

# India: Street Vendors Are Workers, Too

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**Informality is the rule, not the exception. Not only are the majority of workers in Asia working in the informal sectors, many are simply not recognized as workers, nor do they always see themselves as such. The importance of recognition lies in not only the extension of legal protections but is also critical to building collective agency and power as the working class. Yet, this is just the first step to gaining rights and dignity.**

For these reasons, we want to focus more on categories of workers who are usually excluded from the mainstay of the labour movement. In this conversation, we spoke with Nash Tysmans, whose work with [StreetNet International](#) is focused on organizing street vendors in Asia. We discussed why it is essential to recognize street vendors as workers, the challenges of building organizations, and how StreetNet International supports street vendors globally.

**Asian Labour Review (ALR): Whenever I travel in Southeast Asia, the food stalls on the street are where I would go for food. But when we think about street vendors, they are usually considered self-employed rather than workers in the traditional sense.**

**Nash Tysmans (NT):** We understand they are workers, but they're not recognized as such. As a result, they don't enjoy labour rights. They're not allowed to demand a better status in the places they work. They're not allowed to demand anything from local authorities. So recognition is definitely important.

That's something that I saw firsthand when I met with vendor leaders. When the authorities are constantly monitoring you, trying to kick you out, you tend to think of yourself just as powerless: "I'm only a street vendor; I don't have power, and I can't complain about my situation."

One of the challenges I found in my work is having street vendors recognize that they are already mobilizing and organizing for their rights so they can say confidently, "I'm a worker, and I have certain rights". You see the impact of unions and how important it is to have exposure to a union.

I think it's also about the place. If you work in an established market, you have this sense of being a worker in this market, and you have a market authority to speak to. When you're just spreading your goods in the street, then who do I work for? They may say, "I work for my family". Here is where we're trying to challenge these traditional definitions of workers.

The problem is that they're made invisible. They're everywhere in Asia. They're in every street corner. And yet, when we talk about labour, you rarely have these kinds of workers represented. Only through their recognition as workers can they better demand their rights.

**ALR: What are the different types of street vendors that you have come across in your work?**

**NT:** You have traders working in a market, an established space where they're allowed to work. You also have vendors who are on the street, either in stalls or showing merchandise on blankets on the

ground. They're probably the most precarious because they're the ones who depend on the attitude of the authorities: the authorities may either look the other way or come at them and say, "Get out". We also work with cross-border traders. The example here would be in the Mekong region, where vendors get their supply from one country and then sell in another.

The other classification is based on what type of goods they sell. Most of our members are a combination of food vendors and vendors of second-hand clothing, which is why there's a connection with garment workers. You also have general merchandise vendors who sell knock-off Chinese goods. An important thing to note is that a vast majority of our members are women.

**ALR: There is a question of their legal recognition as workers. But there's also a question of their own political recognition as workers capable of pushing back and organizing collectively.**

**NT:** I think the political question arises as they form their membership-based organizations. That is where the shift happens. It will be very difficult for them to see themselves in the same way as factory or office workers. But when a street vendor wants to be part of a union, it means that they will have to start thinking of themselves as belonging to the working class.

For the legal recognition, it doesn't have to be very complicated. It's a question of "Can we get them registered?" Having them registered and getting an identification card gives them protection when they try to get the right to work in certain places. They can tell the policeman, "I got this card", which means I'm legit. That's how it plays out.

**ALR: I want to ask about dignity. I think at the core of a lot of workers' experience is dignity, or lack thereof. Are you being treated with dignity? If you can be evicted or harassed all the time, you don't have much dignity.**

**NT:** I think it's important that you raise this question. It really underpins our work, but we don't often get the chance to speak about it.

One of the main functions of our work is to uphold that sense of dignity, to remind our workers that they belong to a community they have a purpose. Looking at our members, you see how much they value their ability to sell and how proud they are. It's something I feel every time I'm there: they're very proud of what they do because of what they can achieve through their work.

**ALR: I am also thinking about their precarity: it's not just their income will fluctuate depending on the sales, but also they face a lot of harassment from the authorities. They exist in this illegal or semi-illegal zone. And, there is often also a stigma attached to street vendors as shady or connected to criminals.**

**NT:** They experience a lot of confiscation of goods. They experience harassment by the police and local authorities. Yes, sometimes they're even made to pay bribes just for them to be able to work. I think this is the core of the problem.

Street vendors are seen to belong to the "shadow economy". It's very common for the general public, including the local authorities, to see them as criminal elements. They're not criminal elements. There are no syndicates. It's not a drug cartel. It's just selling fruit vegetables, selling meat, or selling these small things.

They're just people who cannot access formal employment, who have no recourse but this path of informality because that's where they can access an income. What our members have been able to do is try to forge relationships with some of their local authorities or at least try to show people that

they're not threats to the safety and security of people in the cities.

During the pandemic, many even acted as health agents. It's quite difficult to change people's perceptions, but our members work on that every day.

We have to get rid of this terminology of "shadow economy," a misleading and prejudiced term. It's not just them recognizing themselves as workers; it's also this general public and local authorities and state authorities who have to see them as part of how our economies really work and thrive.

**ALR: I want to spend a little more time on organizing because I think this is at the core of so much of our work. Because they work primarily individually and they're not working in coordination with others, there's an assumption that they will be hard to organize. What's your observation?**

**NT:** Necessity is the mother of invention. When you're being pushed, say, if you're a group of stall owners or if you're a group of street vendors working in one particular area, a developer wants to develop the area that you're working in, and you're being pushed out, it's very easy for you to just talk amongst yourselves and say, "What are we going to do?" That part is not the difficult part.

I think the difficult part is really about building an organization. This relates to what we try to do in StreetNet. You have a lot of these sentiments among street vendors, but not many of them understand what it takes to build an organization: Where do I get the resources to do this? What skills do I need to make this a viable organization that can recruit members and do this work?

We must work closely with trade unions in the region. It's the trade unions that have this expertise. They also have a seat at the tripartite negotiating tables. They would be the ones who could exchange knowledge to benefit our members.

**ALR: One of the things that I often come across in the informal sectors is that even when there are no trade unions, there are informal networks, sometimes hometown-based. I wonder how the unions relate to those organically formed networks or informal associations. Are they kind of prototype unions? How do you how do you maybe make use of those networks to organize?**

**NT:** One thing that works in our favour is that since there's no established way of unionizing, you can have different ways of organizing tailored to the contexts where we work. I found that informal networks are useful because they get a lot of support, which boosts their capacity as a membership-based organization.

But the limitation is that it's not sustainable and doesn't often lead to political resolutions in favour of workers. In the absence of trade unions, I think mutual aid and the social solidarity economy are useful because this is a way that people come together, and it's good for advocacy.

For us, the main reason why StreetNet International was formed was because they saw there was a need for all of these informal economy workers to come together and to come up with more cohesive and comprehensive demands that move workers from the informal to the formal economy.

**ALR: Please tell us more about StreetNet International. How is it founded, and what is its mission?**

**NT:** We turned 20 years old on November 14, 2022. We are a global alliance of street vendors and other informal traders' organizations, such as trade unions, associations, informal networks, cooperatives, or other groupings formed according to the local context. We have affiliates in over 50

countries, most in Africa and the Americas. We are led by workers in the global south.

One of the biggest inspirations for the creation of StreetNet and our co-founder is SEWA or the Self-Employed Women's Association in India. They were formed in the 1970s. The union tried to create more unity among women workers in the informal economy. It is very sophisticated in how it works, and it has programs for social protection. It has incredible membership. In StreetNet, we want to make sure that the affiliates that we work with can become just as strong, capable, autonomous and democratic in their organizations.

I think we also struggle internally in our work to try to define what our organization does. Because we're not an NGO. We always tell this to our affiliates because they would ask, "Can you help? Can you finance this?" And we tell them, "No, we're not a funding agency." We're working as part of the labour movement to empower our members.

**ALR: What are the current, key agenda for StreetNet International?**

**NT:** There are three focus areas, and women empowerment is something that cuts across all of them.

The first thing that we work on is worker education. We provide workshops and training that are tailored to workers' needs. It is not your typical workshop because we take into consideration what is accessible for them, like if they're working in their stalls, how can they participate. We developed courses in negotiation skills and social protection, which we have managed to conduct online via Zoom and WhatsApp. We're trying to innovate and meet members where they're at.

The second area is capacity building. All of our members belong to what you call MBOs, or membership-based organizations. We're trying to empower those organizations so that they can function autonomously and sustainably in support of their members.

The third part is around advocacy. We need to address the stigma against street vendors in a more systematic way. The negotiation skills course allows members to outline their key demands. We try to bring those demands together and look for spaces of negotiation or decision-making where those policies are actually decided on.

So, the key advocacy areas are in recognition, which is why I was happy that that was your first question.

Then there is decent work, which must apply to street vendors, too. Also, social protection, where we advocate to extend it to street vendors. We published a comic book to explain the life cycle of street vendors, especially for women street vendors.

And then there are other key issues, such as promoting a worker-led social solidarity economy and the right to the city.

**ALR: What do you mean by the right to the city?**

**NT:** Who belongs to the city? Right for whom? For whom does the city exist?

It is important for us that workers can define for themselves a place where they can work, where they will not be harassed, and where they will have access to the customers who buy their product. It's about the right to work in a city.

The problem is that it's not the worker that's informal or illegal; it's this economy. So it's a question

of what the state will do to properly integrate these people into the economy, or at least recognize them as an integral part of the economy.

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### **Asian Labour Review**

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