

# ► Cooperatives and the World of Work

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### Partnerships between trade unions and the social and solidarity economy to support informal economy workers

#### Key points

Around the world, over two billion workers, representing 61.2 per cent of global employment, are in the informal economy. New forms of organizing to tackle decent work deficits in the informal economy have been emerging in response.

Innovative alliances spanning trade unions and the social and solidarity economy (SSE) help increase the visibility, voice and power of informal economy workers and their organizations, in line with Recommendation 2015 (No. 204).

The research has identified three types of emerging partnerships and collaboration between:

- Trade unions and organizations of informal economy workers aimed at establishing independent SSE units;
- Established trade unions and the SSE aimed at organizing, representing, providing services and/or other forms of support to informal economy workers; and
- Partnership of trade union and the SSE established through an enabling partner aimed at facilitating and actively supporting the collective action among informal workers.

These partnerships can support informal workers in improving their livelihoods; providing services and supporting individual needs and access to rights; and improving the structural environment for informal economy workers.

To maximize trade unions and the SSE partnerships and contributions in furthering decent work, among informal economy workers, it is especially important to:

- Develop a supportive policy and regulatory environment conducive to the development of partnerships that support informal economy workers. These include the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, to engage in social dialogue and other forms of advocacy.
- Build an enabling ecosystem, fostering conceptual, strategic, and practical links between diverse organizations to build understanding and commitment to the 'partnership approach' to supporting informal economy workers.
- Provide direct support for partnership development, supporting organizations to understand the options available to them and make informed decisions about the most promising routes of organizing and action.
- Learn and share knowledge and evidence, promoting research, documentation and learning from partnership experiences, as well as facilitating direct exchange and information sharing between partnership organizations and with their enabling partners.

## Introduction

Over two billion workers, representing 61.2 per cent of global employment, are in the informal economy (ILO 2018a). Workers' experiences differ significantly depending on their occupation, with women concentrated in the segments most likely to be associated with poverty, precarious working conditions, and lack of labour and social protection (ibid; Chen 2012; Carre et al. 2020). During the Covid-19 crisis, many informal economy workers have been particularly vulnerable and exposed to income losses, among them home-based workers. Others were concentrated in sectors deemed essential but characterized by precarious, hazardous, unprotected conditions of work with low pay, including domestic and care work, waste picking and street vending (ILO 2020a; 2020b).

New forms of organizing to tackle decent work deficits in the informal economy have emerged in response. Innovative alliances between trade unions and the SSE (Box 1) are increasing the visibility, voice and power of informal economy workers and their organizations, in line with [Recommendation 2015 \(No. 204\)](#) (Box 2).

### ► Box 1. A proposed definition of the social and solidarity economy for discussion

There is not a universally agreed upon definition of the SSE. The Office proposes a definition, for discussion, that is based on values, principles and organizational types based on a review of the adopted national and subnational laws and policies on the SSE.

The social and solidarity economy encompasses institutional units with a social or public purpose, engaged in economic activities on the basis of voluntary cooperation, democratic and participatory governance, autonomy and independence, whose rules limit or prohibit the distribution of surplus. SSE units may include cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-help groups and other units operating in accordance with SSE values and principles in the formal and the informal economies (ILO 2022).

### ► Box 2. The role of diverse organizations and units to support workers in the informal economy as per Recommendation N.204 on Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy

[Recommendation 2015 \(No. 204\)](#) recognizes the important and active role of employers' and workers' organizations in facilitating the transition from the informal to the formal economy (Preamble) and calls on them to extend membership and services to workers and economic units in the informal economy (para. 33). The Recommendation also considers SSE units as core 'economic units' within the informal economy.

Partnerships between workers organizations and the SSE have overcome historical challenges in organizing across movements. They bring together multiple – and complementary – organizational forms to build collective worker solidarity and ownership and support the transition to decent work (WIEGO 2014). Such a partnership approach can also support trade union revitalization, with trade unions increasingly embracing creative organizing strategies, new coalitions and representation of all workers to meet the challenges of changing labour markets and decreased membership globally (ILO 2021).

Moreover, partnerships between trade unions and the SSE can support the effective implementation of International Labour Standards (ILS) and strengthens the capacity of informal economy workers to access their fundamental rights at work. This includes freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; and, the other three fundamental principles and rights at work, namely, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

This brief synthesizes findings from participatory research conducted in 2021, which explored the potential of partnerships between trade unions and the SSE to support informal economy workers.<sup>1</sup> It identifies partnership types, highlights key partnership activities and achievements, discusses challenges and enabling drivers of partnership

<sup>1</sup> This brief is based on a research study that was led by Abigail Hunt and Moizza Binat Sarwar, Overseas Development Institute (Hunt and Binat Sarwar, unpublished). The research was funded and technically coordinated by Open Society Foundations and the International Labour Organization. The research methodology was developed in collaboration with an expert advisory group. It involved a literature review, close examination of selected partnerships through the development of four country case studies, and validation of findings with organizations of informal economy workers. Country case studies that focused on partnerships in Brazil, Colombia, Kenya and South Africa are presented in this brief.

development and impact, and outlines concrete actions to ensure that partnerships can develop, grow and thrive.

## Partnership types

Partnerships between trade unions and the SSE in support of informal economy workers include the provision of individual support and services (micro level) and building collective identity and knowledge and commitment to shared ownership and mutual support (meso level). Often rooted in wider rights and social justice movements, the SSE has successfully built strategic coalitions to build worker power, visibility and influence, leading to improved rights and protections as a result of locally, nationally and globally focused advocacy and dialogue (macro level) (ILO 2022). Three types of partnership between trade unions and the SSE to support informal economy workers are outlined in the following table (see page 4).

## Partnership activities and achievements

Partnership initiatives have secured a number of gains for informal economy workers individually and collectively and have improved the structural environment for informal economy workers' rights. This section highlights some important achievements to date.

### Improving livelihoods

Key partnership outcomes include the increased visibility and recognition of informal economy workers and their work, leading to overall improvements in their incomes. Approaches to securing gains differ by sector. In Colombia a new social enterprise has **generated formal employment opportunities**, where domestic workers

were provided with an employment contract, social security contributions and a living wage (Box 3).

### ► Box 3. Case study: Revaluing domestic work through social enterprise in Colombia

In 2021 the Union of Domestic Service Workers (Unión de Trabajadoras del Servicio Doméstico, or UTRASD) expanded its core activities of advocating at national, regional and local levels for improved labour rights for its core constituency of Afro-Colombian care and domestic workers. A worker-led and managed social enterprise was developed with financial and technical support from enabling partners including the French Development Agency, CARE Latin America and the Caribbean and Fundación Bien Humano. The IMA Limpia social enterprise launched in late 2021, aims to ensure that its design and operations further gender equality, human rights, decent work and economic and social rights (UTRASD et al. 2020).

UTRASD and partners have delivered training to care and domestic workers to build professional skills, knowledge of human and labour rights, and self-esteem with the aim of boosting the professional profiles of workers and the business. UTRASD reports that this has helped change how employers and society perceive domestic work and therefore encouraged improved economic returns. This has been complemented by a social media campaign led by UTRASD to generate a client base supportive of the social aims of the business. As one of the enabling partners has explained: *"Supporting IMA Limpia is not only supporting a social enterprise of women which gives dignity through providing a salary and legal recognition for their work; it is about promoting cultural change where informality and mistreatment are no longer experienced by the people who take care of our homes and loved ones."* Mónica Sandoval, Fundación Bien Humano (cited in IMA Limpia 2021).

## Partnerships between trade unions and the social and solidarity economy to support informal economy workers

## ► Partnerships between trade unions and the SSE to support informal economy workers

Type of partnership	Key characteristics	Examples
Partnership between trade unions and organizations of informal economy workers aimed at establishing independent SSE units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most common form of partnership across all contexts</li> <li>• Partnership initiatives often led by/through formal trade unions and informal economy worker-led associations and organizations</li> <li>• Entities established take diverse organizational forms in the SSE, notably cooperatives, mutual societies and social enterprises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Dominican Republic, the National Union of Domestic Workers (FENAMUTRA) established the COOPFENAMUTRA cooperative (Imparcial RD 2021).</li> <li>• In India, Self-Employment Women's Association (SEWA) has developed multiple SSE entities, such as VimoSEWA Cooperative Limited providing insurance for SEWA members and other informal economy workers (ILO 2019).</li> <li>• In Trinidad and Tobago, the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) has established the Service Workers Centre Cooperative Society Limited (SWCC) worker cooperative (ILO 2018b).</li> </ul>
Partnership and collaboration between established trade unions and the SSE aimed at organizing, representing, providing services and/or other forms of support to informal economy workers	<p>Partnership and collaboration aimed at organizing, representing, providing services and/or other forms of support to informal economy workers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most commonly, trade unions seek out partnerships and collaboration with existing SSE units to extend support to informal economy workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Brazil trade union and SSE alliances were formalized through the creation of the Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários (UNISOL Brazil), a hybrid organization of associations, cooperatives and other SSE units with the active participation of the national Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) (Hunt and Sarwar, unpublished).</li> <li>• In Rwanda the Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs au Rwanda (CESTRAR) approached motorcycle taxi driver mutual fund members in Kigali and supported their efforts toward organizing into unions (Manzi 2007).</li> </ul>
Partnership of trade union and the SSE established through an enabling partner aimed at facilitating and actively supporting the collective action among informal economy workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling partners who aim to facilitate and actively support collective action among informal economy workers (e.g. academics, other technical experts and non-governmental organizations) play a lead role in the conceptualization and foundation of new partnership initiatives to organize and support informal economy workers.</li> <li>• Role of the enabling partner varies according to partnership needs, and may be short-term, sustained or ad-hoc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In South Africa, Social Law Project has led the Digital Platform Cooperative Project, a burgeoning domestic worker-owned platform cooperative, established in partnership with South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and with United Domestic Workers of South Africa (UDWOSA) (Hunt and Sarwar, unpublished).</li> </ul>

In Brazil, successful union-supported policy influencing combined with cooperative membership have **created**

**the conditions for new and more stable income generation opportunities for waste pickers** (see Box 4).

► **Box 4 – Case study: UNISOL and CUT partnership to support waste pickers in Brazil**

Waste pickers and recyclers have long organized into cooperatives and associations in Brazil. However, waste pickers' contact with the trade union movement remained limited until the creation of the Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários (UNISOL Brasil) in 2014, a hybrid organization of associations, cooperatives and other SSE units created in partnership with the national Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT).

UNISOL primarily supports the waste picking sector by helping to overcome entrenched economic precarity among workers as well as their historical invisibility, notably to policymakers. It does this by creating solidarity among workers; facilitating national-level cooperation and dialogue aimed at increasing economic and social inclusion by influencing public policies; fostering democratization in the workplace; securing financing for cooperatives; and sharing capital and earnings generated through members. CUT has supported the development of a worker-led political force by assisting in institutional dialogue, participating in UNISOL's political strengthening, and providing technical support through the Agency for Development Solidarity (ADS).

Achievements include increased social security coverage of waste pickers under the 2010 National Solid Waste Policy (Política Nacional de Resíduos Sólidos, or PNRS), following advocacy carried out by UNISOL and other partners grouped under the Waste and Citizenship forum. UNISOL has also supported waste pickers during the Covid-19 pandemic by fighting the closure of warehouses used to store goods; helping source and deliver food parcels to waste pickers; working with other UNISOL sectoral affiliates to manufacture and distribute face masks; and supporting provision of pandemic-related health and safety training to waste pickers

## Providing services and supporting individual needs and access to rights

**Developing informal economy workers' skills and knowledge is often a partnership priority.** This includes self-awareness and resilience as well as transferrable competencies such as business, leadership and advocacy skills. Digital skills development has become increasingly important as digital technology becomes central to partnership models including platform cooperatives (see Box 5). During the Covid-19 pandemic digital communications have facilitated the reach and scale of activities, including virtual trainings, conferences, advocacy and other movement-building activities such as advocacy strategy meetings between informal economy workers.

**Increasing workers' access to services to meet immediate needs around finance, marketing or to support management of unpaid care,** among others, is another key focus area for many partnerships. The development or adaptation of services to overcome barriers faced by informal economy workers in accessing 'mainstream' services is often a priority, for example in Kenya where a Savings and Credit Cooperative has supported street vendors (Box 6).

**Partnerships have also addressed the widespread exclusion of informal economy workers from public social protection and services** (see examples from Brazil [Box 4] and Kenya [Box 6]), including during the Covid-19 crisis. In Argentina, the Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP), which is linked to various SSE initiatives including a healthcare mutual and workers' kitchens, played a leading role in dialogue with the Argentinian federal government's Emergency Social Committee (ESC) leading to food and income security measures (WIEGO 2020).

## Developing collective identity, shared ownership and mutual support

A key achievement of many partnerships is the **interest and engagement generated among workers to learn, develop, share and invest in themselves, as well as to create new forms of solidarity and generate collective economic opportunities.** This often follows intensive effort by partnership organizations to build a shared identity and purpose among workers, as well as to build knowledge of cooperative and wider SSE principles. This can require sustained effort, including because some occupational groups of workers are accustomed to working independently, for example in street vending or waste picking where informal own-account workers are often found. Furthermore, forming or joining SSE units based on



principles of cooperation and participatory democracy often requires adaptation to new ways of working. For example, the new platform cooperative project in South

Africa has concretized a long-running discussion around options for a domestic workers' cooperative in the country (Box 5).

### ► Box 5 – Case study: A platform cooperative of domestic workers, South Africa

A domestic workers' platform cooperative is being established in South Africa, facilitated by the Social Law Project (SLP), in close partnership with the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and United Domestic Workers of South Africa (UDWOSA). The project was initiated following years of scoping and consultation among the participating organizations. The ILO was an early facilitator of efforts to identify opportunities for cooperatives among domestic workers in South Africa (ILO 2015). Drivers of the project include the leadership of SLP as a key enabling partner as well as growing decent work deficits which led SADSAWU and USWOSA to embrace new possibilities for organizing labour and generating quality, worker-owned economic opportunities.

The platform cooperative has identified three main aims:

- improving the rights and working conditions of domestic workers;
- developing collective and democratic ways of working among domestic workers; and
- harnessing technology to support job creation and security for domestic workers.

Some members of SADSAWU and UDWOSA have become founder-members of the platform cooperative and are enthusiastic about the opportunities the initiative could provide for collective ownership and control over their work. As one founder-member explained,

*"Working together as domestic workers makes us feel that we have been listened to. People look down on us because we do the dirty work, whereas with this we will have something and be going somewhere."*

**For many own-account workers, including street vendors, traders, waste pickers and transport workers, organizing into cooperatives and other SSE units has increased opportunities for trade and access to markets and improved workers' bargaining power.** Some partnerships have developed mechanisms for informal economy workers to join forces (with each other and sometimes with formal economy workers) to generate economies of scale through larger-scale purchases and sales. In the waste picking sector in Brazil, a key success has been the organization of second-tier cooperatives to bolster production and value chain efficiency and increase workers' negotiation power during contract discussions (Box 4).

### Improving the structural environment for informal economy workers' rights

Often strongly rooted in wider rights and social justice movements, many partnership organizations have successfully built strategic coalitions to secure improved rights and protections through joint local, national or global-level advocacy and/or social dialogue. Building alliances with trade unions – notably with national

federations and confederations – has strengthened informal economy workers' advocacy initiatives, as demonstrated by the UNISOL/CUT partnership in Brazil (Box 4) and by COTU-K support to NISCOF in Kenya (Box 5).

Priorities for policy change differ by sector and occupational group. Local-level infrastructure and recognition as service providers by local authorities are often significant for own-account workers such as waste pickers and street vendors, for example by entering into agreements with local authorities through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or through agreements on the use of public space at different times/days or on amenities for workers. For example, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a waste picker union in Pune, India, created the worker-owned Solid Waste Collection and Handling cooperative (SWaCH), which – with KKPKP as an intermediary – signed an MoU with the Pune Municipal Corporation, in 2008, to become the sole provider of door-to-door waste collection in the city, in turn improving members' incomes and working conditions (Chikarmane 2012; Chikarmane & Narayan 2005). However, wage workers/employees such as

domestic workers have often focused on national-level regulation and policy – for example, for legal recognition of, and rights associated with, the employment relationship and regulation for improved protection and conditions.

Finally, **gender equality** is a key focus of several partnerships, either because the organization(s) involved have a primary focus on supporting women (e.g., SEWA in India), or because their sectoral/occupational focus is on traditionally female-dominated sectors, such as the domestic work sector. Many – such as UTRASD in Colombia (Box 2) – take a strongly intersectional gender approach to their work. Others tackle the manifestations of structural gender inequality in the workplace, such as violence, harassment, and threats to the safety of women working in the informal economy. In Uganda, for example, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU), working through its Informal Sector Women's Committee, has led negotiations to improve women's safety and access to toilets and other facilities around transport workers' workplaces (ILO 2020c).

## Key challenges to partnership development and impact

### Internal challenges within partnership organizations

A wide range of internal challenges faced by trade unions and SSE unions posed challenges to their establishment, growth, sustainability and effectiveness. Funding gaps emerged as a persistent challenge. Start-up costs were often significant, and in some cases difficult to justify for organizations seeking to set up innovative initiatives outside of their core mandate and experience. Dedicated funds to establish partnership entities and activities are often essential. Lack of finance and investment also emerged as a major barrier to increasing scale, notably when partnership organizations sought to expand activities such as training opportunities to new worker groups or in wider geographic areas

Technical knowledge gaps reduced capacity, efficiency and impact, spanning a wide range of organizational management and operational areas. High turnover of personnel poses a further key challenge to sustainability. This was highlighted in partnership organizations where change is viewed as inherent to the democratic process meaning leadership elections take place every few years and leadership rotation is encouraged. In practice,

however, this often leads to discontinuity in projects and institutional knowledge.

**Partnerships have also addressed the widespread exclusion of informal economy workers from public social protection and services** (see examples from Brazil [Box 4] and Kenya [Box 6]), including during the Covid-19 crisis. In Argentina, the Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP), which is linked to various SSE initiatives including a healthcare mutual and workers' kitchens, played a leading role in dialogue with the Argentinian federal government's Emergency Social Committee (ESC) leading to food and income security measures (WIEGO 2020).

### Gaps in trade union support to informal economy workers and barriers to collaboration between trade union and the SSE

The relative structural and associational power of trade unions, often stemming from their position in tripartite structures, means that they can significantly aid partnership reach and impact. However, informal economy workers and their organizations are at times sidelined from the agendas of trade unions (and federations/confederations). They do not always represent the interests of informal economy workers within tripartite systems and/or advocate for informal economy workers to be brought to the table to represent their own sectors (see Spooner et al. 2021). Organizations of informal economy workers therefore often remain the primary site of collective action in the informal economy.

Partnership between trade unions and the SSE has been hindered by ideological and practical divides. This stems from perceptions of conflicting aims, roles and practices within each and towards each other, contributing to a history of difficult relations between the two movements in various countries. Organizational leaders can have strongly entrenched views and affiliations, limiting preliminary dialogue to support partnership development. Furthermore, when trade unions and similar organizations of informal economy workers establish SSE initiatives, they may lack the in-depth knowledge required to develop SSE units that are economically viable and have weak links with SSE practitioners and other facilitators who could provide support.

## Difficulties in securing organizational scale and sustainability

Establishing fully independent, sustainable, and scalable organizations remains a challenge for many partnerships. Trade unions and other organizations of informal economy workers often experience limited capacity to service members and engage in advocacy as a result of low membership density and limited revenue from dues. SSE units aimed at supporting income generation experience myriad challenges in developing strong business and organizational models. They often lack access to context-specific and specialized assistance, for example, to help carry out market analysis and design appropriate strategic and operational plans. Covid-19 has exacerbated many challenges, with informal economy workers experiencing curtailed incomes or unemployment with little recourse to other support such as public social protection. Some established SSE mechanisms to support workers' economic security collapsed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Box 5).

## Enablers of partnership development and impact

### Conducive policy and regulatory environment

Policy and regulatory frameworks shape the extent to which informal economy workers are able to access their fundamental rights at work, in particular, freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. It is also important to take into consideration the other three fundamental principles and rights at work, namely, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. Significant challenges persist, including the absence or explicit exclusion of some worker groups from labour law which pushes some occupational groups into the de facto informality and the exclusion of many worker-led organizations from registering officially as trade unions serving those sectors. Partnerships with trade unions have therefore been critical in incorporating informal economy workers and ensuring their representation in social dialogue. The role of international standards has also been critical. Relevant standards include the [Domestic Workers Convention 2011 \(No. 189\)](#) and [Recommendation 2011 \(No. 201\)](#) which are widely cited

### Box 6 – Case study: Increasing street vendors' access to finance and social protection in Kenya

The Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT) is a national alliance of street vendors, hawkers and informal traders as well as informal traders' associations (KENASVIT n.d.). In 2007, KENASVIT received funding to support informal economy workers whose businesses had been affected by the election-related violence. One affiliate of KENASVIT, the Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation (NISCOF), used their share to seed fund a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO). This provided a revolving fund for various self-help groups (SHGs) of street vendors in Nairobi to use for business-related investments that members were ineligible to secure through formal banks. The NISCOF SACCO operated until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Shortly afterwards, the revolving fund collapsed because members and guarantors defaulted on loan payments and remaining funds were disbursed to members as emergency grants. The leadership of NISCOF has since focused on securing seed funding to revive the SACCO.

In parallel, NISCOF and the Central Organization of Trade Unions Kenya (COTU-K) have engaged jointly with the Ministry of Labour to secure improved access to social protection for informal economy workers, including by facilitating coverage through the National Health Insurance Fund (NHI) and the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). COTU-K also worked with NISCOF to present options to the Kenyan Senate around extending emergency support to street vendors early in the Covid-19 pandemic.

as supporting the formalization of domestic workers and their organizations. Similarly, the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy [Recommendation 2015 \(No. 204\)](#), sets a benchmark for national policymaking to improve the conditions and the formalization of workers in the informal economy.

The SSE offers significant potential for informal economy workers to organize and gain recognition. For example, the formal status of a cooperative brings – depending on the jurisdiction – legal and social protections and the power to enter into contracts and own property and/or



registered premises (for example, to trade from or store goods at), among others. They provide a formal framework through which the economic activities of informal economy workers can be recognized as businesses and as a basis for negotiation, including with authorities and trading partners (Mshiu 2019; Eum 2020). Further steps towards the creation of an increasingly conducive SSE regulatory environment have been taken in many countries, for example through legal reforms in Colombia in 2020 to facilitate cooperative formation and registration (Law 2069 of 2020 to support entrepreneurship in Colombia).

### **Strong, worker-led organizations and commitment to cross-movement partnerships**

Establishing strong organizational foundations from the outset is key to ensuring the longevity of the partnership itself and its activities to support informal economy workers. Strong and committed leadership is critical to establishing partnerships and ensuring sustainability beyond short-term project-based initiatives. Critically, ensuring that informal economy workers are central to decisions around partnership models and operations is critical to fostering consensus, ownership, and solidarity, which in turn support sustainability. Potential for scalability emerges when partnership members/affiliates start to take organizational development and strengthening work forward themselves and with peers, generating a snowball effect, for example, in Brazil, where waste picker cooperative members who received support from UNISOL then went on to support others (see Box 3).

### **A broad ecosystem of support**

Movement-building and growth past the primary partnership organizations are critical to achieving impact, scale, and sustainability. Direct enabling organizations facilitate and actively support collective action among informal economy workers, and often form part of a wider social movement by organizing and supporting primary organizations (Dias and Ogando 2020; Duguid and Weber 2019). Their organizational structures are highly diverse in form and include union federations and/or confederations, global and regional networks, national and international organizations. Some have a long-standing commitment to linking trade union SSE approaches. In 2010, the Third StreetNet International Congress adopted a Resolution on the SSE and developed several initiatives to document affiliates' work through research and to provide support to them,

such as training and information. Direct enabling organizations can also include civil society organizations (CSOs) which may be a critical source of support and visibility where trade unions, associations or groups have little organizational profile or strength. This may facilitate campaigning, convening or establishing associations or cooperatives (Bonner and Spooner 2011).

Indirect enabling organizations form part of the wider supportive ecosystem of institutions and organizations with the objective of supporting collective action among informal economy workers but are not clearly constituted as worker or social movement actors. They may include finance providers, funders/investors, international and national institutions (including the ILO), development agencies, organizations focused on developing knowledge and capacity-building (including incubators or education establishments, such as Mondragon University in the Basque Country, in Spain), as well as entities providing logistical and technical support to collectives (for example, tech developers creating apps for platform cooperatives).

Some common factors emerge as critical when conceptualizing and delivering support. Tailoring support to sector and geography is critical, and not all Global North incubators have been appropriate or helpful when transferred to other Southern contexts. This is especially pertinent with regard to new business models and organizing strategies in the informal economy. Training and other forms of capacity development can be an important means to support partnerships; the most successful training initiatives respond to a clearly articulated organizational strategic need and are conceptualized and delivered by facilitators with strong links to the partnership organizations.

### **Sharing knowledge, experience and learning**

Sharing knowledge, experience and learning can be an important means of supporting partnerships. This can include developing studies and other documentation of successful partnerships to inspire and inform emerging initiatives. Direct exchanges of knowledge and experiences can be equally fruitful, such as study visits and other facilitated sharing forums. Longer-term partnership matching, ongoing accompaniment and mutual support can also be an important means of fostering replication/adaptation of learning and promising practices as partnerships emerge and evolve. This can be particularly beneficial where the partnerships share common characteristics - notably, sector focus and type of partnership being developed.

## Ways forward

This brief has highlighted the value-added of innovative alliances, within which multiple – and complementary – organizational forms work together to support informal economy workers. Promising pathways are proposed to ensure that such partnerships are able to emerge, grow and thrive, and therefore be in a stronger position to build on successes to date in furthering the rights, decent work, and collective ownership of informal economy workers. Four areas to support partnerships to develop and thrive are proposed:

- **Development of a supportive policy and regulatory environment.** Key steps include ensuring global, national and local policy and regulatory frameworks are conducive in practice to the development of partnerships to support informal economy workers, including the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, to engage in social dialogue and other forms of advocacy. This may require supporting government ministries and institutions to develop policies and/or regulations which recognize the right of informal economy workers to organize. Organizations supporting informal economy workers should also be fully informed about, and able to navigate, the statutory framework to develop (and register, as appropriate) partnership organizations and activities. This will allow them to meaningfully participate in policy dialogue at all levels.
- **Building an enabling ecosystem.** Key steps include fostering conceptual, strategic, and practical links between diverse organizations to build understanding and commitment to the 'partnership approach' to supporting informal economy workers. This entails engaging direct enabling partners (e.g. informal economy worker networks, trade union confederations, CSOs) and indirect enabling partners (e.g. specialist technical support providers focused on developing knowledge and capacity building such as incubators or education establishments, funders, international institutions) to support partnership

development and impact. It will also require galvanizing the actors not traditionally focused on the informal economy, for example, by sharing successful partnership experiences to support understanding, dialogue, build trust and motivate others.

- **Provision of direct support for partnership development.** Key steps include supporting organizations to understand the options available to them and make informed decisions about the most promising routes of organizing and action. Needs assessments can help ascertain requirements for tailored and comprehensive technical and financial support. The aim is to enable partnership development, effectiveness, scaling up and sustainability in line with partnership strategic priorities and requirements. This could support inter alia development of leadership cadres, elaboration of business plans, membership recruitment and services, strengthening of financial and human resources systems, building advocacy and policy engagement skills, or improving fundraising and programme development capacity.
- **Learning and sharing knowledge and evidence.** Key steps include ensuring learning and evidence on what works to foster a partnership approach to supporting informal economy are produced and made accessible to those seeking to develop or support partnerships. This may include research, documentation and learning from partnership experiences, as well as facilitating direct exchange and information sharing between partnership organizations and with their enabling partners. Facilitating exchange between organizations working on a similar model of partnership and/or with a shared sectoral focus can be particularly beneficial for participants.

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