

# StreetNet International: Nothing For Us Without Us! New forms of self-organisation by workers in the informal economy

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*Ghana StreetNet Alliance march for rights and social security on International Street Vendors Day. StreetNet International has over 600,000 members in 54 affiliated membership-based organisations in 49 countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas and (mainly Eastern) Europe.*

Workers in the informal economy usually hear about themselves in the third person. They are referred to as unorganised, vulnerable workers and victims of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism.

This is despite the fact that workers in different sectors of the informal economy have been self-organising since the 1970s.

- In 1972 the Self-Employed Women's Association in India started to organise women vegetable vendors and home-based workers in Ahmedabad, after the collapse of the textile industry. Today it is registered as a trade union, with over 2 million members.
- In 1979 the General Agricultural Workers' Union in Ghana started to organise informalised agricultural workers and peasant farmers. This happened after the International Labour Organisation (ILO) officially recognised rural workers whose employment relationships had been eliminated by the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the IMF and the World Bank

## Informal workers are organised

Today we have international organised groups of democratic, membership-based organisations of workers in the informal economy. Some are registered as trade unions. Others work like trade unions but are unwilling or unable to register due to short-sighted legislative regimes.

StreetNet International has over 600,000 members in 54 affiliated membership-based organisations in 49 countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas and (mainly Eastern) Europe. It was launched in Durban, South Africa on 14 November 2002, a day which is now celebrated as International Street Vendors' Day. StreetNet is an international federation of organised street vendors, informal market vendors and hawkers. These are mostly "own-account" workers, as defined by the ILO. It was deliberately initiated in the global South, so that the organisation would be led, and its founding policies formulated, by organised informal workers from the global South. This was done to avoid the element of northern domination in global organisations such as the ILO and the organisations of the international trade union movement.

The International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF) has 59 affiliates of membership-based domestic workers organisations (including domestic workers' trade unions) and associations in 48 countries. It was similarly launched in Montevideo, Uruguay, on 28 October 2013. In 2011, ILO Domestic Workers Convention 189 was adopted through the international unity and strength of an organised sector of workers.

This means that strong and viable representative organisations of workers in these sectors of the informal economy are alive and well at national level.

There are also strong worker organisations in other sectors of the informal economy, such as waste pickers, home-based workers, informal transport workers, subsistence fisher people and rural workers.



*Waste pickers ("catadores") in Ecuador. In Brazil, many cooperatives and associations of catadores (waste pickers) are part of the (Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials)).*

## Organisations of waste pickers and other sectors

In Brazil, for example, many cooperatives and associations of *catadores* (waste pickers) are part of the *Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* (National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials (MNCR)) who organise informal workers in their sector into worker-controlled cooperatives. MNCR developed strong policies to maintain worker control of the cooperatives/associations and the movement.

- All elected leadership, no matter how senior, have to be working members of

cooperatives/associations and to earn their income directly from this work, on an equal basis with other members of their cooperatives.

- Negotiations with government and municipalities is done directly by elected *catadores* leaders and not by technocrats, who can assist only in a support role.
- At local and regional levels the MNCR has sub-committees which negotiate directly with state and local governments, with varying levels of success.
- At federal level, however, an inter-ministerial committee was established by President Lula, in response to the development of the MNCR movement. This was an advisory committee which met monthly with elected MNCR leaders, and every year in December, while the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) was in office. The President met with the *catadores* to evaluate the progress of the Inter-Ministerial Committee.

MNCR has a policy of political independence. Their perception is that the trade unions all have political affiliations, and therefore they have avoided trade union affiliation as well.

In the sector of organised waste pickers and recycling workers, a regional network Red Latinoamericana de Recicladores (LACRE) was established in Bogota on 1 March 2008, a day which is now celebrated as National Day of Waste Pickers and Recycling Workers.

There are also regional networks in other sectors of the informal economy, such as HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet South-East Asia . The International Transportworkers' Federation (ITF) has informal transport workers' organisations as affiliates, and other Global Union Federations have also accepted membership-based organisations of workers in the informal economy as their affiliates.



## Challenges for the trade union movement

However, the trade union movement in many countries is still struggling to come to terms with organising workers in the informal economy on equal terms with the traditional organised sectors. That means with the same recognition of their rights to representation by their own democratically elected leadership. It means embracing the membership-based organisations which arose from self-organisation, and were not organised by the unions themselves, into the wider trade union movement.

These are the key challenges:

- 1. Political will:** getting trade union leadership to prioritise the organisation of workers in the informal economy, and to make human and financial resources available to implement this.
- 2. Legal changes:** if a country's laws are an obstacle to organising workers in the informal economy, unions struggling for the necessary changes to the laws.

**3. Constitutional changes:** changing trade union constitutions where they are the obstacle to organising informal workers.

**4. New organising strategies:** learning new organising strategies which are more appropriate for workers in the informal economy. This could mean identifying new negotiating partners (e.g. municipalities in the case of street vendors, rather than employers) and new collective bargaining strategies and demands.

**5. Women leadership:** overcoming the traditional male bias in formal sector trade unions in order to have significant leadership by women. It is women who are in the majority in the informal economy, especially in the lowest income-earning work.

**6. Learning from those doing it already:** by means of exchange visits or other engagements, unions learning from the experiences of those who are already organising in the informal economy, avoiding some of the mistakes and replicating the more successful strategies. There are many different models operating successfully. Sometimes a combination of different models can work where no single one fits exactly.

**7. Organising workers in the informal economy as workers and as equals:** avoiding a tendency for formal workers to want to do things on behalf of informal workers, instead of organising for them to represent themselves and set their own organisational agenda. Workers in the informal economy are more marginalised. They often have lower levels of formal education. Formal workers need to be conscious to avoid this tendency. They must remember their own struggles to represent themselves instead of being represented by others.

**8. Joint campaigns:** including demands set by the workers in the informal economy as well as the demands of the formal workers, for successful joint campaigns. It will not work for formal workers to set all the demands and the agenda and expect the support of workers in the informal economy when there is nothing in it for them.

**9. Tackling globalisation:** workers confronting the negative consequences of globalisation in a unified way. Formal and informal workers should identify their common ground and organise around that,

**10. Civil society:** taking a lead in civil society. If trade unions are sufficiently representative of the working people (which is usually the majority of adults) in any society, they are the natural leaders of any civil society or social movement. They become much more representative of the wider working class if they genuinely represent the workers in the informal economy. They are then much better equipped to take up a leading civil society role.

So the part of the trade union movement which recognises all workers (including “own-account” workers) as workers, can and should promote the right of all workers to represent themselves through their own democratically elected representatives. This may mean developing new models of statutory bargaining forums suitable to the new sectors of workers being organised. It must be in line with the principle “Nothing For Us Without Us”. The working-class alliance of trade unions and worker-controlled cooperatives needs to work together for the promotion of an alternative political economy to replace the current neo-liberal capitalist models existing in most countries.

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**P.S.**

\* Amandla! Magazine | Issue 52, June 29, 2017:

<http://aidc.org.za/nothing-us-without-us-new-forms-self-organisation-workers-informal-economy/>