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Work in Progress: Organising labour in the informal economy - forms of organisation and relationships

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Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organising (WIEGO)**

Abstract: There is growing recognition in the international trade union movement that the informal economy is growing throughout the world, that workers employed within the informal economy should have the same rights and protection as workers in ‘formal’ employment relationships, and that they have the same needs and demands for collective organisation and representation. This paper compares the experience of developing relationships between unions and informal workers’ organisations in different contexts, and looks at the issues that have led to contrasting models of informal workers’ organisation. We consider the different challenges and organising techniques facing workers from different ‘sectors’ within the informal economy, the different forms of organisation that emerge, the impact of gender politics on formal-informal relationships, and the varying relationships with the ‘formal’ economy trade unions.

This paper is work in progress. It draws from, and attempts to summarise, the experience and writing of Chris Bonner and Dave Spooner (WIEGO), Dan Gallin (Global Labour Institute), Pat Horn (StreetNet International), and the other members of the Organisation & Representation Advisory Committee of *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organising* (WIEGO).

1: Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the international trade union movement, NGOs, development agencies, and others have been paying increasing attention to the need for informal economy workers to be organised, and demanding that governments and inter-governmental organisations, notably the International Labour Organisation (ILO), recognise that labour laws and workers’ rights are applicable to *all* workers, whether formally or informally employed. Most importantly, informal workers themselves are becoming more organised, visible and vocal in demanding rights, decent conditions and livelihoods.

The growing urgency to address the needs of informal economy workers, and their increasing strength of organisation, was demonstrated by the tri-partite discussion on decent work and the informal economy at the International Labour Conference in 2002. The discussion sought to “address the multitude of workers and enterprises who are often not recognised and protected under legal and regulatory frameworks and who are characterised by a high degree of vulnerability and poverty, and to redress these decent work deficits” (ILO Resolution, 2002).

Although it was a ‘discussion’, rather than an attempt to frame new formal labour conventions, the 2002 event had an important role in establishing workers’ rights and livelihoods in the informal economy as a high priority for the international labour movement and for the ILO itself, and marked an important turning point for the development of policies and programmes designed to encourage the democratic self-organisation of informal workers. And, although the trade union movement has yet to integrate fully the idea and practice of organising informal workers, substantial progress has been achieved, especially in some countries in the South.

There are several factors behind this trend. Most importantly, there has been a growing awareness of the substantial growth of the informal economy, the numbers of informal workers¹, and the generally appalling conditions in which they work. An international symposium on *Trade Unions and the Informal Sector*² organised by the ILO Bureau of Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) in 1999 concluded:

“Contrary to many predictions, the informal sector is not diminishing. It is increasing everywhere. Globalisation and the associated search for lower labour costs is one significant factor in this. Privatisation and the contracting out of services and activities are others. Contrary to some views, the informal sector is, by and large, neither innovative nor full of opportunity. Working conditions in the sector are oppressive and dangerous. Thousands of children, often as young as four years old, work in this sector; most incomes are well below the poverty line; workers usually do not have access to state-provided social protection, training and social services; exploitation and infringement of workers' rights are common. The vast majority of people do not work in the informal sector by choice and it is certainly not for them a stepping stone to improvement. Rather it represents a means of survival.” (ILO-ACTRAV, 1999).

This expansion also included the extension of informal work into new areas of industry and employment, particularly as a consequence of casualisation of the workforce.

At the same time, the leadership of a growing number of national trade union movements, particularly in the global South, faced a shrinking membership among formal economy workers, particularly in the private sector, with the consequent erosion of political power and influence with governments and inter-governmental agencies. They argued that it was imperative that unions should seek to organise and represent all workers, not just those in formal employment relationships.

In 1996 the Ghana Trade Union Congress adopted six policies to help the organisation confront challenges of declining membership, of which one concerned organising. Since 86 percent of the economically active labour force is in the informal economy, the GTUC policy included a strategy to target these workers for recruitment. The objectives of the informal economy recruitment policy were:

- Create a desk in the Organisation Department and within the national unions for the informal economy
- Develop links with existing informal economy associations
- Design programmes in response to identified problems in the informal economy
- Encourage informal economy operators to form associations
- Encourage the national unions to review their constitutions and develop policies appropriate for the informal economy (Boakye, 2007).

In Zambia, Fackson Shamenda, President of the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions and, at the time, President of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), declared in 2001:

“The reality for the vast majority of workers in the informal economy is a daily battle for simple survival. Their basic human rights are frequently abused and ignored. They are mostly unregistered, unprotected, and working under appalling working conditions. They often suffer acute discrimination and harassment from police, local authorities and political forces. Most importantly, most are still denied their voice. They are grossly under-represented in

¹ Informal employment accounts for one half to three quarters of non-agricultural employment in the developing world: specifically, 48% in northern Africa; 51 % in Latin America; 65% in Asia and 72% in sub Saharan Africa (78% if South Africa is excluded). 60% of or more of women workers in the developing world are in informal employment, the figure rising to 84% in sub Saharan Africa (non-agricultural). (ILO 2002).

² By 2002, the term “informal sector” had generally been replaced by “informal economy”.

government, in civil society – including, I’m sad to say – the trade union movement, and in democratic life.

“The ZCTU is committed to a policy of welcoming informal economy workers into membership of the national trade union movement. Yet we have to be honest, and acknowledge that good policies aren’t always easily translated into practical action. Unions and informal economy workers’ associations have to learn more from one another, appreciate and respect their distinct needs and aspirations, and be flexible in the development of their organisations. The prize of unity and solidarity, however, is great. Ultimately, only by speaking with one voice can we have the strength to advance workers’ rights and economic well-being, whether they work in the formal or informal economies”. (WEAZ 2001)

Meanwhile, there was growing awareness among trade unions in the global North that precarious and informal work was no longer on the margins of the economy, but is becoming ‘normal’ in many sectors. Nor was it a phenomenon restricted to the global South. There was growing evidence that the informal economy was also rising in Europe, North America and other major economies of the global North.

In 2003 for example, a conference was organised by the Dutch trade union Confederation FNV in collaboration with the International Restructuring Education Network Europe (IRENE) and with the support of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC): *Organising in the informal economy: From marginal work to core business: taking the ‘informal(ising)’ margins of the European labour market to heart*. The conference confirmed that the numbers of workers involved in this European ‘informalising’ economy were growing, which means that the trade unions were representing an ever shrinking proportion of the workforce.

Their low rates of pay and substandard conditions undermined the standards and benefits achieved by the labour movement. And, it was argued, since they are among the most exploited of all workers, they ought to find a voice in and through the trade union movement. “Yet, many traditional union members feel defensive or even hostile towards these unorganised workers. At the same time many informal economy workers may not see even themselves as ‘workers’ for whom a trade union is appropriate. Or they are too scared of losing their job to have anything to do with a union. They represent a huge challenge for the trade unions to organise.” (FNV, 2003)

Catelene Passchier, representing FNV, and one of the conference organisers, argued:

“All our unions are faced with the growing percentage of casual, precarious labour and so called self-employment. We have to include these workers in our ranks, and in our policies and strategies. Otherwise we will end up defending a diminishing group of privileged, mostly male, workers with permanent jobs in traditional industries, who feel threatened all the time by the growing amount of unprotected workers outside. We have to include them, because otherwise our power-base will become smaller, and our opinions will no longer be seen as representative of all working people.” (FNV, 2003)

The growing awareness of the problem and need for effective organisation and representation of informal workers was also reflected in the priorities and policies of development agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, recognising that informal workers are among the poorest, most vulnerable and the most deprived of basic human rights. This in turn encouraged NGOs and unions to take up the issue more actively.

Meanwhile, there is growing evidence that informal workers are themselves becoming more organised, even if still a small minority in many sectors³. Much of the inspiration comes from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, the trade union which had been successfully organising poor informal women workers in the state of Gujarat, and then other states in India since 1972. In 2006, SEWA gained formal recognition as a national trade union centre in its own right, by being accepted as an affiliate of the ICFTU (and hence the ITUC, which was founded a few months later). By 2010 SEWA had more than one million members.

Of course, informal workers have always been organised to some extent, even if unions and their allies may not have recognised it as such. In most markets, for example, there is considerable informal organisation, whether through informal associations representing interests and grievances to market authorities, small informal cooperatives, family-based networks and enterprises, collective resistance to political party corruption, criminal gangs and protection rackets etc. Such informal forms of organisation are rarely democratic however, and generally lack the necessary capacity to be effective in representing workers' interests beyond the immediate workplace.

2: Informal Workers Organising

Key challenges

Trade unions and other workers' organisations organising workers in the informal economy face considerable organisational challenges, irrespective of sector and country. There is usually no legal framework or protections around which to organise and make gains, and no traditional collective bargaining forums. Often (such as in the case of own-account workers) there is also no employment relationship or the employment relationship is unclear or disguised. Where an employment relationship exists, workplaces are often so small that precarious waged workers lack power to confront employers and make gains, and they often work for harsh employers who ignore laws, so they are easily dismissed with little or no recourse to legal remedies. This insecurity breeds fear of organising (fear of police, employers, authorities, husbands).

In the informal economy there are different kinds of workplaces – scattered, sometimes mobile, sometimes people's homes are also their workplaces. Long hours are sometimes worked, and time organising can be income lost for informal economy workers. Many are so poor that their primary focus is on survival, and many workers' organisations lack the financial resources and experience to be effective in organising informal workers.

Trade unions often do not perceive informal workers as workers, particularly own account workers, and many informal workers and their organisations do not perceive themselves to be part of the organised labour movement, allied to the labour movement, or even do not perceive themselves as workers at all.

Some of these organisations look, behave, and organise themselves with many or all of the characteristics of trade unions, but for a variety of reasons do not identify themselves as such. Perhaps the members and/or leaders do not identify themselves as 'workers' in a class sense, but rather see themselves as small entrepreneurs or micro-businesses; or perhaps they do not wish to be associated with the political allegiances of the 'formal' trade union movement in their locality or sector.

This is particularly true for women workers, and even more so for home-based workers, who may see their work as simply an extension of domestic chores or family duties. Indeed there is often not a

³ WIEGO's Organisation and Representation Programme includes the development of an international database of informal economy workers' organisations, which (at the time of writing) contains information on over 500 organisations. See <http://www.wiegodatabase.org/>

clearly demarcated line or class relationships between worker/ employer/ entrepreneur in the informal economy. For example, the owner driver of an informal taxi and the driver renting his vehicle may perceive their class position and interests as more common than opposed and may belong to the same organisation (Bonner, 2006); similarly the woman home based worker who receives and gives out work to a group of homeworkers or a street vendor who employs an assistant.

Political Context

Although they may face many common challenges, the structures and characteristics of informal economy workers' organisations depends heavily on the economic, political and organisational context as well as sector-specific factors. Pat Horn, Co-ordinator of StreetNet International, suggests that the political environment is key to an understanding of the way in which the structure of organisations are determined.

“When trying to analyse the motives leading to the formation of different structures of informal workers' organisations in different countries, the clearest determining factor usually seems to be related to the political environment. Where there have been national liberation struggles, the organisation of informal workers will often adopt perspectives and characteristics arising from those struggles (e.g. the Gandhian perspective of SEWA; the socialist perspective of many informal economy workers' associations in post-colonial African countries; the social movement perspective of wastepickers' cooperative movements in Latin American countries with active anti-neo-liberal popular struggles) and corresponding organisational forms.

“The organisational form chosen is also determined by the political space available for organisation. In democratic countries where freedom of association can be taken for granted, organisations have more choices available to them, as to which organisational form to adopt. In recently democratized countries (as in parts of Africa and Latin America emerging from military or other authoritarian dictatorships) there is often a tendency for the pluralistic development of a plethora of fragmented organisations in the same sectors as individuals seek positions of power which they could not easily access before. In authoritarian countries where freedom of association is severely curtailed, informal economy organisations necessarily develop with the characteristics of resistance organisations and often align themselves with independent trade union movements (e.g. Nepal, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) in order to struggle more effectively for their rights.” (Horn 2008 a.).

Informal Workers and Women's Organisation

To understand forms of workers' organisation in the informal economy, the gender issue is crucial, as a substantial number of informal economy workers are women. The majority of workers expelled from the formal sector by the global economic crisis in 1997 were women, being forced to enter the informal economy as a consequence. The financial crisis of 2008 forced even more women workers into the informal economy, increasing competition for livelihoods for the women already struggling to survive, and reducing real household incomes through the fall in demand and shrinking consumption (Horn, Z. 2009).

“For certain, women are bearing the brunt of this recession. Many of the women, especially those who are widowed or single mothers, have no external support. They are caring for children alone, with dwindling incomes. Now many must support relatives who come to them after losing their jobs. The women who are married tell us their husbands have given up. But these women cannot give up, for the sake of their children”. Evalyne Wanyama, National Coordinator of KENSAVIT - national association of street vendors in Kenya. (Horn Z, 2009)

Even before these economic shocks however, women were over-represented in the informal labour force (child labour is also strongly represented). The very great majority of home-based workers are

women, and home-based work represents as much as 40 to 50% of employment in certain key export sectors, such as garments and footwear, in Latin America and Asia. Women are also a majority of vendors in informal markets (which in certain African countries represent up to 30% of the urban workforce).

Not surprisingly, a significant number of informal workers' organisations are comprised of women, led by women, or supported by women's associations and NGOs. Women's unequal status on the labour market and their concentration in the most precarious salaried jobs make them the prime victims of economic downturns and lay-offs. In this context, the organisation of women workers in the informal economy into unions, associations or cooperatives is an act of self-empowerment both as workers and as women. These circumstances explain much about the nature of women-only or women-led workers' organisations in the informal economy where these have arisen spontaneously. Gender separatism is not a matter of principle but a practical response to a specific situation, with the struggle for the rights of women as women and their rights as workers being inseparable. In many cases, middle-class women, often with an academic education and training in the socialist or feminist movements, play a leading role alongside working-class women, and the feminist agenda is often marshalled as an organising tool.

Predictably, this can lead to tensions when the male-dominated mainstream trade union movement perceives the implicit or explicit radicalism of women's organisations as threatening. In some cases, such as SEWA historically, the legitimacy of women's unions as unions has been challenged, especially in the case of organisations in the informal economy where the employment relationship is not always clear: women's unions have been misrepresented as NGOs and recognition, together with access to the institutions of the trade union movement, support and solidarity, have been denied.

There have also been more positive developments, where unions of women in informal employment have become members of representative national trade union bodies and have received their support or, more rarely, where mainstream male-dominated unions have successfully organised women workers in the informal economy (mainly in West Africa). In all such instances, there has been awareness and acceptance of the importance of the gender issue, as well as acceptance of a sufficient degree of autonomy of women's organisations in terms of structure and policy making. (Gallin, Horn P., 2005)

Nevertheless, there is still a struggle in organisations which include both men and women in membership, such as vendors and wastepickers (particularly noticeable in Latin America) where men tend to dominate leadership, unless the organisation have special policies in place to ensure women's representation. The constitution of StreetNet International, for example, specifies that 50% of office-bearers and international council representatives be women.

3. Organisational forms of Membership-Based Organisations

Today, informal workers are organised in a variety of ways. These include trade unions, workers' associations outside of the formal trade union movement, co-operatives and other forms of organisation.

There are two main strategic foci of organisations: those focused on labour rights and representation (employed and own account) and those on economic/ business development (more likely to be own-account workers). These are combined in many informal economy organisations. Traditional trade union structures and approaches need to be adapted if they are to be appropriate for informal workers.

“Self-organised, ‘adapted’ trade union organisations or proto-unions⁴, with innovative organising strategies, provide the most promising vehicle, as demonstrated by the number of organisations who have strived to attain this status” (Bonner, 2010).

Informal workers’ organisations are also diverse in geographical coverage, ranging from small (often fragile) local organisations, to national organisations, federations and alliances, regional networks and associations, and a variety of international organisational forms – both inside and outside the formally constituted institutions of the international trade union movement.

Members of the WIEGO network, along with allies and partner organisations, use the term “Membership-Based Organisations” (MBOs⁵) to describe the range of such organisations in the informal economy. Irrespective of their formal or legal status, these are the organisations that are representative of workers, as distinct from organisations that advocate or campaign for workers on their behalf (NGOs etc). As SEWA describes, an MBO is “*of the workers, by the workers, for the workers, and run, managed and owned by the workers*”, and has certain identifiable features:⁶.

- Defined criteria for membership.
- Transparent democratic management and governance.
- Democratically agreed aims and objectives.
- Democratically agreed programs and activities.
- Elected leadership.
- Financial self sufficiency.
- Decision-making power rests with the members
- Transparency in functioning.
- Focus on needs of members.
- Runs with contribution and participation of members
- Legitimacy based on members, not registration with authorities
- Independent of government, employers, religion, political parties.
- Members are involved in implementing the activities
- Geographically defined area for activities
- “Unity, solidarity and friendliness”

MBOs include trade unions, cooperatives, and other forms of workers’ associations.

Within the **trade union movement**, you can find local and national unions formed by workers in the formal economy that have recruited informal workers into their membership, and newly-formed unions of informal workers themselves. There are also various forms of workers’ association that are trade unions by any other name, but are unable to legally register as such in some countries, due to labour laws that exclude workers from trade union structures unless they are able to demonstrate a clear employment relationship – i.e. an identifiable employer.

Local or national unions of informal workers have varying origins. Some were created ‘spontaneously’ by informal workers themselves (sometimes by former trade unionists forced into informal employment through redundancies etc); some by unions traditionally organising in the formal economy, but reaching out to organise informal workers; and some conceived and supported by external actors (women’s organisations, migrant workers’ organisations, NGOs, etc).

⁴ A proto-union operates like a union, but is not recognized or registered in law as such, often registering as a voluntary association or an NGO.

⁵ Some use the term “Membership-Based Organisations of the Poor” (MBOP)

⁶ SEWA, 2009. SEWA Academy training presentation.

In a growing number of countries, national trade union centres⁷ play an important direct or indirect role in organising and representing informal economy workers. Examples include establishing new unions or associations to organise in the informal economy (Angola, Mozambique), supporting and encouraging affiliated unions to organise informal workers (Ghana, Nigeria), and building alliances with non-union associations of informal workers (Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Philippines).

This close cooperation between national union centres and informal workers' organisations significantly enhances informal workers' effectiveness in representation, defence of workers' rights, and international visibility and support, including

- Recognition by local government authorities (Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe) and in some cases also national government;
- Voice and representation for informal workers, even if ad hoc;
- Means for informal workers to exercise their rights in respect of ILO Convention 87 (Freedom of Association) and Convention 98 (the right to organize and bargain collectively);
- Means for informal workers to affiliate internationally and enjoy international solidarity (e.g. when street vendors face harassment)
- Means for informal workers to be represented in international forums (e.g. ILO Conferences, international trade union meetings). (Horn 2008 b.)

In some cases, informal economy associations not formally constituted or registered as trade unions have been encouraged to join national trade union centres as 'associate' members. This entitles them to have representatives at union meetings, and to participate in discussions, but with very limited constitutional democratic rights. In other words, they have no vote. This reflects nervousness among the 'traditional' union leadership about the role of informal workers in the trade union movement. They worry that many of the associations of informal workers are financially barely sustainable and would be a major drain on very scarce (and dwindling) finances available to the union centre, and that they might lose their own elected positions in the union centre if informal workers' associations had voting power in proportion to the size of membership⁸.

In countries with high level of trade union pluralism, there is a tendency to organise informal workers to gain advantage over rival trade union centres, as this is sometimes the only identifiable unorganised work sector, and opportunity to recruit new union members. Competition between unions attempting to organise in the informal economy, especially if they are competing in the same sector, can lead to confusion, duplication of effort, and can weaken the ability of informal workers to develop a strong and unified position with bargaining counterparts, such as national governments.

The various organisations of the international trade union movement have also been important in developing and supporting organising strategies for informal economy workers. This is discussed below (page 25).

Some informal workers form **cooperatives**, particularly in some sectors such as agriculture and waste-picking⁹/recycling. Again, these are found in various forms: producers' cooperatives, consumer

⁷ *National union centres* are federations of national (normally sector-based) trade unions. Their primary function is in representing union policies to governments and employers' organisations, but also have an important role in supporting trade union development through education, research and capacity-building. The ITUC is the international federation of national union centres.

⁸ The Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) for example, represents a total of approximately 250,000 workers. The Alliance of Zambian Informal Economy Associations, which is an associate member of ZCTU, claims a membership of more than 1.2 million members.

⁹ "Waste-Picking". There are many different terms used to describe workers who extract and sell material from waste (rag-pickers, reclaimers, recyclers, waste-collectors, *recicladores*, etc), which is an ongoing debate among the workers themselves. See 'The Politics of Naming' in Samson, 2009.

cooperatives, marketing cooperatives and so on. Some are formally registered, while others are less formal. In some instances (e.g. India), it can be a very expensive and time-consuming process to register as a cooperative, and may be subject to considerable state regulation and interference; in other instances, it may be that the members simply do not see any advantage to be formally constituted, or have no knowledge of or contact with formalised cooperative structures and procedures. Nevertheless, cooperatives are very important forms of organisation for informal workers.

Although **NGOs** are not MBOs of workers (although some have some form of workers' representation in their systems of governance), they are nevertheless important agents and catalysts in the development of MBOs. There are many NGOs that have been established to support informal workers, or have a remit which includes them. There are, for example, local and national NGOs that concentrate on community development, housing, the environment, livelihood development or human rights for whom informal economy workers become the focus of attention. In areas where trade unions or other MBOs have little influence, profile or organisational strength, NGOs may attempt to fill the vacuum – either by advocating or campaigning on the workers' behalf, providing support and advice, and/or establishing some sort of association.

There are **other forms of membership-based organisation**, sometimes interlinked with NGOs, that combine the features and strategies of both MBOs and NGOs in different mixes. Found amongst informal workers and those with little or no protection, they are seen to be filling the representational needs of workers who have been left out of mainstream trade union organising, such as domestic workers. These varied organisations ranging from advocacy oriented organisations to proto-union organisations sometimes referred to as “quasi unions”, where they focus on workplace and employment issues, or as representing an “association model” of organising, where they may be responding to a range of issues wider than employment. Migrant domestic workers for example may initially seek assistance around their problems as migrant workers, or come together for language, social and solidarity reasons; local domestic workers may form interest groups on the basis of their religious affiliation. Often organising with or through NGOs, community based organisations or religious institutions they develop a form of organisation which may be member based, but without a formal membership mechanism and dues collection system, or may be more akin to a community based, multi- purpose organisation or a non-worker controlled NGO (Bonner, 2010).

Typical examples can be found among migrant communities of Filipina domestic workers. In cities such as London, Brussels and Hong Kong, unions, NGOs and Catholic church agencies each contribute to the development of hybrid workers' organisations that simultaneously provide social and cultural events, training in new skills, advice and support, and campaigning for rights.

In Belgium, the Association of Philippine Migrant Workers (*Samahan*, meaning unity) was founded by a group of migrant workers as early as 1983. They were supported by a missionary who gave them a house with a kitchen where they could gather and eat together. They set up a cultural group and made a cultural show to inform Belgians about Filipino culture. The group runs many activities, particularly skills training and education such as computer literacy, managing household budgets, leading discussions. In 1998 it set up a cooperative scheme for savings and pensions. It organises information campaigns and has linked up with the trade unions on the issue of the rights of undocumented migrant workers (ETUC. 2005).

Similarly in London, an NGO called *Kalayaan* (meaning freedom or liberty) was established in 1987 in a Catholic community centre to provide advice, advocacy and support services for migrant domestic workers. It quickly developed links with the Transport & General Workers' Union (now part of Unite), who were able to assist with education, legal advice, and particularly major campaigns for legal protection for migrant domestic workers. Many of the workers in contact with *Kalayaan* become members of Unite. More recently, *Kalayaan* and Unite jointly established Justice 4 Domestic Workers,

campaigning for workers' rights, as well as providing IT, health and safety, and trade union education programmes at the community centre¹⁰.

These various non-traditional forms of workers' organisation play an important role – providing a safe and suitable place for workers to seek advice, have access to information, share experiences and engage in collective activities and mobilisation. They provide the basis for leadership to emerge, member based associations to develop of a more permanent nature and the ability to more visibly advocate for rights, including as workers. However, without assistance and contact with the trade union movement, they are likely to have limitations in what they can achieve – falling outside of the mainstream industrial relations system they have limited credibility with, and access to, those in power; generally being small and localised they do not have the power base to effect wide scale change. So, on their own, they are more likely to focus on city regulations/laws and their enforcement, or state policy rather than national policies. In both our examples, the organisations have felt limitations and have formed alliances or joined up with other organisations to increase their visibility and voice (Bonner, 2010)

New hybrid forms of organisation also exist at the international level. In recent years, **international networks** have been established between organisations supporting or representing informal workers in specific sectors.

HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet South East Asia, for example, are regional networks of national 'HomeNets'¹¹, each of which are alliances of national groups representing or supporting home-based workers. The national HomeNets vary significantly, with some having a membership almost entirely of NGOs, and others having strong MBOs (both associations and unions) at the core. Structural relationships between home-based workers MBOs and NGOs are complex, and at times problematic (see page 13, below).

The StreetNet International alliance of street vendors was launched in 2002. Its membership is restricted to MBOs (unions, co-operatives or associations) directly organising street vendors, market vendors and/or hawkers among their members. It also has a very clear common agreement on the definition of a democratic MBO and active democratic governance structures. As such, it is somewhat akin to an international union federation of street vendors, yet StreetNet International is not structurally integrated into the international trade union movement, although it retains strong relationships with UNI, other Global Union Federations, and structures of the ITUC. It has 36 member organisations, with its greatest numerical strength in Africa, but has growing numbers of organisations in Asia, Latin America and Europe. It also has the technical capacity to design, manage and deliver its own projects and programmes.

In 2004 waste picker associations (primarily cooperatives and federations of cooperatives) came together to form the Latin America Waste Picker Network. Initially composed of representatives from four Latin American countries the network now has representation from 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries. There is wide variety in the composition of national organisations within the network, although all are MBOs, with NGOs strictly playing a technical support role. The Brazilian Wastepickers Movement (MNCR) is a well established national movement consisting of more than 500 cooperatives, whilst the national networks from Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia have been formed more recently and some countries, such as Paraguay and Puerto Rico have yet to form national associations. Globally, an interim international steering committee has been formed to facilitate global networking between Latin America, Asia and Africa and coordinate global activities such as participation in the United Nations Climate Change Conference negotiations. As yet, the Latin American network and the developing global movement have had little contact with the trade union

¹⁰ See <http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/>.

¹¹ Homenet South Asia is the regional network of 'HomeNets' in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. HomeNet South East Asia covers HomeNets in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos

movement, although there is a growing interest and trade unions such as SEWA with wastepickers as members may help provide such links in the future.

More recently, a number of unions and associations formed the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN¹²). In November 2006 an international conference on 'Respect and Rights: Protection for domestic workers!' was held in the Netherlands. Some 60 participants came from domestic workers' organisations, networks, trade unions and support organisations as well as researchers from all continents. It was the first-ever such global meeting to discuss the situation of domestic workers and to develop effective international action to fight for their rights. The conference determined the need for a permanent international network.

At a follow-up meeting in September 2008 the provisional Steering Committee was formed. The group decided to use the then forthcoming ILO discussions around an international convention on domestic work as a tool for mobilising domestic workers and their supporters and for building and strengthening unions and associations of domestic workers at national and international levels. Representatives from domestic workers' trade unions and organizations attended the 2009 and 2010 International Labour Conference (ILC) to prepare for and negotiate a new ILO Convention for domestic workers. Importantly, IDWN is supported by, and works closely with, the International Union of Foodworkers – IUF (see below).

4. Relationships between major organisational forms

Trade Unions and Coops

Trade unions and cooperatives share common principles and values, whilst focusing on different aspects of economic empowerment: through representation and collective bargaining or livelihood/business development. There are many examples of trade unions over the years working with or forming cooperatives to provide collective services for members or to provide jobs for workers who have become unemployed etc. With the growth of the informal economy, unions/organisations are increasingly experiencing the need to straddle the realms of both union and cooperative. SEWA once again provides an example using a twin strategy of “struggle” and “development”: SEWA as a trade union with over 1 million members uses a struggle strategy and SEWA with over 100 cooperatives run by its members and forming a federation of cooperatives a development strategy. The KKPKP (Trade Union of Wastepickers, Pune, India) provides another example. The Union of over 6000 mainly women wastepickers formed a savings and credit cooperative for members, scrap shop cooperatives where members can sell their materials at a better price and in 2007, after extensive negotiations with the municipality, a solid waste doorstep collection cooperative, SWaCH, that integrates wastepickers into the solid waste management system in Pune (Samson M. 2009).

At an international level, following an International Symposium on Trade Unions and the Informal Sector in 1999 that called for trade unions to expand links with cooperative economic activities, and the discussion in 2002 at the ILC on cooperatives, the ILO initiated a programme, SYNDICOOP, which was jointly designed and implemented by the ILO, ICFTU (now ITUC) and the International Cooperation Alliance (ICA). The programme ran pilots in Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda, and later South Africa 2004-2006. The aim of the project was to improve the working and living conditions of unprotected informal economy workers in selected African countries, through pilot projects aimed at creating decent employment and income. This was to be achieved through strengthening the capacity of national and local level trade union and cooperative organizations to work together constructively in the informal economy¹³.

¹² See <http://www.domesticworkerrights.org/>

¹³ See http://www.ica.coop/outofpoverty/documents/Syndicoop_eval.pdf

Informal Worker Networks and Trade Union Organisations

Informal worker networks have differing relationships with the trade union movement. Whilst the HomeNets in Asia may include some trade unions (e.g. SEWA in India), as networks they generally operate independently of the trade union movement. A similar situation exists with the Latin American regional and national waste picker networks and in India with the national Alliance of Indian Wastepickers AIW. The Latin American waste picker networks have a strong commitment to independence and grass roots leadership and the trade union movement tends to be viewed as bureaucratic, interested only in workers with formal jobs and having political affiliations. The MNCR in Brazil for example has a policy of political independence. With their perception that all trade unions have political affiliations they decided to develop as an independent movement, but do have alliances with various social movements such as the street dwellers movement (Horn P. 2008). On the other hand StreetNet International perceives itself as close to the trade union movement, having similar structures and principles, adapted to its particular constituency. It works with trade union national centres in many countries, has conducted joint organising projects with the global union federations UNI and PSI, and is recognised by ITUC and the ILO as an important player in the organisation of informal workers. This may be partially explained by the linkages of the founders of StreetNet to the trade union movement, but also by the growing number of unions of vendors, particularly in West Africa and Latin America.

The International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) provides a different example of relationships between a global union federation and a network of informal workers. Following the International Conference noted above, the IUF, led by its Equality Officer and member of the ITUC Women's Committee, agreed to provide an organisational base for the network, with the status of a self funded project reporting to the Executive Committee. What is interesting about this decision is that the IUF agreed to a non-union structure being part and parcel of the organisation, without insisting that unions involved should become IUF affiliates. This is the first time that such an arrangement has been entered into by a global union federation (Bonner, 2010).

At a national level in this sector there is a higher degree of cooperation between formal unions and informal worker networks than in other sectors. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions has played a major role in bringing unions, associations, networks of domestic workers- a majority with migrant domestic worker members-together to jointly campaign for domestic workers rights. It has recently facilitated the formation of the Federation of Asian Domestic Workers' Unions in Hong Kong, consisting of six domestic workers' unions representing workers from different countries, helping to break down barriers between migrant and local domestic worker organisations and between formal and informal workers. In the USA, a national network of domestic worker organisations the National Domestic Worker Alliance (NDWA), consisting of a mix of migrant domestic worker organisations (proto unions, quasi unions, associations, coops, NGOs) has developed independently from the trade union movement. The National Labor Relations Act which provides for representation and collective bargaining in the private sector excludes domestic workers and the union movement has likewise failed to include them in their organising programme. Recently however a promising relationship has developed between the AFL-CIO and the Alliance which resulted in strong support by the AFL-CIO for the NDWA and IDWN campaigns for an ILO Convention.

For the most part, this greater link between formal unions and domestic worker networks is made easier than in other sectors because domestic workers are more readily accepted as workers by the trade union movement having an employment relationship, and importantly they have a long history of organising into trade unions – either independent unions or as a sector within a formal union. For own account workers or those with an unclear employment relationship, there may be uncertainty on both sides on how to relate and what benefit would come out of such a relationship. Given the differing political and organisational traditions, the differing perceptions of common/differing interests, it is likely that relationships between the formal/informal, unions/coops, networks/unions will continue to take different paths in different sectors and in different countries or continents but will hopefully over time increasingly grow together. (Bonner, 2010).

An international conference “Combining our Efforts” held in India in 2003 brought together 60 participants from 35 trade unions and other informal economy workers’ organisations from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, already engaged as direct practitioners in organising various sectors of workers in the informal economy. The conference led to the formation of the ‘International Coordinating Committee (ICC) on Organising Workers in the Informal Economy’. Represented on the Committee were SEWA, Ghana Trades Union Congress, Nigerian Labour Congress, Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (Mexico), ORIT (the former Inter-American regional organisation of ICFTU), along with StreetNet International and HomeNet South-East Asia. A second international “Combining our Efforts” conference was held in Accra, Ghana in September 2006, with 65 participants from 55 organisations in 22 countries, the majority again from the South.

The ICC has included an important group of unions in advocating informal economy organising policies and strategies within the ICFTU/ ITUC, and building international union relationships with other associations and alliances of informal workers.

Opportunities to share experiences such as those organised by the ICC and through meetings, education, increased communication, joint projects (such as the StreetNet projects with UNI and PSI), and most importantly working together on campaigns (such as the campaign for an ILO Convention on domestic work or (potentially) climate change justice/green jobs involving formal and informal workers such as wastepickers are practical ways to bridge the divide and bring informal and formal workers together. In the meantime a multi pronged approach would seem to be the best way forward: continuing efforts by informal worker unions(and supportive formal unions) to influence the national and international trade union movements whilst proceeding to organise informal workers in the most appropriate, but democratic and worker controlled, way for the particular sector, particular level (local, national, international) and particular context.

Membership-Based Organisations and NGOs

The term “Membership-Based Organisations” differentiates the self-organisation of workers in the informal economy from organisations that seek to advance or advocate the interests of workers, without being able to claim that they are democratically representative. The most common of these are a wide range of local, national and international NGOs now working to advance the rights and livelihoods of informal workers. At first glance, the differences between MBOs and NGOs are obvious. An MBO can legitimately claim to represent, and negotiate on behalf of, informal workers. An NGO, on the other hand, has no such democratic mandate.

In reality, however, the distinction is less clear – particularly in some sectors, where workers may depend on external groups or individual activists to provide the necessary organisational skills, experience and financial resources. There are many examples of MBOs being initiated and supported by NGOs in their early development, but go on to become self-sustaining independent MBOs under the democratic control and policies of their members. But there are also examples, particularly among home-based workers, migrant workers and so on, where the MBOs would quickly subside without external support.

A key factor in this is financial sustainability. The vast majority of informal economy workers, particularly women, have precarious livelihoods and many face extreme poverty. Their ability to pay regular membership dues to MBOs is severely restricted and may be highly erratic and vulnerable to external shocks (economic crises, natural disasters etc). Even where there is some stability to the income of an MBO of informal workers, it is rarely sufficient to cover the costs of paid staff, meeting expenses, adequate premises etc. The same is true, although perhaps less extreme, for many unions of workers in the formal economy, so that even where informal and formal workers are organised within the same union, they are rarely financially self-reliant.

There are important exceptions to this. Perhaps the best known is the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. SEWA was formed in 1972, and now has a membership of more than one million. SEWA is a registered trade union (and, 2006 affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation as a national trade union centre), but also includes a cooperative development agency, housing trust, bank, social protection agency, marketing and trade facilitation centre, and other functions. While it receives external financial support from a wide range of sources, SEWA's core income comes from its own membership, and it is organisationally and politically self-reliant (reflecting its Gandhian roots and philosophy).

Nevertheless, the great majority of MBOs of informal workers are dependent on external financial support to function effectively, normally through access (direct or indirect) to support from development agencies overseas. In most cases the workers themselves do not have the necessary skills, organisational infrastructure or capacity to write formal proposals, manage donor budgets, or prepare the necessary reports that are needed to access funding. Almost inevitably therefore, MBOs of informal economy workers frequently have strong relationships with supportive NGOs, with activists – sometimes highly educated – capable of providing or facilitating financial support.

The extent to which the MBOs are independent of their NGO counterparts varies considerably. Where an MBO has a strong collective leadership, drawn from the workers themselves, and bound by a robust constitution and strong democratic culture, it is more likely that the NGO is in a clearly defined supportive role that respects the MBO's autonomy and self-determination.

“We are a women's organisation, organised by women household workers, and not managed by an NGO. They give us solidarity and we grew through their help, which we very much appreciate. But we manage ourselves. Our weak point is our financial situation; our resources are always very limited. However, everyone always does what she can, and it is this solidarity by many individuals which makes our organisation strong” (Basilia Catari Torres of the National Federation of Household Workers of Bolivia, quoted in Bonner 2010)

In some cases, however, this is more problematic, where the skills and access to resources of an individual or small group of activists within an NGO, no matter how benign the intentions, can lead to dependency and patronage. This in turn can restrict the development of the MBO, stifle democratic culture, or even lead to an exploitative relationship for financial or petty political gain. More seriously in the long term, an unhealthy MBO-NGO relationship can stifle the voice of the workers, and prevent them from claiming their own rights and advancing their own livelihoods.

The relationship between NGOs and trade unions is frequently difficult. Aside from questions of class background, democratic legitimacy and consistency of policy priorities, NGOs are also viewed with concern as competitors with the trade union movement over scarce financial resources (Spooner, 2004). NGO activists are often highly educated, technically skilled, and have the capacity to successfully manage relationships with donor agencies, thus can be relatively successful in securing funding for project activities. Although there are many notable exceptions, local and national trade union representatives can find it far harder to secure and manage funds from external donors. There is therefore a common complaint of trade unions that NGOs receive funds for work that should be a union responsibility.

Nevertheless, NGOs are a very important source of support for informal economy workers in certain geographical areas and sectors, particularly where the traditional trade union movement is weak (or non-existent), and there are also a considerable number of NGOs which were specifically created by trade unions to provide specialist services or tasks

In Transition – from NGOs to MBOs

Organisations are not static, and the tendency to move from either a small member based group, community organisation or group within an NGO into a trade union is evident in a number of cases. Once domestic workers form or join an organisation their horizons expand, knowledge increases, confidence grows and a need for a more powerful and independent organisation is felt. There are a number of examples of migrant worker or faith based groups seeking out trade unions to join, or seeking to become trade unions in their own right.

The *Tunas Mulia* Domestic Workers' Union in Jogjakarta, Indonesia started out as a religious study group meeting in mosques. The domestic workers involved wanted to take up issues of their rights as workers and decided to form a union. Now they are busy assisting domestic workers' groups in four others cities to form unions.

The Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong grew out of a self organised group, the Indonesian Group of Hong Kong. Members felt that the group was not strong enough and decided to become a union so that they could be officially recognised and have a more political agenda of promoting labour rights.

In the Netherlands a group of migrant domestic workers, the Trusted Migrants group, almost all of whom were undocumented, looked for a trade union to join up with. *Bondgenoten*, an affiliate of the FNV (Dutch trade union federation), accepted them into the union as a group and as individual members. In order to make it easier for the union to “cope” with migrant domestic workers, *Bondgenoten* has made it a policy that they will only accept this category of workers if they are at the same time part of a self –help group. The union is committed to fully integrating them into union structures. It has allocated them into the cleaning section of the union where they have a seat on the committee.

In other cases community organisations or NGOs start out providing services and advocating on behalf of domestic workers. This leads to initiating organising amongst domestic workers who then feel the need and have the confidence to form an independent organisation. In the Philippines, the Visayan Forum (VF) is an NGO supporting and campaigning for domestic workers, while SUMAPI (meaning “join”) is an association of domestic workers themselves. SUMAPI was initiated by, and organised through, VF as early as 1995. The Association continues to work in partnership with the Visayan Forum and others to campaign for legislative change, provide skills training and other services and to build sustainable relationships with employers. It reaches out to domestic workers in parks, schools, churches, communities, villages and engages in recreational as well as work related activities.

Independence is sometimes difficult to achieve as it is not always easy for the NGO to let go, or for the new union/association to become self sufficient and independent.

5. Sector-Specific Models of Organisation

Aside from the general problems and challenges faced by workers in the informal economy, such as low and insecure incomes, lack of social protection and protective labour and other appropriate law and regulation, and the organisational challenges which result, the different sectors of the informal economy each face different problems and organisational challenges. These sector-specific problems have given rise to tendency towards different forms of organisation and differing strategies emerging most strongly. In this section we look in more detail at organisation in four sectors across different continents.

Table 1 provides examples of sectors and occupational groupings commonly found in the informal economy, and sets out some of the key issues, organisational challenges and main forms of organisation in summary form.

Table 1. Examples of Sector-Specific Issues, Challenges and Forms of Organisation (Bonner et al, 2008, updated)

Sector or occupational group	Priority issues and key challenges for workers in different occupational groups	Organising challenges for unions/organisations	Main forms of organisation
Street, market vendors and hawkers	Right and space to vend in public spaces Facilities for storage and shelter, toilets and water Protection against harassment by police and authorities Safety and security Competition – protection against bad effects Access to credit and financial services	Not regarded as workers by selves and others Controlled by politicians, “mafia” Fear of harassment by authorities, police Competition amongst selves and formal sector Time spent on organising means loss of income No rights or forums for bargaining	Local associations Some unions MBO Networks: -Alliances or associations at area, city levels -National alliances -International Organisation: StreetNet
Home-based workers ¹⁴	Equal income, same benefits/ protections factory workers Identifying employer End to exploitation by middlemen Access to regular work Improving skills Access to markets (own account) Access to credit (own account)	Isolated in homes, invisible Time-women double burden of work, child and home care Fear of losing work Restrictions imposed by religion and culture Unclear or disguised status	Local production groups/ self help groups NGOs with member groups (quasi unions) Some unions and coops Mixed MBO/NGO networks -Area -National -Regional networks: HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet SE Asia

¹⁴ Home-based workers includes own account workers and those working as industrial outworkers (homeworkers). Home-based workers work in many industrial sectors e.g. garment, food, electrical, leather, metal, electrical, crafts etc

Sector or occupational group	Priority issues and key challenges for workers in different occupational groups	Organising challenges for unions/organisations	Main forms of organisation
Wastepickers and recyclers	<p>Access/right to recyclable waste Secure space for storage and sorting Integration into municipal solid waste management systems Work higher up the recycling chain Fair prices for recyclables Recognition and improved status Health and safety End to eExploitation by middlemen</p>	<p>Low status and self esteem Fear of losing work Fear/dependency on middlemen Competition amongst selves/lack of collective organising tradition Time to meet means loss of income Child labour</p>	<p>Worker Cooperatives/associations Groups – self help/associated with NGOs Some unions Networks (both mixed and MBO) Area networks National federations/networks Regional network: Latin America</p>
Domestic workers	<p>Recognition as workers Respect and valuing of work Protection against dismissal, abuse Freedom of movement and respect for privacy Freedom to change jobs (migrant) Less hours, more rest Better living conditions</p>	<p>Isolated and invisible in homes Fear of employers and losing jobs Dependency on employer for housing etc Lack of time: long hours Fear of authorities (migrant)</p>	<p>Unions, faith based associations, migrant worker groups, quasi unions¹⁵ Define this earlier (CHECK) Networks (mostly mixed) -Regional networks: Asia Domestic Worker Network; Latin American /Caribbean Network (CONLACTRAHO) -International Network: IDWN</p>

¹⁵ Quasi unions, “the broad range of organisations that have emerged to represent the interests of otherwise unrepresented people in their work lives and in their relationships with their employer, seeking to address matters of worker rights and to improve working conditions”. “The most frequent organisational form is highly staff-driven, with a small and dedicated staff and a very loose and shifting membership.” Charles Heckscher and Françoise Carré. *Strength in Networks: Employment Rights, Organisations and the Problem of Co-ordination*, British Journal of Industrial Relations, 44:4, December 2006

Sector or occupational group	Priority issues and key challenges for workers in different occupational groups	Organising challenges for unions/organisations	Main forms of organisation
Agricultural, forestry and fish workers	Right to land and land use (forests, water) Right to natural resources Regular work Access to resources and equipment Access to credit and markets	Scattered locations Isolated and far distances Child labour Seasonal or intermittent work Dependency on employer for housing	Producer/ Self help groups Cooperatives Some unions
Transport workers (urban passenger)	Access to routes and passengers Protection against harassment by authorities, politicians, mafia Health & safety/ accident protection Parking and facilities Petrol and spares prices and fares Competition-protection against bad effects	Mobility Competition amongst selves and formal sector Own account not regarded as workers by self/others Control by politicians, “mafia” Fear of harassment by police/authorities Time for organising means loss of income	Local associations; unions Unions may be composed of individual members or association members International: Many individual informal transport organisations starting to affiliate to ITF
Construction and related workers (not too sure of this sector)	Irregular work Low wages and poor conditions Safety Facilities on site	Job/workplace mobility Unstable/ irregular work Threats by employers and fear of losing work Competition Inability to implement labour laws where in place	Unions
Sex workers	Decriminalization of sex work Discrimination and stigma – respect Health, including HIV/Aids Safety and security Recognition as workers Protection from police harassment Protection from exploitation by criminals, police, employers	Need to keep under the radar where operating “illegally” Scattered locations and isolation Fear of pimps, employers Fear of police harassment Not recognized as workers- self and others Apathy	Groups, projects, quasi unions Some unions Mixed alliances (projects, NGOs, unions) Regional alliances: Europe, Asia, Latin America International Alliance:

Street and Market Vendors¹⁶

Street vendors, informal market vendors and hawkers are generally the most visible workers in the informal economy. They are in evidence throughout the developing world (Africa, Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, Central/Eastern Europe) and increasingly in the developed countries of North America and Western Europe, where refugees and migrants turn to vending in public spaces as a result of lack of access to the formal labour market.

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

Street vendors are organised in local, district/city, national, regional and international structures. At the local or base unit level, there are examples of associations, market vendors' cooperatives, and associations integrated into union structures; local unions and local branch/district structures of national trade unions; and local groups (*proto-unions*, *quasi-unions*, and self-help groups affiliated in some way with NGOs). There are also groups linked to organisations promoting small businesses and entrepreneurship.

In some cases, local associations and/or unions federate into associations, alliances and Associations of individual associations/unions into city, province/state/country regions (e.g. Eastern Cape Street Vendors' Alliance, FEDEVAL Peru, urban alliances affiliated to KENASVIT Kenya)

Africa has the most extensive organisation, mostly in associations and unions. Since the 1980s in Ghana and francophone West African countries, unions have recruited members from informal workers' associations and integrated these associations into their union structures (e.g. General Agricultural Workers Union in Ghana). More recently federations/alliances of associations (sometimes street vendors only, sometimes including all different sectors of informal work) have been formed in many countries, often with the assistance of trade union centres (e.g. Burkina Faso, Niger, Zimbabwe). Some of the associations have been encouraged to transform their structures and become unions, particularly with the support of the ILO Bureau for Workers Activities (ACTRAV) and project activity by the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA) and Global Union Federations, such as UNI¹⁷.

In **Latin America**, the main forms of organisation are associations, federations and autonomous/own-account workers' unions or informal economy unions affiliated to national trade union centres. Some of these trade union developments are very recent. NGOs providing services to street vendors and informal market vendors sometimes get involved in establishing organisational structures (e.g. CONFIAR in Lima, Peru). They compete for support through the services they provide – and those with substantial resources can create considerable confusion and disunity among members of democratic membership-based worker organisations.

In **Asia**, SEWA has the best-established informal workers' organisation, and has been inspirational for the development of other organisations in Asia as well as internationally. Asia has several national federations/alliances/confederations of street vendors (e.g. India, Korea, Philippines). In the Philippines there are multiple national federations of street vendors, apparently all working in

¹⁶This section and following is an updated version of that found in Bonner et al, 2008

¹⁷ Union Network International – the international federation of unions covering a wide range of services, including retail trading.

competition against one another. Unions organising informal workers in Asia often do not organize street vendors because of their own-account status. However, GEFONT in Nepal formed a street vendors' union (NEST) and BFTUC in Bangladesh formed a self-employed union (SEU) after being aware of similar developments in other countries and the existence of StreetNet as an international organisation to which they could affiliate. NGOs providing services to street vendors have sometimes played a relatively progressive role in Asia, e.g. some of the members of the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), and particularly where there have not been identifiable MBOs (e.g. Cambodia, Thailand).

In parts of **Central and Eastern Europe** there is a growing sector of street vendors and informal market vendors, and some unions have been organising market vendors (e.g. Moldova). The ITUC has an informal workers' organising project in this region, started by the ICFTU prior to establishment of ITUC.

A number of unions in **western Europe** have started organising self-employed workers, such as in the Netherlands (FNV) and Germany (Ver-di). Street and informal market vendors are often found amongst the Roma communities, as well as immigrants from poorer countries – they face additional problems due to their often undocumented citizenship status. UPTA in Spain has taken this organising challenge on by actively recruiting them to register as autonomous workers in terms of new legislation passed in July 2007.

In the **USA**, there are projects in New York providing para-legal and other services, particularly to immigrant street vendors, who have become membership based organisations in order to be able to represent their members in negotiations with authorities.

Wastepickers

For wastepickers, the most extensive levels of organisation are to be found in **Latin America**, mostly through worker cooperatives and associations (operating as cooperatives). In Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Ecuador these are organised into national networks/associations or movements of cooperatives/associations with their own offices, officials and constitutions. Both men and women are engaged in wastepicking/recycling activities, although men tend to be engaged in the more lucrative areas of the work and to hold more leadership positions in the organisations. Many of the cooperatives are recognized by their respective municipalities, and have agreements regarding access to recyclables.

There is an active regional network of wastepicker organisations in Latin America. At its third regional conference, held in 2008, there were representatives from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela¹⁸. Technical support is provided by a range of NGOs (and sometimes by local governments) in different countries. The AVINA Foundation and WIEGO provide support for the regional network.

Despite leading the way in organising wastepickers the majority are still unorganised. For example, in Brazil 80% are unorganised, working on the dumps and in the streets and selling to middlemen. In Bogota, Colombia, the National Association of Recyclers (ANR) estimates that only 2000 out of 18000 wastepickers are organised. Individual coops are small, averaging about 40 members. (Horn, 2008)

In **Asia**, there are very many informal wastepickers but limited organisation. India has the largest number of organisations, most with a majority of women, organised nationally as the Alliance of India Wastepickers (AIW), representing 35 organisations, including both MBOs and NGOs and as yet without formal structure (AIW. 2010). They have come together to discuss and plan around common

¹⁸ See <http://www.wiego.org/reports/WastePickers-2008.pdf>

positions and take up key policy issues with national and state governments. Organisations tend to be small and unstable. The SEWA paper pickers' cooperative in Ahmedabad, has had major problems with wastepickers losing contracts with the municipality, and hence their livelihoods. Others remain relatively well organised, such as the KKP KP trade union in Pune.

In South East Asia there does not seem to be coordinated or extensive organisation. There are NGO projects, such as the NGO Linis Ganda programme in the Philippines and in Thailand a range of small family headed groups, groups headed by village chiefs, migrant groups on landfills and so on (Chikarmane and Narayan. 2009). But wastepickers are generally unorganised and often dependent on middlemen – and in Indonesia, sometimes even for their housing (Personal communication, Ferry Guanto, March 2008).

In **Africa** there appear to be few substantial organisations of wastepickers or national networks, although recent research in four cities in Kenya located more than 350 organisations/groups engaged in the collection and selling of waste¹⁹. The vast majority of these are small and unstable survivalist, self help groups or community based projects (Kuria and Muasya. 2010). To make a good living wastepickers are dependent on access to substantial quantities of “good quality” recyclables, as well as vibrant and accessible markets for the materials they collect. Many countries in Africa, with limited industrial development and poor communities do not provide an ideal context for the development and sustainability of strong organisations. On the other hand, municipal waste management services in cities tend to be inadequate leaving the field open to survivalist informal workers to operate.

In a recent development in South Africa, wastepickers from 26 landfill sites held their first national meeting and are in the process of forming a South African National Wastepickers Association. These developments are supported by the environmental justice organisation, *groundWork* (Samson 2009). In Cairo, Egypt, the Christian Coptic community has a long tradition of door step waste collection and recycling. They are organised mainly in family units and small businesses, and a number of NGOs provide support and services such as training. In all cases there is no relationship with the trade union movements.

The Latin American Wastepickers Network is the only **international** network to date although as noted above an informal global alliance is in existence, coordinated globally by an International Coordinator (employed by WIEGO) and having an interim steering committee.

There has been some interaction with ITUC at the United Nations Forum on Climate Change, Bonn 2009 and the Copenhagen conference in December 2009, where wastepickers and allies have been advocating alternative funding mechanisms to support fair and just solutions to climate change.²⁰

Home-Based Workers

Home-based workers, primarily women, are generally unorganised or very weakly organised into small local groups – for production, informal credit unions, and support groups. Surprisingly worker cooperatives do not appear to be common. With some exceptions, trade unions have largely ignored home-based workers, or have them too difficult to organise. Some unions are even hostile as they perceive homeworkers as undermining conditions and employment in the formal economy. NGOs and/or associations have taken up the space left by unions: often focused on advocacy and welfare and sometimes worker rights, and often are solely or primarily women's organisations.

The strongest home-based workers' organisations are to be found in **Asia**. As mentioned above, there are sub-regional networks of home-workers' organisations (including supportive NGOs) – HomeNet

¹⁹ Wiego is currently attempting to identify waste-picker organisations in Africa

²⁰ See www.wiego.org/occupational_groups/waste_collectors/index.php

South Asia and HomeNet South-East Asia, although (perhaps with the exception of India) the national HomeNets represent relatively small numbers of workers. Very few of the MBOs involved are national organisations, and most are highly dependent on supportive NGOs.

There are also local groups, associations, and cooperatives in **western Europe**, such as STIBTTA, which organises embroiderers in Madeira, and some unions like (e.g. IG Metall in Germany) have organised homeworkers (piece workers). National organisation remains very weak. For some years, the National Group on Homeworking, a UK NGO provided advice and support, and developed good relationships with national unions and local authorities, but closed in 2009 due to lack of funds.

In **eastern Europe**, the strongest organisation is the Bulgarian Association of Home-Based Workers, with 3,500 members. Established in 2002, it is technically an NGO, although it operates like a union in practice, and has close links with the Confederation of Independent trade Unions of Bulgaria (KNSB). It is presently unable to register as a union, as Bulgarian labour law does not allow for self-employed workers' associations to be registered as such. In May 2010, the Bulgarian Association hosted a regional meeting of home-based workers' representatives and trade union allies from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia, which might form the basis of a more permanent regional network. (Personal communication, Dan Gallin, June 2010)

In **Latin America** there are local groups, in Rio de Janeiro, and in parts of Mexico for example, and in Bolivia there is a women's committee in La Paz trying to coordinate home-based worker groups, and some evidence of attempts to form unions in Chile in recent years, but further research and investigation is required to reveal the full extent of organising.

Internationally, the experience of organisations successfully working together in preparing and lobbying for the ILO Homeworkers Convention in 1996 led to the creation of *HomeNet International*, attempting to bring together home-based workers' organisations and supportive NGOs from all continents. Internal divisions, primarily over questions of problematic MBO-NGO relationships, the relationship between advocacy and organising, and the future direction of the network, led to its collapse around 2000. The regional HomeNets in Asia continued as independent organisations.

A new organisation, Home Workers Worldwide²¹ was launched in the UK in 2001, with substantial funding from the British government, to undertake a major international mapping exercises of home-based workers. At the end of the mapping programme, in 2004, participants in an international workshop expressed their desire to maintain links and build an active federation, and formed a Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide, although little is known about its activities.

Domestic Workers

As noted above domestic workers have a long history of organising into trade unions in many countries but have often failed to sustain themselves or to grow substantially, whether as self organised domestic workers' unions or as a sector within a formal service sector union. In recent years there has been an upsurge in organisation primarily of migrant women domestic workers, who often organise firstly around their status as migrant women and then as workers into community based groups or through NGOs. Another common base for organizing is through the formation of church based groups. There are many examples of such small groups feeling the need for an organisation that can fight for their rights as workers and seeking to become or collaborate with a trade union (see above). The upsurge in organizing has also led to the formation of national, regional and international networks- usually of a mixed nature (unions, NGOs, CBOs) but with domestic workers in leadership and with internally democratic structures.

²¹ See <http://www.homeworkersww.org.uk/home>

Latin America probably has the most well established unions, especially in Brazil where 35 unions form the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD). There are also NGOs and supportive organisations in many countries. The Latin American network (CONLACTRAHO), with representation from 14 countries, predates the current upsurge having been formed more than 30 years ago.

In **Asia** domestic worker's organising has developed rapidly over the past few years. In India there are a number of organising initiatives – into unions or through NGOs and church based movements, such as the National Domestic Workers' Movement (claiming over 1 million members) - but as yet no nationally coordinated body. In Nepal a new union the Nepal Independent Domestic Workers' Union (NIDU), affiliated to GEFONT was launched. In South East Asia, Hong Kong is a centre of migrant domestic workers' unions, associations and NGOs. There are also domestic workers unions and support organisations active in Indonesia, Philippines and very recently in Thailand. Two regional networks in Asia, the Asia Domestic Workers Network (ADWN, 2005) for local domestic workers, and the Asia Domestic Workers' Alliance (ADWA, 2008) for migrant domestic workers have been recently formed. The campaign for recognition of domestic workers as workers and for an ILO Convention has spurred on mobilisation and solidarity within the region, with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCFTU) and the IDWN (through its regional coordinator) playing important roles in alliance building amongst unions and NGOs and amongst local and migrant domestic workers.

In **Africa**, there is a tradition of unionisation of domestic workers. However, whether unions of domestic workers or a sector within a formal catering and allied union, membership has tended to be very small and unstable- often financially unviable and neglected by (male) union leadership. Again there is an upsurge in interest in organising domestic workers with some successes. For example, the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Education Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers' Union (KUDHEIHA) organised over 10 500 domestic workers in the space of a year. The campaign for an ILO Convention and the intervention of the IDWN again is proving significant, and although there is no regional network as yet, in an IDWN organised workshop unions present agreed that such a network should be formed.

Europe has a number of established domestic worker unions or sections of unions, and some collective bargaining agreements, such as those in Belgium, Italy, France and Germany, as well many migrant domestic workers groups or NGOs, some of whom have made the move to link with trade unions (e.g. see Kalaayan in UK above)

Internationally the formation of the IDWN and the campaign for an ILO Convention has helped build solidarity within the trade union movement, and with and among domestic workers unions, associations and supportive NGOs (labour, migrant workers, women, legal). The campaign is proving to be an important mobilisation and organising tool. The struggle of domestic workers and their demands, as set out in the Platform of Demands prepared by the IDWN (IDWN. 2010), has garnered unprecedented support from national trade union centres and the international trade union movement in general.

The details provided in these sectoral overviews show a very mixed relationship between informal worker organisations and formal trade unions. Where there already a significant number of trade unions in the sector or a tradition of organising into trade unions, then the possibility of building bridges across the formal –informal divide appears to be much stronger. The effect of a catalyser, such as a committed formal union or an international network with leadership committed to collaboration, or the presence of a campaign to jointly mobilise around is also important, as in the case of domestic workers. Conversely, where organisation has developed with limited or non-existent links with the trade union movement such with home based workers and wastepickers, bridging the informal-formal divide is more difficult.

6. Trade union policy and strategy – International Perspectives

Although the last twenty years or so have seen more support -including formal policy -for organising informal workers by the international trade union movement, this has not necessarily translated into action by all of its affiliates and/or their constituent unions, or by some global union federations. Hence there is still uneven support and contestation around its feasibility, its priority as well as the status and relationship with organisations of informal workers that are not trade unions. However, there are ongoing positive developments that will hopefully see an increase in unions organising or supporting informal workers through innovative organising strategies and new alliances and collaborative efforts.

The constitutional aims of the new International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC²²), adopted in 2006, included direct reference to the need to organise workers in the informal economy:

“To promote the growth and strength of the independent and democratic trade union movement, it shall initiate and support action to increase the representativeness of trade unions through the recruitment of women and men working in the informal as well as the formal economy, through extension of full rights and protection to those performing precarious and unprotected work, and through lending assistance to organising strategies and campaigns.”

The ITUC Action Programme on Organising adopted at the June 2010 Congress includes a commitment to

“promote the development of policies and activities to enable the organisation of atypical, vulnerable, informal economy and precarious workers, including both regular and irregular migrant workers and those performing work on an informal or unprotected basis, through a structured exchange of experience and information between trade unions within the ad hoc networks of the ITUC, global union federations and regional organisations and with the participation of other organisations where useful, and proposes that the secretariat undertake sufficient, substantial follow-up activities including an informal network of affiliates and global union federations to this end”; and

“increase the public understanding of the problems facing workers performing work on an informal basis as well as expand the opportunities for these workers to organise, in general within the existing sectoral structures, so as to change their status and working conditions and ensure solidarity between workers in the same sector, whether in the formal or informal economy”.

This new resolution attempts to give some practical guidance on how to proceed: such as forming an “informal network of affiliates and global union federations” and to organise “in general within “existing sectoral structures”. It also indicates a continuing wariness about working with organisations outside of existing structures e.g. “with the participation of other organisations where useful”.

A draft resolution proposed to the same ITUC Congress by some of the national union centres active in the ICC (SEWA, Ghana TUC, CROC) argued for more committed action. They proposed that the Congress

“Notes the urgent need to strengthen the effective and democratic organisation and collective bargaining strength of informal economy workers;

²² The ITUC was formed in 2006 as a merger between the former International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) (need to explain this earlier at first mention)

“Resolves to establish a sustained programme within the ITUC with the responsibility to manage and co-ordinate support and development for informal economy workers’ organisations and member organisations committed to organising informal economy workers in their sectors, countries and regions.

“Notes the urgent need to ensure that informal workers have a strong voice and representation in the structures and policy-making processes of the international trade union movement, and within the ITUC itself;

“Resolves to provide a platform within the ITUC to member organisations with affiliated unions or associations representing significant numbers of informal workers for exchanging experiences and best practice and developing new policies and strategies for renewal of organising efforts towards decent work. (SEWA et al, 2010)

Despite considerable support (including from some union centres in the North), the resolution did not reach the floor of the Congress for debate. Nevertheless, it suggests that the issue is growing in importance for ITUC delegates, and may be addressed with more seriousness in the future.

Global Union Federation initiatives

Global Union Federations are increasingly paying attention to the organisation of informal workers as their affiliates report on shrinking formal workforces and increased casual and precarious work arrangements. The IUF, with its practical support for organising domestic workers at national and international levels and its open minded approach provides the best example to date of the positive role that can be played by global union federations in bridging the formal-informal divide. There are practical initiatives too by other global union federations. Some of these have been mentioned above. Union Network International (UNI) and Public Services International (PSI) have also both had joint organising projects with Streetnet International. PSI, for example, has had a particular interest in building cooperation between market traders’ associations and municipal workers’ unions when facing privatisation (or mutualisation) of markets in Zambia.

The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) began to show an interest in informal transport workers when it commissioned case studies on organising informal transport workers in 2006. Its 2010 Congress Document takes this further and includes a section on *Organising precarious/outsourced/ contract workers* which recognises that

“Only a minority of the world’s transport workers are in secure jobs. There has been a consistent trend of employers avoiding decent labour standards and rights, and of separating their operations into business units or outsourcing them to contractors in a way which isolates workers and makes collective representation extremely difficult. The global economic crisis has been used by many employers as a further means to shed jobs, casualise or outsource work, to cut pay and worsen working conditions. Many public transport services have been privatised and fragmented into small owner--operator businesses”.

The Congress document goes on to say that reports commissioned by the ITF

“... highlighted that, while some of these (precarious) workers have organised into trade unions, there is a need to recognise and work with other forms of worker organisation which precarious workers have developed among themselves, and to link them to the trade union movement.... The ITF will (therefore) develop a strategic plan which will develop networks of organisations, which will include both unions and other associations, which act on behalf of workers whose livelihoods come from precarious or informal work in the transport sector...” (ITF 2010)

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

7. Conclusions and Prospects: Organising across the formal-informal divide

Greater attention is now being given to the need for workers in the informal economy to be given greater voice and visibility, along with the right to form democratic organisations capable of representing their interests to governments, employers, development agencies and civil society. The international trade union movement, is becoming increasingly aware of the continuing expansion of informality in the world's economy including in northern industrialised countries, and – led by unions and associations in the global South – is adopting policies and developing new strategies for organising in the informal economy.

Trade unions and workers' associations face enormous obstacles and challenges in building effective and sustained democratic organisations representing informal workers, particularly to ensure that women have a strong representative voice. These include attitudinal blockages from “traditional”- mainly male- unionists, as well as real practical difficulties. Informal workers are organised in a multitude of ways, including trade unions, associations, cooperatives, and other hybrid forms of organisation, reflecting different political contexts, organisational cultures and employment sectors. Many of these organisations are fragile, and depend on external support from the trade union movement or from supporting NGOs.

The key challenge is to develop new relationships between informal workers' associations, trade unions, cooperatives, NGOs, and others in social movements that are capable of building and sustaining democratic organisations of informal workers..

What this overview seems to suggest is that, although an international consensus on an organising strategy that commands the support from both sides of the informal-formal divide would be the ideal starting point, in practice this is unlikely to happen due to the dispersed and diverse nature of informal worker organisations, and indeed trade unions themselves, and their differing economic, political, organisational and social contexts. It is more likely that developments will take place at different paces, and with differing degrees of collaboration depending on context and sector. However, prospects for accelerated organising across the “divide” look more promising than before, with local, national and international informal economy organisations strengthening and becoming more visible, and increasing support and action by the trade union movement for organising informal workers into unions, as well as the development of a more open attitude towards collaborating with different forms of worker organisation and NGOs.

A multi faceted strategy is called for that builds on successful models, activities, collaborations at the base and internationally; that can identify and seize new openings and opportunities and importantly is led by informal worker organisations, inside and outside the trade union movement, with the support of strong allies.

The current experience of domestic workers is one example that shows that it is possible for formal trade union organisations and those of informal/precarious workers to work together in ways that incorporate both traditional and formal organising models. It has also shown that finding the right issue to collaborate and campaign around breaks down barriers and build solidarity even further. Whilst this cannot be precisely replicated in other sectors, making opportunities for interacting and sharing experiences, focusing on the common interests of groups of formal and informal workers, and building campaigns around demands or gross injustices that touch on the lives of many formal

workers may help provide reasons to collaborate, incentives for joint organising and would help build understanding between formal and informal workers.

New opportunities and issues that may encourage, or even necessitate, increased organising across the divide are emerging or already present. The current focus by powerful unions in the north on “precarious work” and the growing interest in climate change justice and green jobs are examples of issues that may help bring formal and informal workers together.

“Precarious” is a term used to cover a wide range of employment relationships, from outsourcing to casual, seasonal and temporary work, emphasising the risk and insecurity faced by these workers. Although very broad in definition (which could include virtually all informal economy workers), unions in industrialised countries address the problem of precariousness from the more specific perspective of major (often multinational) employers deliberately moving jobs away from protected full-time employment towards a burgeoning precarious economy. There is a growing focus on addressing the question of organising more seriously workers in precarious employment by global union federations as well as by national unions.

The focus on precarious work has the potential advantage of establishing common ground and encouraging solidarity between unions representing ‘formal’ workers (primarily in the global North) facing the threat of increasing insecurity, and unions and other workers’ organisations (primarily in the global South) struggling to organise among informal economy workers.

By necessity, unions are crossing the formal-informal divide, following the jobs into the ‘precarious economy’ to organise precarious and/or informal workers – whether within the workplace (e.g. agency workers) or in the supply chain – to combat precarious work.

Affiliates of the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF), for example, have demonstrated how unions can successfully combat casualisation through organising among the casual workers themselves. In 2005, Hong Kong Coca Cola workers forced management to provide secured regular status for all casual workers in the bottling plant; in 2003, unions representing workers in an Italian Nestlé plant negotiated permanent employee status for ‘seasonal’ workers; Norwegian brewery workers went on strike in 2004 to gain permanent status for temporary agency workers. There are many other examples (IUF 2006).²³

The organising methods involved share much with those involved in organising informal workers: emphasising community-based organisation, self-organisation by the workers themselves, identifying and organising around issues that are not necessarily ‘traditional’ union demands and concerns, and often involve organising women workers who occupy many of the precarious jobs.

A growing number of unions in both the global South and North (and East) are fighting for their survival. The ‘formal’ economy has in many countries has shrunk to a small proportion of total employment, and with it, trade union membership and trade union power has greatly diminished. It may be that the trade union movement is in a process of change, reorganising itself from a movement of workers in almost exclusively formal employment relationships, towards a movement that is a representative voice of all workers, including those in precarious work as agency labour, temporary or contract employment, and the ‘survival economy’ on the streets and in the markets.

Experience from recent development among the national, regional and international networks of informal workers suggests that they too are changing, with a growing recognition of the importance of strong and productive relationships with trade unions. As informal workers’ MBOs gain strength and confidence, their leaders recognise the importance of hard-won rights, skills and experience held by

²³ See also, for example, the International Chemical, Energy and Mineworkers’ Federation: <http://www.icem.org/en/73-Contract-and-Agency-Labour>

unions: the ability to undertake effective collective bargaining, the establishment of bargaining and consultative procedures with employers and governments, the representation of workers' interests to inter-governmental organisations, and so on.

Policies and the political will of union leadership are also essential for building sustainable organisations of informal workers. Without this, organisational efforts can be easily side-tracked by previous bad experiences, apathy and not seeing the need or benefit from organising informal workers. Recognition of the need to persist and prioritisation by union leadership are key to maintaining a strategic focus on organising workers in the informal economy." (Bonner, Horn, Jones, 2008)

"Ultimately, only by speaking with one voice can we have the strength to advance workers' rights and economic well-being, whether they work in the formal or informal economies"
(Fackson Shamenda, 2001).

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Street Vendors:

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Domestic Workers:

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www.homenetsouthasia.org

Home-Based Workers (South-East Asia):

www.homenetseasia.org

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