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Bangkok's Street Vending Ban: A Summary of the Research on the Social and Economic Impacts

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Street Vendor Categories, Challenges and Characteristics	2
Social and Economic Impacts of the Ban	3
Impact on Formal Businesses	5
Impact on Public Space and Safety	6
From Model Vending Areas to “Pracharat” Markets	8
Conclusions and Recommendations	10
References	12
Appendix	12

Introduction

This Resource Document summarizes findings from research on the social and economic impacts of street vendor evictions in Bangkok, Thailand.

Bangkok was long viewed as a global model for effective, socially progressive management of street vending (see Nirathron and Yasmeen 2014). This took a dramatic shift in 2014 when, following the country's military coup, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) launched the “Return the Footpath to Pedestrians” policy. Although the city had previously “cracked down” on vending (Nirathron and Yasmeen 2014, Tangworamongkhon 2014), the waves of evictions during this period are the most extreme and far-reaching that the city has ever experienced. Tens of thousands of vendors have been affected,¹ and, as a result in 2017, current and former vendors affected by the ban joined together to form the Network of Thai Vendors for Sustainable Development. The Network represents vendors — including those who sell food, clothing, dry goods, and souvenirs — from 25 districts and 34 vending areas in Bangkok.

This study reviews data from members of the Network following the cancellation of permitted street vending zones between 2016 and 2017 in Bangkok. It examines the general characteristics of street vendors; the impact of the ban on vendors, families, related businesses, and urban safety; adaptations by vendors; and policy recommendations. The full report also examines the formation of the Thai Vendors for Sustainable Development — an account this summary lacks the space to cover.

In research for this study, the author conducted site visits and discussions in 27 vending locations across Bangkok between January and June 2018. The research included discussions with vendors and business owners, as well as in-depth interviews with 15 vendors. The author also visited several “Pracharat Markets”, which according to the BMA provide alternative locations for displaced vendors. Information from other studies conducted around the same period (Nirathron 2017, Reed and Samantrakul 2018, Suksai 2018) and media were used to supplement the interviews.

In 23 of the locations visited during the research period, vending had been banned in 2016 or 2017. Some vendors in these areas are continuing to operate illegally and/or nearby their original spaces, usually on smaller alleys and less conspicuous locations, whereas others have left entirely. In four locations, vending had not been banned, and vendors were continuing to operate as usual at the time of research. A full list of vending areas visited during the research is available in Appendix 1.

An English translation of the full report is available at: <https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/file/Angsuthonsombat-Bangkok-Street-Vending-Ban-2016.pdf>

¹ The precise number of vendors evicted or otherwise affected is unknown. The most recent figures on vendor licensing are from 2016 and indicate that nearly 12,000 vendors have lost their licences since 2014. However, these figures include only vendors who are licensed by the city, rather than the much larger number of vendors who operate with or without permission from district officers. See City Law Enforcement Department, available at <http://tinyurl.com/y2etyf6e>.

Street Vendor Categories, Challenges and Characteristics

The study identifies three categories of vendors: 1) licensed vendors in “permitted zones” designated by the Bangkok Metropolitan traffic police; 2) unlicensed vendors who are not permitted but tolerated by local officials, who pay weekly or monthly fines in exchange for the ability to vend; 3) unlicensed vendors without official or tacit permission, who are often mobile hawkers. Some vendors in the latter category are international migrants.

Among the Thai vendors interviewed in this study, many said they have worked in their profession for decades. Some inherited their businesses from their families and are working as second or third generation operators. As a result, they bring specialized skills and expertise: preparing unique dishes based on family recipes, designing and hand-making crafts like flower garlands or jewelry, or procuring high quality produce, meats, or fish. Vendors have generally operated in the same location over many years, and have regular clients. Many are long-term residents in their communities. Though some are migrants from provinces outside of Bangkok, most have lived in the city for decades, with no rural homes, land, or plans to return.

As highlighted in previous research (Nirathron 2006), vending accommodates workers who struggle to access other formal professions, like the elderly, people with disabilities, and mothers with infants — for the latter, vending allows them the flexibility to care for their children while they work (see below: Vital Income: Vending to Support Family). The majority of vendors have lower than middle school education levels (Nirathron 2017). Interviews in this study confirmed that street vending enables workers to live independently without social or family intervention; it has allowed many workers to build a secure foundation for families, purchase homes and vehicles, and support children to obtain university-level educations.

However, the work of vending can take a toll; it requires working irregular hours, and it is common for vendors to work long periods without taking days off. Those who sell in the morning wake up, buy goods, and prepare their products by 2 or 3 a.m. so as to be ready for sale at 5 a.m. Those selling at night start in the late afternoon and work until 1 or 2 a.m. These irregular working and sleeping hours inevitably impact vendors’ long-term health — something that the vendors raised as an ongoing concern for them.

Vendors also generally operate on relatively low margins. Most revenue is reinvested for purchase of raw materials the next day. Remaining profits go towards household expenditures, including utilities, mortgage, and tuition fees for children. Though their income kept up with these expected expenses, vendors were generally not prepared to manage these costs in the event of sudden shocks to earnings.

Vital Income: Vending to Support Family

Dao² (70 years old) works as vegetable vendor on Soi On Nut 70, where vending has been permitted to continue. She vends to support her 17-year-old-grandson, who has an impaired leg.

² All workers in this paper have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

Social and Economic Impacts of the Ban

Vendors and families

At the time of study, designated vending areas had been cancelled by the BMA for between a year and two years. Vendors in these zones responded to the ban in a variety of ways. The majority had sought new vending spaces, in markets or on privately rented land. Others were continuing to sell discreetly in their previous locations, where they faced the risk of fines or confiscation. Some of these vendors had adapted by selling on small mobile carts, which allowed them to abscond quickly when officials appeared.

However, despite their adaptability, vendors and their families have still experienced direct social and economic impacts. These include the following:

Income and debt: All vendors described a significant impact on their income — earning as little as 70 per cent less than they did previous to the ban. They struggle to manage the remaining income frugally (see below: *Less is Less: Instability and Frugality for a Vendor’s Family*) as many are responsible for mortgage, car lease payments, student tuition fees, among other costs. Keeping up with these expenses resulted in many vendors tapping into — and often exhausting — their savings. Some have accumulated debt, including via informal moneylenders charging high monthly interest rates. Ironically, some of the vendors fell into debt due to their participation in the state-sponsored Government Savings Bank “Happy Citizens Microloan,” which they received prior to the vending ban.

Less is Less: Instability and Frugality for a Vendor’s Family

A long-time vendor in Huay Khwang Market in Din Daeng District, Kaew sold vegetables to support her family. She has several dependents under her care, including her elderly mother who suffers from a coronary artery disorder. Kaew continued to sell discreetly in her neighbourhood after the ban, until officials became stricter with enforcement. The family now depends entirely on her husband’s unstable work as a pick-up truck driver for hire, forcing Kaew to cut costs, including spending on food for both children and adult family members.

Schooling: Vendors have struggled to afford tuition fees for children in primary, secondary, and university levels. Some vendors interviewed were three to four semesters overdue on tuition payments. In several instances, children had withdrawn from school to alleviate financial strains, while waiting for the parents to return to the vending business (see below: *Shelving the Dream: Delaying Education for the Sake of Survival*).

Support for parents, grandparents, or other family members: Vendors are often direct caregivers for parents or grandparents who live with them, or give significant financial contributions to parents living in other provinces for daily expenditure and healthcare. Some provide financial and physical support to disabled children or relatives. Many families were forced to reduce or suspend spending in support of these dependents following the vending ban (see below: *A Provider’s Dilemma: Managing Family and Personal Health*).

Shelving the Dream: Delaying Education for the Sake of Survival

Chanhom's husband passed away when her youngest child was seven, so she worked as a soy milk and Chinese churros vendor on Phutthamonthon Soi 3 to support her young family. At the time of the vendor ban, her son was studying in his second year in a private university, for which Chanhom paid THB 30,000 (USD 950) per semester in tuition. She used her savings to pay for one additional semester after the ban — but without income from vending, he withdrew and took a job, "to help the family survive."

Health consequences: The ban has led vendors or their family members to forgo medical treatment. Vendor leaders describe severe stress or related mental illnesses that prevent them from working, and which in some cases led to more serious medical problems (see below: A Provider's Dilemma: Managing Family and Personal Health, and A Preventable Tragedy: A Senior Vendor's Story). Vendors reported stories of stroke, paralysis, death — and in at least one case, a suicide.

A Provider's Dilemma: Managing Family and Personal Health

Note and his wife sold souvenirs in Silom area, earning them enough to rent an apartment and pay for treatments for his son's illness. After the ban in 2016, Note's new job as a security guard earned him too little to support his wife and son, who moved to live with relatives outside Bangkok. His son's condition worsened after missing several medical appointments. The stress affected Note severely. Early in 2018, Note suffered from a sudden hemorrhagic stroke. The stroke resulted in partial paralysis, forcing him to return home to receive care from his elderly mother.

Alternative livelihoods: In the absence of revenue to support their vending businesses, other vendors have switched to new jobs. Some former vendors have become security guards or motorcycle taxi drivers. Others have entered jobs in domestic work as cleaners or carers. Workers earn less in these occupations and may face higher risks related to occupational health and safety (see above: A Provider's Dilemma: Managing Family and Personal Health). Others have left Thailand as migrant workers.

Impact on elderly vendors: In contrast, it is almost impossible for elderly vendors with low education to find alternative forms of employment. Many have had to turn towards their children or other family (some outside Bangkok) for financial support. Those with financial responsibilities or necessary expenditures often risk selling in their original spaces or in smaller alleys.

A Preventable Tragedy: A Senior Vendor's Story

Chomnad (59 years old) worked as a vendor in Huai Khwang District, where she sold fruits and used the income to raise her grandchild. After officials imposed a ban on vending, she was unable pay rent and was evicted. Once homeless, the father of her grandchild removed the child from her custody and she suffered severe emotional and physical stress as a result. Neighbours found a sheltered space for her to sleep under a building, but after only a few months they brought her to a hospital due to her swollen abdomen and feet. She passed away on 2 July 2018 as a result of septicemia and acute renal failure.

Impact on Formal Businesses

In addition to the immediate impacts on vendors and families, research identified indirect economic impacts on related formal businesses. These include formal retailers whose shops neighbour vendor markets, as well as retailers and wholesalers from whom vendors sourced their products.

In several locations, shop houses and other “brick-and-mortar” businesses have traditionally depended on street vendors to attract foot traffic to their neighbourhoods. In Ramkamhaeng market where vendors previously sold clothing, store proprietors reported a severe drop in the number of customers. They estimate that sales volume declined by 50 to 80 per cent since the ban, and that between 10 and 20 per cent of shops in the areas had closed (see below: “The street vendors’ problem is my problem too”: Impacts On a Formal Retailer). Most shops had reduced their opening hours, and one storeowner reported that he was forced to terminate four employees (Reed and Samantrakul 2018).

Businesses owners around Sukhumvit Soi 11 likewise complained about plummeting business volume since the disappearance of the Sukhumvit Night Market in 2017. Rows of shops along Soi 11 aimed at tourists (travel agencies, tailors, massage parlors) closed or relocated. Some business owners tried to alleviate the situation by allowing vendors to continue operating on private areas outside of their shops. In 2017, thirty business owners signed a petition to the District Office asking that vendors be permitted to return (Reed and Samantrakul 2018).

“The street vendors’ problem is my problem too”: Impacts on a Formal Retailer

A clothing retailer on Ramkhamhaeng Road noted that vendors outside her store had attracted customers, including people getting off at nearby bus stops, with their lights and activity. Business had declined significantly since their removal. She explained: “Before I thought that this was the problem of the street vendors. But now I know that the street vendors’ problem is my problem too.”

Fresh markets and wholesalers likewise depend on business from vendors, who purchase raw cooking materials, wholesale garments, souvenirs, and jewelry, among other products. At the former site of Pak Klong Flower Market, storeowners reported in 2017 that their business has declined by 70 per cent as a result of the vendor evictions in 2016. Those businesses had depended on the market’s customers to purchase flower arrangement supplies, such as containers, display cubes, and ribbons (Nirathron 2017, Thai Post 2016). Garment wholesalers at Bo Bae Market interviewed in mid-2018 reported plunging sale volumes of over 70 per cent (see below: Wholesale in Decline: Losing Customers and Shrinking Businesses). These impacts also extend upwards to secondary suppliers, including farmers and home-based workers (see below: Impacts Upstream: A Home-based Worker’s Story).

Wholesale in Decline: Losing Customers and Shrinking Business

Khachen is a chicken wholesaler whose primary customers are restaurants and Hainan chicken and rice vendors in Rat Burana District. Khachen reports a sales decline of over 60 per cent following the vendor ban.

The owner of **Ruby Tilapia Fish Shop** in Ladkrabang wholesale fish market reports a reduction in business by over 60 per cent. **Jeh Mam Wholesale Fish Shop** lost roughly a half of its regular customers, forcing the owner to terminate her assistant and deliver fish to customers herself.

A garment wholesaler in Bobae Wholesale Market, **Boon** reports that her main customers — garment sidewalk stalls in tourist areas such as the Sukhumvit Road — reduced their purchases by over 50 per cent. As a result, Boon has terminated an employee and canceled one of her two rented selling spaces at Bobae.

As a butcher stall owner in Huay Kwang Market, **Chaba** previously purchased 18 pigs per day from an abattoir and hired two to three workers. After vendors from Huay Kwang vending area closed their businesses, she reduced her orders by nearly half, now hiring only one worker and picking up orders personally to save costs.

Impacts Upstream: A Home-based Worker's Story

Chit (48 years old) lives in Lopburi Province, where she previously produced handmade bracelets and necklaces for a souvenir vendor on Silom Road. Chit had weekly orders, which earned her THB 800-1,200 (USD 25-38) per week, and supplemented her main source of income from the paddy rice farming season. In the year since the stall was banned, she has not received any orders. She now relies exclusively on income from paddy rice farming.

Impact on Public Space and Safety

Beyond economic impacts, the study observed how removal of vendors could impact the atmosphere and safety of neighbourhoods. Anecdotes from vendors demonstrated the ways in which vendors provided “eyes and ears” on the street, to guard against crime.

In contrast, many areas from where vendors have been removed experience lower levels of pedestrian traffic during the late evening and night. These zones appear to have higher incidences of petty crime like bag theft and pickpocketing. These include:



Figure 1 & 2: Soi Suksawat 25/2 in front of Lotus Suksawat Mall, Rattaburana District. The District Office recently installed a sign warning against bag snatching.



Figure 3: Sukumvit Night Market: A business operator in the former Sukhumvit market expressed concerns regarding increasing snatching theft and narcotic crimes after the street vending ban.



Figure 4: The Former King Rama I night market on the end of the Bridge Phra Nakorn District: The operation booth for Bus Service No. 8 has been relocated for security reasons.

Not pictured: The main road of Phahon Yothin: During an interview, a local official agreed that street vending should be allowed on the in the evening, to reduce the risk of motorcycle snatching theft in the neighbourhood (Suksai 2018).

From Model Vending Areas to “Pracharat” Markets

The BMA has justified the need to curb street vending to “reorganize the sidewalks.” It claims that this policy addresses problems like vendors obstructing foot traffic, businesses, or bus stops, and dumping garbage on the sidewalk or sewage.

This study found that these issues did not occur in many of the street vending zones affected by the policy. Banned zones included those that were formally regarded as “models”— zones where vendors had organized their stalls and the zones in a manner that permitted the flow of pedestrian traffic, efficiently managed waste, and kept the public space clean (see below: *Doing Everything Right and Still Being Banned: The Case of Rama II Soi 69*).

Doing Everything Right and Still Being Banned: The Case of Rama II Soi 69

Before the street vending ban, vendors on Rama II Soi 69 took the initiative to reorganize their vending area to leave adequate space for commuters. Vendors pooled their own money to build a new roof and set up new stalls to widen the footpaths. This vending area was eventually cancelled by the BMA, despite being recognized previously as a model vending zone.

The case of Rama II Soi 69 casts doubt on the justifications for the ban. It indicates that the “Return the Footpath Policy” reflects this administration’s political priorities, rather than the physical conditions of street markets.



Figure 5: Rama II Road, Soi 69 before the vending ban

In contrast, the BMA has claimed that it is accommodating vendors' needs through the establishment of Pracharat ("citizen") markets, as alternative spaces for vending.

This study found that in several cases, the BMA has relabeled existing, successful markets as Pracharat markets. These markets have continued to run well — but they primarily house existing market vendors and cannot make room for most street vendors affected by the vending policy.

The BMA has also created new "Pracharat" markets. Among those observed in this study, almost all are poorly located in remote and/or dead-end areas with low foot traffic. Many of the vendors who relocated to the new markets have since closed their businesses due to a lack of shoppers, low sale volume, and increasing expenses (e.g. rental). These markets include, for example:

- Pongpharam Expressway Market: Located under an expressway, the market was introduced in October 2017 to support 340 vendors. Vendors gradually closed down and moved out. The BMA increased advertising for the market and reopened it on 9 February 2018, but it nevertheless fails to attract shoppers.
- Hassadin Alley Market: The market was designated for former vendors from Pratunam market. It is located in a small, dead-end alley beside an abandoned building.
- Airport Link Station Market: This market is located in a non-pedestrian area, between Ratchaprarop and Phayathai Airport Link stations, with very limited foot traffic.
- Tawanna 2 Market: Despite being privately owned, this market is designated by Bang Kapi District as the relocation site for vendors from Ramkamhaeng area, but the rent is high and customers are few.

The experience of vendors in the Pracharat markets suggest that the central government and the BMA favour the interests of private investors over those of the vendors, since the policy to ban street vending encourages vendors to relocate to private markets. This practice forces former vendors to pay rent in private markets, only to find that there are fewer customers, and that they cannot earn enough to break even with their investment or to pay their rent. Many vendors abandoned the private markets and returned to the sidewalks for survival.

Location, Location: Decreased Income and Increased Expenses in New Markets

For more than 50 years, Chada sold pork knuckle over rice at Huay Kwang Market. Chada relocated to a private market in Patrara Building, spending a total of THB 100,000 (USD 3,170) from her savings to invest in her business. Sale volume was low, however, and her monthly rental expense high. Chada moved again to a new, cheaper space, where she pays considerably more for transportation costs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings are consistent with previous research, which emphasizes the role of street vending in creating jobs and elevating the economic status of vendors, subsidizing the cost of living for consumers, and contributing to the overall formal economy (Nirathron 2017).

The study demonstrates how, in a short period of time, Bangkok's vending ban has significantly destabilized the livelihoods and incomes of working families in Bangkok. The ban presented a severe shock for households who were upwardly mobile, undermining generational gains in wealth, lifestyle, and education. Particularly for older vendors who had previously supported themselves, a lack of alternative employment options has meant becoming dependents and imposing a burden on family. In other cases, the ban has split up families, either within or beyond Thai borders. Health and psychological consequences are severe, in some cases even fatal.

Beyond immediate impacts on vendors, the ban has rippled through neighbourhood economies. Street vending generates significant revenue for the formal economy, including for shop houses in the same area, wholesale markets and outlets, and upstream producers. In contrast, the disappearance of vendors has hurt these businesses. It has also deactivated urban streets, with routes becoming deserted, uninviting, and vulnerable to crime. The ban has impacted well-designed, well-managed vending areas. For many vendors, relocation to failing "Pracharat" markets has only exacerbated their precarious situations.

In consideration of these impacts, this study recommends a re-examination of the current vending policy. A new approach to administering vending and sidewalk trade can preserve Bangkok's unique identity and lifestyle, supporting urban transformation and development that "leaves no one behind."

While vending policy has been dictated by the BMA without the participation of vendors, there is an opportunity for district offices to develop independent administrative systems according to local needs. Vendors themselves are an asset for this type of planning because of their deep knowledge and long histories of operating in communities.

This paper offers the following recommendations to government:

1. In the short term, vendors should be granted a temporary injunction to sell in their original places. After a new policy is drafted and implemented, the new vending spaces should be organized and improved to ensure that the vending areas will not impede pedestrians and other sidewalk users.
2. Vendors should actively participate in the development of guidelines to re-organize the side walks and vending areas in collaboration with other stakeholders: officials, agencies, academics, the street-vendor network representatives, citizen or community representatives, and related organizations.
3. Vendors from all vending zones should be supported to organize into membership-based groups, to engage locally with their district authorities and supervise local members to follow mutually agreed guidelines. These could include guidelines on cleanliness, maintaining pedestrian walking widths (e.g. of at least two meters), vending hours, and sanctions for those who breach the agreement.

4. The Thai government and BMA should provide remedies for those affected by the street vending ban policy. Remedies could include low interest loans, and a debt grace period and/or debt relief measures for vendors who received the government's micro-loans from the Government Savings Bank.
5. In the long-term, there is a need to revise and improve the legal framework governing street vending. A new law should help vendors develop sustainably over the long-term and avoid impacts from unstable policies that cause unnecessary suffering for those trying to make an honest living.
6. Bangkok has a strong opportunity to resolve existing problems and develop a new model that is consistent with the era and with the needs of stakeholders from all sectors. By implementing the above recommendations to support vending in Thailand, Bangkok can cultivate sustainable urban development and propel its economy in a way that allows all parties to benefit and co-exist.

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Appendix 1

Study Locations

Table 1: Vending areas banned between 2016 and 2017

	District	Group Name / Vending area
1	Watthana	Sukhumvit Street Market (Soi Sukhumvit 1-21)
2	Pathumwan	Flower garland group (In front of the Erawan Shrine, Ratchaprasong intersection)
3	Pathumwan	Ratchadamri (From Big C to 7-11/Top Charoen Optical Shop)
4	Pathumwan	Central World Mall (In front of Central World Mall to Bhrama Shrines)
5	Pathumwan	Bonkai Market (Soi Plukchit Intersection to Bangkok Bank, Lumpini Branch)
6	Bang Rak	Silom (Night Market, Narathiwas Road to Rama 4 Road)
7	Bangkapi	Ramkhamhaeng (Soi Ramkhamhaeng 17-65)

8	Ratchathewi	Watergate (Soi Petchaburi 17-31 and Soi Ratchaprarop 8; two sides of Pratunam intersection)
9	Din Daeng	Huay Kwang Market (From clock tower to the Ganesh Deity Shrine)
10	Wang Thonglang District	Lardprao, Saphan 2 Bridge Market (Soi Ladprao 45 / 1-49)
11	Chatuchak	Pet fish market (Kamphaengphet 4 opposite Children's Museum To Her Majesty Queen Sirikit Garden)
12	Chatuchak	Street Food of Chatuchak (The entrance to Kamphaengphet 3 from the guard post to the Chatuchak market, around Children's Museum)
13	Pra Nakon	King Rama I Bridge (Under the King Rama I bridge and King Prajadhipok bridge)
14	Bueng Kum	Indra Rak (Front of Indra Rak Market)
15	Phayathai	Phayathai (Phahonyothin 49 to Wat Phai Tan)
16	Klong Toey	Klong Toey (Sukhumvit Soi 4-12)
17	Ratburana	Ratburana (In front of Lotus Mall to Bangpakok market and in front of Big C Ratburana, entrance of Soi Suksawat 26)
18	Bangkok Yai	Pho Sam Ton Market (Soi Issarapap 23-29/1)
19	Bangkok Yai	Soi Charansanitwong 13 (Entrance of Soi next to main road)
20	Bangkok Noi	Bang Khun Si Market (From front of 7-11 Bang Khun Si Market, Charansanitwong 35 to 7-11 Soi Charansanitwong 37)
21	Thawiwatthana	Phutthamonthon Soi 3 (Buddhamonthon 3)
22	Bang Khun Thian	Rama 2 Soi 69 (Entrance of Soi Rama 2 Soi 69, Opposite Tesco Lotus)
23	Bangkae	Front of Petchkasem Village 2 (Soi Phetchkasem 55 - 55/3)

Table 2: Areas where vending was still permitted at time of study

	District	Group Name / Location
24	Prawet	Onnut 70 (In front of Seri village)
25	Bang Kho Laem	Bang Kho Laem (Wat Phraya Krai) to Charoenkrung Hospital)
26	Saphan Sung	Mooban Nakila (Community public park)
27	Bangkok Noi	Behind Kung Luang Restaurant (In front of Krung Luang Restaurant, Soi Borom Ratchachonni 11)

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: www.wiego.org.



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