

#3 Social Protection Responses to Covid-19

Informal Workers and Dialogue for Social Protection

Introduction

This week's brief focuses on how informal worker organisations in South Africa and Argentina have sought to foster productive dialogue spaces for engagement with the government around the social protection needs of informal economy workers in response to COVID-19. We look at how informal economy representatives across both countries have been able to use such spaces to prioritise food security. In South Africa, this advocacy was framed through the key role informal food vendors play in the provision of affordable food to the working poor in the townships, and hence the importance of their right to work. In the case of Argentina, this space has provided an opportunity to restructure the frequency of government cash transfers from monthly to a weekly, to assist households with budgeting and cash flow.

In Argentina the development of a space for dialogue, in the form of the Emergency Social Committee, appeared recently in response to the pandemic. One of the major strengths of this structure has been its ability to replicate itself at a local level, giving grassroots worker voices a chance to be heard. However, being a new space has meant a lack of institutionalisation or formalisation at a federal level, raising concerns about sustainability. In comparison South Africa's space is of longer standing, and more institutionalised, an important reminder that the more established the structures in place before the crisis, and the longer the relationship with government - the easier it will be for IE organisations to engage around COVID social protection responses. Such institutionalisation, however, does not always translate into a conducive space for dialogue. Entrenched governmental attitudes towards the IE, and a lack of commitment in terms of resources and time to the process of dialogue, remain challenges in the South African context.

Argentina

Incorporating informal worker representation into governmental COVID response strategies¹

On the 27th of March the Argentinean federal government created the **Emergency Social Committee (ESC)** to engage stakeholders in dialogue around the COVID-19 crisis. The goal of the ESC is to tackle issues that arise as a result of the pandemic, in particular food security,

¹ This case draws from the information collected from an interview with Carolina Palacio, from the Argentina's National Waste Picker Federation (FACCyR, Federación Argentina de Cartoneros, Carreros y Recicladores), UTEP and WIEGO team member.

income security and job security. The governance structure of the ESC, which covers all three levels of government - national, provincial and local - is chaired by the minister of Social Development, and includes representatives from Buenos Aires metropolitan area and province, mayors from five cities and representatives of churches and civil society organizations. Equally important, social movement and worker organization representatives from the formal and informal sectors were involved, including a representative of UTEP (Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular) and Barrios de Pié - both of which are central unions with a broad informal sector membership. UTEP is a broad coalition, created by the union of other popular economy organizations, has an estimated base of 600,000 workers and aims to increase its membership base to 5 million members².

Giving worker voices a platform at the grassroots level

One important feature of the ESC dialogue initiative is its orientation towards replication at a local level, ensuring grassroots representation. Following the first meeting of the federal level ESC, the mayor of each participating municipality established a local level dialogue committee, made up of a similar cross-sectoral representation from their municipality. Several local dialogue committees are currently operational, such as the one from the capital, Buenos Aires. These local dialogue committees operate independently, but deal with responses to COVID at a municipal level. For example, they have played an important role in implementing the "*El barrio cuida al barrio*" (the neighbourhood takes care of the neighbourhood) programme, which the federal government created in April. This programme consists in specific monitoring of groups at risk, disseminating preventive measures and distributing health and safety items at the sub-local level.

Prioritising food security

Food security emerged as a top priority in the federal meetings of the ESC, together with measures to guarantee income security. It is significant to note that food security also registered as one of the main concerns for informal economy worker organisations in Argentina. At the second federal ESC meeting, for example, strategies regarding the expansion of food purchases for municipalities and provinces and changing the top up the frequency of the Alimentar³ Card was discussed. After the meeting, the card, which is normally topped up monthly, started to be topped up on a weekly basis. This ensured households have more regular cash flow, and families can better manage their household budgets.

² El Editor Platense, "Nació UTEP, el sindicato de las organizaciones sociales", December 22nd 2019. Available at:

https://eleditorplatense.com.ar/nota/12388/nacio_utep_el_sindicato_de_las_organizaciones_sociales

³ The Alimentar Card is a tool for everyone to access the basic food basket. It allows the purchase of all types of food, except alcoholic beverages. It is intended for mothers or fathers with children up to 6 years of age who receive the Universal Child Allowance (AUH). Pregnant women from 3 months of age who receive the Pregnancy Benefit and people with disabilities who receive the AUH are also eligible.

The challenge of institutionalizing dialogue spaces at the national level

Unfortunately the federal level Emergency Social Committee has not been able to sustain, as its meetings were held irregularly, and stopped after a month into the lockdown, although the local committee meetings continue to occur, as with this decentralized policy design, each local has autonomy to run their own meetings. While Argentina is currently under lockdown, its restrictions will start easing soon, and when this happens, having an operational ESC at the federal level would be helpful in guiding and overseeing the piloting of measures for the post-lockdown period, and for ensuring that workers' demands are fed back into federal level dialogue.

Political context can enable or disable dialogue

One of the factors that has created a conducive climate for the Emergency Social Committee dialogue initiative, was a recent change in government. Elections in December 2019 ushered in the *Frente de Todos*, a centre-left coalition government in Argentina more sympathetic to workers' demands, and more open to creating institutional spaces of dialogue. Indeed, some workers' leaders from trade unions and workers associations, including street vendors and waste-pickers, are now working in high level positions in government bureaucracy. On the one hand, this meant that informal dialogue channels were opened and are being used between informal workers and government. But, on the other hand, this has also created tensions in the workers' movement, as not all claims are being addressed. This limitation creates the need to deploy pressure strategies from outside the dialogue spaces open by the state, such through media statements, petitions and demonstrations, to leverage workers' position in those institutional dialogue spaces.

South Africa

In South Africa, informal economy worker organisations have engaged the government in dialogue around the right to work, rather than social protection measures directly. Nevertheless, this experience holds a number of important lessons when reflecting on how dialogue and worker participation can facilitate and secure the social protection needs of informal workers. Furthermore, it's equally important to remember that the spaces informal workers are able to foster for dialogue with government around the right to work, can also be used to engage the government around 1) the implementation of emergency social protection measures in response to crisis, and 2), the development of sustainable, affordable and appropriate social protection legislation, policy and infrastructure geared towards the needs and specific context of the informal economy.

Engaging in dialogue with government around the right to work has enhanced the food security of many informal economy workers

In the case of South Africa, informal economy worker organisations have successfully used pre-existing dialogue space with the government to advocate for the right to work of spaza shops

and informal food traders during the lockdown. This space had been created by the work of an advisory group initiated by StreetNet International and WIEGO, to counsel the government on the implementation of ILO recommendation 204. Because informal food vendors are key in the provision of affordable and accessible food for the vulnerable and working poor in the townships, (many of whom themselves make their living through the informal sector), this advocacy has contributed towards *enhancing food security* - a key aspect of social protection. Research conducted by WIEGO⁴ has shown that a large number of people depend on access to informal food vendors; with the cost of a food basket sourced through this sector coming in lower than the same basic basket from a commercial retailer. With the lockdown people were forced to buy from supermarkets, which increased their food budgets at precisely the time when many had lost their income. Furthermore, informal food vendors offer greater accessibility and convenience by operating outside of commercial hours and being more accessible in residential areas.

The first set of regulations instituted at the beginning of South Africa's lockdown, set out a range of limitations which prohibited informal workers across many sectors from operating, either implicitly or explicitly. With the long queues outside retail food shops it quickly became evident that this was creating a food security crisis, and so informal economy worker organisations decided to intervene. WIEGO made contact with the South African Informal traders Alliance (SAITA), led by Rashida Muller, and the Joburg Informal Traders Platform, (JITP). They jointly released a statement on the 25th of March, which they then took to government⁵ advocating for the right to work on the basis of securing livelihoods, as well as promoting food security in the townships.

Building on pre-existing structures and relationships is an advantage

In addition to this statement, this coalition of informal economy representatives also worked through a pre-existing platform and leveraged the long-term relationship they had been endeavouring to build with the government, to get their voices heard. This platform was an advisory group created on the initiative of StreetNet International and WIEGO, to counsel the national task team, the national Dept of Labour and other government Departments responsible for advising the government on the implementation of ILO recommendation 204 which calls for the transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy (2015). Informal economy representatives used the space of this advisory group to take some of the arguments that informal economy worker organisations were developing (which advocated for the classification

⁴ See research conducted by the Hungry Cities Project: <https://hungrycities.net/> and Food Security and Street Vendors During COVID-19: Interview with WIEGO's Caroline Skinner <https://www.wiego.org/blog/food-security-and-street-vendors-during-covid-19-interview-wiegos-caroline-skinner>

⁵ This statement, built on an earlier statement supported by 9 IE workers organisations, released on the 20th calling for a living cash grant, urgent interventions to protect those working (mass provision PPE – gloves, soap, sanitizer), the issuing of health guidelines and inclusion of the informal sector in any discussions going forward.

of certain categories of informal workers as essential workers, and linked to this their key role in ensuring food security) to the government.

Initially there was resistance and the informal economy representative had to push the Department of Labour to convene a meeting of the task team virtually under the context of lockdown. Two other parallel processes were taking place, which helped the informal worker representative on the advisory to push this agenda. First, the ILO came forward and convened a complementary process of trying to identify COVID related needs of IE workers in South Africa. Second, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) itself - to which the R204 national task team reports via the decent work country programme - established nerve centres, including a community nerve centre in Pretoria, which allowed our informal economy representative to push the interests of IE workers and get some direct representation on forums in various sectors.

As a result, the government revised its Disaster Management Regulations on the 2nd of April to include “spaza shops and informal food traders, with written permission from a municipal authority” in the definition of essential services. All types of cooked food vendors remained excluded. Some municipalities initially resisted, however after more concerted advocacy, the Ministry of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs ordered that all offices relevant to the issuing of permits be opened immediately and provided a template permit for municipalities to use. Within a few days, thousands of permits were issued, with about 4,000 in Johannesburg alone.

The more established the structures in place before the crisis, and the longer the relationship with government - the easier it will be for IE organisations to engage around COVID social protection responses. In a crisis situation unless there has already been investment in getting processes of dialogue in place, it is very difficult to get the government at national or local level to engage properly. The ongoing efforts over the years to engage the government as well as the process of setting up the advisory team for the R204 task team were important in this regard, and they also helped to facilitate a climate where the workers organisations felt confident to try whatever avenues were available to them.

There is a lack of recognition that dialogue is a process that takes time and resources

Despite the fact that informal economy worker organisations met with some success in their engagement with the government around the right to work, they tell us that this space for dialogue remains uncondusive for meaningful engagement for a number of reasons.

In the world of formal trade unions, it is taken for granted that stakeholders need to set aside a significant amount of time, possibly two months from the start to finish, meeting once a week, to engage in a meaningful dialogue process. Worker parties need to be provided with transport and given time off work and a place to report back and to reach a decent agreement in the interests of both. It is a process that takes time, logistics and resources. This is something that

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officials often do not understand when it comes to engaging with informal economy worker representatives. Without that understanding and the necessary resources to support that understanding you are unlikely to have good outcomes from consultation. For example, Jane Barrett of WIEGO tells us that in South Africa, although there is a national task team for Recommendation 204, the national Department of Labour and other government Departments in that task team have not put aside the necessary human and financial resources to make that a very vibrant space of consultation and negotiation.

Informal workers are not recognised as workers in these dialogue forums on the same terms as their formal counterparts

The terms of engagement are not always equal for informal economy workers. This is illustrated by their representation within NEDLAC, to which the R204 task team reports. Informal economy workers are represented on this forum, only via the community constituency and not in the workers group. It has been a battle to shift the discourse, and get employers, trade unions and the government to not only recognize IE workers as workers but also to see them as part of the workers group.

COVID 19: StreetNet International and WIEGO engagement & updates

Check out WIEGO's Briefing Note which provides a brief overview of current social protection debates and issues from an informal worker perspective

<https://www.wiego.org/publications/extending-social-protection-informal-workers> (available in English, Spanish, French and Russian).

ABOUT WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.