup>92</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, op.cit, pages 9-11



- Informal transport workers are essential allies to other urban informal economy sectors (street vendors, waste-pickers, home-based workers etc) in advocating and negotiating inclusive policies for urban development.
- Addressing the problems of informal transport workers is crucial in the wider context of reducing emissions in the fast-growing mega-cities of the global south, which is one of the key drivers of climate change.
- Informal transport workers are potentially key players in combating threats to road safety and the urban environment.”<sup>93</sup>

## 4.6 Construction workers

*“Informality is now the norm, rather than the exception, in the construction industry throughout much of the developing world.”*

Jill Wells, construction industry specialist.<sup>94</sup>

There is also strong evidence that the number of informal workers as a proportion of all construction workers is growing. Little reliable data on the industry exists but that which does was largely commissioned by the ILO, particularly around the time of the Tripartite Meeting on the Construction Industry held in Geneva in 2001.<sup>95</sup>

Construction provides much needed employment for many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. It provides work for low-skilled or entry-level workers. The industry is of special importance for the landless poor, and large numbers of rural workers migrate to cities to look for work in construction. It also provides work for millions of international migrants, for example from South Asia working on construction projects in the Middle East, or from Eastern/Central Europe working in Western Europe, and from Latin America working in North America.

The industry is notorious for widespread use of hiring workers on short-term contracts, including daily hiring, and/or through labour agents. Workers rarely have access to insurance against periods of unemployment or sickness or other forms of social protection.

This is one sector in particular where there are no clear dividing lines between the formal and informal. This means that many formal trade unions of construction workers around the world are actually largely organizations of or for informal workers.

<sup>93</sup> Dave Spooner, 2011, *ibid*, page 9

<sup>94</sup> Jill Wells, 'Informality in the Construction Sector in Developing Countries', *Construction Management & Economics*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 2007, pages 87-93:

[http://econpapers.repec.org/article/tafconmgt/v\\_3a25\\_3ay\\_3a2007\\_3ai\\_3a1\\_3ap\\_3a87-93.htm](http://econpapers.repec.org/article/tafconmgt/v_3a25_3ay_3a2007_3ai_3a1_3ap_3a87-93.htm)

Quoted in Dave Spooner and Annie Hopley, 'Construction Workers in the Urban Informal Economy: Livelihood Profile', Global Labour Institute, commissioned by WIEGO, January 2011

<sup>95</sup> <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/construction-workers> which is based on Spooner and Hopley, *ibid*.



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Many of these unions are in turn affiliated to the global union federation for building and wood workers, the BWI. One of BWI's campaigns is to get labour standards included in official bidding and contracts for public procurement.<sup>96</sup>

According to the ILO, construction jobs in most countries are undertaken almost exclusively by men. However, in the countries of South Asia women play an important role which consists of performing unskilled tasks for low pay. For example, in India it is estimated that up to 30% of the construction workforce are women. They are integrated into the building workforce at the bottom end of the industry, as unskilled workers or head-load carriers.

**SEWA in India** has 20,000 women construction workers as members in the city of Ahmedabad. The union started organizing them in 1996, by visiting the crossroads where the construction workers stand each morning in search of work. SEWA conducted a survey of their socio-economic and working conditions and used this to negotiate with the Gujarat State Government to include these workers in new national legislation that recognized the rights of construction workers, including access to welfare benefits.

SEWA was invited to join a state-wide government task force, and this led to the establishment of a Welfare Board for construction workers. However, the workers could not access the welfare benefits because of a rule that they had to present certificates from their employers, which was of course impossible for most of them. So SEWA negotiated again with the Gujarat State Government, who eventually agreed to accept a certificate issued by the union. However, the detailed arrangements remain under negotiation and the workers still do not have access to the benefits.

#### **4.7 Agricultural workers / small producers, fish workers, forest product workers**

Land-based work has, in many parts of the world, traditionally been very informally organized. It is often affected by the seasons, and this has perhaps set the scene for much agricultural and forestry work being 'seasonal', casualized to some extent, providing a rationale for exploitative short-term contracts. Organizing informal landless labourers into trade unions has long been a challenge for agricultural workers' unions.

Added to that is the extent in today's world of migrant labour. Migrant workers now provide up to 80% of the agricultural labour force in some countries or regions, and their flows are increasing. Instead of employing local (even if migrant) labour, more and more workers are being brought in from other countries, sometimes from very distant places.

The global union federation for food, agricultural and allied workers, the **IUF**, has developed a number of activities to support its affiliated trade unions in organizing migrant workers.

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<sup>96</sup> [www.bwint.org/pdfs/WCProcurementFiona.pdf](http://www.bwint.org/pdfs/WCProcurementFiona.pdf)



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[www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)

Going back as far as the 1920s, the IUF had in its Rules a 'Reciprocity Agreement' which said that a member of an IUF affiliated union in one country, who then migrates to another country, can automatically become a member of an IUF affiliate in that destination country.

With the increase in migration in recent years, the IUF has stepped up its support for affiliated unions' involvement in migrant workers' rights. At the 25<sup>th</sup> IUF Congress in March 2007, delegates from 32 countries adopted a 'Charter of Migrant Workers' Rights'. The following year the IUF produced a special manual for union organizers, education officers and officials to help strengthen the internal and cross-border organization of migrant agricultural workers, highlighting some of the imaginative activities already carried out by IUF affiliates.<sup>97</sup>

As well as landless labourers, there are also millions of small-holder farmers around the world. When they organize together, they tend to form cooperatives and producer associations.<sup>98</sup>

Others working on the land include forest products workers.

In India, there is a mixed network (thought to comprise of MBOs of forest workers, NGOs, and activists) advocating for the rights of forest workers, the **National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW)**. According to Ashok Chowdhury of the NFFPFW, *"In many areas they (workers) themselves have taken initiatives to implement the Act (Forest Rights Act of 2006), effectively through collective methodology. They have formed their own 'gram sabhas' and forest rights committees and in some places they have also started collective production process. Since the forest resources can only remain sustainable in a collective ownership, such collective initiatives are very significant"*.<sup>99</sup>

The global union Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) reports that it is supporting organizing projects among informal forest products workers, and in India it has, amongst its affiliated unions, state-wide unions of informal leaf workers.<sup>100</sup>

On rivers, lakes and the sea too there are many informal fishing workers. In fact, *"the vast majority of the world's fishermen are artisanal and small-scale fishermen"*.<sup>101</sup>

As in the case of waste pickers and their need for access to public spaces, forest workers and fish workers are also deeply affected by laws that govern rights of access to land and sea resources, such as forest laws or coastal regulations. If these workers are not in a

<sup>97</sup> IUF, 2008, op.cit.

<sup>98</sup> <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/smallholder-farmers>

<sup>99</sup> Ashok Chowdhury, 'Developing a Platform of Forest Based Working People', unpublished paper prepared for WIEGO Law Project, India Pilot, 2009

<sup>100</sup> Christine Bonner and Dave Spooner, WIEGO, forthcoming

<sup>101</sup> Chris Bonner, ITF, 2006, op.cit., page 29, drawing on 'Conditions of Work in the Fishing Sector. A comprehensive standard on work in the fishing sector', ILC 92<sup>nd</sup> Session, ILO, 2004.



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clear employment relationship, they may not be recognized as having any rights of access, pushing them into an 'illegal' status when they do go into those spaces to harvest.<sup>102</sup>

Many traditional artisanal and other fish workers are organized into associations at local and national level.<sup>103</sup> At the international level, there are at least three networks or federations that bring these organizations together, as well as some engagement by the global union federation for the sector. The networks appear to have somewhat different coverage of the world regions from each other but share similar aims, though more research would be necessary to confirm the similarities and differences between them.

#### 1. The **International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)**

The ICSF works towards *"the establishment of equitable, gender-just, self-reliant and sustainable fisheries, particularly in the small-scale, artisanal sector"*. It was established by fishworker organizations and concerned academics and social activists 25 years ago, following an International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters in 1984 that was held parallel to a World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). They felt that the FAO *"overemphasized the commercial, industrial, scientific and fishery resource aspects, at the expense of the actual real-world, life-and-blood people involved in fishing worldwide fishworkers who are often sections of the population marginalized from mainstream society"*.

The ICSF's mission is *"to support fishing communities and fishworker organizations, and empower them to participate in fisheries from a perspective of decent work, equity, gender-justice, self-reliance and sustainability"*. The ICSF tries to influence national, regional and international decision-making processes in fisheries so that the importance of small-scale fisheries, fishworkers and fishing communities is properly recognized, through:

- monitoring issues that relate to the life, livelihood and living conditions of fishworkers around the world;
- disseminating information on these issues, particularly amongst fisherfolk;
- preparing guidelines for policymakers that stress fisheries development and management of a just, participatory and sustainable nature; and help create the space and momentum for alternatives in the small-scale fisheries sector.

The ICSF's work is largely in the global South but also Europe. It has a strong gender focus. Its extensive documentation centre produces regular newsletters in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French: the tri-annual 'Samudra', and 'Yemaya' on gender and fisheries, as well as frequent 'news alerts', sent to readers in 71 countries.

The ICSF engages in high-level policy discussions, including at COP, ILO, FAO, UNCTAD, etc. It sends representatives to local level workshops, for example to reportedly the first community-based meeting on marine protected areas in South

<sup>102</sup> Sankaran and Madhav, 2011, op.cit.

<sup>103</sup> Chris Bonner, ITF, 2006, op.cit., page 64, outlines the case of Ghana, for example.



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Africa in April 2010, and to another in Recife, Brazil in August 2010. It has a training programme for fishworker organizations, particularly on sustainable management.

The General Body of ICSF members meets every three years and takes all policy decisions, which are implemented by an elected Animation Team that meets once a year, and staff team in offices in India and Belgium. The Collective's membership is not, however, clear from the sources used, and would need more investigation.<sup>104</sup>

## 2. World Forum of Fisher Peoples

Founded in New Delhi, India, in 1997, the WFFP claims a membership of 36 organizations in 24 countries, mostly in Asia and Africa, plus others such as Canada, Spain, France, New Zealand and Honduras. Its General Secretary is based in Sri Lanka, Treasurer in Spain, and Coordinators in Canada and South Africa.<sup>105</sup>

## 3. The World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers

The WFFHFW *"brings together small scale fisher organization for the establishment and upholding of fundamental human rights, social justice and culture of artisanal /small scale fish harvesters and fish workers, affirming the sea as source of all life and committing themselves to sustain fisheries and aquatic resources for the present and future generations to protect their livelihoods."* Its four core values are listed as: transparency, participation, accountability, and gender equity.

Its Secretariat is based in Kampala, Uganda. Its website shows a greater profile of members in Latin America, plus Africa and others in North America and Europe and a few in Asia. *"Only one national organization per country may be a member. Such organizations must be democratically constituted and may be included, but not be limited to, trade unions, associations, federations of cooperatives and aboriginal nations dependent on the fishery for their livelihoods."* The General Assembly meets every 3 years, and there is a Coordination Committee made up of one woman and one man from each of the six continents.<sup>106</sup>

## 4. International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)

The global union federation for transport workers ITF has fishing workers in its remit, and they are included in its research into informal workers (see section 4.5). A collaborative pilot project on the fishing sector is currently being undertaken by the ITF and the IUF for food workers. Called 'From Catcher to Counter', it seeks to *"combat illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing and increase union power for all workers along the fisheries supply chain"*.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> [www.icsf.net](http://www.icsf.net) including the ICSF Annual Report of Activities 2010-2011, accessed 7 February 2012

<sup>105</sup> <http://worldforumoffisherpeoples3.blogspot.com/> accessed 7 February 2012

<sup>106</sup> [www.worldfisherforum.org](http://www.worldfisherforum.org) accessed 7 February 2012

<sup>107</sup> [www.itfglobal.org/fish/index.cfm](http://www.itfglobal.org/fish/index.cfm) accessed 7 February 2012



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## 4.8 Sex workers

In many situations, sex workers are excluded because they are seen as 'immoral'. Sometimes they are seen as 'victims' in a male-dominated society. However, there is a big debate as to whether they should be seen 'victims' or as 'workers'. Clearly, this has a lot to do with whether the sex workers themselves do or not control their own situation.

Not a lot is generally known or discussed, including within the labour and women's movements, about sex workers. Sex workers say they organize themselves in order to break through this exclusion, and they are supported by the trade unions in a few countries.

**De Rode Draad** is a trade union of sex workers in the Netherlands, supported by the FNV trade union federation in that country, which has accepted sex workers as members since brothels were legalized there in 2000.<sup>108</sup>

Some sex workers' organizations also receive official support because of the role they can play in preventing HIV-Aids and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, this is project-based activity, linked to funding, and so is unlikely to contribute towards building sustainable member-based organizations.

The **International Union of Sex Workers**, is based at the GMB union in the UK. Its statement reads:

*"For our human, civil and labour rights. For our inclusion and decriminalization. For freedom to choose, respect for those choices and the absolute right to say no. For the full protection of the law. For everyone in the sex industry."*

*The IUSW was founded by a migrant sex worker, working with a group of colleagues, academics and allies. The first public event was a march through Soho (London) on International Women's Day, March 8 2000, when a Brazilian samba band, sex workers and supporters swung and shimmied through the streets.*

*We know that the primary difficulty we face is not our work itself but the conditions in which we work. This includes both conditions in the workplace, and in society as a whole – the stigma and social exclusion many of us experience. We see how legal status and social stigma combine to increase our vulnerability and enable abuse and exploitation within our industry. Such wrongs are often then blamed on the nature of our work, sometimes by those who themselves perpetuate them.*

*A group of workers organizing to improve the conditions of their work is a union, and so the International Union of Sex Workers was the obvious title for our organization. "International" both because there are many migrants involved in the organization,*

<sup>108</sup> FNV, 'From Marginal Work to Core Business: European Trade Unions Organizing in the Informal Economy', report of a conference, January 2003, page 43: [www.etuc.org/a/1924](http://www.etuc.org/a/1924)



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*and also because we are proud to be a part of the global movement for sex workers' rights, that spans every continent (except Antarctica!).*

*In March 2002, the GMB struck a great blow for human rights by recognizing our right to self organize and fight for better working conditions and to join a trades union, and a branch for people in the sex industry was established. This established one major basic labour right to all sex workers in the UK – the right to join and be represented by an officially recognized trade union...*

*Our work today includes responding to proposed changes in the law and policy around the sex industry, supporting individuals experiencing problems at work or (more frequently) due to attitudes of others to their work, member meetings, social events, fundraisers and media work.*

*Sex workers are part of the solution, not part of the problem. Real solutions to problems associated with the sex industry cannot be found while we go unheeded. The only way to create policies that effectively address the very real abuses which take place within the sex industry is to base them in reality, rather than on the ideology, assumption and stereotypes which often hold sway. There is no more valid group of stakeholders in this debate than sex workers themselves.”<sup>109</sup>*

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<sup>109</sup> [www.iusw.org/iusw-history/](http://www.iusw.org/iusw-history/) accessed 25 October 2011



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## Appendix A

### What is 'informal'? What is 'formal'?

The term 'informal sector' used to be widely, but erroneously, used to describe both informal businesses and informal jobs. Technically its meaning is quite specific. It is limited to production units (enterprises) and does not refer to persons or jobs. It was never intended to refer to the informalization of employment.

So, some other term was needed to express the broader concept. In the mid-1990s, the International Labour Office (ILO), the International Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics (called the 'Delhi Group'), and the WIEGO network began working together. As a result, in 2003, the term 'informal economy' was adopted by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS).

The term 'informal economy' refers to all economic activity by workers and economic units that are in law or in practice not covered, or insufficiently covered, by formal arrangements. It therefore covers informal enterprises, and informal jobs in formal and informal enterprises. It covers activities that are not illegal in themselves (and therefore excludes such activities as drug trafficking), but that are outside the reach of the legal system, such as production that is not declared for tax purposes.<sup>110</sup>

For WIEGO:

- Wage employees are classified as informal if they do not have social protection benefits – such as pension or health insurance contributions - provided by the employer.
- All unpaid contributing family workers are classified as informal.
- Own-account workers and employers are classified as informal if the enterprise is not registered or not 'incorporated'.

As we know, all workers were once informal. Through long struggles, some workers won legislated employment recognition, rights and benefits, and so became 'formal'. But the majority of the working poor, especially in developing countries, have always been 'informal', and still are globally.

What is more, rather than an anticipated 'historic trend' of industrialization that would increasingly move the working poor towards the formal economy, neo-liberal globalization has increasingly moved workers in the opposite direction – sending those with formal employment and its negotiated rights into the informal economy. Employers have become deft at 'side-stepping' their legal obligations through many different forms of informalization. They have created 'core' and 'peripheral' employment tiers, where the 'peripheral' workforce may be on short-term contracts, extended 'probationary' periods, 'seasonal' work that has nothing to do with the seasons, or part-time hours, for example. They have also externalized jobs through contracting out, or hiring in through labour agencies where the actual employer becomes unclear, and so on.

<sup>110</sup> For more information on terminology, see [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org) and United Nations, 'Status in Employment: A Brief on Statistical Concepts from the United Nations Publication', in *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*, 2010: [http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/status\\_in\\_employment.pdf](http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/status_in_employment.pdf)



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In any case, there has always been a continuum between the 'formal' and the 'informal'. This is true for many individuals who move between different types of income generation, across years, months or even within the same day. Many people have multiple roles and identities so as to 'make ends meet'.

There is also on-going discussion about whether bringing informal workers into organizations which become formally registered and recognized means that those workers have become 'formal', or not, or are perhaps in some stage in between. The question applies, for example, to waste pickers who have formed cooperatives which have then been awarded contracts by local authorities and integrated into the local waste collection system (see section 4.4). WIEGO's waste sector specialist Sonia Dias, for example, refers to such waste pickers in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, as 'semi-formal'.<sup>111</sup>

Some argue it is therefore better not to see it as an 'either / or' dichotomy, 'formal or informal', but rather as a continuum. That does seem to be increasingly how many in the global labour movement are indeed seeing it, with organizing strategies to suit.

There are also quite substantial debates about the use and validity of such terms as 'precarious' or 'vulnerable', instead of 'informal', for example. However, there was not enough time to go into these debates in this report.

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<sup>111</sup> Sonia M. Dias, 'Belo Horizonte Selective Waste Collection Programme – Social Inclusion Features', WIEGO, 2010: [www.inclusivocities.org/pdfs/BELO%20HORIZONTE%20SELECTIVE%20WASTE%20COLLECTION%20PROGRAMMEaug18.pdf](http://www.inclusivocities.org/pdfs/BELO%20HORIZONTE%20SELECTIVE%20WASTE%20COLLECTION%20PROGRAMMEaug18.pdf) accessed 6 February 2012. For a summary of how WIEGO sees the characteristics of 'formality' and 'informality' and the processes between them, see: 'Rethinking Formalization: the WIEGO Perspective' at <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/rethinking-formalization-wiego-perspective> accessed 6 February 2012.



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## Appendix B

### Those interviewed for this paper

Name	Position	Organization	Country	Date
Renana Jhabvala	National Coordinator  Chairperson	Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) WIEGO	India	12 September 2011
Rhonda Douglas	Global Projects Director	WIEGO		13 September 2011
Pat Horn	Coordinator	StreetNet International		28 September 2011
Dave Spooner		Global Labour Institute	UK	23 September 2011 20 October 2011
Lucia Fernandez	Coordinator for Waste pickers	WIEGO		29 September 2011
Poonsap Thulapan	Coordinator	HomeNet Thailand	Thailand	15 October 2011 1 November 2011
Wisborn Malaya	Secretary General	Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA)	Zimbabwe	28 October 2011
Violeta Zlateva	President	Association of Homeworkers	Bulgaria	By email 7 November 2011



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### **For further reading:**

An extended bibliography for the Solidarity Centre 'Global Labor Program' is in preparation by WIEGO.

Many documents can be found on the WIEGO website at: [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)