

Organizing Informal Workers: Benefits, Challenges and Successes

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ABSTRACT

The informal workforce represents more than half of all workers in most developing countries and a significant share of workers in developed countries. This paper summarizes the history and forms of organizing informal workers, providing a timeline of organizing, typologies of organization forms and strategies, and data on numbers of organizations by type, sectors and countries. It discusses what different groups of informal workers bargain or negotiate for, and with whom; and analyses the strategic goals, benefits and challenges of organizing. It presents some recent legal and policy victories by organizations of informal workers. The concluding section extracts some lessons learned and makes a few recommendations, especially for governments and policy makers.

Introduction

The informal workforce comprises both the self-employed in informal enterprises (i.e., unincorporated or unregistered enterprises) as well as wage workers in informal jobs (i.e., without social protection through their work). It represents a large and, in some countries, growing share of total employment.¹ It comprises more than half of non-agricultural employment in most developing countries: 82 percent in South Asia, around two-thirds in sub-Saharan Africa and East and South-east Asia, and just over half in Latin America. Only in the Middle East and North Africa does it represent less than half (45 percent) of the total workforce. The informal workforce also represents a growing share of total employment in most developed countries (Vanek et al. 2014).²

Informal employment is a greater source of employment for women than for men, outside of agriculture, in three out of five developing regions: South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. In East and South-east Asia (excluding China) the percentage is roughly the same; only in the Middle East and North Africa is informal employment a greater source of non-agricultural employment for men than for women. Because more men than women are in the workforce in most countries, however, men comprise a larger overall share of informal employment than women in all regions (Vanek et al. 2014).³ Moreover, gender segmentation within the informal workforce by status in employment, branch of industry and place of work tends to disadvantage women informal workers, relative to men informal workers, making it particularly difficult for women to organize (see Box 1).

¹ There is, as yet, no official international definition of informal employment in agriculture, so few countries measure it. In those that do, the share of informal employment in total employment is larger than the share of informal employment in non-agricultural employment.

² These estimates, prepared by James Heintz for the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) network, provide a comparative perspective on informal employment in Asia and of women and men informal workers across the regions. In 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and WIEGO compiled data for 47 countries from different regions, available on the [website](#) of the ILO Statistics Department. These were used in preparing the new regional estimates presented here. Detailed country tables are also in ILO and WIEGO 2013.

³ In labour force statistics, ‘status in employment’ delineates two key aspects of the labour arrangement: the *allocation of authority* over the work process and the outcome of the work done; and the *allocation of economic risks* involved. The International Classification of Statuses in Employment includes five main statuses: employer, employee, own account worker, unpaid contributing family worker and member of producer cooperative.

Box 1: Gender segmentation in the informal workforce in developing regions

There is gender segmentation in informal employment by status in employment, branch of economic activity and place of work. In terms of *status in employment*, in most regions, women in informal employment are more likely to be self-employed than men. The self-employed can be further disaggregated into employers, own account operators and unpaid contributing family workers.⁴ Women informal workers are also more likely than men informal workers in most regions to be own account workers, who have lower incomes, on average, than informal employers.

In South Asia, however, own account workers comprise a larger proportion of men's non-agricultural informal employment than women's. This is because contributing family workers account for a particularly sizeable share of women's informal employment, comprising 26 percent of women's non-agricultural informal employment. For all developing regions, the percentage of women contributing family workers is at least twice that of men. In the sub-regions of Asia, it is three times greater. Employers comprise only between 2 and 9 percent of non-agricultural informal employment, with the proportion higher for men than women. Very few women in informal employment are employers: 0 percent in South Asia, 1 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 2 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 9 percent in East and South-east Asia (Vanek et al. 2014).

In terms of *branches of economic activity*, very few women work in informal construction and transportation activities, the one modest exception being female construction workers in South Asia. These two sectors are clearly male-dominated. Manufacturing accounts for an equal or greater share of women's informal employment than men's in all regions, except for sub-Saharan Africa. A similar pattern holds for trading activities, with the exceptions in this case of the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. Services other than trade and transportation (e.g., domestic work) account for a larger share of women's employment than men's across all regions (Vanek et al. 2014).

Although the regional estimates do not include analysis by *place of work*, other recent statistical analyses indicate that women are overrepresented in two forms of employment that take place in private homes: home-based work (in the home of the worker) and domestic work (in the home of the employer) (Chen and Raveendran 2014, Raveendran et al. 2013). Recent statistical analyses also indicate that women are less likely than men to be engaged in workshops or factories outside the home, but are engaged alongside men in public spaces, including to varying degrees in construction, street trade and waste-picking depending on the country (Chen and Raveendran 2014, ILO and WIEGO 2013).

⁴ In some countries, members of producers' cooperatives represent a fourth (but usually small) category of informal self-employment. Where relevant, data on members of informal producers' cooperatives are included in the overall estimate of informal non-agricultural self-employment, but separate regional estimates for this particular category of self-employment are not presented in WIEGO Working Paper Number 2 (Vanek et al. 2014).

Those working in the informal economy, and especially women, face many challenges, including low and fluctuating incomes, difficult working conditions, lack of legal protection, numerous legal and physical risks, and often low social standing. Yet the informal workforce is not adequately covered by legal and social protections. This is partly because informal workers have not been recognized as workers eligible to be covered by labour standards and social protection, or as workers suitable for purposes of union organization and collective bargaining (Bonner and Spooner 2011a and 2011b, Schurman and Eaton 2012). Nor have their activities been seen as legitimate economic pursuits requiring supportive policies and services. Rather, the informal economy and those who work in it tend to be stigmatized by policy makers and the general public. As a result, most informal workers face an unfavourable, if not hostile and punitive, policy and regulatory environment.

The working poor in the informal economy, especially women, need to organize to overcome these structural disadvantages, as organizing would give them the power of solidarity and a way to be seen and heard by decision makers with the power to affect their lives. As this paper will show, informal workers are increasingly self-organizing or organizing in unions, cooperatives or associations. And organizations of informal workers have engaged in collective action of different forms: bargaining, negotiating and advocacy; mobilization and campaigns; production and marketing; and mutual aid or self-help. But the primary goal of organizing is to increase their collective and representative voice. Collective voice comes through being organized in democratic member-based organizations. Representative voice comes through having representatives of these organizations participate in relevant policy-making, rule-setting, collective bargaining or negotiating processes. Ideally, the representation of member-based organizations in the relevant processes should be ongoing, not one time or ad hoc, and should be statutory.

This paper summarizes the history and forms of organizing informal workers; analyses the strategic goals, benefits and challenges of organizing; and presents some recent legal and policy victories by organizations of informal workers. The first part describes recent efforts to organize informal workers, both women and men, providing a timeline of organizing, typologies of organizational forms and strategies, and some data on numbers of organizations in different sectors and countries. The second part discusses a central strategic goal of organizing: collective bargaining or negotiating, focusing on what different groups of informal workers bargain or negotiate for—and with whom. A third section analyses the benefits and challenges of organizing and global networking. A fourth part summarizes several recent legal and policy victories by organizations and networks of informal workers. The concluding section extracts some lessons learned and makes a few recommendations, especially for governments and policy makers.

The paper relies heavily upon the field-based knowledge and experience of the WIEGO network and the 34 national, regional and international networks of organizations of informal workers in its membership. Much of the evidence and data provided draw on the research, documentation and analysis of these organizations and networks by WIEGO, including analysis of a database of over 800 organizations of informal workers. The paper also builds on research by other scholars and activists. Unless we quote directly from WIEGO sources, we do not cite them, as this would become too repetitive and cumbersome. All WIEGO sources are included in the references.

Finally, a note on terminology. In this paper, we use the term ‘membership-based organizations’ (MBOs) to refer to organizations “in which the members elect their leader and which operate on democratic principles that hold the elected officers accountable to the general membership” (Chen et al. 2007, p. 4). So defined, a MBO is different from a conventional non-governmental organization (NGO), which, however well-intentioned or effective, operates as an outside entity, with no membership for those it serves. The paper focuses on MBOs of informal workers, which can take different forms—trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups or associations.

Local organizing, global networking

Informal workers are affected by forces at the local, national, regional and international levels. As a result, and over time, they have organized at all levels from the local to the global.

- At the individual, local and national levels, organizing can help workers share resources to achieve improved incomes, negotiate with employers or authorities to improve working conditions, and influence policies, programmes and regulations that can directly impact them.
- Regional organizations allow workers to share information and learn from successes in other locations, while also influencing regional decision makers.
- International networks give workers a strong, collective voice on the global stage to foster changes in international instruments and policies—which can lead to changes in national legislation.

HISTORY OF ORGANIZING

Organizing informal workers has a long history. At the dawn of the industrial capitalist age in the 18th century, the whole economy was informal. As Dan Gallin (2011, p. 1) notes, in his historical overview of organizing informal workers, “...in the beginning all workers were informal.” Workers organized

into unions, and fought and won rights, and their situation started to become formalized. Many workers, however, especially in developing countries and particularly women, were left out of this process and remained in what became known as the informal sector or informal economy (*ibid.*).

More recent organizing among informal workers can, arguably, be traced back to the founding of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India in the 1970s (see Box 4). During the 1980s, domestic workers' organizations in Latin America formed the multi-country regional Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers (CONLACTRAHO). In 1983, SEWA was recognized as a trade union and accepted as an affiliate by the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF). In the 1990s, home-based workers came to the fore, organizing into HomeNet International (1994) and HomeNet South East Asia (1997) to advocate for home-based workers and engage in negotiations at the International Labour Conference; this resulted in the adoption of the Convention on Home Work (C177) in 1996. Recognizing the important role that data on home-based workers had played in the campaign for the convention, SEWA and its allies founded WIEGO in 1997 to provide research, statistical, technical and advocacy support to organizations of informal workers, and to help build sector-specific networks of these organizations (Bonner and Spooner 2011b; Chen 2000, 2013).

The need for transnational linkages and global advocacy was driven in large part by the globalization of production and markets. Informal workers' organizations recognized the need to engage with international agencies and the international development community, which deal with issues that affect their work and livelihoods. Given that businesses and governments were taking advantage of the rapid transmission of ideas and technologies, organizations of informal workers felt the need to do the same. In effect, globalization provided both the impetus and the means for these organizations to link up transnationally and engage on the global stage.

In the late 1990s, the ILO began a process of engagement around the informal economy leading to the discussion on "Decent Work and the Informal Economy" at the 2002 International Labour Conference (ILO 2002a), making this a strategic moment for transnational network building and alliances. WIEGO and member informal workers' organizations were very active in the preparations for and the discussions at the conference, influencing its ground-breaking resolution and conclusions on several key points: notably, ensuring that informal workers, and their organizations, should be officially recognized and seen as having the right to collective bargaining, and that own account workers should be considered workers—as they do not hire others but use their own labour, often more so than their own capital—and should be represented in the Workers' Group, not the Employers' Group (Bonner et al. forthcoming, Bonner and Spooner 2011a, Chen 2013).

For organizations of informal workers and their members, advocacy in international venues is greatly enhanced by the formation of global networks. Since 2000, several transnational networks of

organizations of informal workers have been formed or consolidated: StreetNet International in 2002, HomeNet South Asia in 2000, the Latin American Waste Pickers Network (Red Lacre) in 2005, the International Domestic Workers' Network in 2009, the Global Network of Waste Pickers in 2009 and HomeNet East Europe in 2013. The International Domestic Workers Federation was officially launched in 2013. Initially an informal network, the Federation grew in numbers and solidarity through the successful campaign for the international Domestic Workers Convention (C189) adopted at the 2011 International Labour Conference. For a thumbnail history of organizing of informal workers, see Box 2.

Box 2: A brief history of organizing by informal workers

1970s: [SEWA](#) of India was the pioneer organization, founded in 1972 as a trade union in the state of Gujarat in India.

1980s: SEWA began to make headway in the international trade union movement when it gained affiliation to the [IUF](#) in 1983. This important step meant that for the first time, informal self-employed workers were recognized within the trade union movement as workers with a right to form trade unions. Domestic workers had been organizing into unions in many parts of the world but their voice was weak. In 1988, CONLACTRAHO held its first Congress, giving a more powerful voice to domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean. Waste pickers also began organizing into cooperatives in Latin America in this period.

1990s: Home-based workers came to the fore in the 1990s, setting up HomeNet International (1994) and successfully campaigning for an ILO Convention on Homework (C177), adopted in 1996. The pace quickened when WIEGO was established to support informal workers in 1997. Street vendors held their first international conference in 1995, and in 2000 the StreetNet Association was formed, paving the way for the launch of [StreetNet International](#) in 2002. Waste pickers in Latin America stepped up their organizing into cooperatives throughout the 1990s. In the meantime, the trade union movement and the ILO were beginning to recognize that the informal workforce was growing and could no longer be ignored.

2000s: Organizing took off nationally, regionally and internationally. A key event was the adoption of the Resolution and Conclusions Concerning Decent Work in the Informal Economy at the 90th session of the International Labour Conference in 2002. This recognized informal workers—both wage earners and own account workers—as having the same rights to decent work as other workers. Various mobilizing activities to prepare for the conference helped to build collective organization in different parts of the world.

The number of grass-roots informal workers' organizations increased rapidly in this period, and national and international networking activities intensified. In Latin America, national movements of waste pickers (*catadores* or *recicladores*) formed, and in 2004 the Latin American Waste Pickers Network was founded. Although HomeNet International collapsed in 2000, [HomeNet South Asia](#) was founded following a successful regional dialogue with employers and governments leading to the [Kathmandu Declaration](#). In 2006, domestic workers came together internationally; this led to an agreement to form their own international network, the [International Domestic Workers' Network](#). The first World Conference of Waste Pickers took place in 2008, resulting in ongoing global networking (see the [conference report](#)).

2010s: The movement continues to grow. Informal workers are increasingly visible and recognized, and are making concrete gains. In 2009, 2010 and 2011, waste pickers set out their demands at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change conferences (see more at [www.globalrec.org](#) and [waste pickers and climate change](#)). In 2011, domestic workers won a major victory when the International Labour Conference adopted the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (see [The Campaign for a Domestic Workers' Convention](#)), and in 2013 they transformed their network into the first International Domestic Worker Federation, completely run by women ([read more](#)).

For a more detailed timeline, see [Informal Workers Organizing Internationally—Timeline of Key Events](#).

Source: [www.wiego.org](#).

The WIEGO network maintains the only database on organizations of informal workers: the [WIEGO Organization and Representation Database](#) (WORD). It is by no means comprehensive, and is skewed towards the occupations/branches of informal activity in which WIEGO is most actively engaged. It requires constant updating as the situation changes rapidly, especially with local organizations. There are 805 organizations in the database: around 240-250 organizations each in Africa, Asia (including the Pacific), and Latin American and the Caribbean; 62 in Europe; 18 in North America and 1 in the Middle East. In terms of occupations or branches of economic activity, the organizations in the database have concentrated on organizing vendors (266 organizations, notably in Africa), domestic workers (173 organizations, notably in Asia), waste pickers (133 organizations, notably in Latin America) and home-based workers (121 organizations, notably in Asia). See Table 1.

Table 1: Organizations of informal workers by occupational group and region*As of 27 March 2015, based on 805 entries*

Occupational groups	Africa	Asia/Pacific	Caribbean	Europe	Latin America	Middle East	North America	Total by occupational group
Organizations: all groups	240	250	11	62	223	1	18	805
Agricultural workers	23	15	1	2	10	0	1	52
Construction workers	11	10	1	4	1	0	0	27
Domestic workers	30	70	7	21	32	0	14	173
Home-based workers	10	76	0	15	20	0	0	121
Sex workers	2	13	1	10	19	0	1	46
Transport workers	31	21	1	5	5	0	2	65
Waste pickers	32	29	1	1	70	0	0	133
Vendors	130	47	2	13	73	0	1	266
Other	51	9	3	17	20	1	2	133
Total by region	320	319	17	88	250	1	21	1016

Source: WORD database.

Notes: 'Other' is where non-specified, usually where organizing multiple sectors. Totals by group and region differ from the number of organizations as many organizations have members in multiple occupational groups. In other words, although there are 805 organizations listed in the database, many of them are counted more than once.

Over 100 of the organizations in the WORD database are affiliates of the regional and international networks that the WIEGO network works most closely with and draws its institutional membership from: the International Domestic Workers' Federation, three regional HomeNets (Eastern Europe, South Asia and South-east Asia), StreetNet International and the regional Latin American Waste Pickers Network. Table 2 presents the number and regional distribution of the national or local affiliates of these networks. The two international networks, the International Domestic Workers' Federation and StreetNet International, have a similar distribution pattern in terms of countries where they have affiliates, with more in Africa than in other regions, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, then Asia and the Pacific plus Europe and North America, although both networks are working to ensure the more even distribution of affiliates in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean. Two (of the three) regional HomeNets are in Asia; the third is in Europe. The one regional alliance of waste pickers is in Latin America.

Table 2: Affiliates of regional and international networks, number and geographic distribution

Network	Number of affiliates	Number of countries per region			
		Africa	Asia/Pacific	Latin America/Caribbean	Europe/North America
Domestic workers					
International Domestic Workers' Federation	54	18	12	17	7
Home-based workers					
HomeNet Eastern Europe	10	-	-	-	10
HomeNet South Asia	49	-	49	-	-
HomeNet South East Asia	5	-	5	-	-
Street vendors					
StreetNet International	51	25	5	13	8
Waste pickers					
Red Lacre	17	-	-	17	-

Sources: Compiled by WIEGO from websites; personal communication with the International Domestic Workers' Federation, StreetNet and HomeNet South Asia (30 March 2015); and presentations at the Global Conference of Home-Based Workers (February 2015).

Not all of the informal workers' networks and their affiliates in the WIEGO network report how many individual members they have: For some, we have estimates or unverified figures. Others, whose annual fees are based on claimed membership, provide details from each affiliate, and are therefore likely to be more accurate. But here is what the available reported figures suggest. Although we do not have verified membership numbers for most of the waste picker organizations or networks, an estimated 200,000 waste pickers belong to the 17 affiliates of the Latin American Waste Pickers Network, with 85,000 members in the Brazilian movement. The 54 affiliates of the International Domestic Workers' Federation report a total of 261,180 members; the 51 affiliates of StreetNet report 523,257 and HomeNet South Asia's 49 affiliates report 450,388 members and/or beneficiaries. The five affiliates of HomeNet South East Asia report a combined total of 28,364 members (with HomeNet Philippines accounting for 19,598 of these). SEWA, which is a founding member of HomeNet South Asia and StreetNet, has nearly 2 million members. These numbers suggest that between them, the affiliates of the regional and international networks of domestic workers, home-based workers and street vendors have a combined total membership of over 3 million informal workers.

FORMS OF ORGANIZATION

Neither informal workers nor their organizational structures and strategies fit easily into mainstream definitions of workers and workers' organizations. The informal workers' organizations take various forms: trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups or associations or hybrid forms. For registered organizations, their legal form is often dictated by what is possible under the regulations of their respective countries, and may, therefore, differ from their de facto structure, strategies and activities. Regardless of particular form and registration, however, what is important is how well each organization deals with the economic concerns of its members, and whether or not the organization's governance is representative and democratic (Bonner and Spooner 2011a, Carré 2013).

Different criteria can be used to assess whether or not the leadership of an organization has the authority to represent its membership, and whether or not the internal governance is democratic, including:

Type of leaders: Are leaders from the working class membership and/or middle class? Does the leadership reflect the gender, class, ethnicity of the membership?

Degree of member control: Do the members elect leaders who take decisions on their behalf or is decision-making top-down? Are elected leaders from the membership of informal workers?

Internal governance system: Are meetings of the elected leaders and membership held regularly? What committee structures are in place? How well do these elements work in practice? Are elections held regularly according to the constitution of the organization? Is there a mechanism for dues collection?

In some cases, especially with home-based workers, organizations are started by pro-labour NGOs. In such cases, it is important to assess whether or not the NGO is committed to developing a democratic, representative, membership-based organization of informal workers. NGOs that aim to do so need to find ways to develop interim structures in the absence of elected leadership; these should allow informal workers to exercise voice, assume leadership roles and gradually take over the organizing, administrative, advocacy and other functions of the organization. Some organizations have a hybrid structure with both NGO and MBO members, and with representatives of both on their board. HomeNet South Asia has recently shifted from a hybrid MBO-cum-NGO structure into a more representative, democratic MBO-led structure with a constitution that mandates the respective role and power of the MBO and NGO affiliates, giving MBO affiliates a greater voice in decision-making (Bonner and Carré 2013).

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

Given that most informal workers are not in a recognized employer-employee relationship, even if they are wage employees, and that a large percentage are self-employed, organizations of informal workers typically pursue a wider set of strategies than trade unions of formal workers (Carré 2013). See Box 3 for a typology of common core and supplemental strategies.

Box 3: Typology of organizing strategies

Common core strategies: pursued by most organizations

- Collective bargaining with employers/contractors
- Collective bargaining/negotiating with other dominant stakeholders: notably, government (local, provincial, national)
- Policy advocacy
- Mobilization campaigns

Supplemental strategies: undertaken by some organizations

- Economic development services, including financial and marketing services
- Collective economic action: e.g., cooperatives that provide services of various kinds (such as waste collection) and producer groups that do joint marketing
- Collective access to social protection: negotiating access to existing schemes and advocating for more inclusive schemes or providing their own schemes

Source: Adapted from Carré 2013.

The largest organization of informal workers in the world, SEWA, pursues a twin strategy of ‘struggle’ (i.e., union organizing and collective bargaining) and ‘development’ (i.e., service delivery and other interventions). It engages in all of the strategies listed in Box 3 and more (see also Box 4).

Box 4: A brief overview of SEWA

Registered in 1972, SEWA is today the largest trade union of informal workers in the world, involving 2 million working poor women in 10 states of India. Members are drawn from multiple trades and occupations, and from all religious and caste groups. SEWA is the most influential organization of informal workers worldwide, having influenced policies, norms and practices at the local, national, regional and international levels. It is a pioneering leader of the international labour, women's and microfinance movements, and a member of the International Trade Union Confederation.

The SEWA approach involves meeting with specific groups of working poor women, understanding their struggles and developing joint strategies. There is an emphasis on self-reliance, both individual and collective, and organizing on four sources of security: work, income, food and social security. While SEWA is primarily a trade union, it engages in a wide range of interventions, including leadership development, collective bargaining, policy advocacy, financial services (savings, loans and insurance), social services, housing and basic infrastructure services, and training and capacity-building. In sum, it pursues a joint strategy of struggle (union-type collective bargaining, negotiations, campaigns and advocacy) and development (direct interventions and services of various kinds).

Organizing is the central strategy of SEWA and takes several forms. In addition to organizing its members by trade into unions, SEWA helps them form cooperatives, other local associations, and state and even national federations. All members of SEWA belong to a relevant trade group and are voting members of the SEWA trade union; many also belong to one or more other SEWA MBOs—service, producer or marketing cooperatives; marketing companies; and, in rural areas, savings and credit groups. The trade union is federated at the national level, and the cooperatives and rural associations are federated into separate state-wide organizations.

Of particular concern to SEWA is the fact that the working poor, especially women, do not have a voice in the institutions that set the rules affecting their lives and livelihoods. SEWA seeks, therefore, to expand the voice of its members through representation at different levels. Its efforts include building the capacity of its members and creating opportunities for them to participate in local councils; municipal, state and national planning bodies; tripartite boards; minimum wage and other advisory boards; sector-specific business associations; and local, state and national labour federations.

Source: Adapted from Chen 2006, 2008, 2010.

Despite the example and leadership of SEWA in the growing international movement of informal workers' organizations, organizing women informal workers and empowering them to become leaders, particularly in organizations with both men and women members, remains a challenge. The gender division of labour limits the time women have for activities outside the home, and gender norms and relationships can constrict their physical mobility and/or their involvement in the public sphere. Further, when women assume leadership roles, they may not be as respected as their male counterparts, as stereotypes persist that women are emotional and not capable of exerting authority. These contribute to their being ignored or silenced in group meetings or formal settings.⁵ One solution to these issues involves all-women organizations such as SEWA. Some organizations with both men and women members have stipulated that leaders must be all women (e.g., Sisula Sonke, an agricultural workers' union in South Africa) or at least half of all leaders must be women (e.g., StreetNet International) (Bonner and Carré 2013).

Gender norms and relationships that impact women informal workers are quite common across sectors and countries, although they vary in degree and manifestation. They contribute to a second set of factors that pose a challenge to organizing women informal workers: namely, those associated with status in employment and place of work. As noted earlier, women are concentrated in the more disadvantaged areas of informal employment (subcontracted and unpaid family work) and places of work (private homes). In the case of subcontracted workers, it is not clear who is ultimately responsible for their work orders and pay rates: the immediate contractor, the supply firm that outsourced production, or the lead firm that governs the whole value chain, planning production, designing products and/or selling finished goods. This makes it difficult for subcontracted workers to bargain for more secure work orders and higher pay rates, and to seek recourse when work orders are cancelled, finished goods are rejected, pay rates are below the minimum wage or payments are delayed. In the case of unpaid contributing family workers, should they bargain alongside the head of the family firm or farm with suppliers and buyers/customers and/or with the head of the family farm or firm? Organizers find it difficult to locate and organize home-based workers, and, especially, domestic workers who work in the homes of others, as they remain invisible and isolated from one another. In sum, because of women's structural disadvantages in the informal labour market, organizing informal women workers is both more difficult and more necessary.

⁵ The WIEGO network has [a project dedicated to building the strength of women waste pickers in Brazil](#), led by Sonia Dias, WIEGO's waste specialist based in Belo Horizonte.

TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF ORGANIZATIONS

Increasingly, as described above, organizations of informal workers are linking up transnationally, in many cases, due to the inspiration of SEWA and/or with support from WIEGO. SEWA was a co-founder of WIEGO and continues to be represented on its board. Together, SEWA and WIEGO helped co-found StreetNet International, and, together with UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women, now UN Women), HomeNet South Asia. With the IUF, WIEGO helped co-found and continues to support the International Domestic Workers' Federation. WIEGO has also worked closely with the Latin American Waste Pickers Network and supported the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (a non-formal alliance) by hosting its website and newsletter, convening meetings, and facilitating participation in global forums and other global activities (Bonner and Carré 2013, Chen 2013).

The form or structure of regional and international networks varies from more formalized structures to less formal alliances. StreetNet, founded in 2000 and officially launched in 2002, has 51 affiliates in 47 countries. It operates with a trade union-like structure based on direct representation by national affiliates. The International Domestic Workers' Federation, although younger (the network was founded in 2009, the federation officially launched in 2013), also has a formal trade union-like structure with a constitution and elected representatives from 54 affiliates in 44 countries. The three regional networks of home-based workers—in Eastern Europe, South Asia and South-east Asia—all have a hybrid structure comprising both informal workers' organizations and support NGOs. In part this is because there were few pre-existing organizations of home-based workers. As noted earlier, HomeNet South Asia has recently undergone a major transition from its NGO-type structure and governance to one based more on democratic decision making by MBOs of home-based workers (Bonner and Carré 2013).

The Latin American Waste Pickers Network (Red Lacre), the only regional alliance of waste pickers, is based on a social movement philosophy and form. It defines itself as being anti-bureaucracy and hierarchy, and has no traditional office holders (e.g., no president). Its secretariat is divided among three countries, rotates every two to three years, and is appointed at large conferences/assemblies. Its leadership is drawn exclusively from waste pickers, but the network is dependent on NGOs (Bonner and Carré 2013).

There is also a Global Alliance of Waste Pickers. But the organizations of waste pickers in this non-formal alliance have focused on sharing and advocacy across borders rather than on institution building. In terms of global advocacy, alliance members have established links primarily with environmental justice NGOs, notably the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, for recognition of the role of waste pickers in mitigating climate change and, thereby, in contributing to sustainable

environments. They have demanded a share in the Green Climate Fund, and more recently have focused on the ILO to demand recognition as workers (Bonner and Carré 2013).

The organizations in the WORD database categorized by type and level of operation encompass: local non-union organizations, including cooperatives, self-help groups and associations (262); trade unions, both local and national (341); union federations (122); non-union federations (224); and regional or global federations or alliances (18). Cross-tabulating occupation/branch of economic activity with type/level of organizations, we find that domestic workers are most likely to be members of unions with both mixed membership and only informal members; transport workers are most likely to be members of union organizations, national federations and (more so) unions with both formal and informal members; both home-based workers and street vendors are most likely to be members of unions of informal workers and (more so) non-union organizations; waste pickers are most likely to be members of non-union organizations, both local and national federations/associations; agricultural workers are most likely to belong to national organizations, both union and non-union; and sex workers are most likely to belong to non-union national federations/associations but also to their own trade unions. See Table 3, noting, however, that for some sectors, local organizations are not well recorded.

Table 3: Overall analysis of key organizational types by levels and occupational groups

	Local cooperatives and self-help groups	Local associations and networks	Trade unions of informal and formal workers, all levels	Trade unions of informal workers only, all levels	Trade union federations informal and formal workers	National and provincial federations, alliances, networks, associations	International, regional and global	NGOs	Total
Agricultural workers	5	4	7	9	10	16	1	0	52
Construction workers	0	1	6	5	8	7	0	0	27
Domestic workers	3	20	26	72	21	19	5	7	173
Home-based workers	27	21	10	19	7	27	3	7	121
Sex workers	0	3	0	5	4	24	5	5	46
Transport workers	0	1	23	19	13	9	0	0	65
Waste pickers	50	15	2	11	3	37	1	14	133
Vendors	7	90	12	60	25	62	2	8	266
Other	1	14	23	32	31	23	1	8	133
Total all organization	93	169	109	232	122	224	18	49	1016
	262		341						

Notes: Agricultural workers include fisherfolk, forest products workers, etc. Local includes city. Province includes state, county, district or region within a country. NGOs are included where they are hybrid formations, which include groups/MBOs of informal workers.

In terms of strategy, the regional and international networks of organizations of informal workers offer their affiliates some mix of the following opportunities:

- Information sharing, for example, on strategies and organizing
- Solidarity and alliance-building around common issues or threats
- Mutual support and learning for national advocacy
- International advocacy: for instance, at the International Labour Conferences, the World Social Forum, UN conferences on climate change and sustainable development, and economic development forums such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- Global campaigns: for example, the successful campaigns by home-based workers and domestic workers for international conventions, and StreetNet's World Class Cities for All Campaign, which targets common policies of evicting vendors from public spaces when mega-events take place, such as the World Cup (Bonner and Carré 2013).

While some remain weak, most of these networks and organizations have been able to leverage resources and influence policies on behalf of their members. Furthermore, by acting collectively by sector and across sector—at the local, national, regional and international levels—these networks and organizations have been able to secure policies, laws or legal judgements in support of one or more of the groups in many countries; two international conventions (for home-based workers and domestic workers); and growing recognition worldwide of the economic and social contributions of informal workers.

Collective bargaining, negotiating and advocacy

As detailed above, neither informal workers nor their organizations fit easily into mainstream definitions of workers, workers' organizations and organizing strategies. This mismatch is perhaps most pronounced when it comes to collective bargaining, as a large share of informal workers are self-employed, and most informal wage workers do not have a recognized employer. Whom do informal workers need to bargain with and what do they need to bargain for? If they bargain with local government for infrastructure services, is this collective bargaining, as defined by trade unions, or should it be considered negotiating or advocacy? Informal workers' organizations are often asked these questions by outside observers, especially trade union organizers and scholars.

Collective bargaining is usually understood as taking place between an employer and employees to achieve a collective agreement, primarily around wages and working conditions.⁶ Workers in the informal economy, including self-employed own account workers, also engage in forms of collective bargaining through their MBOs. Their counterparts across the table, however, are often not employers, but other entities. Street vendors most often negotiate with local authorities, for example, and with different municipal departments on issues such as with police regarding harassment and confiscation of goods. Waste pickers negotiate with local authorities for storage and sorting facilities, or, more ambitiously, for the right to provide collection and recycling services for which they are paid. Many need to negotiate with buyers for better prices for recyclables.

Unlike workers in the formal economy whose rights are usually laid down in labour statutes, most informal workers do not have statutory collective bargaining rights. While the right has been acknowledged by the ILO in its 2002 ILO Resolution and Conclusions concerning Decent Work in the Informal Economy, including for own account workers, it has not generally been extended to these workers. Most often, negotiations take place in ad hoc meetings, often arising out of a crisis, or in consultative forums without statutory obligation on the part of the authorities, and without enforceable agreements or continuity. While dialogues, consultations or meetings to resolve immediate disputes play a role in enabling informal workers to raise their voices and make gains, agreements reached can be easily ignored or undermined.

Whom informal workers bargain/negotiate/advocate with—and for what—depends on their status in employment, the economic activity in which they are engaged and their place of work. Their status in employment and overall work arrangements tend to define the key counterparts in the private sector whom informal workers need to bargain with: The self-employed in informal enterprises, both employers and own account workers, need to bargain with suppliers and buyers/customers; employees need to bargain with an employer; casual day labourers with multiple employers and their brokers; subcontracted workers with a lead outsourcing firm and/or its intermediaries; and unpaid contributing family workers either with suppliers and buyers/customers together with the head of the family firm or farm and/or with the head of the family firm/farm herself or (more likely) himself. But most informal workers also have to bargain with public sector institutions at, especially, the local level, but also at the provincial and national levels.

What informal workers bargain for is often defined by the economic activity they are engaged in. Street vendors need a secure place to vend in a good location and basic infrastructure services at the vending site, for example, while waste pickers need access to waste and the right to bid for solid

⁶ See the ILO's definition of collective bargaining: [C154: Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981 \(No.154\)](#).

waste management contracts. What informal workers bargain for, and with whom, is also defined by their place of work. As noted, street vendors have to negotiate with municipal governments to secure their vending sites. Waste pickers also have to negotiate with municipal governments to secure the right to reclaim recyclable waste from households or neighbourhoods, municipal bins, open dumps or landfills. Home-based workers have to bargain with local government for basic infrastructure services to make their homes more productive. Domestic workers bargain with the individual or household whose home they work in. In addition to the demands and needs that are specific to their status in employment, economic activity and place of work, all informal workers need to bargain for legal recognition and identity, the right to organization and representation, access to social protection and accessible/affordable transport.

Under a collaborative project with the Solidarity Center of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and trade union scholars at Rutgers University, WIEGO commissioned a set of case studies of collective bargaining campaigns by informal workers in different countries: domestic workers in Uruguay, home-based workers in India, street vendors and hawkers in Liberia, transport workers in Georgia and waste pickers in Brazil. Table 4 summarizes the priority issues, organizing challenges and bargaining counterparts of each group of workers.

Table 4: Collective bargaining campaigns: priority issues, organizing challenges, bargaining counterparts

Sector/group	Priority issues	Organizing challenges	Bargaining counterparts
Street, market vendors and hawkers	Right and space to vend	Not regarded as workers by selves and others	Municipality: local economic development, health and safety, zoning
	Facilities: storage, shelter, toilets, water	Controlled by politicians, 'mafia'	
	Protection against police harassment	Fear of harassment by authorities, police	National and municipal police
	Safety and security		Suppliers and buyers
	Competition: protection against bad effects	Competition among selves and with formal sector	
	Access to credit	Time spent on organizing means loss of income	
Home-based workers		No forums for bargaining	
	Equal income, benefits as factory workers	Isolated in homes, invisible	Contractors
	Identifying employer	Time-double burden of work and home care	Tripartite boards Suppliers and buyers

Sector/group	Priority issues	Organizing challenges	Bargaining counterparts
	End to exploitation by intermediaries	Fear of losing work	
	Access to regular work	Restrictions imposed by religion, culture	
	Access to markets (own account)	Children working	
	Access to credit (own account)	Unprotected by labour law or disguised status	
Waste pickers and recyclers	Access/right to recyclable waste	Low status and self-esteem	Government: national and local
	Integration into municipal systems	Fear of losing work	Dealers in recyclables
	Work higher up the recycling chain	Fear/dependency on middlemen	Recycling companies
	Fair prices for recyclables	Competition among selves	
	Recognition and improved status	Time to meet means loss of income	
	Health and safety	Child labour	
	End to exploitation by intermediaries	Not protected by labour law	
Domestic workers	Recognition as workers	Isolated and invisible in homes	Employers
	Protection against dismissal, abuse	Fear of employers and losing jobs	Employer associations
	Freedom of movement		Government
	Freedom to change jobs (migrants)	Dependency on employer for housing, etc.	
	Fewer hours, more rest	Not protected by labour law	
	Better living conditions	Lack of time: long hours	
		Fear of authorities (migrants)	
Transport workers (urban passengers)	Access to routes and passengers	Mobility	Municipality
	Protection against	Competition among selves and with formal	Formal companies

Sector/group	Priority issues	Organizing challenges	Bargaining counterparts
	harassment	sector	Customers
	Health and safety/ accident protection	Control by politicians, 'mafia'	
	Parking and facilities	Threats by employers	
	Petrol and spares prices and fares	Fear of harassment by police/authorities	
	Competition—protection against bad effects	Time for organizing means loss of income	
Women workers: all sectors	Safe and affordable childcare	Fear and lack of confidence	Government
	Income protection during/after childbirth	Cultural and religious barriers	Employers
	Physical security	Often in scattered locations	Formal companies
	Protection from sexual harassment	Dominated by men in sector	Community elders
	Equal income for equal value work	Lack of time	
	Access to higher income	Childcare and home care	

Source: Adapted from Budlender 2013, table on pp. 25-26.

As discussed in the section on transnational networks, informal workers' organizations and networks are, increasingly, engaging in collective negotiations and advocacy at the regional level, with regional banks and intergovernmental cooperation associations, and at the international level with the ILO (all groups), with UN-Habitat (all urban workers) and with the UN climate change negotiations (waste pickers). Informal workers are demanding: recognition as workers who contribute to the global economy, appropriate international norms that recognize and value informal workers, and global processes that include representatives of their organizations.

Benefits and challenges

As the evidence suggests, informal workers are self organizing and being organized on a greater scale and faster pace than is widely known. But why are they organizing? What are the benefits to them, including of having a representative voice in relevant policy-making, rule-setting, collective

bargaining or negotiating processes? And what are the challenges to forming and maintaining organizations and gaining a representative voice in relevant processes?

BENEFITS

Joining forces through their own organizations can provide many benefits to the working poor in the informal economy, and in particular to women workers. The benefits are felt in different domains of workers' livelihoods and lives. Organizing confers greater voice, visibility and validity on informal workers, which in turn enables them to exercise greater influence on the wider environment that impinges on their livelihoods. Whether or not they gain greater influence over this environment, organizing leverages the following benefits:

1. Economic benefits

- Workers can use their collective strength to negotiate better wages and conditions.
- Workers receive better prices from those who buy their products.
- Workers pool their limited resources and increase their access to financial resources.

2. Social protection benefits

- Informal workers can access existing social protection systems.
- Organizations can build mutuality structures and achieve improved support systems for their members: running schools, childcare centres and health centres, and mobilizing assistance during disasters or hardships.
- Organizations can improve working conditions, including by fostering occupational health and safety approaches for informal workers.

3. Intangible but consequential benefits

- Improved self-esteem, and both social and personal empowerment among informal workers.

As noted above, informal workers need to, and do, organize at the local, regional and transnational levels. Regional organizations enable additional information sharing and regional influence. Transnational networks help foster change in international policies, which in turn can lead to change at the national level (Bonner and Carré 2013, Carré 2013).

CHALLENGES

The formation and establishment of transnational and global networks underscore the specific challenges that informal workers' organizations face in all arenas and at all levels. Building and sustaining organizations is a challenging endeavour for both formal and informal workers. All strive ultimately for democratic, worker-led structures and governance, solidarity and shared learning. All have to overcome the barriers posed by differences in language, culture, politics and organizing traditions.

Resources are almost always scarce. Global organizing is expensive and electronic communication has not (yet) replaced the need for meetings, congresses and so on. In addition, all global worker networks have to ensure they are relevant for and link to grass-roots members who are facing more immediate local and national struggles. Due to the nature of informal work and informal workers' organizations, additional challenges present themselves and common challenges are more intensely felt.

The recent wave of network formation is still in its formative phase; time and institutionalization matter. Domestic workers have had a toehold in the trade union movement for many years, which enabled their global network to secure its base in the IUF, and helped the rapid build-up of domestic workers' unions in some countries. Associations of street vendors have been in existence for many years, and have provided the basis for national and global organizing. Home-based workers, with little organized base and minimal trade union support, have as yet to succeed in developing a global organization or a truly worker-led regional body. Waste picker organizations are underdeveloped or non-existent in most countries, with exceptions in many countries of Latin America and in India, where they have existed for 20 years. The absence of a strong, widespread grass-roots base, however, has not prevented the formation of global networks in their different forms, nor their achievement of goals beyond the level at which their base should dictate. In other words, the sum can be more than its parts.

On the other hand, building strong MBOs at the local and national levels is essential for global networks to become and remain a significant and credible representative force. Unavoidably, the strength of local organizations matters for the strength and sustainability of the network. The challenge, then, is how to maximize the global reach of networks and their limited resources to provide support for strengthening and growing local organizations. Both the organizations and the networks face a number of organizing challenges.

CHALLENGES IN BUILDING LOCAL INFORMAL WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS

It is often difficult to organize informal workers or recruit them into existing organizations. Most informal workers do not work in factories or firms, although some do. And most do not work an

eight-hour work day; most work longer, less fixed hours, leaving little time at common times of day to meet and discuss issues and strategies. Further, a key constraint or need around which workers might want to organize may differ by their status in employment and branch of economic activity. As noted earlier, organizing and recruiting women informal workers is particularly challenging, because they often work in private homes where they remain invisible and isolated; they have less time for meetings at the beginning and end of their (often especially long) workdays when they have to cook and otherwise take care of their families; and they are more likely than men to be subcontracted workers and unpaid contributing family workers (in which case it is not clear whom they should bargain with).

Informal workers' organizations at the local and network level face many challenges beyond recruiting members, both internal and external.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Internal challenges relate to capacity, representativeness and sustainability

Capacity: Both the networks and their member organizations need capacity-building of various kinds, including to establish democratic, representative structures; to educate, mobilize and serve their members; to engage in effective collective bargaining, negotiating and advocacy; and to manage the operations and finances of organizations/networks.

Representativeness: Related to organizational strength are questions of structure, governance and accountability. As with all workers' organizations, it matters that representatives are credible and held to account. Representativeness matters at all levels; legitimacy with both membership and local authorities may be reduced if leadership is not representative. Also, while one of the successes of the global networks has been their ability to have impacts far exceeding the strength of their members, there is the familiar danger that an unrepresentative leadership may become increasingly out of touch with membership concerns. This danger is lessened where member organizations have strong traditions of representation, and where global networks develop structures for representation.

Sustainability: Sustainability is an ongoing challenge for organizations of informal workers at the local and global levels. Local organizations face limited dues collection options because membership is not large; members have low, often poverty-level, earnings; and, in practice, dues compliance is voluntary. There are no automatic dues collection mechanisms, because there is no 'employer' in most cases, and, where there is an employer—as for domestic workers or for subcontracted home-based workers—he or she has little incentive to partake in establishing a dues collection system.

The sustainability prospects of regional and global networks entail access to resources beyond the dues of their member organizations. All the networks discussed here rely on external funding and on technical support from NGOs such as WIEGO. In the case of the International Domestic Workers' Federation, the IUF provides an institutional home as well as information, support and strategic advice. The nature and extent of such relationships affects how a global network can develop. There are practical as well as political reasons for regional and global informal workers' networks to consider more formal relationships with the global labour movement. Some of the benefits include recognition of informal workers as part of the global workers' movement and the possibilities for sharing on strategy development, organizing and leadership development. The global labour movement, however, is not always welcoming.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

External challenges include relationships with the union movement, inappropriate or hostile institutional environments, competing vested interests and the 'mindsets' of stakeholders.

Relationships with trade unions and the international labour movement: Historically, trade unions and the international labour movement have been at best ambivalent towards informal workers, arguing that they are not workers or informal employment should be abolished. But increasingly, national trade union federations are playing an important role in organizing or supporting organizations of informal workers, as Table 3 confirms. For instance, across Africa, national trade union centres have formed new unions or associations of informal workers (Angola, Mozambique), encouraged and supported affiliated unions to organize informal workers (Ghana, Nigeria), or built alliances with organizations of informal workers (Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe).

While SEWA is still the only national trade union centre of informal workers affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation, the international labour movement is paying increasing attention to organizing in the informal economy and to organizations of informal workers. Several of the Global Union Federations, including the International Transport Workers' Federation and Building Workers' International, support organizing efforts among informal workers in their respective sectors. Both Public Services International and UNI Global Union have worked with StreetNet International. As noted earlier, the IUF has partnered with the WIEGO network to support the formation of the International Domestic Workers' Federation and its campaign for an international convention on decent work for domestic workers (Bonner and Spooner 2011a).

Inappropriate or hostile institutional environment: Existing laws, regulations and policies are often not appropriate for the employment arrangements of informal workers and enterprises, or are biased in favour of formal enterprises and workers. In addition, the administrative and governance structures of countries often stand in the way of implementing appropriate laws, regulations and

policies. Some legal systems are more amenable to positive economic and social rights arguments than others. This has to do in part with how constitutions are drafted, but also with the receptivity of courts to such arguments. South Africa is perhaps the leading example in the world of a legal system that, by virtue of its Constitution and interpretive decisions by its courts, embraces a positive economic and social rights agenda. Colombia's Constitutional Court has also emerged as one willing to protect economic and social rights (Chen et al. 2013).

Competing vested interests: There is a widespread assumption that the informal economy represents unfair competition to the formal economy. From the perspective of informal workers, the formal private sector in various guises—as employer, private real estate developer or competitor in specific value chains—has unfair advantages and poses unfair competition. For example, when cities privatize public land and public services, formal firms often benefit at the expense of informal livelihoods. This is even more likely when governments privatize public services and public land.

To date, while some informal workers' networks are linked to ethical and fair trade initiatives, most have focused their advocacy efforts primarily towards development and governmental bodies. Local and multinational corporations, however, have immense power over some informal worker groups' livelihoods. Homeworkers at the bottom of supply chains, for instance, could benefit from global advocacy and engagement at different points in the chain and with their ultimate employer. Waste pickers, at the bottom of an unregulated recycling chain, are increasingly threatened by multinational (and local) corporations gaining contracts for waste collection and disposal, often in collaboration with municipal officials and politicians.

'Mindsets' of influential stakeholders: Underlying these constraints or barriers is another fundamental challenge: namely, the mindsets or assumptions of influential policy makers in economic and international development circles, but also of national and local policy makers. For instance, many mainstream economists subscribe to one or both of two common assumptions about informal operators and informal activities: informal operators are seen as illegal, as deliberately avoiding taxation and regulation; and informal activities are seen as inefficient and non-productive. But many informal operators pay taxes of various kinds and would welcome the benefits of legal recognition. Many local government policy makers and built environment professionals subscribe to the view that removing street vendors, waste pickers and informal settlements is a sign of 'progress' since the informal economy is inimical to what is considered a 'modern' city. What is needed is a new vision of the economy and cities that recognizes and supports 'economic diversity', and that sees the need for formal and informal units, workers and activities to coexist, as they are intrinsically linked.

Successful struggles

Despite the challenges of organizing informal workers, several organizations and networks have led successful legal or policy campaigns in support of their membership either locally, nationally or globally. What follows is a brief summary of several of them: domestic workers globally; home-based workers in Thailand; street vendors in India; street vendors and barrow operators in Durban, South Africa; and waste pickers in Bogotá, Colombia.⁷

DOMESTIC WORKERS GLOBALLY

Despite obstacles, domestic workers have a long history of organization and advocacy to be recognized as workers and covered by the labour laws of their respective countries. In 2006, domestic workers' organizations began to organize internationally with the support of international trade unions and NGOs, including WIEGO. Their main demands were to be recognized as workers with rights and benefits. In 2008, after the ILO decided to place Decent Work for Domestic Workers on the agenda of the International Labour Conferences in 2010 and 2011, they began a campaign for an ILO convention. The campaign was led by the newly formed International Domestic Workers' Network, with its organizational base in the IUF and with support from WIEGO. The campaign involved extensive coordination and engagement at the country level to mobilize workers and engage with ministries of labour, trade unions and employers' associations. The process had immediate benefits in some countries, and led to the adoption, with an overwhelming majority vote at the 2011 International Labour Conference, of two standards: the Domestic Workers Convention and the Domestic Workers Recommendation.

The main achievement of the convention is that domestic workers are unconditionally defined as workers with the same protections under national labour laws and social protection schemes as other workers. Some articles offer special protection for live-in, migrant or other specific groups of domestic workers. The recommendation provides a comprehensive framework and set of guidelines for governments seeking to implement legislation in line with the convention. While the convention and recommendation will not directly or immediately change the situation of domestic workers, they provide a normative framework and legislative springboard for organizations to work further with governments and other partners.

Achieving the convention was itself a catalyst for global organizing and for gaining representative voice. It contributed to building the capacity of organizations and individual leaders,

⁷ The cases are adapted from Chen et al. 2013, with the exception of the one from Thailand, which draws on reports by HomeNet Thailand and WIEGO.

especially women; enhanced the status of domestic workers associations with formal trade unions; and created the preconditions for recognition and enforcement of rights in countries. The campaign for ratification is a long-term process, but legislative changes are already taking place.

HOME-BASED WORKERS IN THAILAND

HomeNet Thailand has helped achieve several national policy successes for informal workers, some in alliance with other civil society organizations. The first success was universal health coverage for informal workers and other groups not covered by formal health insurance.

Thailand stands out for its decade-long inclusion of civil society organizations in an alliance for health reform, with HomeNet Thailand one of the partners. They contributed to the campaign for what became known, initially, as the 30 Baht Scheme (Namsomboon and Kusakabe 2011, Alfes and Lund 2012). When the 30 Baht Scheme was replaced by the free Universal Coverage Scheme, the civil society alliance, including HomeNet Thailand, was involved in its design, in legislation, and in facilitating, monitoring and evaluating implementation.

HomeNet Thailand also successfully campaigned, with support from WIEGO, for the Homeworkers Protection Act, which entitles Thai homeworkers (i.e., subcontracted home-based workers) to a minimum wage, occupational health and safety protection, and other fundamental labour rights. To understand obstacles to implementing these protections, under a WIEGO project on law and informality, HomeNet Thailand examined instances where homeworkers had attempted to access their rights and implement the tripartite committee set up under the act. HomeNet Thailand also made a concerted effort to inform homeworker leaders and homeworkers about their rights under the act through workshops with lawyers and government officials, posters, newsletters and other documents. In 2014, as a direct outcome of these struggles, three home-based workers supported by HomeNet Thailand were included in the tripartite committee.

Also under the WIEGO law project, HomeNet Thailand organized local and national consultations with domestic workers to update them on the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189), and to mobilize action to protect migrant domestic workers in Thailand, especially Bangkok. During the course of the project, the Thai Domestic Workers Network was formed, which helped pressure the government to pass the Ministerial Regulation for Domestic Workers in 2012.

STREET VENDORS IN INDIA

Since 1998, when it was founded, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) has dealt on a daily basis with challenges to street vendors associated with urbanization, urban renewal, and economic reforms. One of its first steps was to conduct a survey of street vending in seven cities

of India in 2002. This highlighted the increasing harassment of street vendors by local authorities and the growing exclusion of street vendors in city plans (Bhowmik 2002). The report generated a good deal of discussion and was presented at a national workshop organized by the Ministry of Urban Development in 2000. At that workshop, the Minister for Urban Development announced that a National Task Force on Street Vendors would be set up to frame a national policy with and for street vendors.

The policy, developed by the National Task Force, including NASVI and other street vendor organizations, was adopted by the national Government in January 2004. It recommended that state and local governments register street vendors, issue identification cards to them, and amend legislation and practices to reduce their vulnerabilities. The main plank of the policy was to establish vending committees at the town and ward levels with representatives from street vendor organizations to identify designated zones for vending and hawking. The national policy was never implemented very widely, however, in large part because local governments are controlled by state governments, and few state governments followed the national policy when formulating their own state policies.

In response to this lack of implementation, the national Government declared the need for a new national policy for street vendors, while NASVI and SEWA demanded a national law for street vendors. In late 2011, due to the campaign and advocacy efforts of NASVI, SEWA and other organizations, the national Government changed its position and decided to support a national law for street vendors. The draft law was formulated by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation in consultation with NASVI, SEWA and other organizations of street vendors, was approved by Parliament in February 2014, and went into effect later that year.

STREET VENDORS AND BARROW OPERATORS IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

For many years, Warwick Junction, a precinct in the inner city of Durban that houses, on a busy day, up to 8,000 street and market traders, was looked to for best practices in street vendor management and support. High levels of consultation with the street vendors resulted in a significant degree of self-regulation and a sense of ownership of the area among them. But in February 2009, to the surprise of many, the Durban/eThewini Municipality announced its plans to grant a 50-year lease of public land to a private developer to build a shopping mall in Warwick Junction, at the site of a fresh produce market that was to celebrate its centenary in 2010. The plans entailed a redesign of the whole district, ensuring that foot traffic, estimated at 460,000 commuters a day, would be directed past the mall rather than the informal traders, threatening the viability of all street vendors and market traders.

There was a groundswell of opposition to the proposal. A major civil society campaign to oppose the planned mall emerged, involving organizations of street vendors, academics, urban practitioners and a local NGO called Asiye eTafuleni, which has supported the street vendors of Warwick Junction for many years. Central to this campaign was a pair of legal cases pursued by a public interest, non-profit law firm—the Legal Resources Centre. One case challenged the process by which the City awarded the lease and contract to the private real estate developer, thus drawing on administrative law. The other case challenged building a mall where a historic market stands, thus referring to historic conservation principles.

In April 2011, the City Council rescinded its 2009 decision to lease the market land for the mall development, noting that “there was little prospect of the legal challenges relating to the current proposal being resolved.” This was a major victory for the street vendors and barrow operators. The legal cases did not mandate the change in position by the City Council, but in combination with civil society activism and protests, helped leverage it.

WASTE PICKERS IN COLOMBIA

For decades, if not centuries, *recicladores* (waste pickers) in Colombia’s capital, Bogotá, have earned a living by recycling metal, cardboard, paper, plastic and glass, and selling the recycled material through intermediaries. Today there are an estimated 12,000 *recicladores* in Bogotá.

But recent privatization of public waste collection threatened their livelihoods. In response, the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB), an umbrella association of cooperatives representing over 2,500 waste pickers, began a legal campaign to allow the *recicladores* to continue to collect and recycle waste.

The *recicladores* achieved a landmark victory in 2003 when the Constitutional Court ruled that the municipal government’s tendering process for sanitation services had violated the basic rights of the waste-picking community. In making its case, ARB and its pro bono lawyers appealed to the constitutional provision of the right to equality, arguing that waste pickers should be allowed preferential treatment and judicial affirmative action in the tendering and bidding process for government waste management contracts.

Subsequent cases have drawn on other constitutional provisions, including the right to survival as an expression of the right to life (Article 11), which was used to argue the right to pursue waste picking as a livelihood, and the right to pursue business and trade (Article 333), which was used to argue that cooperatives of waste pickers—and not only corporations—can compete in waste recycling markets. The most recent ruling, in December 2011, halted a scheme to award \$1.7 billion worth of contracts over 10 years to private companies for the collection and removal of waste. The court

mandated that the cooperatives of waste pickers had a right to compete for the city tenders, and gave the ARB until 31 March 2012 to present the municipality with a concrete proposal for solid waste management inclusive of the waste-picking community. The current mayor of Bogotá honored this mandate by de-privatizing waste collection, setting up a public authority to manage solid waste management, and allowing ARB and other organizations of *recicladores* to bid for contracts. With the help of WIEGO and other allies, the ARB prepared a proposal, elements of which were adopted into the official proposal made by the district agency in charge of the city's public service.

In March 2013, waste pickers in Bogotá began to be paid by the city for their waste collection services. And, in June 2014, the national Government mandated that the Bogotá model be replicated in cities and towns across the country. Vested interests in the private sector who want to regain control over waste collection and recycling, however, have mounted a political campaign to remove the current mayor of Bogotá, who rescinded some private contracts to set up a public waste management authority and brokered the contract with the *recicladores*. They argue that the public management of waste collection and the involvement of the *recicladores* undermine 'free competition' and are, therefore, illegal.

As these case studies illustrate, informal workers' organizations are increasingly finding a place at the table with national and local governments, and are also finding their voice in international negotiating forums, especially at the annual International Labour Conference. At the same time, these organizations often need to resort to litigation, in addition to policy advocacy, and need support from allies to protect the interests of their members.

Looking back, looking forward

LESSONS LEARNED

Informal workers are self-organizing or being organized in many sectors and countries around the world. They are engaging in formal collective bargaining through their MBOs, networking transnationally and linking together in collective international advocacy. Many organizations and networks have had impacts on the wider environment, influencing laws, policies and practices.

But clearly, the structures and strategies of these organizations and networks do not fit easily into conventional structures and strategies associated with the trade unions of formal workers. Most notably, their counterparts in bargaining are often not employers, and the issues tackled are not always the same. Organizing informal workers is different than organizing formal workers—and has distinct challenges of several kinds.

To begin with, many informal workers are not considered workers under the law, by policy makers, by trade unions, by other workers or even by themselves. Globally, the ‘employment relationship’ between a recognized employer and employee has historically represented the central legal concept around which labour law and collective bargaining agreements have sought to recognize and protect the rights of workers (ILO 2003). This concept has usually excluded the self-employed, but also excludes wage workers or employees who are hired by firms in ways that disguise the employment relationship, or make it unclear and ambiguous, which is the case with most informal wage workers. Further, many key stakeholders—policy makers, trade unions, other workers—do not perceive or recognize informal workers as workers. Some informal workers do not perceive themselves as workers, especially women, and, in particular, women who produce goods and services in their own homes (home-based workers) or in the homes of others (domestic workers).

Second, informal workers belong to various statuses in employment making it difficult to organize around a single identity. Further, individual workers may be engaged in multiple activities and/or employment statuses within a single day, month or year. A very small percentage of informal self-employed workers are employers; most are own account workers who do not hire paid workers. A small share of informal wage employed workers are employees, but most are casual day labourers or industrial outworkers who by definition do not work in a standard workplace, and, often, do not work for a single employer. A large percentage of informal women workers, especially in agriculture, are unpaid contributing family workers.

Organizing own account operators who often invest more labour than capital into their enterprise and earn relatively little is different from organizing informal employers who, on average, invest and earn far more. Organizing industrial outworkers who work under a subcontract for multiple employers and their intermediaries is different from organizing informal employees in an informal or formal enterprise, just as organizing informal day labourers who work for multiple employers at different times is different than organizing informal employees of a single employer. Unpaid contributing family workers need to be organized in order to bargain in the interests of the family enterprise or farm, but also in their own interests within the family.

Third, most informal workers do not work in a standard workplace such as the firm or factory of an employer, but work primarily in public spaces including streets, markets, pastures, forests and waterways; in private homes as home-based producers or domestic workers; or on private farms. There are special risks as well as organizing challenges associated with each of these categories. Where should domestic workers be organized, for example? Are there common places where they congregate on their day off (if any)? The same consideration applies with regard to day labourers and home-based workers, especially those prohibited by social norms from moving outside their homes.

Fourth, most informal workers—other than the fully dependent wage workers—have to deal with multiple points of control or multiple dominant players. The self-employed have to bargain with those from whom they buy supplies and raw materials or rent space and equipment, and to whom they sell goods and services. Industrial outworkers have to deal with one or more firms and their intermediaries who subcontract work to them. Day labourers have to deal with both recruiters and employers, often different ones each day or season. Having to bargain with more than one counterpart makes it difficult to do so effectively. Also, ideally, most informal workers would need to negotiate multiple collective bargaining agreements with both the public sector, especially local governments, and private firms.

Fifth, the control points and dominant players faced by informal workers are often sector-specific. Consider the urban informal workforce, where activities are governed by industry-specific regulations (e.g., those governing fresh food) as well as by urban planners and local governments that set rules and determine norms and practices governing who can do what and where in cities. Often the rules are framed or interpreted in ways that discourage—if not outright ban—informal activities. Urban informal workers, like all informal workers, have to negotiate with dominant players in the sectors or value chains within which they operate. This means that they have to negotiate on several fronts with private businesses and with local authorities. It also means that there is no immediate pay off—no equivalent to the ‘wage dividend’ enjoyed by many organized formal workers. Often they have to negotiate and bargain to simply be allowed to pursue their livelihoods without being harassed, having their goods confiscated, having to pay bribes and being evicted. In such situations, the hoped-for dividend of organizing is usually a reduction in the risks and costs of operating informally, rather than an increase in earnings.

Given all this, new and innovative approaches to organizing and collective bargaining are needed, keeping in mind that no one model fits all. At the local level, organizing takes different forms, from trade unions to cooperatives to associations of various kinds to savings and credit groups or self-help groups, depending in part on the local political and legal environment. In many countries, unregistered associations function like cooperatives or trade unions but find it difficult to register as such. But to some extent, organizational form follows organizational function. Domestic workers who need solidarity in order to bargain with their employers often form or join trade unions. Self-employed home-based workers often form associations to leverage skills training, product designs and marketing services. Industrial outworkers who work from their homes need to form unions for collective bargaining with employers and their intermediaries. Street vendors who need to bargain collectively with local authorities often form unions or market-specific associations. Waste pickers who provide recycling services to cities or cleaning services to firms often form cooperatives.

What have we learned from the successful struggles of informal workers' organizations? Common strategies include awareness-building and mobilization around issues, collective bargaining, negotiating and advocacy and (often) legal struggles. Action on these different fronts feeds into others in a circular, interactive, reinforcing manner. Common barriers and constraints include an inappropriate or hostile institutional environment, competing vested interests and the mindsets of influential stakeholders. And common sources of technical and political support include pro bono lawyers, activist academics, specialized NGOs, and, most importantly, alliances of organizations of informal workers.

All cases of success illustrate the importance of joint action by informal workers' organizations backed by individuals or institutions. The alliance that campaigned successfully against the proposed mall in Durban included local associations of street vendors, StreetNet, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Communist Party in the KwaZulu-Natal province, local team members of the WIEGO network, local civil society organizations, urban practitioners, academics and the legal resource centre that filed the case. A local NGO, Asiye eTafuleni, dedicated to providing legal, technical and design support to the informal workforce of Warwick Junction, played a key role by monitoring the situation on the ground, alerting the legal resource centre to the day-to-day harassment of traders by the city and facilitating access by the centre to appropriate claimants.

The alliance that helped advocate for the national policy and now the national law for street vendors in India included NASVI, SEWA as well as academics and activists working on street vendor issues. The campaign also received support from political leaders and government officials. In Bogotá, Colombia, the alliance that helped the ARB in its campaign to bid for solid waste management contracts included pro bono lawyers, academics, WIEGO and NGOs. The alliance that helped build the International Domestic Workers' Network and supported its campaign for the ILO convention included the IUF, a national union federation (FNV of the Netherlands), the International Trade Union Confederation and the Workers' Bureau of the ILO (ACTRAV), the WIEGO network and NGOs. During the tripartite discussions at the 2010 and 2011 International Labour Conferences, this alliance mobilized additional resources: researchers who helped the domestic worker delegates find information, write speeches and draft demands; media experts who helped write press releases and organized press conferences and interviews and used social media to publicize the negotiations; and interpreters who interpreted for delegates and also translated documents.

At the heart of each of these successful campaigns, except for the domestic workers' campaign, was a legal case. Key to the success of the legal cases was access by the informal workers and their organizations to free, high-quality and responsive legal assistance—from a high-level team of

lawyers. Informal workers would not have been able to pay for such representation: They were fortunate to be represented by pro bono lawyers. At the same time, the technical knowledge and political support from civil society—most importantly, from the informal workers themselves—have been critical to the success of legal cases.

In sum, well-managed collaborations and alliances with a range of organizations allow a pooling of resources, skills and knowledge, including that of informal workers themselves. The process extends points of influence and leverage, raises awareness more widely and potentially increases pressure on those with power to influence the outcome of negotiations (Bonner and Pape 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

These lessons suggest two sets of recommendations. The first set relates to the work or livelihoods of informal workers, and the second to organizations of informal workers. Both sets include recommendations about the roles of key stakeholders, especially policy makers in governments and international agencies, but also their mindsets and policy stances.

The first set of recommendations involves the recognition of and support to informal workers and their livelihoods. In the end, what the working poor in the informal economy need, through organization and collective bargaining/negotiating, is more and better economic opportunities. For some, this means better wage jobs, for others, more secure and productive livelihoods. But so long as informal units, workers and activities are stigmatized by policy makers as illegal and non-productive, and excluded from economic planning and policies, informal livelihoods will remain insecure and less productive than they could be. What is needed is a change in the mindsets of policy makers—to recognize and validate informal workers and their livelihoods—accompanied by changes in laws, regulations and policies to protect and promote informal workers and their livelihoods.

Work today takes many forms and is central to people's lives, to economies and societies. More and more wage workers are employed informally without a recognized employer through disguised, ambiguous or third-party arrangements. Yet labour and employment laws are premised on the central notion of an employee relationship. One-third or one-half of the informal workers in most developing countries are self-employed, but a small percentage of these hire workers. Yet commercial laws are premised on enterprises with 10 or more workers. And sector-specific laws, including urban policies and plans, are biased towards formal firms and activities. Given the sheer size of the informal economy and informal workforce, the policy goal must be to overcome the formal and informal divide by providing appropriate recognition, protection and support to all workers and enterprises, and to promote a hybrid economy in which formal and informal, small and large, enterprises may coexist.

A second set of recommendations revolves around the recognition of and support to organizations of informal workers and their campaigns. While the organizing of informal workers has taken place mainly outside the mainstream labour movement, this too is beginning to change, as formal and informal workers join hands. In today's global economy, those who work in a particular industry—even for a single firm—include not only the core formal employees, but also all of the workers down the supply chain, including the contracted daily or seasonal workers and the subcontracted outworkers. Rather than being divided by big business, formal and informal workers along specific global supply chains or in specific industries should forge a joint united front. Then only, in today's global economy, which privileges capital over labour, will workers be able to improve their situation.

In today's globalizing economy and modernizing cities, there is also a critical ongoing need to promote the representative voice of the working poor in the informal economy in the policy-making and rule-setting processes that impact their lives and livelihoods. This will require more and stronger MBOs of informal workers. There is a role for supportive NGOs to help start and build the capacity of informal workers' organizations, but they must learn when and how to hand over the leadership and administration of these organizations to leaders elected by the membership. As the case studies illustrated, there is also a role for experienced, informed and committed supporters, including academics, lawyers, urban planners and others, to support the legal and policy reform campaigns of these organizations.

The key role for government and international agencies is to recognize organizations of informal workers and invite representatives from them to relevant policy-making and rule-setting processes. The motto of StreetNet International, "Nothing for us, without us," reflects the key enabling condition to ensure more and better work opportunities for the working poor in the informal economy—namely, to invite organizations of informal workers to help develop appropriate policies, laws and regulations that recognize, validate and integrate their work and livelihoods.

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