

## **Organiser la main d'oeuvre au sein de l'économie informelle: relations et formes institutionnelles**

Christine Bonner et Dave Spooner

### *Résumé*

*En réponse aux défis et limitations auxquels sont confrontés les travailleurs informels et leurs regroupements, une multitude de formes et d'approches organisationnelles sont apparues au niveau local, reflétant des facteurs contextuels et particuliers à leur secteur. Cet article examine les relations entre organisations de travailleurs informels, syndicats et ONG, et démontre l'importance de bâtir des relations pour augmenter la visibilité, l'influence et le pouvoir institutionnel de ces groupes. L'importance des syndicats est soulignée et l'article se penche sur les signes d'une évolution au sein du mouvement mondial de syndicalisation, vers des politiques et des pratiques plus solidaires. Des structures nationales et internationales évidentes indiquent aussi un besoin d'évoluer vers des organisations plus massives, pour mieux susciter la collaboration des gouvernements et avoir un impact sur les développements mondiaux qui affectent les vies des travailleurs informels. Après étude, l'article conclut qu'aucune forme organisationnelle ou stratégie ne peut répondre à tous les besoins, mais qu'il faut plutôt favoriser une approche flexible et à multiples facettes du syndicalisme.*

# Organizing Labour in the Informal Economy: Institutional Forms & Relationships

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## *Abstract*

*A multitude of grassroots organizational forms and approaches have emerged in response to challenges and limitations faced by informal workers and their organizations, reflecting contextual and sector specific factors. This article examines the relationships between informal workers' organizations, trade unions and NGOs, thereby demonstrating the importance of relationship building to increase visibility, influence and institutional power. Trade unions are particularly important and the article points to signs of a shift within the international trade union movement towards more supportive policy and practice. Also evident are national and international structures indicating a need to scale up into larger organizations to engage governments and to make an impact on global developments affecting informal workers' lives. In looking at these organizational forms the article concludes that there is no one organizational form or strategy that fits all, but that a flexible, multi faceted approach to organizing is required.*

## **Introduction**

Over the past twenty years informal workers, especially in the South, have become more organized, visible and vocal in demanding rights, better conditions and livelihoods. Alongside this the international trade union movement, NGOs and development agencies have been paying more attention to the needs of informal workers. In particular the "Resolution Concerning Decent Work on the Informal Economy" adopted at the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2002 (ILO, 2002a) has increased awareness of the need to organize informal workers and spurred policy changes in the international trade union movement. However, whilst most would agree that organization is necessary there is not yet consensus amongst trade unionists nor amongst researchers and commentators on the feasibility or desirability of organizing informal workers into

trade unions, or indeed what other possible organizational forms, strategies and relationships would best enable informal workers to achieve voice and visibility and the power to change their lives (Lindell, 2010).

This article examines some of the diverse forms of organization in the informal economy and the relationships being built amongst informal worker organizations themselves, and with trade unions, other worker and non-governmental organizations (NGO). From this it suggests that there is no single appropriate organizational form, approach or strategy, but rather that a range of organizational forms and a multi-faceted approach is required. It further suggests that given the challenges and limitations faced by informal workers and their organizations, it is important that they gain the support of, and form strategic and tactical alliances with, a range of organizations in order to increase their visibility and voice. Trade unions are key actors in this, together with NGOs of various kinds. Within this framework it is crucial that informal workers are agents rather than subjects; to move from dependency to independence and to speak for themselves through their elected representatives. This requires the development of membership-based organizations (MBO) which are “those in which the members elect their leaders and which operate on democratic principles that hold their elected officers accountable to the general membership”. (Chen et al, 2007: 4).

The challenges and limitations informal workers’ organizations face are very real. Some are common across sector and country whilst others are more sector-specific. Some challenges result from the gender composition and segmentation of the informal workforce where women form the bulk of those employed in sectors with the least income, security and status (ILO, 2002b). Others relate to exclusion from the legal frameworks protecting formal workers-*de jure* or *de facto*-around which they can organize, or, conversely, over-regulation and consequent harassment by authorities. Self-employed workers in particular are excluded from protection by virtue of their lack of an employment relationship, and the perception that they are not workers. Workplaces are usually unconventional, being scattered and individualised and lacking a central point or collective employer, around which organization can coalesce, or they are difficult to reach being far flung or mobile. Many informal workers have multiple or seasonal jobs whilst others are migrant

workers working under the radar. A majority are poor and focused on survival. Their organizations struggle to collect membership dues and they lack the financial resources to sustain effective organization. It is not surprising that many trade unions are reluctant to become involved in directly organizing informal workers having neither the experience nor resources required to do so.

This article is based on the experiences and writings of the authors resulting from their work with the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) network. This includes extensive interaction with organizations of informal workers at grassroots meetings, conferences and workshops, and reading of reports, documents, correspondence of, and about, such organizations, especially those of street and market vendors, home-based workers, domestic workers and waste pickers, i.e. workers who extract and sell recyclable materials from waste and who are called by many different names, such as rag-pickers, reclaimers, recyclers etc. A debate about naming is ongoing amongst the workers themselves (Samson, 2009). These direct sources are supplemented by information and reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and global union federations, as well as academic writers and commentators in the field.

The article firstly gives an overview of different organizational forms in the informal economy from local through to international, focusing on two illustrative examples-domestic workers and waste pickers. It then analyses the relationships between informal worker organizations and other worker and non-governmental organizations, drawing out the importance of alliance-building and support. Despite misgivings by some, many within the international trade union movement feel strongly that the trade union movement should and can promote and practically support organizing informal workers. We examine this more closely, looking at the background, and recent developments in support of informal workers within the international trade union movement, drawing on our interaction with, and recent documents of, trade unions and global union federations organizing, supporting or discussing organizing informal workers.

### **Institutional Forms in the Informal Economy**

Informal workers organize in varied forms and in ways appropriate to their circumstances. Their organizations are growing

in number and scale despite the limitations they face. Drawing especially on the authors' personal engagements with informal economy worker organizations and their recording of organizational forms, as well as writings of others active in the field, we provide an overview of the different organizational forms within the informal economy, with a closer look at the situation in two sectors: domestic workers and waste pickers. This provides a background for developing an understanding of the organizational forms and relationships that are most likely to lead to effective and sustained organizations of informal workers.

How workers choose to organize, the detailed organizational form, structure and characteristics results from a complex mixture of contextual factors: political, economic, legal, organizational and sector, as well as inside and outside agency. Pat Horn, International Coordinator of StreetNet International, suggests that the political environment is key to an understanding of the way in which the structure, perspectives, characteristics and organizational forms are determined in particular countries:

Where there have been national liberation struggles, the organisation of informal workers will often adopt perspectives and characteristics arising from those struggles (e.g. the Gandhian perspective of SEWA; the socialist perspective of many informal economy workers' associations in post-colonial African countries; the social movement perspective of waste pickers' cooperative movements in Latin American countries with active anti-neo-liberal popular struggles) and corresponding organisational forms. (Horn, 2008:45)

With informal employment making up more than 60 per cent of women's employment (ILO, 2002a), and women's location in the most precarious segments of the informal economy, gender is another important determinant. A significant number of informal workers' organizations are led by women. Some women workers have chosen to organize as women only. They may begin by organizing around their interests as women and then as workers, or may consciously focus on women as workers from the start, as is the case of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India (Gallin and Horn, 2005) or the waste pickers cooperative, Coopcarmo, in Brazil (Samson, 2009). In mixed organizations patriarchy is the norm and

women struggle to assert their right to equality as members and leaders. The predominance of men in the most powerful leadership positions in the mainstream trade union movement at all levels is persistent, despite positive action taken to promote gender equality and improve representation of women in leadership positions and negotiating teams. This is attributed to a number of interlocking factors such as prejudice, lack of confidence on the part of women, the burden of domestic chores, the subordinate position of women in the labour force as well as the masculine culture and rigid practices of trade unions (ILO and ITUC 2000; ITUC 2009; ETUC 2011). This contributes to male centred agendas giving lower priority to issues and perspectives of particular importance to women.

### ***Local and national organizations***

Informal workers' organizations are diverse. Many are MBOs such as unions, associations, cooperatives and self-help groups. Others are hybrid or mixed formations that lie somewhere between an MBO and an NGO. They are diverse in terms of both size and coverage, ranging from small, fragile local organizations, to national federations and alliances, to regional and international networks and federations – both inside and outside the formal trade union movement.

Inside the union movement there are unions whose members consist only of informal workers as well as unions that have membership of both formal and informal workers. Some were created by informal workers themselves and others by formal unions reaching out to organize informal workers. Some were conceived and supported by external actors such as women's organizations, migrant workers' organizations and NGOs. There are also many forms of association, outside of the union movement by choice, lack of information or opportunity, or because of legal restrictions. Many groups of self-employed workers form cooperatives to collectively buy, sell or produce their goods or to provide a service to their members. Some are registered but many operate informally or may have the legal status of an association or society but operate as cooperatives. There are many other forms of membership-based organization, sometimes independent and sometimes interlinked with NGOs, community based organizations (CBO) or faith based organizations, which often combine the features and strategies of both MBOs and NGOs in different mixes. Some are short lived,

emerging or reviving in response to an immediate problem, but fading away when the issue is resolved or subsides while others have sustained themselves against all odds.

Increasingly we see informal workers' organizations uniting at city or national levels to engage with authorities on policy, regulatory change, and to campaign more effectively, achieving successful outcomes from time to time. These are generally sector specific national alliances such as the Kenyan National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT) (primarily associations and city alliances) or the city wide alliance *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (ARB). Pune India provides a less common example of cross sector organizing. Trade unions of street vendors, waste pickers, domestic workers, head-loaders, construction workers, and drivers of auto-rickshaws and motor tricycle vehicles have formed a city-wide Manual Labourers' Association that is *de facto* recognised by the municipal authorities as the bargaining counterpart for issues related to the informal economy.

Aside from organizing challenges common to informal workers' organizations, the different sectors of the informal economy face sector-specific problems and organizational histories. These have given rise to a tendency towards different forms of organization and differing strategies emerging most strongly. Here we examine the situation within two sectors: domestic workers and waste pickers.

Domestic workers' organizing challenges centre on the lack of recognition of and respect for domestic workers as valuable workers. This is compounded by gender discrimination, low wages, long hours, isolation and control by employers. These challenges have been well documented (ILO, 2010a; IRENE and IUF, 2008; ITUC, 2010a). Where there is coverage under labour law, it is either inferior to that of other workers or in most cases largely ignored and unenforced (ILO, 2010 a).

In response, a range of organizational forms have emerged, primarily focused on the struggle of domestic workers for worker and human rights. Domestic workers have a long history of organizing into trade unions in many countries but these have often failed to sustain themselves or to grow substantially, whether as self-organized domestic workers' unions or as a sector within a formal service sector union. Migration has also become an increasingly important factor.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in organizing, propelled by labour market changes such as the increased numbers of migrant domestic workers filling gaps in care provision (ITUC, 2010a; ETUC, 2005); public awareness of the situation of domestic workers through NGO effort and through new mobilizing opportunities such as the tripartite negotiations for an ILO Convention on Domestic Work in 2010 and 2011. Migrant women domestic workers are one of the newest groups to engage in organizing activities. This organisation usually begins on the basis of their shared status as migrant women and later progresses to encompass their status as workers, through NGOs or into varying community based groups. Another common base for organizing is through the formation of faith based groups, which in the initial stages can provide cover for domestic workers to meet with the approval of their employer. These different groups develop a form of organization which may be membership-based, but without a formal membership mechanism and dues collection system, or they may be more akin to a community based, multi-purpose organization or a non-worker controlled NGO. They provide a safe place where domestic workers can share experiences, develop confidence and leadership skills and act as a launching-pad for transitioning to a fully-fledged union or MBO and to the formation of wider alliances or federations. Cooperatives do not feature strongly amongst domestic workers but with the increasing presence of exploitative recruitment and placement agencies, domestic workers' cooperatives are beginning to emerge as placement services with a difference, having democratic structures and a political and social purpose (Bonner, 2010).

There are differences between regions and countries. Latin America probably has the most well established unions, especially in Brazil with thirty-five unions forming the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD), with supportive NGOs in many countries. In Africa, domestic workers are more likely to be organized into mixed sector unions. Membership has tended to be very small, unstable, financially unviable and neglected by the predominantly male union leadership. The recent upsurge in interest in organizing domestic workers has been somewhat successful. For example, the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Education Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers' Union (KUDHEIHA), organized over 10,500 domestic workers in the space of a year with the support of the International Union of Food, Agricultural,



Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) and the Solidarity Center, a non-profit organization, linked to the AFL-CIO (United States National Centre), that assists workers around the world to build democratic and independent unions. Another important factor in this success was the strong support given by the union general secretary (IDWN, 2009). In Asia, the organizing efforts of domestic workers has developed rapidly over the past few years, into unions or through NGOs and faith based movements. Increasing migration between Asian countries has seen the growth of unions of domestic workers organizing according to nationality, especially in Hong Kong. In Europe there are established unions of domestic workers or unions with a domestic workers' sector, which have formal collective bargaining agreements, as well as a growing number of migrant workers' groups. In the United States the upsurge has been amongst migrant domestic workers organizing as migrant women and workers. One limitation on unionization is that the National Labor Relations Act does not apply to domestic workers, effectively preventing them from forming or making the transition to a trade union (ITUC, 2010c).

An example from the USA of a "new" organizational form and strategy is provided by the *Mujeres Unidas Y Activas* (MUA) or Women United and Active, in California. Arising out of community organizing, it was formed by immigrant women to provide a support group where they could share experiences and become empowered to collectively fight for immigrant, women and workers' rights. Women who approach the organization for support are encouraged to become members and attend weekly meetings. Later they are invited to attend MUA training programmes. MUA's strategies combine solidarity activities, mobilization, advocacy, legal assistance, training and leadership development. MUA was a founder member of the National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA), formed in 2007. The aim in forming the Alliance was to collectively bring public attention to the plight of domestic workers; to bring respect and recognition; improve workplace conditions and consolidate the voice and power of domestic workers as a workforce. The benefits of national organizing are summarised by organizers of alliance members:

"The coming together of these organizations has exponentially increased the capacity, visibility and influence of domestic workers as a sector in the social

justice movement..... In addition, other sectors, including the labour movement, are beginning to recognize the strategic role this workforce plays in rebuilding the labour movement.” (Mercado and Poo, 2009: 4).

Similarly, the organizing efforts of waste pickers have become progressively noteworthy. Significant membership-based organizations of waste pickers are concentrated in Latin America and in India. Waste pickers have different challenges from those of domestic workers, although the issues of recognition, respect and valuing of their work are similar. Being self-employed means they fall entirely outside of labour protection and face unfriendly spatial, environmental, health and other city regulations, with consequent harassment. They also face increasing competition from big business through privatization, and displacement by new technologies such as incineration. Their immediate concerns and strategic focus is on the struggle for the right to a livelihood through access to recyclable materials. Additionally, they seek to increase income through collective selling and avoiding the use of middlemen. However, they are also involved in the bigger struggles against privatization, incineration and for integration into municipal solid waste management systems. Therefore cooperatives, especially in Latin America are the dominant form of organization at the base, where they have had some success in gaining recognition by their respective municipalities, and have agreements regarding access to recyclables, rent free sorting, compressing and baling facilities. In India there is greater variety of organizational forms such as unions of waste pickers, waste pickers as a sector within an informal union, cooperatives as part of an integrated union-cooperative strategy, self-help groups, groups formed by welfare or environmental justice NGOs and even worker controlled companies (Samson, 2009). In the cities of Asia and Africa waste pickers can be found on dumps and streets but little is documented about the state of organizing. Initial research commissioned by WIEGO to identify organizations of waste pickers in four Kenyan cities located 350 waste picker groups. However these were mainly small, self-help community based groups and projects rather than well-established, independent MBOs (Kuria and Muasya, 2010). Despite this there are nascent national networks being formed in both South Africa and Kenya which may aid in the development of more grounded MBOs and

support for engagement with municipalities.

Like domestic workers waste pickers have seen the need to scale up through federating and forming national associations, and international alliances or networks. Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador all have national alliances or associations that focus on struggles for policy and legislative change but also have a social and political role. For example, Brazil has a national movement, the *Movimento Nacional do Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* (MNCR) or National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials, that has been particularly successful in obtaining policy and legislative changes assisted by the support of the Workers' Party and of (ex) President Lula. The Movement is composed of MBOs only and is fiercely committed to leadership by waste pickers and non-hierarchical forms of organization. It does however, work with, and have the support of NGOs. India too has a national alliance, Alliance of Indian Waste pickers (AIW), made up of thirty five organizations, both membership-based and NGOs, and although still informally organized it has already made its presence felt through putting demands forward to ministries, with some success, and backing this up with collective demonstrations and publicity.

These examples illustrate how a range of factors differentially affect the organizational form and strategy within sectors; that no one type of organization fits all circumstances and can best address local issues and goals of increased visibility, voice and power to effect change. Gender is an important factor in the organizational form chosen by domestic workers (migrant and religious groups) as is their legal status in most cases as employees (trade unions). For waste pickers their status as self-employed inclines them towards cooperatives, and in Brazil the formation of a federated structure explicitly named "Movement" reflects their social movement political and organizational history and their identity as political as well as economic actors. Both groups find a need to scale up, to increase their visibility and tackle issues at a national as well as local level. The organizing activities of domestic workers and waste pickers have extended to include significant developments at the international level.

### ***International organizing***

International organizing is playing an increasingly important

role for both waste pickers and domestic workers. In November 2006, NGOs initiated and supported an international conference called “Respect and Rights: Protection for domestic workers!”, which was held in the Netherlands under the auspices of the Netherlands National Trade Union Federation (FNV). This led to the formation of the International Domestic Worker Network (IDWN) with its organizational base in the IUF, and with WIEGO providing technical, fund raising and personnel support. It has an active international steering committee composed of women representatives from domestic workers’ unions and networks from Asia, Africa, Latin America, USA and the Caribbean. This developing Network has focused on mobilizing around the campaign for the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which was adopted at the International Labour Conference (ILC) in June 2011. The ILO Convention campaign has provided an opportunity to garner funds and support from a range of people and organizations. The ILO Convention also serves to raise the visibility of domestic workers globally, as well as developing women leaders who can speak and negotiate effectively in international forums. Following the adoption of the Convention, the Network is turning its attention to formalizing its constitution and structures as a membership-based global organization.

Waste pickers on the other hand, coming from different organizing traditions, are grappling with deciding what kind of global organization they want and how to implement it. At the regional level, waste picker organizations from four countries took the first steps towards forming a Latin American Waste Picker Network (*Red Latinoamericana de Recicladores* (REDLACRE) in 2005. The Network now has representation from 12 countries including recently from the Caribbean. Although there is variety in the composition of national organizations within the Network, all are MBOs, with NGOs strictly playing a technical support role. The focus is on sharing of information and experiences to learn from each other on organizational and technical issues, and solidarity actions. On the global level, the first World Congress in 2008, “Waste pickers without Frontiers” (WIEGO: 2008), strengthened their worldwide connections, extending into Africa and Asia, and producing several international meetings to plan collective activity and discuss global institutional structure. One important global activity is the participation by waste pickers (and their allies) in the United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) negotiations. This forum

has allowed waste pickers to elevate their international visibility and advocate for alternative funding mechanisms in support of just solutions to climate change (Inclusive Cities, n.d.).

Home-based workers as well as street and market vendors are also organizing internationally. Home-based workers have formed two sub-regional networks, HomeNet South Asia, and HomeNet South East Asia, with the possibility of moving towards a global network over the next few years. National HomeNets are a mix of MBOs and NGOs. Street and market vendors have the best established international alliance, StreetNet International, with membership restricted to MBOs, active democratic governance structures and with a quota system to ensure gender equality in its leadership. The model adopted is akin to an international union federation (StreetNet International, n.d).

In a WIEGO workshop held in Bangkok on March 2011, MBO representatives from different sectors of the informal economy expressed common views on the role and advantages of international organizing: it provides recognition, increases visibility, allows informal workers through their representatives to influence international policy and thus national policy, promotes information exchange, learning and solidarity across the sector globally and can provide practical support to national organizations by assisting with fund raising, access to international supportive groups such as WIEGO, and education and capacity building (Mitullah, 2010).

This range of institutional forms in the given sector examples demonstrates that informal workers are adopting multi-faceted and multi-scale approaches to organizing based on their circumstances and needs. At the base key strategic issues influencing form are whether their priority is livelihood development, where cooperatives are a likely choice, or a struggle for rights with unions and associations being the dominant forms. In reality many organizations of informal workers integrate both forms. How, where and when organizations develop is deeply influenced by legal, political, social factors as well as sector specific issues. At an international level there is commonality of purpose but differences of form and development pace, influenced by international opportunities, cultural, social and gender influences. There is a commonly shared strong sense that informal workers should represent themselves and thus that MBOs are the desired institutional form. Finally, the type of supportive relationships and alliances they build are important in determining

organizational form and in particular organizational success and sustainability. In the next section we look at this more closely.

### **Relationships between Institutional Forms**

Many organizations of informal workers are small and fragile, still developing or newly constituted. Falling outside of the mainstream industrial relations systems or policy setting forums they have limited credibility with, and access to, those in power. MBOs have found a need to form relationships between themselves such as between cooperatives and unions as well as differing relationships or alliances with other organizations to access resources, increase their visibility, run successful campaigns and gain representative voice and influence.

### ***Trade Unions and Informal Worker Cooperatives***

With the growth of the informal economy, organizations are increasingly experiencing the need to straddle the realms of both union and cooperative. SEWA for example uses a twin strategy of “struggle” and “development”. It is a trade union (struggle for rights) yet has over 100 cooperatives run by its members combined into a federation of cooperatives (livelihood development). Similarly, KKPKP (Trade Union of Waste pickers, India), with 6,000 mainly women members, formed a savings and credit cooperative, scrap shop cooperatives to sell recyclable materials at a better price and a solid waste doorstep collection cooperative to integrate waste pickers into the local solid waste management system (Samson, 2009). Domestic workers’ unions are beginning to set up cooperatives to act as a collective rather than commercial placement agency, provide training and negotiate better wages. In Trinidad and Tobago the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) has recently formed a service workers’ cooperative and has negotiated higher pay. This has helped increase the membership of the union.

The view that trade unions and cooperatives need to work together to provide for the dual needs of informal, self-employed workers –livelihoods and rights- is recognised at an international level. The ILO initiated a programme, SYNDICOOP, jointly designed and implemented by the ILO, International Confederation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU) (now ITUC) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). They ran pilots in East and South Africa, 2004-2006. The aim was to improve the working and

living conditions of unprotected informal economy workers in selected African countries, through pilot projects aimed at creating decent employment and income. This was to be achieved through strengthening the capacity of national and local level trade unions and cooperative organizations to work together constructively in the informal economy. The project was hailed as a success, but has not been widely replicated as was the plan (ILO, 2005). There is, however a growing interest by those organizing in the informal economy to promote coops as a democratic organizational form that can meet the economic needs of self-employed informal workers, whilst at the same time linking with, or being part of the union movement, to provide a vehicle to achieve rights and protections.

### ***Informal Worker Organizations and Trade Unions***

In a growing number of countries, national trade union centres (also known as federations) play an important role in organizing and representing informal economy workers both directly and indirectly. All across the African continent there are numerous examples of this. National centres have established new unions or associations (Angola, Mozambique), supported and encouraged affiliated unions to organize informal workers (Ghana, Nigeria), built alliances with non-union associations of informal workers (Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe). In the case of Zambia and Zimbabwe national associations of informal worker have associate membership of the trade union national centres, or have a memorandum of understanding, which entitles them to representatives at union meetings, and to participate in discussions, but with limited constitutional democratic rights.

This close cooperation between national union centres and informal workers' organizations significantly enhances informal workers' effectiveness in representation, defence of workers' rights, and international visibility and support including recognition by local and national governments; a means for informal workers to exercise their rights in respect of ILO Convention 87 (Freedom of Association) and Convention 98 (the right to organize and bargain collectively); and a means for informal workers to affiliate internationally and enjoy international solidarity, amongst others (Horn, 2008). With the support of national and international trade union organizations informal workers have been able to influence negotiations on international standards at the ILO and where informal workers' organizations and unions work together on campaigns

and solidarity activities their effectiveness is enhanced, such as in StreetNet International's 'World Class Cities for All Campaign'. In South Africa prior to the FIFA World Cup, a multi-sector campaign committee was formed, including municipal, building and transport workers' unions, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and NGOs.

Turning to the sector cases we see very differing relationships between organizations and trade unions. As noted above, trade unionism amongst domestic workers is not uncommon. Although governments and employers have not always recognized domestic workers as workers, unions have accepted their (majority) status as employees and workers. However, as domestic workers are mainly women, there are often underlying tensions within mixed sector unions where invariably the leadership is composed largely of men who fail to prioritize organizing domestic workers or adopt a patronizing attitude towards them. Similar attitudes are present within the leadership of national centres to which domestic workers' unions may be associated hampering the development of domestic workers' unions and women's leadership. However, as a result of the campaign for an ILO Convention domestic workers have garnered more support for organization building from unions and national union centres as well as from ITUC, particularly promoted by the ITUC Women's Committee. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Union (HKCTU) has been proactive in helping build domestic workers' unions led by women officers. However, because of the multiplicity of migrant domestic workers from different countries, and NGOs supporting the different groups, they have organized into separate nationality based unions. Taking up the issues of a common minimum wage and the campaign for an ILO Convention, the HKCTU was able to bring local and migrant domestic workers' unions together into one federation, the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions (FADWU).

There is little evidence of national centres assisting waste pickers to organize, apart from SEWA, which now has the status of a national centre in India, and isolated examples in Latin America such as the *Union de Clasificadores de Residuos Urbanos Solidos* (Urban Solid Waste Recyclers' Union) in Uruguay. This union is also affiliated with the national centre and has mounted a collective struggle with a union of municipal workers against privatization of the dump (Samson, 2009). Waste pickers are self-employed and do



not historically have a close relationship with trade unions. In Brazil, as in many Latin American countries, trade unions are regarded as being bureaucratic and having political affiliations. Therefore, waste pickers have generally chosen to remain independent of the union movements (Horn, 2008).

International networks of informal worker organizations and nascent networks have differing relationships with the trade union movement, according to country and sector but closely linked to the relationships at national level. So the International Domestic Workers' Network has a close relationship and is partly integrated into the trade union movement through its organizational base in the IUF. This strong link and backing from a global union federation has opened doors within ITUC and the ILO, enhanced IDWN's status as the legitimate representative of domestic workers globally within the unions, with NGOs and with governments thus positively impacting on their lobbying and advocacy efforts for government support for a convention.

The developing global network of waste pickers has not yet built a relationship or garnered support from the trade union movement. But they have a growing interest in working with the labour movement following an exploratory meeting with ILO-ACTRAV (Workers' Bureau), and discussions held at the UNFCCC negotiations in Copenhagen with ITUC concerning common interests on climate change and green jobs. However, as discussed below, waste pickers in Latin America and now globally have garnered significant support from relationships and alliances with NGOs.

Other sector networks also have differing relationships with trade unions. Originally, home-based workers had some international success with the adoption of the ILO Convention on Homework (C 177) in 1996. This was achieved through a collaborative effort led by SEWA, with other organizations of home-based workers who formed HomeNet International (which subsequently collapsed), global union federations such as the IUF, and were supported by researchers. Relationships between the HomeNets in Asia and the union movement are now limited, although they include some trade unions (e.g. SEWA in India, Nepal Home Based Workers Union (NHBWU)) in their networks. StreetNet International, on the other hand works with trade union national centres in many countries, has conducted joint organizing projects with the global union federations, Union Network International (UNI) and Public Services International

(PSI), and is recognized by ITUC and the ILO as an important player in the organization of informal workers. It has been given status at the ILC and has been invited to the last two ITUC Congresses. This may be partially explained by the linkages of StreetNet founders to the trade union movement, but also by the growing number of unions of vendors, particularly in West Africa and to some extent in Latin America. This has raised the profile and provided increasing acceptance of their status as workers amongst trade unionists, which has translated in Africa in particular to a broader recognition of vendors and their problems, concrete organizing activities, access to tri-partite and other negotiating forums.

### ***Membership-Based Organizations and NGOs***

NGOs are often important agents and catalysts in the development of MBOs. In areas where MBOs have little influence, profile or organizational strength, NGOs may attempt to fill the vacuum – either by advocating or campaigning on the workers’ behalf, providing support and advice, and/or establishing a workers’ group or association.

At first glance, the differences between the MBOs organizing informal workers and NGOs are obvious. An MBO with a defined membership and leaders elected by, and accountable to members, can legitimately claim to represent, and negotiate on behalf of, informal workers. An NGO, on the other hand, has no such democratic mandate. In reality, however, the distinction is less clear, particularly in some sectors where workers may depend on external groups to provide the necessary organizational skills, experience and financial resources. This ambiguity is especially evident where the NGO begins to organize groups of workers resulting in a hybrid organizational form.

There are many examples of MBOs being initiated and supported by NGOs in their early development, which go on to become self-sustaining independent MBOs under the democratic control and policies of their members. In Brazil the initiatives and support of NGOs was a critical factor in catalyzing the formation, development, and sustaining of organizations of *catadores* (Dias and Alves, 2008). At a continental level the REDLACRE has developed with the support of the AVINA Foundation amongst others. More recently WIEGO is providing support for global and regional networking. This support includes assistance with funds

through joint projects, capacity building, the opportunity to share information, experiences and knowledge through cross-sector meetings and media, and support for global engagement such as at the UNFCCC negotiations. Here a strong alliance has been forged with environmental justice groups campaigning against incineration and promoting recycling (Global Alliance of Waste pickers and Allies), the key partner being the Global Anti Incineration Alliance (GAIA).

Domestic workers are often supported in the initial stages of development by NGOs who start off advocating on behalf of domestic workers, leading to the formation of organized groups which ideally become independent, self-sustaining MBOs. Due to resource constraints, skills and capacity limitations and the often inability to collect regular and sufficient membership dues or to raise funds without assistance or a mediating organization, one finds that sometimes the transformation to an independent MBO never takes place or is incomplete and a situation of dependency on, or dominance of, the NGO persists. This often leads to resentment on the part of domestic workers who repeatedly raise the importance of self-representation and independence.

We are a women's organization, organized by women household workers, and not managed by an NGO. They give us solidarity and we grew through their help, which we very much appreciate. But we manage ourselves. Our weak point is our financial situation; our resources are always very limited. However, everyone always does what she can, and it is this solidarity by many individuals which makes our organization strong. (Basilia Catari Torres, National Federation of Household Workers of Bolivia, IRENE and IUF: 43)

NGOs are often a very important source of support for informal workers and fill important gaps in organizational skills, access to resources and institutional influence. In many cases, without their initial or on-going support some MBOs would certainly cease to exist. Elizabeth Tang of the HKCTU noted that, "our close collaboration with NGOs in building the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions has been key, especially NGOs that work closely with migrant workers in Hong Kong." (WIEGO Workshop, Bangkok, March 2011).

For high profile international campaigns various organizations combine as in the case of the domestic workers' campaign for an ILO convention. In this case the IDWN joined hands with, and had the support of, the international union movement and local and high profile NGOs dealing with child labour, slavery, human rights, migration as well as faith based organizations.

NGOs play a critical role bringing their advocacy, media, fund raising skills as well as an ability to facilitate engagement across a wide range of organizations. A willingness and ability of informal workers organizations to join hands with other supportive organizations, whilst retaining or gaining organizational independence and leadership, democratic decision making processes and setting their own agenda, appears to offer the best opportunity for success and sustainability. In particular, the support of the trade union movement at different levels can provide legitimacy and influence and access to institutional power.

### **International Trade Union Developments**

Trade unions remain the most important representatives of workers worldwide. As we have seen, many informal workers' organizations have opted to organize as, transform into or align with, trade unions. Internationally this has not been without a struggle. In recent years international union bodies have adopted more supportive policies, but uncertainty as to the importance or feasibility of implementation remains. Many unions and MBOs already organizing informal workers have been actively pressing ITUC and affiliates to take a more active role in supporting informal workers' organizing efforts. Given its importance for such unions/MBOs, this section takes a closer look at the development of international policies and strategies on organizing informal workers.

The struggle of informal workers for recognition by the international trade union movement is a long standing one. SEWA has been an important force in this. When SEWA was founded in the early 1970s one of its first battles was for recognition as a trade union in Gujarat State, but it took three decades for it to be recognised in India as a national centre. Internationally, a breakthrough took place in 1983 when the IUF accepted SEWA into affiliation, giving SEWA recognition as a legitimate trade union centre and its self-employed members recognition as workers with a rightful place in the trade union movement. Over twenty years later, in 2006, SEWA became

an affiliate of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which merged to become ITUC in the same year. This gives SEWA a voice in the highest trade union body, with SEWA General Secretary being elected as one of ITUC's Vice Presidents at ITUC's 2010 Congress.

SEWA has over the years combined with other national union centres and networks organizing informal workers, to influence the policies and practical organizing activities of the international trade union movement. In 2003 SEWA co-organized and hosted an international conference "Combining our Efforts" bringing together 60 participants from 35 trade unions and other informal economy workers' organizations already organizing workers in the informal economy. This led to the formation of the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) on Organizing Workers in the Informal Economy. Represented on the Committee were SEWA, Ghana Trades Union Congress, Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), *Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos* (CROC), ORIT (the former Inter-American regional organization of ICFTU), along with StreetNet International and HomeNet South-East Asia. This was followed three years later by a second international "Combining our Efforts" conference in Accra, Ghana; side meetings at the annual ILC in Geneva and commissioning of education materials for organizers. Whilst the ICC is no longer functional the trade union centres involved continue to put pressure on ITUC to be more pro-active in their support for informal workers' organizing. In 2010 SEWA, the Ghana Trades Union Congress and CROC jointly submitted a resolution to the ITUC Congress calling for a programme of action and a platform for organizing informal workers within ITUC. The resolution did not reach the floor. Instead a general clause was included in the composite resolution on organizing, calling upon trade unions to "meet the challenge of organizing all workers within their respective jurisdictions without distinction as to employment status" (ITUC, 2010 b). Although this did not meet the expectations of the group, it further raised the profile and provided an impetus for the development of more active programmes in the regions and internationally, something that ITUC committed to at its founding Congress when adopting its constitution which states: "... shall initiate and support action to increase the representativeness of trade unions through the recruitment of women and men working in the informal as well as the formal economy, through extension of full

rights and protection to those performing precarious and unprotected work, and through lending assistance to organizing strategies and campaigns” (ITUC, 2006).

ITUC policy was developed in more detail at its General Council meeting in February 2011, when it adopted a resolution calling for a range of actions to “respond to the urgency and the gravity of the situation faced by the hundreds of millions of workers in precarious and informal work worldwide” (ITUC, 2011). These include demands for social protection, higher minimum wages, labour inspection, property rights, training opportunities, and the regulation of temporary work and labour migration agencies. It proposes a meeting of affiliates, regional organizations and global union federations to discuss the transformation of precarious and informal work into secure, decent work and implementation activities, including setting up an informal network of affiliates and global union federations to promote this.

The global union federations are increasingly paying attention to the organization of informal workers as their affiliates report on shrinking formal workforces and increased casual and precarious work arrangements in the north as well as the south. The IUF, with its early recognition, its practical support for organizing domestic workers and its open minded approach provides the best example of the positive role that can be played by global union federations. The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) began showing an interest in informal transport workers when it commissioned case studies on organizing informal transport workers in 2006. The ITF 2010 Congress declared “...there is a need to recognise and work with other forms of worker organization which precarious workers have developed among themselves, and to link them to the trade union movement. The ITF will develop a 2011-14 strategic plan to develop networks of organizations, which could include both unions and associations, which act on behalf of workers whose livelihoods come from precarious or informal work in the transport sector” (ITF, 2010: 4). The Building Workers’ International (BWI) too supports organizing projects among informal forest products workers and construction workers. In India for example, the BWI’s Global Wood and Forestry Programme supports a project organizing among Kendu and Sal leaf-pickers (Kendu for wrapping bidi cigarettes; Sal used for making plates, bowls etc), led by state-wide affiliated unions of informal leaf workers. And the role of the PSI and UNI in working

with StreetNet International has been mentioned above.

These global union federations are increasingly recognizing the importance of building links and cooperation with associations of informal workers, but do not necessarily have the capacity to provide direct support to a myriad of small, under-resourced and often precarious organizations. For them to provide meaningful support and assistance, it is becoming necessary to encourage the development of national, regional and international networks and alliances of informal workers with whom they (and their national affiliated trade unions) can engage more effectively.

## **Conclusion**

The growth and intensification of informal work and new informal work arrangements has stimulated new organizing approaches. Informal workers have adapted traditional worker organizations such as unions, and strategies such as collective bargaining, to suit their circumstances. They have developed different and more flexible organizational forms, led by informal workers themselves, and are forging new alliances and relationships. As the world's labour force faces increasingly informal and precarious employment, the trade union movement has to confront questions about its future. How can the labour movement be reorganized to include and represent the majority of the world's workers- those in informal work? Will the organizational forms being developed by informal workers become predominant? Are we seeing the emerging characteristics of an international trade union movement appropriate for a twenty-first century global economy?

A labour movement fully inclusive of workers in the informal economy might look very different. Firstly, the leadership profile would be transformed. Informal workers' organizations would surely demand full membership of trade unions and of national trade union centres (or other national worker bodies), rather than a form of associate membership, leading to representatives of informal workers gaining the majority voice on many executive committees, and assuming positions of leadership not only in their own organizations but in federations nationally and internationally. And, given the gender composition of the informal workforce, unions would have to ensure gender equality and active promotion of women leadership. Whenever women workers organize, the issues of autonomy and leadership are crucial, requiring the development of

political space where independent and creative initiatives recognize the specific problems of women workers and focus on their needs and sensitivities (Gallin and Horn, 2005).

There would be no single organizational form or approach, but a flexible and multi-faceted, multi-scale set of interlocking organizational forms, built on successful models and activities, and capable of identifying and seizing openings and opportunities. Relationships and tactical (short term) or strategic (longer term) alliances would be important and constructed with a wide range of organizations, helping to leverage resources, provide support and maximize influence and impact on local authorities, national governments, international institutions, employer bodies.

The functions of unions would have to adapt to the constantly changing needs of the membership. For many informal workers, employment is transient: today's street vendor may become tomorrow's home-based worker or transport operator. Successful organizations are likely to be those with a broad base and flexible response to changing employment conditions: a 'union for life' where membership is retained through changes in occupations and working environments, and where they provide for a wide range of functions. These may include mutual social protection, cooperative and livelihood development, self-help welfare provision, access to financial and legal services, skills training and so on.

Collective bargaining will inevitably change as well. Bargaining counterparts and the negotiating agenda will have to reflect the priority needs and demands of both formal and informal workers. New forums, new bargaining approaches, new pressure tactics and new methods to resolve disputes will be needed, and are already in the making through informal workers' organizations.

Finally, effective organization of informal workers may provide the opportunity to change the relationship between unions and governments, having the potential to reverse the loss of power and influence felt by unions in many countries over the past few decades. It is important that the international trade union movement seize this opportunity.

## **Endnotes**

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