

Experiences Organizing Informal Workers: A Comparative Investigation

Overview of the Project as of August 2014

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Can the world's workers hope for progress toward work with dignity and economic security? The answer to this question depends above all on what happens to precarious informal workers. Informal workers¹ make up an estimated half to three-quarters of the non-agricultural workforce in the global South, according to estimates by the ILO and WIEGO (Women in the Informal Economy, Globalizing and Organizing). Estimates for richer countries run about one-fifth of the nonfarm workforce. Given the relative populations of the global South and North, this means that the majority of workers in the world work informally. Just as important, the proportion of precarious informal workers is growing across a broad spectrum of countries, from the US, Europe, to Latin America and Asia, contradicting expectations that informality was a vestige of past forms of production that would be left behind in a process of modernization. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that the greatest challenge facing those concerned with decent work and job quality around the world is finding ways to bolster the quality of informal work. The main front in this challenge is what could be called *precarious informal workers*, those facing low compensation, insecurity, and poor conditions.

Despite important innovations in labor regulation, on the whole the global tide has run toward deregulation or non-enforcement. Therefore, without effective organization of informal workers themselves change is unlikely. The challenge of organizing informal workers has not gone unnoticed. Organizing and technical assistance projects and global networks—through the ILO, WIEGO, sector-specific networks such as StreetNet, and progressive trade unions—have grown significantly in recent years. Accompanying the network-building has been documentation of effort to organize informal workers around the world. But, despite these efforts we still lack analytical cross-country comparisons grounded in in-depth country-based case studies.

Such systematic comparative research would go beyond more descriptive compilations, and allow us to assess the effects of different economic environments, political institutions, labor law, and organizational alliances and strategies. Given the accumulation of global documentation and in-depth national studies, the time is ripe to move to this level of comparison. Indeed, this kind of analysis is critical to building cross-national strategies for improving informal work and also for improving *national* strategies by enabling organizers to understand “what works in what circumstances, and why.” It is also critical from an intellectual standpoint, for analyzing central arenas of contention and change in the globalized world of work.

With this in mind, [Experiences Organizing Informal Workers](#) is a new global network of university-based researchers with primary research interests in eight countries (Brazil, Canada, China, India, Korea, Mexico, South Africa, and the U.S.). All of the researchers are in active dialogue with informal worker organizations in their respective countries. We held a first meeting of the network at UCLA in April 2012. Subsequently, preliminary pilot studies (workers in public space in the U.S. and Mexico; subcontracted garment workers in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa; domestic and construction workers in varied countries) have shown considerable promise. What follows summarizes the design and plan, plus more details on who is involved.

We believe that this is an exciting opportunity to take analysis of informal worker organizing to the next level, in ways that will both learn from and inform activism. Participants in the network feel that our research enterprise has the potential to do something new and important, in dialogue with emerging global networks of activists grappling with these same questions. We look forward to opportunities to discuss these ideas and plans with a broader community of researchers, activists, organizations, and funders concerned with these issues. Beyond the summary in this document, a more expansive set of supporting documents is available at <http://www.irle.ucla.edu/research/ExperiencesOrganizingInformalWorkers.php>.

¹ Definitions of informal work vary and have changed over time. We provisionally define informal work as work that, by law or by widespread practice, lacks key standard protections available to other workers. Thus defined, it includes both self-employment and other-employment.

Summary of Work Plan for “Experiences Organizing Informal Workers”

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A) COUNTRIES

Project coordinators are Chris Tilly, UCLA and Peter Evans, UC Berkeley.

Our set of principal countries and researchers (in addition to Evans and Tilly) includes:

- Brazil. Carlos Salas, State University of Campinas.
- Canada. Jennifer Jihye Chun, University of Toronto; Mark Thomas and Leah Vosko, York University.
- China. Pun Ngai, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology; Tong Xin, Peking University; Katie Quan, UC Berkeley.
- India. Rina Agarwala, Johns Hopkins University.
- Korea (South). Jennifer Jihye Chun, University of Toronto; Byoung-Hoon Lee, Chung-Ang University.
- Mexico. Enrique de la Garza, Metropolitan Autonomous University-Iztapalapa; Georgina Rojas, Center for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology.
- South Africa. Sarah Mosoetsa, University of Witwatersrand.
- USA. Hector Cordero, CUNY; Janice Fine, Rutgers University; Ruth Milkman, CUNY; Victor Narro, UCLA; Abel Valenzuela, UCLA.

Inclusion is based on meeting *at least some* of 5 key criteria (many countries do not have all:

- 1) Important in the global political economy
- 2) Large informal workforce
- 3) Relatively low levels of regulation
- 4) History of strong, creative formal union organizing
- 5) Important experiments with informal worker organizing

B) MODEL (Provisional)

- a. Determinants/starting conditions/structural factors:
 - i. Economic (position in global economy),
 - ii. Political (parties, unions, alliances, degree of incorporation of workers and their organizations into government and governance)
 - iii. History
 - iv. Organization of work, work regime
- b. Outcomes (differences, but also a hunch there are commonalities)
 - i. Organizational structure/content (content meaning democracy, accountability, processes)
 - ii. Strategy
 - iii. Success (or not)
- c. Note that the outcomes in b are also endogenous causal variables; they affect future organizational outcomes, strategy, and success
- d. We do not have enough cases to examine correlations between a and b. Instead, the research will use cases to unearth suggestive patterns, to query how key actors themselves explain success and failure, and to trace processes (especially at critical junctures that appear decisive in determining outcomes). What strategies seem to work, in particular contexts? We will look for commonalities but also variation.

C) STAGES OF RESEARCH

- 1) Initial comparison: “inventory” of informal worker organizing in the 8 countries
- 2) Then split into two streams: people doing new fieldwork, and people doing comparative work based on existing fieldwork
- 3) Come back and do enriched comparison based on the two streams in (2).

D) STAGE 1 DESIGN & PLANNED TIMELINE

For each of the 8 countries:

Country inventories (compilations of existing documentation and cases, not integrated narratives, not based on new fieldwork) with 3 columns:

a) Sectors	b) Themes	c) Inductive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-employment (4 sectors): domestic workers, street vendors, recyclers, transport (e.g. taxi) • Subcontracted/concealed employment (3 sectors): manufacturing, construction, transport/logistics (e.g. truck drivers, warehouse) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relation to state, political parties, policy • Relation to formal unions • Other identities. Gender, migration status, race/ethnicity/ caste/religion 	Key cases and issues <i>for this country</i> . "Tell what's important about each country's story."
Important to look at both broad categories in all countries. Will not have existing case studies of all sectors in all countries.	Definitely include gender and migration status; include other ascriptive categories as appropriate.	