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COOPERATION AMONG WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY:

A focus on home-based workers and waste pickers

A Joint ILO and WIEGO Initiative



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Cooperation among workers in the informal economy: A focus on home-based workers and waste pickers
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Cover photographs: Left: Members of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá unload materials, from door-to-door collection, to be recycled. Photo Credit: Juan Arredondo/Getty Images Reportage.

Right: Workers create handcrafted bags at the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Artisan House. Photo Credit: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage.

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Preface

Worldwide a large percentage of women and men workers are engaged in the informal economy. Typically, informal workers are excluded from labour legislation and social protection; work under poor conditions; and have low and insecure incomes. In overcoming these decent work deficits, workers in the informal economy devise different solidarity mechanisms, including cooperatives, to improve their livelihoods by gaining access to a range of services and markets; to practice workplace democracy; and to engage in collective negotiations. Membership-based networks and alliances of workers in the informal economy have long observed that their affiliates often adopt cooperatives or other social and solidarity economy (SSE) enterprises and organizations as a model to support members.

This recent joint International Labour Organization (ILO) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) initiative aims to deepen understanding on the nature and role of cooperatives and other SSE enterprises and organizations in formalizing the informal economy, with a focus on waste pickers and home-based workers. While other groups of workers in the informal economy, including domestic workers and street vendors, also use cooperatives and other SSE enterprises and organizations, waste pickers and home-based workers were identified as initial target groups of this joint initiative.

This report is a result of action research, a global mapping and survey conducted with members of existing cooperatives and other SSE enterprises and organizations, complemented with a literature review of existing studies. It summarizes the findings of this research, including the challenges and opportunities around the economic viability and sustainability of organizing through cooperatives and other SSE enterprises and organizations. A set of recommendations based on an analysis of the findings are shared in the final section.

We hope the report will help promote further discussion and inform future action on cooperatives and other SSE enterprises and organizations in the transition from the informal to the formal economy. The ILO will follow up with its constituents and cooperative and SSE partners in transforming the findings and recommendations of the study on formalizing the informal economy through cooperatives, especially among women and youth. WIEGO will also relay the findings to its members and build on the recommendations going forward.

Martha Alter Chen
International Coordinator
WIEGO

Vic Van Vuuren
Director, Enterprises Department
ILO

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADS-CUT	Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário/Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Solidarity Development Agency/Unified Workers' Central), Brazil
AIW	Alliance of Indian Waste pickers
ARB	Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (Waste Pickers Association of Bogota)
CECAM	Centro de Educación y Capacitación a la Mujer (Training Centre for the Working Woman), Chile
COOPERVESP	Catadores e catadoras de Materiais Recicláveis
COOPERT	Cooperativa de Reciclagem e Trabalho Ltda
CTEP	La Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (The Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy), Argentina
HNSA	HomeNet South Asia, India
HNSEA	HomeNet South-East Asia, Thailand
ICA	International Co-operative Alliance
IEMS	The Informal Economy Monitoring Study
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILC	International Labour Conference
KKPKP	Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, India
MBO	Membership-based organization
MBOP	Membership-based organization of the poor
MNCR	Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials), Brazil
NGO	Non-governmental organization

PATAMABA	Pambansang Kalipunan ng mga Manggagawang Impormal sa Pilipinas (National Network of Informal Workers), the Philippines
PMC	Pune Municipal Council
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association, India
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
SWaCH	Seva Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit (Solid Waste Collection and Handling), India
TLA	Textile and Labour Association, India
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

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ILO and WIEGO would like to thank all cooperative members who gave their time to participate in the survey and provide new insights into the role that cooperatives play in improving the lives of informal workers.

Summary of key findings

Legal status

Although most of the cooperatives participating in the survey were legally registered, they experienced many difficulties in the registration process, such as bureaucratic obstacles, lack of information and financial costs.

Many reasons for registering were common to both waste picker and home-based worker cooperatives. However, home-based worker cooperatives cited financial reasons as being the most important for registering, whereas for waste picker cooperatives accessing social benefits, including social protection, and improved bargaining power were most commonly cited. For waste pickers registration was seen as a way to defend their activities in the sector.

Cooperative structure

Cooperatives, associations and self-help groups alike indicated that they adhere to cooperative values and principles, especially with regards to democratic structure, governance and member participation. The majority noted that they hold regular elections, and those that do not, appoint committee members through agreement or on a consensual basis depending on availability of time. By following a traditional structure of governance, electing a board of directors, or administrative and financial committees, they are also able to structure their organizations around their needs. Indeed, the self-management and ownership of the cooperatives by workers themselves often paves the way for operational structures that serve the needs of members.

Sources of funding

Cooperatives of the workers in the informal economy need sustainable sources of funding to be able to provide the necessary conditions for economies of scale, to assure continuity of service and to be able to sustain themselves and grow. Although a majority of the cooperatives report that members pay dues or make contributions, these funds

are generally insufficient as members usually have low earnings which prevent them from contributing significantly. This renders the support of external actors necessary in many cases. However, such support runs the risk of making the cooperatives dependent on external actors, compromising independent governance and decision-making.

Economic benefits: member benefits and earnings

The majority of cooperative members earn a living by selling their products or the recyclables they collect directly. The main role of the cooperatives is to facilitate the earnings of their members by supporting them to access markets and providing them with the concrete space to carry out their activities, without acting as a fully-fledged enterprise paying wages. They also provide members with training and skills upgrading appropriate to the characteristics of each sector.

Activities and functions

The key functions and activities of the waste picker cooperatives are collection, sorting and recycling of waste. These three activities are always interrelated reflecting the environmental implications of their work. Some cooperatives in Latin America and South Asia are already integrated into formal municipal solid waste management systems.

The economic activities of home-based workers are much more diverse. A majority of the surveyed cooperatives work in garment production, clothing and craftwork, with others specializing in food, catering and farming. Home-based workers often combine subcontracting and own-account work, usually engaging in own-account work when they are not sub-contracted by firms or when they have completed the sub-contracted orders. The most common relationship is the one that is directly between the worker and the buyer. Agreements are generally occasional and informal. Even where they are sub-contracted by allied organizations, such as other cooperatives, trade unions or other NGOs, home-based worker cooperatives often have informal subcontracting agreements.

Skills training

Almost all of the surveyed cooperatives provide and/or facilitate access to technical or legal training for their members. For home-based workers, the training is usually centred on production skills, training on new equipment, design, accounting or marketing.

The nature of training reflects the characteristics of the sectors and the constraints the workers face. Home-based workers focus on skills upgrading in order to offer better products and to secure markets, while for waste pickers the training responds to the legal difficulties that they face, and serve to enhance advocacy efforts for recognition. Waste pickers are also trained on technical skills relating to waste management. Technical skills seem crucial in some contexts even when the regulatory framework is inclusive of waste pickers.

Training and support on accounting and business plans is common to most of the cooperatives. Moreover, several cooperatives, mostly of home-based workers, provide leadership training for building and strengthening the organization. Very few cooperatives provide or facilitate occupational safety and health or political and union training to members.

Financial service provision

The provision of financial support is crucial for the livelihoods of home-based workers and waste pickers. Moreover, home-based workers' ability to accumulate capital and expand and improve their activities can be difficult without support. This makes the provision of financial services by cooperatives an essential service. These can be facilitated with the support of government and/or bigger and more powerful financial institutions, including larger credit unions. In this regard, most of the surveyed cooperatives that provide or facilitate financial support or microloans for their members are supported by partner organizations, and only very few facilitate financial support exclusively through the government. Some of these cooperatives financially support their members to buy equipment or provide them with microloans to support purchasing of raw materials or entrepreneurship.

Economies of scale and access to markets

Home-based workers and waste pickers can achieve significant economies of scale, i.e. lower costs of production, through joining or forming cooperatives. These economies of scale are achieved through buying cheaper inputs, sharing equipment, and attenuating costs through pooling of resources and joint selling of production, e.g. bulk recyclables.

Home-based worker cooperatives negotiate with their suppliers for equipment and sewing materials. Lowering costs of materials often depends on the size of the order, and thus the importance of membership size and orders that the cooperative receives. Waste picker cooperatives mainly negotiate with suppliers, middlemen and manufacturers of products as well as with big generators of waste to receive recyclables as donations.

Another form of economy of scale is generated through sharing of equipment that workers in the informal economy could not acquire by themselves. A majority of the home-based worker cooperatives provide and/or facilitate sharing of sewing and cutting equipment and other related items whilst most of the waste pickers' cooperatives provide and/or share working space, collection carts, pressing and baling machines.

Alliances and affiliations

There are growing efforts among cooperatives of home-based workers and waste pickers in networking with other cooperatives, trade unions and social movements at the local, regional and national levels. Yet, these efforts are uneven across the different groups of workers and countries. Among the cooperatives surveyed, waste picker cooperatives appear to be more engaged in alliances and affiliations than home-based worker cooperatives. These tend to take place either through local or national federations or alliances or through a dual union-cooperative organizational structures.

Waste picker cooperatives appear to have wider affiliations, especially on the regional and national levels and even at the international level. For both groups, alliances are mostly with other cooperatives and organizations in the same sector, especially for waste pickers. Alliances with trade unions are less common, only with a few individual examples from the surveyed cooperatives. Workers in the informal economy often organize themselves independently of trade unions around basic needs. Many workers, particularly those working in the informal economy, consider unions to be too male-dominated and bureaucratic.

Alliances with other social movements appear to echo the contextual specificities of each country. For both waste pickers and home-based workers, the relationship with NGOs primarily revolves around skills, capacity building, and legal and technical assistance. NGOs also support cooperatives of both home-based workers and waste pickers in relation to advocacy and organizing. Some NGOs directly support the activities of the cooperatives, especially for waste pickers where they provide recyclable materials.

Voice and recognition

One of the main achievements of cooperatives is the empowerment of members and their social visibility. Home-based workers and waste pickers experience marginalization, stigma and/or isolation in their work and livelihoods. Self and social recognition of their worker identity is a pre-requisite toward building collective voice and self-representation and in order to engage in negotiations with employers, suppliers, buyers or middlemen.

The mobilization strategies adopted by different cooperatives often emerge from workers' perceived realities and challenges. Home-based worker cooperatives appear to be more inclined to adopt 'softer' mobilization strategies than waste pickers, as they are often isolated in their homes, work individually, lack clear employment relationships and face more constraints in terms of mobility. Blurred employment relationships often constrain their ability to bargain, for example when the buyer is also the employer.

Waste picker cooperatives seem to engage more in negotiations with governments. This is probably due to their stronger associational power and their need to negotiate with local authorities on inclusion in waste management systems. Key issues for negotiation, advocacy and policy work in both sectors include firstly access to health services and pension schemes, followed by improving working conditions and income. Addressing gender inequalities and gender-based violence, housing, legal protection and provision of storage space and local market places are also important issues. They advocate for these demands through lobbying with local and national governments, public forums and city council meetings protests, and direct actions and occupations as well as direct negotiations.

There are growing organizing efforts within both sectors, as well as networking with other cooperatives, trade unions and social movements at the local, regional and national levels.

Negotiations and sales

The support of larger organizations and networks, including cooperative federations and other cooperative support organizations, can significantly increase the negotiation power of cooperatives. This might explain the findings revealing that waste picker cooperatives seemed more likely to engage in negotiations with buyers than home-based worker cooperatives. Home-based worker and waste picker cooperatives negotiate with enterprises, as well as NGOs and other cooperatives which act as middlemen, or are regular middlemen, and with governments.

Home-based workers negotiate with international and local buyers, while waste pickers engage with scrap dealers, mainly to get fairer prices. Some negotiate through the cooperatives or their affiliated networks.

For cooperatives selling at regional, national and international levels, a common feature is that these sales are made to enterprises and often through intermediaries. These

intermediaries can be fair trade organizations or networks, or negotiated through secondary level cooperatives

Especially for home-based worker cooperatives, the buyers can be employers at the same time. However, only a few cooperatives indicated to negotiating with employers. This might be due to not perceiving to have been engaged in any employment relationship, or not knowing who the employer is. The answers show the ways employment relations are blurred in the case of own-account and sub-contracted home-based workers in cooperatives. The findings show that workers who lack clear employment relationships tend to confine negotiations with 'hidden employers' to bargaining for better piece rate work, without negotiating more broadly their working conditions and benefits.

Negotiations with the state for improved conditions

The survey results reveal that waste pickers are more likely than home-based workers to engage in negotiations with their respective governments at local and national levels. This may be due to the need to engage with local authorities to get concessions regarding their inclusion in the municipal waste management systems and payment for services, as well as their older and stronger organizations with long history of bargaining with governments. This was echoed in the details that were given by a number of respondents as they expressed that registration gives them more visibility and voice, and hence access to the negotiation process.

The cooperatives advocate for these demands through lobbying with local and national governments, public forums and city council meeting protests, and direct actions and occupations as well as through direct negotiations.

Cooperatives in both sectors negotiate with national government: waste pickers on demands related to social security, access to work space and markets, and legal recognition and protection, as well as on being represented in the solid waste management systems in order to defend their recycling activities. Home-based workers mainly negotiate on issues involving application of existing laws, inclusion of informal economy workers in social security and access to training and resources.

At the *regional government level*, waste picker cooperatives mainly engage in negotiations related to recycling and collecting waste. Negotiations at the *local government level* include access to collection and sorting spaces, and provision of better infrastructure and contracts from local authorities to collect waste. The demands of home-based worker cooperatives at the local government level revolve around practical issues such as setting up minimum piece rates, accessing markets, participating in exhibitions, access to training, and provision of loans to buy equipment.

Negotiations with the state for social benefits

Whilst a number of cooperatives get support for social security and housing from their governments, the acquired social benefits depend on country specificities. Although building alliances and affiliations is crucial in enabling workers in the informal economy to engage in negotiations with governments, it seems difficult to dissociate the social protection policies from the wider political context. These social gains were largely connected to wider labour and social struggles, particularly in the case of waste pickers'

movements in Brazil and Colombia, and to governments in power favouring more distributive social protection policies at the time.

Government support

Members can enhance their economic benefit by accessing government support channelled through cooperatives. When there is support, tax exemptions were the least common form, while training and technical support were among the most common. This is largely due to the different institutional settings between the countries. Waste picker cooperatives also reported that the provision of space for storage and sorting as well as financial and technical support were most common.

Main challenges

Economic challenges are mainly related to the difficulty in accumulating and achieving real economies of scale. Many respondents emphasized their inability to acquire their own venue/shed, pay their bills and reduce insecurity and precariousness for their members. Such weak infrastructure is often directly linked with weak bargaining power. When the cooperatives are not able to improve their infrastructure and increase their production capacity, they cannot make better agreements with buyers and/or compete in the market. In these cases, they are eventually unable to secure 'satisfactory income' for their members.

This challenge is not only related to limited economic and financial capacities. In addition to these many waste pickers are negatively affected by the privatization of waste collection through contractors and companies, thus reducing their livelihood opportunities and incomes. Even when waste management is open for bidding, waste picker cooperatives are not able to compete with larger and more established waste companies in the absence of governmental support. This challenge is quite similar for home-based worker cooperatives whose products have to compete with larger companies selling at lower prices. Both sectors have challenges in accessing markets and in dealing with middlemen.

At the *policy level* the sectors share similar challenges. For waste pickers the major challenge identified is the lack of enforcement of laws and agreements regarding waste management plans; and for home-based workers weak government support and absence of legal recognition and regulations. In addition, home-based worker cooperatives from some countries shared a similar concern: maintaining the governmental support for their cooperatives with recent government changes. They pointed out the ways the presidential elections could directly affect their working and living conditions.

Challenges related to markets and the policy realm are often accompanied by *internal challenges*. The latter are mainly attributed to weak structure, internal tensions, lack of common coherent vision, absence of strategic planning, lack of technical and political capacity building, blurred division of work, and having "no fixed dates for monthly meetings and no written record of meetings", amongst others. Some respondents emphasized the difficulties of recruiting new members, the high turnover, and the low sense of ownership and commitment amongst members. Unequal participation between members was also raised, which challenges cooperative values and could generate credibility issues between members and leaders.

Introduction

Recent statistics on the informal economy show that in most developing countries informal employment exceeds formal employment in the non-agricultural sectors, accounting for more than 50 per cent of total employment and in some cases reaching 75 per cent (Vanek et al., 2014). At the same time, an increasing proportion of the labour force in developed countries work under non-standard work arrangements that offer limited benefits and social protection (ILO, 2013).

The work is on-going to expand the definition of the “informal economy” to include not only informal enterprises (those that are not legally regulated), but also unregulated or unprotected employment relationships (Chen, 2005). Under the expanded definition, informal employment can take the form of self-employment in informal enterprises (including employers, own-account workers, members of informal producers’ organizations and contributing family workers), and/or employment in informal jobs (which can include employees of informal enterprises, casual or day labourers, domestic workers, some part-time or unregistered workers, and sub-contracted industrial out-workers) (Chen, 2012). Informal work can be understood as existing on a spectrum, characterized by varying degrees of regulation and protection (Chen, 2005). This is especially true as increasing numbers of workers in both developing and developed countries find themselves in situations of disguised and ambiguous employment relations (see ILO, 2016).

Within the informal economy, women are predominantly concentrated in the lowest earning forms of informal work - such as unpaid family work and home-based work – and face a higher risk of poverty than men (Chen, 2012). Nevertheless, workers in the informal economy share many characteristics, including a lack of social protection, low and insecure income, poor working conditions, and the absence of labour rights.

Those working in the informal economy have pursued different means of struggle for better conditions, and have made gains at local, national, regional and international levels. They have formed or joined membership-based organizations and worker associations; taken part in national, regional and international alliances; and forged solidarity with many civil society organizations (Bonner & Carré, 2013). Workers in the informal

economy, especially the self-employed, have also sought cooperatives or other forms of collaboration models to respond to their economic needs.

Waste pickers have been particularly active in adopting the cooperative model, especially in parts of South America and South Asia. Organizing into cooperatives has allowed them to pool their resources, share benefits and risks, and attain economic gains toward formalization. It has also allowed for the negotiation of basic labour rights including social protection, increased wages or incomes, and improved working conditions and occupational safety and health. Cooperatives also facilitate access to a range of services for workers in the informal economy, such as finance, housing, and education, among others. The democratic governance structure of cooperatives, based on one member one vote principle, as well as collective ownership and mutualistic principles encourages workplace equality.

The International Co-operative Alliance has established the following seven internationally agreed cooperative principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

Source: International Co-operative Alliance.
Available online at <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

The ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204) recognizes many of these benefits, and highlights the important role that cooperatives can play in the transition to formality. The Recommendation No. 204 states that ILO member States should adopt an integrated policy framework in their national development strategies to facilitate the transition to the formal economy. Among other things, this policy framework should address: “the promotion of entrepreneurship, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, and other forms of business models and economic units, such as cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy (SSE)¹ units” (ILO, 2015b).

¹ The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy defines SSE “as a concept designating enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which have the specific feature of producing goods, services and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity” (UNTFSSSE, 2014). In addition, for the purposes of this report, the term SSE is inclusive of informal organizations such as self-help groups and community-based organizations.

This joint ILO and WIEGO initiative aims to understand the nature and scope of cooperatives² and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations formed by workers in the informal economy, with a focus on cooperatives of waste pickers and home-based workers. The initiative included a global mapping and a survey of these enterprises and organizations in the two sectors. Not all the surveyed enterprises and organizations were registered as cooperatives, but also other economic units which observe cooperative principles were considered.³ The subsequent analysis aims at identifying the current challenges, opportunities, obstacles and practices of these cooperatives in order to inform future actions and interventions seeking to support cooperative growth and action. In addition, the survey analysis is complemented with a literature review that provides a broader perspective on the conditions and potentials of cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations for workers in the informal economy. This report seeks to critically explore the current situation of these groups in relation to their operations and stakeholders.

The following are the key chapters of this report: **The next chapter** explains the methodology used for the study, and outlines its limitations. **The third chapter** consists of a critical literature review that examines the role of cooperatives in the informal economy, and reviews the on-going struggles of waste pickers and home-based workers for better working conditions and rights within the framework of cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations. **The fourth chapter** presents the survey findings and data analysis. Specifically, a comparative analysis of the findings on home-based worker cooperatives and waste picker cooperatives is presented on three areas: 1) general findings with respect to the legal aspects of the surveyed cooperatives, size and their activities; 2) economic viability and sustainability of the surveyed cooperatives; and 3) organizing and negotiations in terms of the ways that cooperatives – with their alliances and affiliations – negotiate for social and economic rights. **The fifth chapter** lays out the main challenges faced by the cooperatives surveyed. Finally, the **conclusions** aim at summarizing the key findings of the report by focusing on the main challenges for action based on the surveys, and suggestions on ways forward for future interventions.

² “A cooperative is defined as an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ILO, 2002). For more elaboration on the role and definitions of cooperatives in relation to the informal economy, see CICOPA, 2017.

³ There were different types of cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations studied for this report. The term “cooperative” is used in the remainder of this report as an inclusive term referring to all of these types, and not exclusively to legally registered cooperatives.

Research Design and Limitations

2

2.1 Data collection

The principal research method of this initiative was a survey conducted with members of existing cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations of waste pickers⁴ and home-based workers.⁵ Surveys were conducted with a total of 50 respondents representing their respective cooperatives: 29 waste pickers and 21 home-based workers from Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as from Turkey. The majority of the respondents hold a leadership position within their cooperatives, including presidents, board members, legal representatives, treasurers, founders and coordinators. The waste picker cooperatives are mostly from Latin American countries (21 out of 29 cooperatives), and particularly Brazil (with 14 cooperatives). The sample of home-based worker cooperatives is characterized by more even geographical representation (see Table 1). The majority of the surveyed cooperatives are urban: 13 out of 20 home-based worker and 26 out of 29 waste picker cooperatives.

The size of cooperatives of the respondents vary. As table two shows, the home-based worker cooperatives in the sample are generally smaller in size than those of waste pickers – 62 per cent of these have a membership below 40 members, whereas 55 per cent of waste picker cooperatives have a membership of above 60. Moreover, the median number of members for home-based workers is 33, whereas the cooperatives of waste pickers are much larger, with a median number of 86.

⁴ Referring to the provisional term adopted by the 1st World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008, waste pickers include “poor people rummaging through garbage in search of food, clothing and other basic, daily needs to informal private collectors of recyclables for sale to middlemen or businesses, as well as organized collectors/sorters of recyclables linked to unions, cooperatives or associations” (Dias & Samson, 2016).

⁵ In this report, the term home-based worker applies to two types of workers who carry out paid work in or around their homes: 1) Homeworkers are subcontracted workers who work directly or indirectly for employers or their intermediaries, usually on a piece rate basis – also known as piece rate workers or industrial outworkers; and 2) Other home-based workers are own-account, self-employed workers who design, produce and market their own products. This distinction will be discussed further in the literature review.

Table 1: Sample characteristics: geographic representation of surveyed cooperatives

Sector	Country	Frequency	Percentage of sample
Home-based workers	Brazil	2	9.5
	Argentina	4	19
	India	2	9.5
	Nepal	2	9.5
	Pakistan	1	4.8
	Kenya	3	14.3
	South Africa	2	9.5
	Thailand	3	14.3
	Uganda	1	4.8
	Turkey	1	4.8
	<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>100</i>
Waste pickers	Brazil	14	48.3
	Argentina	3	10.3
	India	3	10.3
	South Africa	1	3.4
	Turkey	4	13.8
	Colombia	4	13.8
	<i>Total</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>100</i>

2.2 Data analysis

The data resulting from the surveys formed the basis for the data analysis. The survey consisted of closed and open-ended questions, developed by WIEGO and ILO. The surveys were conducted through face-to-face interviews by a variety of volunteers from WIEGO and partner organizations between November 2015 and April 2016. The authors of this report analysed the findings of the survey and conducted a literature review.

The data obtained from the closed question component of the survey was analysed using SPSS statistical software. The answers were number-coded and entered in SPSS for analysis via simple frequency tables. Cross-tabulations were used to examine the relationship between different variables.

The statistical analysis was coupled with qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses. The method of ‘pattern coding’ was used for analysis, which is a way of grouping segments of data into a smaller number of themes and variables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Hence, pattern codes for the survey responses were developed. Subsequently, these codes were used to examine patterns and trends in the responses. Finally, the statistical findings were combined with the qualitative patterns to carry out the analysis.

Table 2. Sample characteristics: composition of cooperatives (number of members)

Sector	Number of members	Frequency	Percentage
Home-based workers	0 – 10	4	19
	11 – 20	2	9.5
	21 – 40	7	33.3
	41 – 60	2	9.5
	61 – 100	1	4.8
	201 – 300	2	9.5
	Above 300	3	14.3
	<i>Total</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>100</i>
	<i>Median</i>	<i>33</i>	
Waste pickers	0 – 10	4	13.8
	11 – 20	3	10.3
	21 – 40	6	20.7
	61 – 100	5	17.2
	101 – 200	3	10.3
	201 – 300	1	3.4
	Above 300	7	24.1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>100</i>
	<i>Median</i>	<i>86</i>	

This report outlines the major findings from this analysis, including selected quotes from some of the open-ended responses.

2.3 Research limitations

This study faced several limitations as described below.

Sample: The sample is small and was chosen with random selection. Waste picker cooperatives from Brazil are over-represented in the sample. The respondents are very heterogeneous and significantly scattered between and within countries. The survey does not include questions specific to countries, making it difficult to contextualize results and patterns and draw clear-cut conclusions.

Design of the survey: The combination of open- and closed-ended questions could enrich the study as it allows for quantitative results to be complimented with qualitative insights. However, this combination presented a challenge in terms of data entry, coding, and statistical analysis. There was confusion and overlap between the questions, as a number of the open-ended questions repeated information from the close-ended questions. Hence, questions deemed repetitive were excluded from the qualitative

pattern analysis as they did not provide any details beyond what were provided by the closed-ended options.

The questionnaire was also considered to be too long by some interviewers, possibly causing important information to be lost towards the end as respondents grew tired or distracted. In addition, some questions were deemed to be confusing by interviewers, in particular where the survey was translated from English to Portuguese. Also, a high rate of non-response was noted for certain questions.

Given these limitations, the analysis included in this report focuses more on the qualitative data than the quantitative data emerging from the survey. The qualitative data analysis is complemented by the literature review to draw conclusions based on patterns.

Literature Review

Debates about the informal sector began to take shape after British anthropologist Keith Hart coined the term as part of his study on the economic lives of rural migrants in Accra, Ghana, in 1973. At around the same time, the ILO World Employment Mission to Kenya in 1972 noted the persistence and expansion of the informal sector (ILO, 2012). In the years following these two pioneering studies, schools of thought about the informal sector began to coalesce, and can be classified into four camps: the dualists, the structuralists, the legalists and the voluntarists (Chen, 2012).

Since its “discovery” in the 1970’s the informal economy has proven to be persistent, dynamic, heterogeneous and growing. Research has shown that the informal economy (or informal economic activities) form an integral part of the economies of many countries – alongside and in interaction with the formal economy. Research on the issue has expanded beyond the early debates, with studies highlighting linkages with the formal economy; the coping strategies of workers to obtain income security and social protection through various means; and the building of organizations of workers in the informal economy – cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations and enterprises amongst them.

A significant number of workers in the informal economy have formed cooperatives in their quest for labour rights, recognition and social protection and to secure economic gains, such as access to market, skills development opportunities, financial and social services and others. Globally, cooperatives are gaining momentum and present a potential alternative for workers in the informal economy to secure economic gains and reduce their vulnerability. In the light of the failures of the prevailing economic model, cooperatives provide potential for a bottom-up approach to inclusive and sustainable development.

Nevertheless, cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations and enterprises set up by workers in the informal economy still struggle for recognition as valid, viable economic agents. Many do not yet operate in an enabling legal and socio-economic environment in which they are recognized or included in policy formulation. Despite the unstable environment they often operate in, cooperatives of workers in the informal economy – including those highlighted in this study – have made

significant progress. Through their cooperatives, home-based workers and waste pickers are securing recognition and freedom from marginalization, stigma and isolation.

This section reviews a wide range of studies related to the informal economy, cooperative enterprises, and movements of home-based workers and waste pickers. It first explores the place cooperatives occupy within the literature on the informal economy, as well as the recent attention to cooperatives as a means of transitioning to the formal economy. Then, it moves to look at the situation of home-based workers and waste pickers; their achievements and challenges in the struggle for recognition, voice and economic and social improvements.

3.1 Cooperatives of workers in the informal economy

The literature on the informal economy makes reference to cooperatives in three, somewhat limited contexts: members of cooperatives (and other organizations) as actors in the informal economy; cooperatives as stakeholders in the informal economy; and cooperatives as a part of existing or potential strategies to organize workers in the informal economy.

This literature mainly emphasizes the role of cooperatives as entities where workers in the informal economy organize. Gallin (2001) states that “the creation of cooperatives can be an important flanking support measure for informal sector workers organizations”. Here cooperatives are seen as a complementary strategy for trade unions to strengthen their support for workers in the informal economy. In this regard, cooperatives and trade unions might converge at times and diverge at others.

In his study “Organizing Workers in the Informal Sector”, Birchall (2001) outlines a brief history of the relationship between cooperatives and trade unions – highlighting their common origins as well as their cooperation. Birchall asserts that both organizations were considered as pillars of the labour movement and had close ties in their early formation phase, especially when the cooperative movement mainly consisted of consumer cooperatives. The relationship faced two major difficulties: first, the trade union movement had close ties to political parties whereas the cooperative movement opted for neutrality; second, the proliferation of other types of cooperatives, such as credit, farmers, and workers cooperatives generated more distance from the trade union movement as they “objected to being aligned too closely with the labour movement” (ibid.).

Birchall elaborates on the difficulties of cooperation between the two movements in developing countries, citing various reasons related to institutional, legal and political arrangements. The first relates to the fact that laws in some countries prevented the use of trade union funds to develop cooperatives and institutional membership between the cooperatives and trade unions was forbidden. The hostile government attitude towards both types of organizations exacerbated these difficulties. Further, historically there was a lack of trust between the two movements – while trade unions were sceptical of government involvement in cooperatives, cooperatives often viewed the unions as untrustworthy on the basis of their political alliances. In some cases cooperatives were established as a result of trade union neglect of the diverse needs and characteristics of workers in the informal economy (ibid.). In fact, “in some places informal workers may see trade unions as too dominated by men who are not prepared to engage with women workers, or too preoccupied with formal workforces, or tied to particular political forces, or too bureaucratic to be of much use to them” (Mather, 2012).

Nevertheless, cooperatives and trade unions have common values and principles, as emphasized by Birchall. He identifies liberty, equality and solidarity as first order values, and democracy as a second order value. Furthermore, he highlights that trade unions opt for mutual struggle as a second order value whereas cooperatives opt for mutual help. He states, “There is no basic disagreement over core values. One (cooperatives) maximizes liberty by mutual help in joint trading, the other (trade unions) by mutual struggle against those who would appropriate the value created by labour. They use the same kind of associational principles in fashioning their organization but they differ in the strategies they use to express their values; unions, of necessity, use political as well as economic means to achieve their aims, while cooperatives remain economic and cultural institutions” (Birchall, 2001). However, these distinctions may not be so clear-cut, as “cooperative movements can be politically active and unions can offer cooperative-type services to their members. Both can unite to defend their common interests against forces that would destroy their democratic rights to associate” (ibid.).

The nature of the employment relationship also plays a role in whether workers opt for cooperative or trade union form of organization. Rosaldo et al. (2012) create a typology of employment-employee relations arranged on a continuum from less formal (or informal) to more formal. The typology arranges workers into seven categories, the bottom of which is classified as informal self-employment. They indicate that “the top of the array touches more on unionized workforces and their concerns, whereas the bottom is the main terrain of informal worker organizing (cooperatives, vendor associations, etc.)” (Rosaldo et al., 2012). Mather elaborates on the differences between workers in the informal economy as she states that own-account workers tend to organize more in cooperatives whereas dependent workers tend to choose trade unions to organize (Mather, 2012).

Birchall asserts that the characteristics of workers in the informal economy informs the strategy that should be used. He states that “the nearer the workers are to paid employees, the more a trade union strategy is appropriate. [...] The nearer they are to a group of self-employed workers, the more a cooperative strategy is appropriate” (Birchall, 2001). Bonner and Spooner (2012) take this idea further in specifying that workers form cooperatives in order to use “their collective strength to further the members’ economic/livelihood interests, for example through organizing into a cooperative, or they may focus mainly on defending and advancing their rights and status as workers through a trade union or workers’ association”. Despite this distinction, they emphasize that these two roles are not necessarily separate, on the contrary they converge and coincide “when trade union members form cooperatives, or when cooperatives come together into a social movement organization” (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). This has been witnessed in many instances where trade unions set up consumer, housing and insurance cooperatives (Birchall, 2001).

In this regard, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) presents a pioneering experience in organizing workers in the informal economy through a combination of trade union and cooperative strategies. SEWA was founded in 1972 by the Women’s Wing of the Textile and Labour Association (TLA) in India (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). SEWA split from the TLA in 1981 on the basis of two main factors. First, “The TLA (male) leadership had become increasingly uncomfortable with an assertive women’s group in its midst – one with its own agenda and its own views on union priorities” (ibid.). Second, at a time where SEWA sought to organize self-employed women in the informal economy, the TLA neglected them and did not regard them as workers (Webster, 2011).

SEWA now represents around 1,200,000 poor women who work in the informal economy all over the country. It is a confluence of three movements: trade union, cooperative, and women (De Luca et al., 2013). Through this convergence of movements, SEWA pursues “a mix of what it calls ‘struggle’ and ‘development’. [...] Struggle takes place through Union struggles for rights and improved working conditions; development by providing economic opportunities through cooperatives, producer groups, savings and credits groups among others” (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). While SEWA is a trade union organization for self-employed women in the informal economy, it has adopted different strategies.

“SEWA is not a traditional trade union that aims, through collective bargaining with an employer, to improve its members’ wages and working conditions as sellers of their labour power. Instead it aims to empower women economically in the informal economy by bringing them into the mainstream economy as owners of their labour” (Webster, 2011). Women members of the SEWA trade union form cooperatives “in an effort to become the owners of their labour” (ibid.), and members engage in several income-generating activities instead of one. SEWA places great emphasis on solidarity and self-reliance through creating child-care facilities, credit facilities and by providing access to a range of social security benefits for SEWA members.

Gadgil and Samson (2017) reflect on the challenges of hybrid organizations such as SEWA through their study of the KKPKP trade union of waste pickers and its cooperatives from Pune, India. They argue that the formation of cooperatives by unions of workers in the informal economy can affect their organizational and political processes either negatively or positively. Specifically, they argue that cooperatives respond to specific needs of workers in the informal economy that are not part of trade union functions. The authors call these “development activities” that include “education, a gold loan scheme [a KKPKP scheme which consists of buying back gold given as surety to lenders and now provides women with loans at more reasonable interest against their gold], a group life insurance scheme, and work to eliminate child labour” (ibid.). Therefore, a conscious political effort is required to align both organizational forms and to assure convergence between the union’s political purposes and cooperative’s “developmental” services.

Cooperatives as a pathway to transition to the formal economy

In 2002, the ILO adopted the Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation (No. 193), which provides a general roadmap for governments to create enabling environments for cooperatives. The Recommendation No. 193 recognizes the important role of cooperatives in the transition of informal economy activities into legally protected work, and stresses the need to promote ILO fundamental labour standards and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work for all workers in cooperatives (ILO, 2002). These are complemented with an additional set of measures such as access to information and access to markets, as well as support from labour market institutions on the local, national and regional levels. The Recommendation outlines supportive actions for institutions and social partners to take, including the provision of training programmes and easy access to finance; and it advocates for the oversight of cooperatives while respecting their independence and autonomy.

The Recommendation No. 193 further states that cooperatives ought to be included in social dialogue notably at the national level in order to be active partners in formu-

lating policies encouraging productive and formal employment (ILO, 2002). Finally, it establishes that cooperation between cooperatives and trade unions can contribute to increased voice and recognition for cooperatives, and can also provide a system of mutual support for increased access to services and resources.

The International Labour Conferences (ILC) in 2014 and 2015 constituted an important stepping stone for situating and advancing cooperative issues within the context of the informal economy. A report for the 103rd session of the ILC in 2014 entitled “Transitioning from the Informal to the Formal Economy” recognized the role of cooperatives in transforming marginal activities to protected work (as mentioned in the Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 [No.193]), and as agents of local economic development. It urged governments to take necessary action to secure an enabling environment for cooperatives (ILO, 2014a). The report also contributed to the milestone Recommendation No. 204 that explicitly mentions that it “applies to all workers in the informal economy (...), in particular members of cooperatives and of social and solidarity economy units” (ILO, 2015b). This constitutes a shift away from the narrow coverage of cooperatives’ members that can be observed in the aforementioned ILC report that only specifies producers’ cooperatives and not all workers’ cooperatives and social and solidarity economy units. Recommendation No. 204 re-emphasizes the importance of promoting cooperatives as a pathway towards formalization.

Increasing attention has been paid to the cooperative sector and the rise in the number of cooperatives has been highlighted. In fact, the number of cooperatives is increasing in several African countries: seven per cent of Africans indeed belong to one or several cooperatives. A similar revival of cooperatives is being observed all over the world. Latin America is considered by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) as “the ‘fastest growing’ region in terms of new cooperatives and membership” (Fonteneau et al., 2010).

In this regard, cooperatives are considered as important vehicles for transitioning to the formal economy and enhancing job and income security for their members. An ILO policy resource guide on the informal economy and decent work attests that “cooperatives are gaining new attention as a democratically-based means of addressing the social and economic exclusion of informal economy actors, as well as an important pathway towards formality. While globalization and the recent financial crisis have created new challenges, cooperatives continue to be vehicles for sustainable incomes and for social and economic development” (ILO, 2012). The guide adds that “where informal economy actors have been able to overcome legal and policy barriers that may exist, they are often able to become registered as legal entities, and hence become part of the mainstream economy” (ibid.) This might suggest that formalization through cooperatives is restricted to legal registration enabling it to have formal contracts with buyers and suppliers. This would be a narrow definition of formalization through cooperatives, especially at a time when thinking on informality has evolved and has shown that the informal and formal divide is more of a continuum where the informal economy is entrenched in, and feeds the formal one.

Community empowerment and gender equality

Cooperatives can be crucial agents in empowering communities they are engaged in as well as participating in and contributing to local economic development processes. This aspect of cooperatives – enshrined in their seventh principle of concern for community

– has been highlighted by various works on the subject. The ILO states that, “the cooperative approach to development offers a useful mechanism for linking local and national development needs and trajectories” (ILO, 2014a). In this view, cooperatives can link national economic development policies to local action and be means to their success as intermediaries and as workers and employers. A prominent example of this is the White Revolution in India in the 1970s to improve the dairy industry, where cooperatives were formed as a response to the proliferation of middlemen in the industry as a result of government planning. These cooperatives succeeded in cutting out the middlemen, took control of the entire value chain of milk production and increased their share of profit. This ultimately led to a significant increase in milk production (Chua, 2014).

In 2015, an ILO–ICA report on cooperatives and gender equality found that women’s cooperatives often address community needs such as freedom from violence (ILO & ICA, 2015). The report states that “cooperative-led awareness raising activities that address issues such as child labour, child marriage, HIV, gender-based violence and alcoholism are also seen as having an impact on the status of women and their livelihood” (ibid.). As the report shows, cooperatives can be an important vehicle for gender equality, especially through empowering women by guaranteeing flexibility and self-determination with regards to scheduling work hours. Also, the active involvement of members, especially women, and their ownership of the organization allow them to gain a sense of self-worth and respect. This is further deepened through democratic governance where women have increased opportunities for taking on leadership positions (ibid.). The survey attests that advancing gender equality in cooperatives stems from the values of the movement encouraging democracy, education, open membership and concern for the community.

Nevertheless, gender equality gains in cooperatives are not always obvious and self-realizing, particularly as in some sectors there are gender inequalities within cooperatives, which is not aligned with the cooperative values and principles proclaiming equality and equity. This is reflected in Dias and Ogando’s study (2015) on gender dynamics in the waste picker movement in Brazil. The authors highlight several aspects of gender inequality and imbalances within waste picker cooperatives in Brazil that show cooperatives are not inherently conducive to gender equality. The authors attest that the higher concentration of women in waste picker cooperatives does not, in itself, constitute an indicator of gender equality. Their study highlights the sexual division of labour within waste picker cooperatives where men work in physically demanding activities such as collection and transport, whereas women are involved in activities “that require greater dexterity, such as sorting” (ibid.). They note while the latter is more time-consuming and crucial it is less valued than the former.

As a result, in order to assert equal standing within cooperatives, women waste pickers often take on activities that require physical strength in addition to their regular activities. As the authors explain, “they realized that while women may be doing all kinds of activities, the same is not true for the men” (Dias & Ogando, 2015). The study also revealed that women members do not always enjoy the democratic values that cooperatives are built on, often having less decision-making power within cooperatives than their male counterparts. Dias and Ogando argue that gender imbalances need to be recognized and addressed, instead of assuming that gender equality is realized by default through the values and principles of the cooperative movement. As the authors explain, “building gender awareness is aligned with the ideals of the cooperative movement precisely because it exposes how forms of power and injustices undermine workers’ capacities to improve their livelihoods” (ibid.).

3.2 Cooperatives of home-based workers

Situation of home-based workers

There are over 100 million home-based workers worldwide according to recent estimates; the majority of these workers are women (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). Home-based work accounts for a significant share of non-agricultural employment in several countries, especially in South Asia. According to WIEGO and HomeNet South Asia, home-based workers accounted for 7 per cent of non-agricultural employment in Bangladesh, 15 per cent in India, 30 per cent in Nepal and 5 per cent in Pakistan (HomeNet South Asia Group, 2014). Moreover, they represent 18 per cent of urban employment in South Africa (ILO, 2013). The data also suggests that the majority of home-based workers are women (e.g. 70 per cent in Brazil, 88 per cent in Ghana, and 75 per cent in Pakistan) (ibid.). Also, home-based work absorbs a significant share of women's non-agricultural employment as it reaches 40 per cent in Pakistan, 32 per cent in India and 48 per cent in Nepal (HomeNet South Asia Group, 2014).

In the available literature, home-based workers are usually divided into two categories of workers who produce goods and services from their homes or adjacent premises. Self-employed, or own account home-based workers produce goods and services with raw materials that they purchase themselves, and are responsible for the sale of their own products. Sub-contracted home-based workers are referred to as homeworkers.⁶ Homeworkers produce for firms or other intermediaries, who provide them with raw materials and typically pay them by the piece rate. Homeworkers usually do not have direct contact with the market (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). Much of the literature on home-based workers focuses on homeworkers rather than own-account home-based workers. However, this distinction is not necessarily clear between the two groups, as home-based workers may move between both types of employment relationships.

A salient feature of home-based workers is the phenomenon of income patching. "Home work is one of the most vulnerable and lowest paid types of work, with some of the poorest working conditions within the informal economy" (ILO, 2012). The low earnings from home-based work often pushes workers to engage "in multiple occupations – known as income patching – so that very often both of these kinds of home-based work are only one of many income-generating activities" (Pearson, 2004). Pearson elaborates on the blurred boundaries between the two categories of home-based workers, arguing that in many ways own-account workers are also dependent on middlemen to market and sell their products, and that "like subcontracted workers, they are another form of 'dependent' workers rather than representing the autonomous home-based business that the term micro-entrepreneur suggests" (ibid.).

Regardless of the employment relationship, own-account home-based workers and homeworkers face many similar challenges. Home-based workers' workplace is their homes, which has major implications in terms of occupational safety and health. They often suffer from back pain and deterioration of eyesight due to the poor working conditions at home, for instance (Chen, 2009). In addition, a WIEGO commissioned study on the situation of home-based workers in ten cities around the world found that among the main negative driving forces facing home-based workers is inadequate housing

⁶ Homeworkers are also often referred to as dependent or industrial outworkers. This paper uses the term "homeworkers" as encompassing the categories of dependent outworkers, industrial outworkers and sub-contracted home-based workers.

conditions, which hampers productivity. Inadequate conditions, such as small, cramped work spaces, can impede workers from taking on big orders as they cannot store raw materials. In addition, working from home can hamper efficiency of production as work is often “interrupted by the competing needs of other household activities” (Chen, 2014). Poor housing conditions, especially flooding and roof leakages, can cause damage to equipment, raw materials and finished products. Finally, the lack of appropriate infrastructure – including high cost and low supply of electricity, and lack of access to affordable transportation to purchase raw materials and sell finished products – can also increase the costs and risks of production for home-based workers (ibid.).

Despite many similarities, there are also challenges that are specific to each of the two categories of home-based workers. For example, many own-account workers are faced with severe competition in the market, especially from imported products, which affects their earnings and ability to sell (Pearson, 2004). On the other hand, homeworkers that depend on a firm or intermediary for work are often faced with irregularity of work, irregular and late payments and the heavy costs of providing and maintaining workspace, utilities and equipment (Chen, 2009). These constraints can prevent home-based workers in both categories from earning enough to accumulate savings or invest in capital or machinery that could enable them to grow and achieve profitability (Pearson, 2004).

Home-based workers of both types are usually invisible as they work within the confines of their homes – a characteristic that is linked to their work being undervalued. Esim (2003) explains that “home-based workers are in general an ‘invisible workforce’ in terms of the national employment/workforce policies as well. The fact that home-based work is predominantly done by women is closely related to its invisibility and lack of recognition as ‘work’ by national statistics and policy”. Thus, this work, even for many home-based workers themselves, is seen as “extra-work” that provides extra pocket money to the household in addition to the main income provided by the husbands or fathers, despite the fact that is often crucial to the family’s survival and well-being (Mather, 2010). Moreover, the invisibility of home-based workers significantly limits their access to knowledge of markets and market prices. This contributes to exposing them “to unpredictable and often unfair value chain dynamics, including: irregular purchase/work orders, irregular supply of raw materials, and delayed payments” (Chen, 2014).

Isolation and invisibility have implications on the level of policies and regulations, as well as on organizing. Often, as stated above, home-based workers are denied their worker status, and are excluded from rights guaranteed under labour laws. However, even when they are included, laws and regulations are often not applied either due to avoidance by employers, lack of effort on the part of employers and government, or due to the difficulty of accessing work premises for inspection (often the household). “As home work takes place in the private domestic sphere, it is invisible and difficult to access [...] and labour inspection, when applicable, is difficult. The fact that homeworkers are confined to their homes, and because of their lack of access to resources (such as training, education, credit) and information, their situation is difficult to improve” (ILO, 2012). Finally, the isolation of home-based workers poses a challenge to their ability to organize and negotiate with the government and employers (Bonner & Spooner, 2012).

Linkages to the formal economy

Home-based workers mostly work within the informal economy and suffer from low earnings and occupational hazards, and are often isolated and invisible. Nevertheless,

they contribute to, and are connected with the formal economy in a number of ways. For example, own-account home-based workers, especially when organized in cooperatives, forge linkages to the formal economy through the bulk purchase of input materials for production and through the sale of products to formal enterprises. Sub-contracted homeworkers are at the bottom of an often long and complex value chain that either links to a formal domestic or international company.

Chen identifies three factors that characterize employment relationships of workers in the informal economy: disguised (giving the appearance of a relationship of different legal nature); ambiguous (there is a doubt whether the employment relationship exists); and not clearly defined (there is an employment relationship but it is not clear who the employer is) (Chen, 2005). Home-based workers can be engaged in ambiguous employment relations on two levels. For example, some home-based workers may depend on a single supplier for raw materials, while others (individually or through cooperatives) may depend on a single trader to sell their goods. In either case the ambiguity of the relationship is striking, as income depends on a single supplier or buyer who is not a formal employer.

In addition, some home-based workers may seek unpaid work from family members or other home-based workers. Some home-based workers may become subcontractors themselves (ILO, 2012). Furthermore, it is often difficult to identify employer relationships as many home-based workers (specifically homeworkers) find themselves operating within complex webs of middlemen, intermediaries and subcontractors (ibid.). Finally, cooperatives themselves can be employers when they subcontract orders to home-based workers who are not members of the cooperative.

Based on the above, the question remains: what does formalization mean for home-based workers? Some may consider formalization as the equivalent of corporatization where “the aim of informal worker movements might simply be to formalize their workplaces under traditional hierarchies, rather than to generate new rules and institutions to increase worker voice and power” (Rosaldo et al., 2012). Informal workers’ movements generally seek to formalize aspects of their jobs such as legal recognition and protection, while maintaining elements of informality. In this regards, home-based workers might want to preserve their work location at home for reasons of flexibility and convenience, or might not want to be tied with one employer. Chen (2009) proposed that formalization for home-based workers would mean regular, secure and enforceable work orders; regular and timely payments; piece-rates equivalent to the minimum wage; occupational health and safety measures; capital to improve workspace (often their homes) and upgrade their equipment. Bonner and Spooner (2012) add that home-based workers also demand to be recognized as workers; and to have access to credit, to markets and to skills training as well as capacity building. They also mention that home-based workers demand the recognition of their organizations and their right to collectively bargain.

Overcoming invisibility: achievements and challenges of home-based worker organizations

Home-based workers organize in order to overcome the difficulties and constraints mentioned above. Home-based workers have established membership-based organizations (MBOs) to advance their demands and seek better working conditions. More specifically they organize through membership-based organizations of the poor (MBOPs). Chen et

al. (2007) distinguish MBOs from other type of organizations, and differentiate between MBOs and MBOPs. They “define MBOs as those in which the members elect their leaders and which operate on democratic principles that hold the elected officers accountable to the general membership. MBOPs are MBOs in which the vast majority of members are poor, although some non-poor persons may also be members”. The authors stress that MBOPs are organizations of the poor, not organizations that work *for* the poor, which includes organizations that are not necessarily composed of a majority of poor working people.

MBOPs can take the form of cooperatives, self-help groups, associations, credit groups, and other social and solidarity economy organizations. Trade unions can also be MBOPs, however “only some of them are directly concerned with advancing the cause of the working poor” (Chen et al., 2007). This can be attributed to two main causes. First, historically unions have neglected home-based workers – while some are sympathetic to their cause, they typically concentrate exclusively on formal workers. Even when formal trade unions reach out to home-based workers, they don’t have much agency inside trade unions (Mather, 2010). Other unions might be hostile to home-based workers and refuse to recognize them as such. This can also be compounded by the fact that trade unions tend to be male dominated, which does not encourage women workers to join (Carré et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, unions have increasingly been realizing the importance of organizing workers in the informal economy in general, including home-based workers. In many cases, however cooperatives can present a better opportunity for home-based workers to overcome the difficulties posed by the nature and conditions of their work. As Bonner and Spooner (2012) assert “the advantages of self-help groups, cooperatives, social enterprises, etc., is that they provide a vehicle for improving livelihoods: jobs, loans, access to markets, and regular work”. Some of these are able to negotiate with contractors for better terms and conditions of work.

Indeed, through cooperatives home-based workers pool their limited resources and capital to overcome their inability to accumulate. They increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis the suppliers of materials and the buyers, as well as bypass the middlemen. Moreover, peer-to-peer skills learning can be possible where production techniques are shared among members, especially when they are able to secure a common place to work from. Home-based workers also gain better access to finance through establishing solidarity or revolving funds. Similarly, they can access banks and government funds through their organization or being member of a wider network or federation of cooperatives (Mather, 2010).

However, organizing home-based workers is a complicated task. First, the isolation of home-based workers in their homes (workplaces) poses a constraint to organizing (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). Second, the organization or cooperative might be difficult to sustain financially due to workers being isolated and working in separate places. Organizing, then “requires a team of committed and trusted collectors who are willing to go repeatedly from place to place to collect the money, as well as keep records and hand over the sums to the organization [...] as well as the commitment of the members to contribute” (Mather, 2012). This concern becomes more acute when members’ earnings are very low as they are for home-based workers whose activities are often of a subsistence nature. Thus, members find themselves willing to contribute whilst being unable to do so, or being unable to contribute a sufficient amount, making it difficult for the organization to exist based on earnings and membership dues (ibid.).

As a result, MBOs of home-based workers are often obliged to raise external funding in order to maintain their organizations (Rosaldo et al., 2012), which might challenge their autonomy and members' ownership. It is also difficult for home-based workers to be able to give time to their cooperative (Mather, 2012), as the majority of them are women who juggle their time between paid work and unpaid care work. Finally, home-based workers' organizations may be blocked or hindered by a change of government, national or local, that might not be supporting of their activities (Esim, 2001). However, and despite these challenges, home-based workers have been able to organize and make significant achievements.

Home-based workers around the world have been organizing on the local, national, regional and international levels to advance their rights and interests. There are successful experiences in different contexts that clearly demonstrate the achievements of home-based workers organizing to obtain legal recognition, protection and better working conditions.

For example, in Chile, the Training Centre for the Working Woman (CECAM), supported home-based workers to organize through various means, including training, capacity building and research. The organization built on the momentum of the adoption of the ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177). By the end of 2004, CECAM had successfully organized 750 women home-based workers in 15 different organizations, including trade unions and other MBOs. The achievements of this network include the elimination of intermediaries for groups of home-based workers such as seaweed collectors. They also succeeded in securing access to markets for home-based workers in the garment sector and better piece rates. Finally, CECAM was able to obtain recognition by the authorities of the existence of home-based workers (ILO, 2015a). However, due to reduced funding, CECAM was dissolved and the groups of home-based workers, without their national and regional structures, withered away. Since 2012 there are some efforts linked to the CUT (Trade Union Confederation in Chile) to organize home-based workers, particularly garment workers, through small unions of home-based garment workers and a recently formed cross-sectorial union.

In the Philippines, a rural women's association KaBaPa, founded in 1975 to raise awareness of women's need for steady employment and income, started to collaborate with the ILO in 1988 on a project to organize home-based workers. The common efforts to organize home-based workers from nine provinces led to the founding of PATAMABA, the national network for home-based workers. The organization has over 19,000 self-employed and subcontracted workers as members, covering 10 regions, 34 provinces and 276 chapters nationwide (WIEGO, 2016a). It works at a policy level as well as in supporting home-based workers' groups to sustain themselves and become independent from subcontractors. PATAMABA played a key role in influencing the government to include provisions for home-based workers in the labour code (Jhabvala & Tate, 1996).

Among the most prominent success stories of organizing women working in the informal economy, including home-based workers, is Self-Employed Women's Association SEWA of India. SEWA has historically organized home-based workers into cooperatives and has succeeded in negotiating higher piece rates from the ones previously received from subcontractors. SEWA cooperatives are active in various sectors, such as health care, savings and credit, and in trade. Also, SEWA cooperatives have their own shops to sell their products. Moreover, SEWA has succeeded, in cooperation with the government, to insure thousands of its members against natural, social and individual crisis that

might affect their members. Home-based workers are also provided with access to credit through the SEWA Cooperative Bank (Jhabvala & Tate, 1996). SEWA has been influential in shaping home-based workers organizing worldwide through its unique model, and its efforts were important for the process leading to the adoption of the ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) (Sinha, 2006).

In addition to local and national home-based workers organizations, there are several regional organizations, among the most prominent ones being HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) and HomeNet South-East Asia (HNSEA). The former is a regional network of organizations of mainly women home-based workers. HNSA has 53 member organizations from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Affiliates of HNSA are MBOs of home-based workers, NGOs working for or with home-based workers, networks of home-based workers, or those that work with or for them. The organization aims to increase the visibility of home-based workers and their issues, ensure they have secure livelihoods, and strengthen their voice and organizing efforts in South Asia.

HNSEA is an umbrella organization for country HomeNets in the Philippines, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Thailand. The country HomeNets are not homogenous in their composition - some are networks of home-based workers' MBOs, and others group together NGOs working with home-based workers. The HomeNets actively work to promote the rights and interests of home-based workers on the national and regional levels and work with governments and relevant stakeholders. They also assist home-based workers in improving skills, enhancing products and market access and supporting them in building and solidifying their organizations (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). Despite these achievements, home-based workers coming together and organizing has not been easy, with many obstacles that hinder their efforts.

The experiences of home-based workers organizing reveal that their success depends on several factors that can be considered as external to the workers themselves. The isolation of home-based workers and their severe vulnerability as well as the gender-based social pressures exercised on them constitute serious challenges and threats to achieving significant success as a result of organizing. Kabeer et al. (2013) argue that experiences of organizing workers who lack a clear employment relationship show that although they sometimes negotiate with employers, organizations of home-based workers most often engage in social bargaining with local and national governments. Similarly, organizations of women workers in the informal economy tend to use 'less confrontational' strategies which are necessary to build their 'associational power' (Kabeer et al., 2013).

Carré et al. (2014) argue that success for organizing is achieved through a three-part process, consisting of: political power, as they "rarely have substantial economic power to direct at employers or customers and instead must win concessions from the state"; the need for allies to acquire political power, such as unions and political parties; and self-organization that creates the conditions for alliances (such as credibility and legitimacy in terms of mobilization). This process could explain particular successes or failures of the home-based workers movement. In several contexts, such as India and Bulgaria, traditional trade unions started cooperating with home-based worker organizations when they became strong and had acquired a considerable number of members (Bonner & Spooner, 2012). In Brazil and South Africa union power stemmed from their base and their close link to political parties in power (Workers Party in Brazil and African National Congress in South Africa) (Carré et al., 2014). Nevertheless organizing strat-

egies played a decisive role in these two contexts, where Brazilian unions' innovation and flexibility rendered them more successful and effective in organizing home-based workers than their South African counterparts.

Moreover, the political context plays an important role in the success of home-based workers' organizing. The Lula government in Brazil gave a boost to the cooperative and social solidarity movement through the establishment of the National Secretariat for the Solidarity Economy (SENAES). In Turkey the local level political change affected the Çorum Women's Cooperative's activity. When the opposing political party came into power it "asked them to leave the permanent shop space that was allocated to them free of charge by the previous municipality" (Esim, 2001). In contrast, one of the factors of success of an Indian women home-based worker cooperative, Lijjat, was the fact that its activities were compatible to the prevailing social norms of a patriarchal society. "The snacks were produced in women's homes or close to them (thanks to rapid branch expansion). Therefore, women did not need to leave their homes to work. Women could make papads in their spare time, thereby not posing a problem for taking care of their familial responsibilities by enabling them" (Ramani et al., 2013).

Furthermore, and based on the examples provided above, the majority of successful cases had the support of outside actors. In Chile, Thailand (ILO, 2015a), the Philippines and other contexts, it was mainly NGOs, academics, activists or international organizations that intervened in order to support the organizing of home-based workers. The involvement of these actors was crucial for the organizing process. The external players in these cases provided the know-how, the funds, the instigation and agitation in order to make organizing possible. Low earnings and very little time to organize makes the support of external actors important for home-based workers.

Nevertheless, the most important factor lies in the fact that outside actors can help overcoming the problem of isolation, and subsequently self-identification. In this sense, outside actors can help bringing home-based workers together on the common grounds of working conditions and blurred employment relations, thus contributing to creating a sense of solidarity and an overarching workers' identity. Kabeer et al. (2013) elaborate on this point by highlighting that these categories of workers in the informal economy are geographically dispersed and socially isolated, and their working conditions mean that a shared identity cannot be assumed, and most often has to be built. NGOs and other external actors often facilitate this process. They also highlight the potential risks of such involvement related to accountability and dependence on donor support and lack of long-term sustainability: whilst NGOs are accountable to their donors, cooperatives (and other MBOs) are accountable to their members which can be a source of tension where priorities diverge. Moreover, external actors might not possess an exit strategy to phase out their involvement, which might result in their undue control over the strategic or day-to-day decisions of the cooperative, thus undermining members' ownership.

3.3 Cooperatives of waste pickers

Situation of waste pickers

There are an estimated 15 million waste pickers worldwide who, "make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling materials that someone else has thrown away" (Bonner & Spooner, 2012; WIEGO, 2013). Waste pickers, a provisional term adopted

by the 1st World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008, include “poor people rummaging through garbage in search of food, clothing and other basic, daily needs to informal private collectors of recyclables for sale to middlemen or businesses, as well as organized collectors/sorters of recyclables linked to unions, cooperatives or associations” (Dias & Samson, 2016). The term came about from global debates among waste pickers about what to call themselves. They rejected the use of ‘scavenger’ due to its derogatory meaning (Samson, 2009).

The majority of waste pickers deal with municipal solid waste, but they are also beginning to recover e-waste as an additional source of recyclable material. The smallest, yet the fastest growing waste stream in the world, e-waste is generated in two principal ways: 1) old or unused domestic electronics, and 2) legal and illegal importation of second-hand electronic equipment and waste (ILO, 2014b).

While there are different categories of waste pickers, 80 per cent of them work in the informal economy (WIEGO, 2016b). They predominantly “perform labour at the bottom of the much larger waste recycling chain” (Samson, 2009). Although they provide a public service with economic, social and environmental benefits to their communities, they often suffer from poor working conditions and lack social protections. Furthermore, waste pickers face risks of injuries as they often work in hazardous and dangerous conditions, particularly those who work on landfills. They are also exposed to health risks, resulting from exposure to “toxic materials, bottles and containers with chemical residues, health residues, contaminated needles, and heavy metals from batteries” (Bonner & Spooner, 2012).

The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS)⁷ showed that occupational health and safety was among the major problems that waste pickers faced. In Belo Horizonte, body pains were a common complaint among waste pickers interviewed. In Nakuru, lack of gloves and masks were raised as an issue. As a participant stated, “We don’t have protective gear. Our work is hazardous. We are exposed to dangerous materials which always harm us” (Dias & Samson, 2016).

In addition to health hazards, there is a serious risk of loss of life from collapsing slopes, fires, and waste slides (Scheinberg, 2010). According to a study conducted in Mexico City, the general population’s life expectancy is 67 years, but decreasing to 39 years for dumpsite waste pickers. Another study in Egypt showed that the waste picker communities had an infant mortality rate of 1/3 in Port Said, which is several times higher than the rate for the region as a whole. In Cairo, 1/4 babies born in the waste picker communities die before reaching their first year (Medina, 2007).

Despite circulating in various public spaces, waste pickers are largely invisible and stigmatized. They live at the bottom of the economic pyramid, struggling to survive with their families. Despite delivering almost all recyclable materials to the recycling chain, they remain the most vulnerable and invisible actors within a highly profitable industry that generates significant profits for those at the top of the pyramid (WIEGO, 2013).

Waste pickers are frequently discriminated against due to their daily contact with garbage. They are usually “associated with dirt, disease, squalor, and perceived as a nuisance, a symbol of backwardness, and even as criminals” (Medina, 2007). The hostile

⁷ Waste pickers from Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Bogota, Colombia; Pune, India; Nakuru, Kenya; and Durban, South Africa participated in the study.

physical and social environment they work in could even threaten their lives. The social stigma is exacerbated when class intersects with gender, racial, ethnic and religious discriminations. Waste pickers are usually poor immigrants from rural areas and/or socially marginalized groups (ibid.). In the case of Pune, India, Chikarmane (2012) points out that “waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers are not always among the economically poorest, but they are usually among the most socially excluded and discriminated against populations in urban areas”.

Although there are millions of waste pickers worldwide, mainly in developing countries, statistics are still limited. Brazil is the only country that systematically reports official statistical data on informal waste pickers. This data shows that over a quarter million persons are engaged in waste picking in Brazil (Dias, 2011a). Other studies have also shown the relevance of informal waste picking as a main source of income. According to the IEMS, 75 per cent of the surveys' respondents do not have another wage or income from other forms of self-employment, nor is waste picking a seasonal activity. In Pune, for instance, 90 per cent of the waste pickers worked 12 months of the year (Dias & Samson, 2016).

Despite their contributions to local governments, communities and recycling value chains, waste pickers' linkages to the formal economy still go unrecognized. The IEMS shows that in most cases formal businesses are the main buyers from the informal waste pickers. The latter are “not only one of the main stakeholders in formal solid waste systems (...) but are also an integral part of the recycling value chain and, thus the formal economy” (Dias & Samson, 2016). In Brazil, waste pickers are responsible for majority of recycling among some key materials: in 2008 nearly 92 per cent of aluminium and 80 per cent of cardboard in Brazil were recycled. The high rates of recycling are mainly due to waste pickers working outside municipal recycling programmes (Dias, 2011a).

Nonetheless, and despite their widespread economic vulnerability, social marginality and exclusion from public policies, waste pickers from around the world have started to organize, particularly in Latin America and Asia. Samson (2009) states that, “They are demanding recognition for the contributions that they make to the environment and the economy, and they are fighting to ensure that their role within municipal waste management systems is valued and made more secure”.

Struggles for recognition

A number of authors have explored the reasons behind mobilizing and organizing informal waste pickers, who “were previously presumed too weak and fragmented to challenge capital and state” (Rosaldo et al., 2012). Medina points out that recyclables in developing countries encourage and support the existence of waste-dealers between industries and wastepickers to provide them with suitable volume and quality of recyclables. The dependency of workers on middlemen who sell their materials to industry ensures fertile ground for the exploitation and political control of the waste pickers, particularly in dumpsites. Hence, the formation of waste picker cooperatives attempted to bypass the middlemen, dismantle the monopolistic markets, and thus increase waste picker earnings (Medina, 2007). While there is no doubt that the formation of cooperatives could help break the “vicious circle of poverty and exploitation”, the factors that trigger, facilitate and support the organizing of informal waste pickers are less analysed. In a case study of the Colombian recyclers' movement, Rosaldo argues

that three occurrences created political opportunities that stimulated the waste picker movement in Colombia:

First, civil society support provided recyclers with the financial and technical backing to develop innovative organizing models. *Second*, human rights provisions contained in the Constitution of 1991 served as a strategic leverage point for challenging state policy. *Third*, the privatization of waste management – fueled by structural adjustment pressures and the increasing price of recyclables – impelled the recyclers to action by leaving them with two clear-cut possibilities: waste corporations might permanently displace them, or recyclers might collectively organize to protect, improve, and formalize their livelihoods (Rosaldo, 2012).

While the waste picker movement in Colombia resorted to the legal framework as strategic leverage to challenge public policies, legal tools are being used in a variety of ways by different waste picker organizations across different contexts (see for example Dias, 2011b). Likewise, although other authors have indicated the role of external professionals, NGOs, religious organizations and international donors in the formation of a number of the waste picker organizations (Medina, 2007; Samson, 2009) it remains crucial to contextualize each factor that triggers and supports the formation of waste picker cooperatives. Kabeer et al. (2013) argue that given daily struggles for survival and security, “most of (women’s) organizations have their origins in the efforts of actors that are not engaged in the same livelihood strategies or come from the same class background as the women who are being organized”. A case study on Coopcarmo, in Mesquita, Brazil shows that the relationship between external actors and waste pickers can be troubled by power dynamics. In this case, the *catadoras* had to fight to gain their autonomy from the priest who initially helped them and ended up making most of the decisions. Hence, Samson rightly highlights that further research is required to critically interrogate “how the role of outside actors shapes and influences the political orientation, objectives, organizational form and functioning of waste picker groups” (Samson, 2009).

Samson (2009) explores how waste pickers in different contexts organize, mobilise for their rights, and demand their inclusion in municipal waste management systems. She highlights that examining how waste pickers fit into the global recycling chain and how they are bargaining within the chain should be studied according to specific contexts:

Policies such as privatisation and formal integration take significantly different forms in different places due to the specific social, economic and political dynamics within each city and country. The ways that waste pickers organise in relation to these policies also affect how they are designed and implemented on the ground (...) Important differences exist between organised formations of waste pickers within and across countries on issues such as how they see themselves; how they organise; how they would like to relate to municipal waste management systems and the state more generally; how they understand and situate themselves within the capitalist economy; and how they engage with other mass movements (...) Therefore, the approaches to organising and policy presented in this book cannot and should not be treated as models which could simply be transplanted to other contexts (Samson, 2009).

Taking the contextual concern into consideration, Samson interestingly highlights the existence of “intimate relationship between policy and organising”. In this sense, the legislative context affects the form and goals of waste picker organizations, while mobilising, organizing and networking of waste pickers shape and push policy and legislative reforms (Samson, 2009). Numerous examples reveal how waste pickers have collectively

struggled to secure legislative and policy changes that improve their status and working conditions. In the Brazilian case the *catadores*' mobilization has led to significant policy and legal reforms. In addition to the federal government recognition of their work as an official occupation, some sub-national governments, such as the state of Minas Gerais, have gone further to issue a law that authorizes the use of public funds to compensate *catadores* for their environmental contributions on an ongoing basis (WIEGO, 2016b). Furthermore, all federal buildings must separate their waste and give the recyclables to *catadores*' cooperatives. In Peru, a major struggle was on securing recognition for the role of *recicladores* within municipal waste management systems. While waste pickers in Brazil and Peru have focused on engaging their local and national governments, Colombian waste pickers have also strategically used the Constitutional Court to secure their legal right to bid for privatization contracts (Samson, 2009).

Waste pickers are amongst groups of workers in the informal economy who have 'innovated' new forms of organizing. Two prominent cases from India have developed hybrid organizational forms that include cooperatives: the unions SEWA and KKPKP. The latter is a union that has combined political struggle with the formation of three cooperatives to meet member needs, including the SWaCH Cooperative formally contracted in 2008 by the municipality to collect waste from residents (Chikarmane, 2012). Gadgil and Samson (2017) argue that the formation of cooperatives by trade unions of workers in the informal economy can pose challenges when their membership base diverges from the one of the union and when they become partly accountable to external parties.

SWaCH has achieved important success in improving the livelihoods, earnings and working conditions of its more than 2000 member-workers. The opening of the cooperative to both waste pickers who were not members of KKPKP union and urban poor who had not worked as waste pickers posed challenges that KKPKP had not experienced in the case of the two other cooperatives. In fact, the increase in the number of staff, as well as the relationship with Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and residents, shifted power dynamics within the cooperative. "The unequal power relations between the PMC and the cooperative, combined with the PMC's misconception that SWaCH staff had the power to 'discipline' members, began to undermine the carefully constructed democratic practice of the union and led some staff to start treating members like employees". This is why hybrid organizations can improve the status quo of their members, but "it is crucial for the union to carefully strategize how to ensure that the cooperative remains consistent with and enhances the political orientation and struggles of the union" (Gadgil and Samson, 2017).

Furthermore, waste pickers around the world are building alliances, networks and federations that link organizations from geographically distant locations. These linkages range from very loose to formally structured networks, with varied discourses and political orientations. For instance, the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW) in India decided to maintain the looseness of the alliance whose member organizations do not have a united orientation; the alliance is a space for debate and collective actions when needed.

In contrast to AIW, the Association of Recicladores of Bogotá (ARB) in Colombia, and the National Movement of Catadores (MNCR) in Brazil are much more structured. Whilst both alliances fight to improve the working conditions and secure social and economic recognition of the *recicladores*' work, the "MNCR has a different and broader social and political agenda" (Samson, 2009). The latter sees *catadores* as workers as opposed to

the Colombian recicladores who frame themselves much more as entrepreneurs. “It is a mass-based movement that allies with other organizations of the oppressed classes in a common quest to transform society and eradicate oppression and exploitation” (ibid.). Despite the widespread legal and policy achievements secured through mobilizing, organizing and networking, waste pickers in different parts of the world continue facing serious challenges.

Structural challenges

The recent global recession exacerbated waste pickers’ vulnerability through dramatic price fluctuations, exploitation by middlemen, and artificially low prices (WIEGO, 2013). Waste pickers, particularly the unorganized, suffer enormously from the monopolistic markets that generate high profits for middlemen who purchase the recyclables at very low prices. Unless organized, waste pickers cannot usually bargain for higher pricing.

In addition to the middlemen’s exploitation, a more recent risk is facing millions of informal recycling workers. The privatization of municipal waste management services partly due to the increasing price of recyclables is posing major threats to waste pickers’ livelihoods. Municipalities are increasingly “outsourcing waste collection and transportation to private companies, whether local or multinational, threatening the livelihoods of both waste pickers and municipal workers who have traditionally collected, sorted and added value to waste” (WIEGO, 2013).

The privatization of the *dhaloes* (communal waste disposal sites) in Delhi, India, displaced waste pickers who previously provided this service informally, and so excluded them from the contracts. Moreover, the companies’ contracts over the waste in the *dhaloes* also threatened the access of waste pickers to the recyclable materials on which their livelihoods depend (Samson, 2009). In Turkey, according to the law passed recently, the status of waste pickers is not formally recognised, and purchases from informal waste pickers by recycling companies is punishable with a fine (Oran, 2016).

However, the control of solid waste management by the private companies does not only jeopardize the informal recycling workers, but also risks fuelling fragmentations between waste pickers and municipal workers. For instance, in Colombia, the privatization of collection threatened municipal workers with job loss or deterioration in wages and working conditions since they were in charge of door-to-door collection. In this case, if waste pickers demand to receive contracts for door-to-door collection, then “they could be complicit in displacing municipal workers and supporting state agendas to neoliberalise the state and weaken the union movement” (Samson, 2009). Therefore, privatization of waste management attempts sometimes pit vulnerable workers against each other, and thus to undermine their bargaining power.

In this regard, authorities are not only complicit with private waste companies, they also display a wide variety of policies that intimidate waste pickers. These range from direct repression to neglect or collusion. In fact, many cities in countries such as Colombia, India or the Philippines consider waste picking to be an illegal occupation. Some African cities including Dakar, Senegal, Bamako, Mali, and Cotonou, Benin, demonstrate the policy of neglect towards waste pickers, leaving them alone, without repressing or helping them.

According to a comparative study of three countries (Brazil, India and Egypt), informal sector integration in solid waste management systems not only depends on the capaci-

ties of the informal sector to organize, but also on the political will to integrate it (GTZ, 2010). In this regard, Van Zeeland (2014) studies the expansion and sustainability of the social and solidarity economy by focusing on the waste picker movement. She argues that it is not purely a technical or economic matter, but is essentially a political one depending on public policies that support a process of social transformation. More precisely, the interaction between collective action and public policies at federal, state and municipal levels is crucial for the inclusion of informal waste pickers in waste management systems. Hence, she also highlights “the need for political conditions to ensure an enabling environment” (ibid.).

Survey Findings

4.1 General findings

Legal status

Organizations of home-based workers and waste pickers can exist under many legal forms, and can be registered as cooperatives, associations, self-help groups, micro-enterprises and community-based organizations, amongst others. All the surveyed waste picker organizations were legally registered under cooperative or other laws. Of the 21 surveyed home-based worker cooperatives and other economic units adhering to cooperative principles, five were not registered. These were either in the process of registration, or their number of members was not sufficient to meet legal requirements. Of those home-based worker organizations which were registered, the majority were registered under cooperative laws and a few under another law. The latter includes micro-enterprise law (mainly for home-based worker cooperatives in Brazil), association law, as well as laws relating to self-help groups, particularly in Kenya. As for waste picker cooperatives, ten cooperatives were registered under another law, mainly association law, particularly in Brazil. It is worth mentioning that waste picker associations and cooperatives in Brazil are both included in the waste management policies, and therefore it is believed that the choice of the law, at least in Brazil, is specific to each organization. Nevertheless, they need to be legally registered as cooperatives to access funding from government for equipment, or to be hired as service providers.

Several cooperatives from amongst the home-based workers and waste pickers cited that they faced bureaucratic obstacles during the registration process. A member of a home-based worker cooperative in Buenos Aires explained, “There are many requirements, it took us two years to meet them”. Moreover, lack of information regarding registration presented a difficulty as well, although more home-based worker cooperatives reported this problem than waste pickers. One of the main challenges for home-based workers is their isolation and restricted mobility, making it more challenging for them to access information or to be included in government outreach efforts to disseminate information on cooperative registration requirements. Also, the financial costs of registration have presented challenges to a number of the surveyed cooperatives. For example, two of the

three Thai home-based worker cooperatives in the sample have encountered financial difficulties – as a result one of them was unable to register.

A number of respondents stated that cumbersome bureaucracy and financial requirements made the intervention of a third party necessary to obtain registration. Specifically, 14 respondents declared that they have received support from outside entities in the registration process, including corporations, community-based organizations, NGOs or even local government (especially in Brazil). As a board member of the waste picker cooperative COOPERVESP in Brazil explains, “There were difficulties related to notary expenses and required documentation, but formalization was made possible with the support of the Moradia NGO of Belo Horizonte”.

The process of legal formalization that waste pickers and home-based workers initiate through the registration of their organizations seems to occur out of economic necessity more than as a result of a collective decision-making process on different organizing options. The findings of the survey reveal that one of the principal reasons to register the organizations is the opportunity to access incentives and support provided by local or national governments, and in some cases from the private sector. Registration can pave the way for accessing funds, as expressed by the chair of the home-based workers group Ngalo Women’s Development Initiative in Uganda. She stated that her cooperative, “decided to formalize the initiative in order to be recognized and to qualify for government’s financial assistance”. In Brazil, registration allows waste pickers to benefit from the Social Security National Institute, as pooling their resources allows them to contribute to the fund, which is a condition for benefitting from it.

Obtaining financial assistance is important for workers in both sectors as one of the common and crucial challenges facing cooperatives of workers in the informal economy is securing funds for sustainability. Incentives and support provided through government and private funds and projects also help workers overcome, even if momentarily, economic vulnerability and the dearth of opportunities through prospects of increased income through these projects.

The most commonly cited motivations for registration by home-based workers are financial reasons, including the need to pool resources, secure markets for selling products, acquire skills and achieve economies of scale. A member of the home-based worker cooperative Cartoneros de Villa Itati in Argentina stated that “In order to market our material we needed to form a cooperative so we would be recognized by the government”. Another common reason for registration is the ability to engage in negotiation and bargaining. As the chairperson of the Grihasramik Mahila Sitmulak Sahakari Sangh home-based worker cooperative in Nepal explains, “We thought that legalizing will provide us more bargaining power with potential buyers and provide regular income as cooperatives have more credibility than groups”.

Although waste picker cooperatives share many of the motivations of home-based workers, the most frequently mentioned reason for registration among waste pickers was social benefits. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, this motivation could be related to social security access, including health insurance, and identification cards (that many waste pickers have been able to obtain). Second, registration was motivated by the desire to enhance social worth, which is related to the stigma associated with the occupation of waste picking. Through their cooperatives, waste pickers seek not only to fight stigmatization, but also to perform a wider social and environmental role.

Table 3. Survey results: reasons given for registration

Reason for registration	Waste picker cooperatives	Home-based worker cooperatives
Financial benefits	Exemption from financial costs/restrictions (Brazil) <i>“We, as a cooperative, are exempt from many things”</i>	Access to credit (Brazil) Recognition from government (Kenya) Access to social services funds (Kenya) Government recognition and access to financial assistance (Uganda) Assistance from municipality (Turkey)
Social benefits	Access to social security benefits (Brazil, Turkey) <i>“Changed the legal status from association to cooperative to have the social security benefits”.</i>	Health insurance access and retirement income (Argentina)
Economic stability	Organizing as a collective business, better conditions, improved income (Brazil) Access to economic benefits from government and the private sector. (Brazil)	Enhance product distribution and purchase of materials (Thailand) Facilitate marketing of material (Argentina)
Negotiating/bargaining power	Recognition in negotiation processes for sale of materials (Brazil) Access to national movement and strengthened advocacy capacity (Brazil)	Negotiating power: participation in local, regional and national forums (Brazil) Visibility, voice and representation by women (India) More bargaining power with potential buyers (Nepal)
Members requested registration		Group unity, economic stability and sustainability (Nepal)
Other	Environmental support Change in public thinking about waste picking and waste (Brazil) Increased self-esteem for members (Brazil) Legal obligation (Colombia) Defence of activities (Colombia)	Access to training (Kenya)

A common explanation for registration provided by waste pickers was to defend their sector and gain recognition for their activities. Waste pickers frequently face discrimination and are seen as a nuisance and as representative of “backwardness”. They face numerous challenges that are not limited to social stigma, but also to hostile governmental attitudes and measures as well as the increasing privatization of waste-management systems that pose a serious threat to their livelihood. Two of the three surveyed waste picker cooperatives in Colombia expressed that they registered to defend recycling activities. Moreover, some Brazilian waste picker cooperatives also expressed that registration was motivated by the desire to join the national movement of waste pickers. In Brazil, the movement has been crucial in achieving breakthroughs for waste pickers toward recognition and inclusion in waste-management systems.

Membership criteria

Home-based worker cooperative membership criteria often reflect the economic needs of the members as well as the characteristics of the sector. Most expressed the criteria in terms of the particular skills or “trade” of the potential member (weaving, catering, etc.) and not in terms of being a home-based worker. This stems from both economic needs, skills that the cooperatives require, and the fact that they do not self-identify as home-based workers (Mather, 2010). On the other hand, waste picker cooperatives often set “being a waste picker” as a clear criteria for membership, i.e. a clear definition of profession. For example, the Indian waste picker cooperative Safai Sena Welfare Foundation defines the membership criteria as “to be actively working as a professional waste picker”. This is expressed by the SWaCH cooperative in India as “carrying ID card issued by the State Government, any Local Municipal Authority”. Moreover, the discourse of the respondents reveals that being a waste picker is not merely about work but also an identity.

This is also related to the characteristics of the profession and its classification by state authorities as a result of the achievements of the waste picker movement. It is also a reflection of the different struggles by workers in both sectors. Home-based workers’ main interactions are with private buyers and suppliers and the activity is relatively open, i.e. entry is easy and does not depend on certain geographical sites, and entry of new workers does not have significant effects on others. This is opposed to waste picking which depends on dumpsites or other collection sites and the entry of people in waste picking activity is likely to crowd out professional waste pickers and create competition on their work sites.

One important criterion of membership for both groups lies in respecting and being committed to the constitution of the cooperative, as well as its principles – particularly solidarity and willingness to work collectively. Other answers include paying membership fees, defending the profession (specifically for waste picker cooperatives) and social criteria such as “to become a member you must come from the slum area, be a woman with children, poor and show interest,” as stated by the treasurer of the home-based worker cooperative Bega Kwa Bega in Kenya. In this regard, being a woman was stated as a criterion for membership for many home-based workers.

Indeed, the predominance of women is highly observed in the surveyed cooperatives. Over 70 per cent of surveyed home-based worker cooperatives stated that the share of women members in their organization is higher than 75 per cent, compared to 20 per cent for waste picker cooperatives. This further strengthens the notion of home-based

work as a “feminized” sector, unlike waste picking where both men and women are present. Home-based work can be seen within the category of the extended role assigned to women as it involves skills that are considered feminized, and it is also a way to adapt to the restrictions on women in terms of mobility, care roles, as well as the restricted opportunities in the labour market. Nevertheless it appears that the share of female membership is also high in waste picker cooperatives, although lower than their home-based worker counterparts.

Cooperative structure

Despite the variety of organizational types such as cooperatives, associations or self-help groups, all declared to adhere to cooperative values and principles, especially with regards to democratic structure, governance and member participation. The majority hold regular elections, and those that do not, appoint committee members through agreement or on a consensual basis depending on availability of time. By following a traditional structure of governance, electing a board of directors, or administrative and financial committees, they are also able to structure their organizations around their needs. Indeed, the self-management and ownership of the cooperatives by workers themselves often paves the way for operational structures that serve the needs of members. As a former leader of the waste picker cooperative COOPERT of Brazil explains, “We achieved an internal organization process in which cooperative members have full ownership, always responsible in the management of the cooperative assuming full responsibility for errors and gains”.

Amongst the waste picker cooperatives, political and environmental education committees can be found. This reflects the need for waste pickers to pursue their political struggles for recognition and rights as well as the wider role they claim at the societal level, as contributors to sustainable development. On the other hand, some of the surveyed home-based worker cooperatives are structured around committees reflecting divisions of work inside the cooperative based on production areas such as ironing and sewing. Thus, home-based workers can adjust their internal structures to optimize their production efficiency and specialization. These differences in structure are also reflections of the sectors themselves: while waste pickers’ activities and work are clearly defined (which might facilitate the homogeneity of structure), home-based workers’ activities and work can be much more diverse in terms of what they produce, where they sell, and their employment relations, which might translate into more heterogeneity in the structure. Also, the different structures can be traced back to the size of the cooperative. The bigger the cooperative is, the more complex the structure will be (and vice versa).

Activities and functions

The main functions and activities of the surveyed waste picker cooperatives are the collection, sorting and recycling of waste. These three activities are always interrelated, reflecting the environmental nature of their work. In addition, some produce artwork and other products from recyclable materials. In describing their functions and activities, members of the waste picker cooperatives underscore the social meaning that they ascribe to their economic activity. For example, the president of the Brazilian ASCAR waste picker cooperative said “the work is performed with recyclable materials, giving new meaning to what would be trash as an opportunity for life both for people and for the environment”. This statement clearly underscores the role that waste pickers assign to themselves as key agents of sustainable economic change.

The economic activities of home-based workers are much more diverse. Although the majority of the surveyed cooperatives work in garment production, clothing and craft-work, a number of cooperatives specialize in food, catering and farming. The activities of the cooperatives are not limited to their members. Some cooperatives stated that other workers benefit as well, especially those cooperatives engaged in catering activities that sometimes require waiters. Moreover, some respondents indicated that they provide savings and credit services and skill enhancement trainings to members. This reflects the ways in which home-based workers overcome their vulnerability and address their lack of access to finance and exclusion from social security systems.

The terms of employment of home-based workers are reflected in the types of contracts with buyers. None of the surveyed home-based worker cooperatives stated that they are engaged in subcontracting exclusively, which can be seen as a sign of precariousness and instability of the sector. As explained previously, the phenomena of income patching is often observed with home-based workers (Pearson, 2004).

The Cooperativa de Costura de Osasco in Brazil is subcontracted by garment enterprises, recyclers' cooperatives as well as ADS-CUT (the development arm of the Unified Workers' Central, Brazil). One respondent stated that all of the agreements are informal, especially with regards to the duration of the work or remuneration. The case of South African home-based workers is clearer – both Women of Worth Cooperative and Wonnors Partnership Cooperative mostly depend on the Township Patterns social enterprise for orders. The latter provides support for the cooperatives and in order to engage in business with Township Patterns the cooperative has to meet certain criteria, such as a minimum membership of eight people. Thus, the cooperative members are in a dependent relationship with Township Patterns but nevertheless a service level contract is used instead of an employment contract. The members of the cooperatives can engage in own-account work or work for other parties as long as it does not conflict with Township Patterns. In this example, a clearer dependency relationship can be seen in terms of control over the process of production as well as the structure of the cooperatives (Township Patterns has a model cooperative structure adopted by both surveyed home-based worker cooperatives), and also a high degree of dependency in terms of trainings and other services that the cooperative is able to provide to its members through Township Patterns.

Subcontracting does not seem to occur on a regular basis but there is a mix between subcontracting and own-account work. Based on the responses, home-based workers usually engage in own-account work, i.e. they produce and sell their own products directly at the market when they are not sub-contracted by firms, or when they have completed the sub-contracted orders. Many respondents confirmed that the relation is mostly direct between the worker and the buyer. The cooperative might facilitate the connection, but without issuing a direct contract with the buyer. However, in both cases, the agreements remain informal and occasional.

4.2 Economic viability and sustainability

Economic benefits: member benefits and earnings

Cooperatives pave the way for their members' transition to formality by providing them access to income security. Members earn their living through piece rates (homeworkers), payment based on recyclable materials collected, payment for services (waste pickers),

shares of profits, and/or through directly selling their products or the recyclables they collect. As President of Las Madres Selva waste picker cooperative in Argentina explains, “When we were independent we practically lived in the garbage, taking out what we could eat, whereas now we lead cleaner lives, with members earning a more decent wage and not having to walk 60 blocks dragging all those kilos behind us. It has also generated more stable jobs for us. We used to work seven days a week, rain or shine, to support our families, and now we have managed to get better working conditions”.

Amongst the surveyed cooperatives, the most salient trend is the mix of earnings that members get, followed by being paid by the unit. This indicates that the model used by these cooperatives is mostly based on making resources available for members, facilitating access to markets and space to exercise their activities, and not acting as a fully-fledged enterprise paying wages. This trend is reflected in the study for WIEGO by Co-operative College UK, which asserts that “the majority of cooperatives operating in the informal economy provide services for their members rather than direct employment” (Co-operative College, 2014). The majority of members who are paid by the unit or share profits are waste pickers from Latin American countries. The case of Argentina adds an important aspect to the financial benefits of members since the government provides waste picker members with incentives that “works as a wage”. In other cases cooperative members also receive payments from government such as the recycling bonus in Minas Gerais State, Brazil, or for their services in collecting, transporting and recycling in Bogota, Colombia. When it comes to the details, profits may be divided equally among members or income calculated according to the working hours of each member. Also members can get paid according to their share in the cooperative, which is not aligned with the third cooperative principle. In some instances parts of the profit is kept to sustain the cooperative.

Based on the survey, the mix of benefits for home-based workers is not the same as for waste pickers. For home-based workers in many cases it is a mix between getting paid by the unit and profit. The mix of financial benefit for waste picker cooperatives does not usually involve wages paid by the cooperative but rather by rate (based on units of recyclables collected amounts are usually weighed by type of material and then paid by price and/or sharing the earnings). In the case of SWaCH in India, and unlike other waste picker cooperatives, households directly pay members for their services. Amongst the sample of cooperatives, only the Bega Kwa Bega home-based worker cooperative in Kenya reported that it deducts 5 per cent of member earnings for a group fund that supports members in case there is no work or orders. This approach directly responds to one of the main challenges faced by home-based workers – the irregularity of work and income.

Skills and service provision

Another important factor contributing to increased economic benefit is skills upgrading. Almost all of the surveyed cooperatives provide and/or facilitate access to technical or legal trainings for members. For home-based workers, trainings are usually centred on production skills, training on new equipment, design, accounting or marketing. As the secretary of a South African home-based worker cooperative Women of Worth explained, “We learn skills in the group that you don’t learn from a real boss”. In this respect, sharing common workspaces is very significant in order to assure learning and passing of skills through training and continuous support.

This was reflected through the fact that only a few of the surveyed home-based worker cooperatives stated that their members work exclusively from their homes or adjacent places, whereas a large majority reported that they share a common workspace. Those who stated working exclusively from a collective workspace are small cooperatives of less than 20 members. It appears that the larger the cooperative grows in size the more difficult it may be to accommodate the growing membership in collective workspaces, as this imposes higher costs. It is interesting to mention that a number of home-based workers who worked individually at home in the beginning, eventually moved to rented collective spaces when the cooperatives were established. Workspaces are mainly rented by the cooperative's members, but are sometimes provided by the church, as in the case of Bega Kwa Bega in Kenya, or an NGO, as in the case of Jazba cooperative in Pakistan. Moreover, members might work from a member's home or they might rent a building to be used as both workspace and housing. As for the division of work between home and common space, it is sometimes related to the labour process: "They work at home and bring their finished products to the venue", stated the treasurer of Bega Kwa Bega.

The nature of training reflects the characteristics of the sectors and the constraints the workers face. Home-based workers focus on skills upgrading in order to offer better products and to secure markets. For waste pickers, the trainings respond to the legal difficulties that they face, and serve to enhance efforts for recognition. Waste pickers are also trained on technical skills relating to waste management. Technical skills seem crucial in some contexts even when the regulatory framework is inclusive of waste pickers. The case of Medellín, Colombia is very telling. The municipality made strides in the inclusion and recognition of waste pickers in waste management. Nevertheless, "The new legal framework states that to become public service providers, waste picker organizations need to comply with many formal requirements. To meet them, they need, among other things, to develop managerial and accounting skills, as well as the ability to relate with end users".⁸

Training and support on accounting and business plans is common to most of the cooperatives. They either provide the training directly or facilitate trainings through other supportive organizations, such as Redesol,⁹ the Pronatec programme¹⁰ and the national movement for waste pickers in Brazil; ARB in Colombia; a WIEGO project in Kenya; and HomeNet in Thailand. Very few cooperatives provide or facilitate occupational health and safety or political and union training to members. Moreover, several cooperatives, mostly of home-based workers, provide leadership trainings for building and strengthening the organization. Others, especially Brazilian waste picker cooperatives facilitate the connection between their members and partners in order to meet demand.

The provision of financial support is crucial for the livelihoods of home-based workers and waste pickers, as their income is unstable and most of them do not benefit from social protection measures. Moreover, home-based workers' ability to accumulate capital and expand and improve their activities can be difficult without support. This makes the provision of financial services very important for cooperatives. These can be

⁸ WIEGO. (2016, July 21). Inclusive recycling with waste pickers in Medellín? Retrieved October 3, 2016, from <http://wiego.org/blog/inclusive-recycling-waste-pickers-medellin>.

⁹ Network of recyclers working in cooperatives in Belo Horizonte.

¹⁰ The National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment (Pronatec) under the Ministry of Education.

facilitated with the support of government and/or bigger and more powerful financial institutions, including credit unions. In this regard, most of the surveyed cooperatives that provide or facilitate financial support or microloans for their members are supported by partner organizations, and only very few facilitate financial support exclusively through government. Some of these cooperatives financially support their members to buy equipment or provide them with microloans to support purchasing of raw materials or entrepreneurship.

Negotiations and sales

The support of larger organizations and networks can significantly increase the negotiation power of the cooperatives. According to the president of the Brazilian Redesol, “Negotiating through network has greater bargaining power compared to individual level negotiation”. It seems more likely for waste pickers to be connected to larger organizations and movements than home-based workers. This might explain the findings revealing that waste picker cooperatives seemed more likely to engage in negotiations with buyers than home-based worker cooperatives. Home-based worker and waste picker cooperatives negotiate with enterprises, as well as NGOs and other cooperatives which act as middlemen, or regular middlemen, and with governments.

Home-based workers negotiate with international and local buyers, while waste pickers engage with scrap dealers, mainly to get fairer prices. Some negotiate through the cooperatives or their affiliated networks (such as Redesol). In Nepal, Kamala Karki – whose cooperative receives support from the Trade Union Congress in Nepal and HomeNet South Asia – stated that, “We negotiated with Pradhan Nag industry, an export firm of woollen products and ensured Rs. 500 per each piece of sweaters. Earlier, it was Rs. 300 when we worked through middlemen (...) it was the success of the cooperative that we could ensure good price and regular income to members through negotiation”.

The results of the survey may suggest that the bargaining power of the cooperatives increases if they negotiate through a network of cooperatives such as Redesol. Nevertheless, this relation is not an automatic one, as even when cooperatives form part of networks, they may still face many difficulties, which push them to make deals with intermediaries rather than directly with the industry. However, their bargaining power seems weaker if the cooperative deals with exporters, subcontractors, wholesalers and middlemen who act as an intermediary with the buyers. Additionally, some cooperatives experience a constraint that significantly reduces their bargaining power when the buyers provide the cooperative with a shed or equipment in exchange for sales loyalty. For instance, “*Associrecycle* shed is provided by the buyer; currently this buyer wants to collect rent on the shed but *Associrecycle* does not have the funds to pay (...) In the negotiations to allow the organization to stay in the space provided, the buyer negotiated to exclusively obtain all of the organization’s production and the production of organizations that are part of the same network of cooperatives under the threat of *Associrecycle* losing the shed if it sells to other buyers”. The confusion of roles in this case, i.e. when the buyer is at the same time a supplier of fixed capital, significantly decreases the leverage of the cooperatives as they become dependent on the buyers not only for sales, but production as well.

Also, in some cases, particularly for home-based worker cooperatives in Thailand, the buyers are NGOs and trade unions and negotiations do not usually occur. In the case of a home-based worker group in Kenya, Malembwa negotiates the prices of its products

with Machakos Cooperative Union that acts as intermediary between the cooperatives and the international buyers.

The general observation is that local buyers, especially amongst home-based worker cooperatives, are private individuals and not enterprises or any other entities. The exceptions in this regard are one home-based worker cooperative in Thailand that is subcontracted by a company, and two home-based worker cooperatives in South Africa whose establishment and sales revolve around Township Patterns social enterprise. Moreover, surveyed home-based worker cooperatives in India sell their products on the local market through the SEWA outlet-marketing store. These same observations cannot be made for waste picker cooperatives as they gave few details of their buyers, beyond stating that they sell recyclable materials, which are most likely sold to enterprises. This is supported by the Informal Economy Monitoring Study which states that over 75 per cent of the surveyed waste pickers in Belo Horizonte, Bogota, Pune, Nakuru and Durban mentioned that they sell their products to formal businesses (Dias & Samson, 2016). However, they do not sell exclusively to them but also to informal businesses, individuals and middlemen.

For cooperatives selling at regional, national and international levels, a common feature is that these sales are made to enterprises and often through intermediaries. These intermediaries can be fair trade organizations or networks (such as the Kenya Federation for Alternative Trade KEFAT or union-linked organizations such as ADS-CUT). In Brazil, the second level cooperative Redesol negotiates with the intermediaries for bulk selling of recyclables from primary cooperatives. One home-based worker cooperative in Brazil and one in Thailand stated that they export to China and Japan. Cooperatives that sell beyond the local level are generally engaged in garment related activities, and sometimes crafts, as in the Kenyan case.

Especially for home-based worker cooperatives, the buyer can be the employer at the same time. However, only a few cooperatives indicated to negotiating with employers. This might be due to not perceiving to have been engaged in any employment relationship, or not knowing who the employer is. The answers show the ways employment relations are blurred in the case of own-account and sub-contracted home-based workers in cooperatives. “We are all self-employed”, said an interviewee from Kenya, refusing to consider the contractor as an employer. Also, two home-based worker cooperatives from India denied any negotiation with employers because “women members are the owners of their cooperatives”. The findings show that workers who lack clear employment relationships tend to confine negotiations with ‘hidden employers’ to bargaining for better piece rate work, without negotiating more broadly their working conditions and benefits.

Government support

Finally, members can enhance their economic benefit by accessing government support channelled through cooperatives. When there is support, tax exemptions were the least common form, while training and technical support were among the most common. This is largely due to the different institutional settings between the countries. In this regard, the case of Brazil presented an exception – the only three cooperatives reporting of receiving tax exemptions were waste picker cooperatives from the country. Moreover, most of the cooperatives receiving technical support from the government are in Brazil. They receive support through national capacity building projects for waste pickers implemented by the government as well as through financial audits. This indicates the role

of institutional arrangements and the presence of an enabling environment in fostering cooperative growth.

Waste picker cooperatives also reported that the provision of space for storage and sorting was a frequent form of support. This was mainly reported by cooperatives in Brazil, Argentina and India. Hasiru Dala waste picker cooperative in India receives storage spaces in the form of “installation of aggregation of low value/no value waste and recyclables and dry Waste Collection Centers”. Similarly, Argentinian waste pickers reported receiving storage space from the government. On the other hand, only one home-based worker cooperative from Argentina, *La Cacerola*, reported that the government had provided them with a venue for 20 years. Other forms of frequent government support are financial and technical.

Economies of scale and access to markets

Through joining or forming cooperatives, home-based workers and waste pickers can achieve significant economies of scale, i.e. lower costs of production and bulk selling. These can take the form of purchasing cheaper inputs, sharing of equipment, and attenuating costs through pooling of resources.

Twelve of the surveyed home-based worker cooperatives stated that they engage in negotiations with suppliers. The negotiations revolve around equipment and sewing materials for orders. Some cooperatives have expressed difficulties in negotiating lower prices for raw materials, especially when the order is not important enough. Negotiations are with small businesses, other cooperatives and wholesalers, as well as with middlemen. Successfully lowering costs of materials often depends on the size of the order, which in turn depends on members having the capacity to obtain and carry out the order. Cooperatives help members cut out the middleman as in the case of the home-based worker cooperative Ngalo in Uganda, whose founder stated that, “The group has been negotiating with ‘middlemen’ on the cost of materials, but now they have managed to buy their materials directly from wholesalers”. When a cooperative is small it is difficult to negotiate for cheaper materials. However, cooperatives constantly try to lower costs, even indirectly. For example, home-based worker cooperatives sometimes negotiate to have materials delivered to them to save on transportation costs. Waste picker cooperatives are more likely to negotiate with suppliers, middlemen and/or manufacturers of products, and some of them negotiate with big generators of waste, i.e. commercial or educational institutions, to have access to recyclables as donations.

Another form of economies of scale is the sharing of equipment that the workers could not acquire by themselves. “We have acquired our own equipment, five sewing machines and an industrial iron that is fully paid” (Women of Worth, South Africa). Due to their precarious conditions, home-based workers face difficulties in acquiring new equipment to expand and upgrade their production. The majority of the surveyed home-based worker cooperatives reported that they provide and/or facilitate sharing of equipment, mainly including sewing and cutting equipment and other related items.

The majority of the surveyed waste picker cooperatives provide and/or share equipment such as collection carts and pressing and baling machines for recyclable materials. Cooperatives also provide protective equipment for waste pickers (such as gloves and masks). Waste pickers need more capital for their activity, requiring collective ownership as the equipment is expensive, for example, as well as trucks to transport waste and

pressing machines. The provision of equipment can be enhanced through government support. A member of the waste picker cooperative Ascampa in Brazil stated that, “The municipality supported us by granting land for 20 years, also some equipment was acquired with the support of a national government foundation project”. Only three waste picker cooperatives reported receiving support in the form of transportation where the government provides a truck to transport collection material. This was limited to Brazil (where it is a common form of grant) and Argentina.

Home-based worker cooperatives can be essential in helping their members to overcome the difficulties they face in selling their products, i.e. assisting them in accessing markets and enhancing their marketing techniques. A manager of the home-based worker cooperative Panmai Group, Thailand stated that, “We have employment and substantial income for women and successfully secured markets for the products, otherwise they would have to migrate to Bangkok”.

The services that home-based worker cooperatives are likely to provide and/or facilitate are often centred around marketing services. These services include collective marketing assistance, sharing information on available spaces to sell products, securing access to fairs, and training on marketing techniques, among others. In South Asia, this kind of assistance is very salient for own-account workers. Cooperatives in India, Nepal and Pakistan assist their members in finding potential buyers, access fairs and stores where they can sell their products.

Waste picker cooperatives are also likely to provide and or/facilitate information sharing. This includes information about door-to-door collection of waste, as well as educational campaigns and engagement with the community. This reveals the efforts of waste picker cooperatives as active members within their communities and outreach elements of their engagement. As a representative from Las Madres Selva waste picker cooperative, in Argentina stated, “We were considerably helped by people from neighbouring apartments who gave us materials, thereby allowing us to keep our families from going under. We have won the affection of everyone, and now these clients are some of the cooperatives’ biggest providers”.

Sources of funding

In order to be able to perform their functions in enhancing economic benefits for waste pickers and home-based workers, and to provide the necessary conditions for economies of scale, cooperatives need sustainable sources of funding. This is not only important to assure the continuity of services, but also to be able to grow and sustain themselves. While most of the surveyed cooperatives reported income from membership dues or contributions, self-sufficiency is still a serious challenge for both home-based worker and waste picker cooperatives as members generally have low earnings that prevent them from significantly contributing to the cooperative funds. There are also difficulties in collecting funds, and even when there are regular contributions, they are generally meagre and often not enough to sustain the cooperative (Mather, 2012). Home-based worker cooperatives declared that one of their main sources of funding is earning from production. Another important source of funding includes loans to the cooperative.

With respect to external actors, the most salient support that home-based workers receive, falls under the categories of: charitable foundations, organizations such as Fondo

de Mujeres del Sur¹¹ in Argentina and HomeNet in Thailand, and private sector and second level cooperatives (for example, the Machakos Cooperative Union in Kenya). As for the waste pickers it is mostly grants by government and charitable foundations. There is limited government financial support for home-based workers.

The most observable form of support to home-based worker cooperatives is through public grants (three cooperatives in Thailand, Uganda and Argentina), or through low interest loans (Argentina). As for waste picker cooperatives, the support is granted for equipment, such as a van (Colombia) and building maintenance. Moreover, COOPERT waste picker cooperative in Brazil declared receiving a “recycling bonus from the state government of Minas Gerais in the form of payment for environmental services, every three months the state government pays cooperatives who managed to prove that they have commercialized recyclables for the benefit they provide to the environment”. It is worth noting that all surveyed primary level cooperatives from Minas Gerais receive a recycling bonus as all cooperatives registered in this bonus system are entitled to be compensated for environmental services they provide. Also, SWaCH in India signed an agreement with Pune Municipal Council (PMC) towards providing door- to- door collection service to the entire city. PMC will bear all the administrative costs of the cooperative and the equipment costs of the members.

Despite these arrangements, financing remains one of the main concerns of the cooperatives surveyed. The irregularity and scarcity of finances poses a serious threat to their achievements.

4.3 Organizing and networking

Voice and recognition

One of the main achievements of cooperatives is the sense of identity, recognition and visibility that they create for members. A significant number of respondents (mostly waste picker cooperatives) emphasized the self- and social recognition that comes from having a common worker identity. In the discourse of the waste pickers, expressions such as confidence, dignity and value of their work are used frequently. As expressed by the president of Recycling Workers Association, a Turkish waste picker cooperative, they are “bringing visibility to an area of work that is invisible. Fighting for our right to being recognized as workers and what we do to be valued as work with environmental, social as well as economic value”. Where waste pickers tend to emphasize the defence of recycling activities when consolidating their collective identity, home-based workers, (who are predominantly women undertaking a ‘feminized’ type of work), are more inclined to stress the gender aspect of their labour identity. “Being a woman” is sometimes one of the criteria for membership for home-based worker cooperatives, which might accompany “being poor”, “from the slum area” and/or “with children”.

A sense of pride in the gender aspect of their labour identity is also reflected in their perceived achievements: “Income and savings have grown (...) confidence has increased among all group members, but there is a marked improvement among the women who are keen to take up leadership roles in the group and in the wider community. We have realised our rights as women to own property”, said the founder of Ngalo, a home-based

¹¹ Organizations that aim to mobilize financial and technical resources in support of women's initiatives which aim to advance gender equality as the path for social change.

worker cooperative from Uganda. These achievements highlighted by both home-based workers and waste pickers correspond to the findings from the literature on the importance of combining the politics of recognition and self- and social recognition of a worker identity with redistribution in order to build voice and representation among vulnerable workers in the informal economy (Kabeer et al, 2013).

The mobilization strategies adopted by different cooperatives often emerge from the workers' perceived realities and challenges. As workers in the informal economy join cooperatives to economically sustain themselves, as they start to recognize the value of their work and become empowered, as they build relations of trust and consolidate their collective identity, they tend to politicize their struggle and start to influence policies and legislation. The findings of the survey show that home-based worker cooperatives seem to be more inclined to adopt 'softer' strategies compared to waste pickers, as they are often isolated in their homes, work individually, and face more constraints in terms of mobility. For instance, a member of Odemis, a home-based worker cooperative in Turkey, noted their "efforts to stay away from politics" and to focus instead on "conferences and workshops". This kind of fear of politics clearly contrasts, for example, with the discourse of an Argentinian waste picker cooperative '*Cartoneros de Villa Itati*': "It should be understood that cooperatives are an alternative and valid solution in tackling social problems (...) and to address the problems of savage capitalism. We need to be recognized and valued at the public and political levels".

However, the discourse of cooperative members and their strategies are intimately connected to each context. While many of the waste picker cooperatives in Latin America, such as in Brazil and Colombia, engage in direct political actions to negotiate and adjust public policies, cooperatives in other countries where they may be more fragmented and smaller in size, do not engage in advocacy and negotiations and avoid confrontational actions. In this respect, a Brazilian waste picker from Ascampa, explained their fear from the repressive policies and measures towards waste pickers: "there is some political work, but it is weak. The waste pickers in Tocantins are concerned about being persecuted by the authorities of the state and the city". When they succeed in consolidating their organizations and building networks, home-based workers were able to engage more confidently in policy and advocacy work related to political, economic and social issues affecting their members. For instance, home-based workers from Thailand, such as Garment and Leatherware Producers, Panmai Group and Solidarity Group cooperatives, were all able to engage in policy advocacy to improve their working conditions and demand social security for those working informally. In fact, these cooperatives are members of wider networks: the Informal Workers' Network and HomeNet Thailand. Therefore, the contextual experiences of cooperatives and their ability to consolidate their collective identity and internal organization seem significant in enabling workers in the informal economy to boost their bargaining power.

Alliances and affiliations

There are growing efforts for networking with other cooperatives, trade unions and social movements at the local, regional and national levels. Yet, these efforts are uneven across labour categories and countries. Among the cooperatives in the survey, waste picker cooperatives appeared to be more engaged in alliances and affiliations than home-based worker cooperatives, although in South and South East Asia all surveyed cooperatives were affiliated directly or through a 'parent' organization to a regional HomeNet. These

tend to take place either through local or national federations or alliances, such as the National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials in Brazil (MNCR), or through a dual union-cooperative organizational structure such as that of SEWA or the trade union of waste pickers KKKPKP, and its related cooperative, SWaCH cooperative in India. Also, the Latin American Network of Waste Pickers (RedLacre) functions as a regional social movement based alliance that relies for the most part financially and administratively on NGOs. While less formally structured than its Latin-American counterparts, the Alliance of Indian Waste pickers (AIW) in India is also made up of both NGOs and MBOs (Bonner and Carré, 2013).

Waste picker cooperatives appear to have wider affiliations, especially on the regional and national levels and even at the international level (the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers¹²). Latin America is considered the “fastest growing” region in terms of alliances and affiliations of waste pickers, with the prominent role of the Association of Recicladores of Bogotá (ARB) in Colombia and the MNCR in Brazil (Fonteneau et al., 2010). This could be due to higher level of engagement in advocacy amongst waste pickers, and their quest for inclusion in the waste management systems at various levels.

For both groups of cooperatives surveyed, alliances are mostly with other cooperatives and organizations in the same sector and which they are allied with, especially for waste pickers. In some cases more varied alliances are noted: home-based worker cooperatives in Argentina are in alliance and receive support from the recovered factories operated by workers; Maesol Buffet e Comércio de Alimentos, a home-based worker cooperative in Brazil receives support from Paulista Network of Cooperatives (Sao Paulo State network of cooperatives) and another two cooperative networks, Coopermundi (education and capacity-building) and Coopernatuz (waste pickers); the Garment and Leatherware Producers Cooperative, a home-based worker cooperative in Thailand, receives support from the State Railway Workers’ Union Saving and Credit Cooperative of Thailand Limited.

Alliances with trade unions are less common. These are limited to home-based workers in Argentina who are affiliated with the national workers federation Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) and La Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP). In Brazil, a number of waste picker cooperatives receive assistance from the Metal Workers’ Union and occasional support from some unions in Porto Alegre. In India, SEWA is a combination of three movements: trade union, cooperative, and women’s movements (Jhabvala & Tate, 1996). Hence, under the SEWA trade union are a variety of cooperatives that provide services from finance to child care and access to social services protection. The subsectors of workers are also organized into their own cooperatives as waste pickers and street vendors, among others. In Nepal, home-based workers cooperate with the Trade Union Congress on the campaign for ratification of ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) and also receive skills training for weavers and wool makers from them.

Cooperatives could be considered as complementing trade unions to strengthen their support for workers in the informal economy (the case of SEWA is typical in this regard). Workers have mainly formed cooperatives as the latter respond to their specific livelihood needs in the informal economy (Gadgil & Samson, 2017). However, trade unions tend to neglect informal and more vulnerable workers (Mather, 2012). As a result, workers in the

¹² The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers is an informal networking process that brings together waste picker organizations – cooperatives, unions, associations, and networks – from countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Bonner & Carré, 2013).

informal economy often organize themselves independently of trade unions around basic needs. In addition, many workers, particularly those working in the informal economy, consider them to be too male-dominated and bureaucratic (Kabeer et al., 2013).

Alliances with other social movements appear to echo the contextual specificities of each country. Noticeable linkages exist with Movimiento Evita and the Catholic Church in Argentina, activists and academics for waste pickers and women movement for home-based workers in Turkey, solidarity economy movements Movimento Nacional da Economia Solidária and black social movements in Brazil, fair trade movement in Kenya and the heritage movement in India, among others.

For both waste pickers and home-based workers, the relationship with NGOs primarily revolves around skills, capacity building, and legal and technical assistance. For example, Nenuca Institute for Sustainable Development (INSEA) in Brazil provides legal and technical support for waste picker cooperatives. It assists them in building capacities in terms of accounting, administration, and managing financial resources among other skills. NGOs also support cooperatives of both home-based workers and waste pickers in terms of advocacy and organizing in Brazil, Argentina, Thailand and South Africa. For instance, Cooperativa de Trabajo La Cacer is a home-based worker cooperative in Argentina that collaborates with the Asociación Lola Mora on women's rights; SIYACOCA, a waste picker cooperative in South Africa, receives training in political organizing from the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG).

Also, some NGOs directly support the activities of the cooperatives, especially for waste pickers where they provide recyclable materials (as in the NGO called “donate your waste” in Brazil), or financial support. However, two waste picker cooperatives in Brazil reported that they had negative experiences with NGOs. The NGOs that supported them tended to take over the management of the cooperatives, thus undermining the role of their members and democratic decision-making processes. A respondent from the Cooperativa de Catadores Profissionais do Recife Pró-Recife, Brazil noted “The NGO technicians did all the administrative work, and these technicians did not train the waste pickers to manage the cooperative themselves”. As discussed above, the vulnerability of waste pickers and home-based workers, as well as the social discrimination and oppression they experience, makes the support of external actors, such as NGOs, sometimes necessary. However, as mentioned by the two cooperatives, it could render them dependent financially and technically, which might also undermine their independence and decision-making mechanisms.

Negotiations with the state for improved conditions

The survey results reveal that waste pickers are more likely than home-based workers to engage in negotiations with their respective governments at local and national levels. This may be due to the need to engage with local authorities to get concessions regarding their inclusion in the municipal waste management systems and payment for services, as well as their older and stronger organizations with long history of bargaining with governments. This was echoed in the details that were given by a number of respondents as they expressed that registration gives them more visibility and voice, and hence access to the negotiation process.

Priority issues for negotiation, advocacy and policy work in both sectors include first access to health services and pension schemes, followed by improving working conditions

and incomes. Addressing gender inequalities and gender-based violence, housing, legal protection and provision of storage space and local market places are also important issues. The cooperatives advocate for these demands through lobbying with local and national governments, public forums and city council meeting protests, and direct actions and occupations as well as through direct negotiations. These efforts could not be isolated from their political and social contexts as the majority of these actions are taking place in Brazil as part of the national movement of waste pickers, but also in Thailand (HomeNet) and India (SWaCH).

Cooperatives in both sectors negotiate with *national government* albeit to some extent on different issues. For waste pickers most negotiations at this level are done collectively by networks of cooperatives such as the MNCR in Brazil. In addition to their main demands related to social security, access to work space and markets, and legal recognition and protection, cooperatives negotiate with governments on being represented in the solid waste management systems in order to defend their recycling activities. In Brazil and Argentina, some have expressed their concerns that public policies currently in favour of cooperatives may be reversed in case of political change in the presidency and government. For these cooperatives, the main struggle is to maintain and enforce the favourable public policies. Home-based workers mainly negotiate on issues involving application of existing laws, inclusion of informal economy workers in social security and access to training and resources.

At the *regional government level*, waste picker cooperatives mainly engage in negotiations related to recycling and collecting waste. The key issues for negotiation revolve around inclusion in the waste management systems and/or negotiating the ‘recycling bonus’ (*bolso reciclagem*). The latter is a feature of a particular state in Brazil – Minas Gerais – and the ‘recycling bonus’ is a public policy that secures funds for environmental services provided by collectors and is paid according to the quantity of material sold. Thus, a number of surveyed cooperatives from Brazil demanded its implementation in their respective states. In addition, two waste picker cooperatives in Brazil negotiate their issues at the Regional Solidarity Economy Forum of the city of Osasco and West Sao Paulo metropolitan region, which is a regional network with city government officials and cooperatives.

Whereas these issues are also addressed in the negotiations at the *local government level*, more functional and practical issues are often salient locally. These include access to collection and sorting spaces, and provision of better infrastructure and contracts from local authorities to collect waste. Specifically, many cooperatives (mainly from Brazil) negotiate with municipalities to provide sheds, which include the rent, water and light costs and to process the recyclable materials as part of the municipal waste policy. Other demands of waste pickers include the expansion of existing selective collection in the municipality along with contracting collector organizations in Brazil; their inclusion in the Waste Management systems and for Social Security schemes in Brazil; and the defence of recycling activities in Colombia. Similarly, the demands of home-based worker cooperatives at the local government level revolve around practical issues such as setting up minimum piece rates, accessing markets, participating in exhibitions, access to training, and provision of loans to buy equipment.

Negotiations with the state for social benefits

While a number of cooperatives do receive support for social security from their respective governments, the acquired social benefits are essentially related to the countries’

different contexts. Amongst all cooperatives, only three Brazilian waste picker cooperatives stated that they receive housing support from their government. However, the survey findings do not always provide details on whether these social gains were the outcomes of cooperatives' increased bargaining power or were implemented by pro-labour governments, or if these factors were interrelated.

The Brazilian example seems typical in this regard where the governments of Presidents Lula and Dilma Rousseff promoted a social agenda that integrates non-contributory social protection policies for the poor vulnerable population. In addition to the Unified National Health System, these governments built a unified system of social assistance in 2005 (Paes-Sousa et al., 2011). Hence, workers' cooperatives negotiated with the Reference Centre for Social Assistance (Centro de Referência de Assistência Social – CRAS) to support their members. The president of Cooperideal, a Brazilian waste picker cooperative, said that the CRAS built a centre in the region of the dump where the cooperative is located, especially for the waste pickers. With regards to housing, three waste picker cooperatives in Brazil have priority in obtaining government housing through the national government housing programme *Minha casa minha vida* (My House, My Life)¹³, which is a special registry for access to popular houses.

In Colombia's system of universal health insurance, people participate in one of two regimes depending on income: the Contributory Regime (CR), which covers workers and their families with monthly incomes above a minimum monthly amount, and the Subsidized Regime (SR), which covers those identified as being poor (Uribe, 2009). Thus, cooperatives of informal economy workers in Colombia are included in the SR if they are identified as poor. In Argentina, home-based worker cooperatives benefit from the Simplified Scheme for Small Contributors known as *Monotributo* (single tax), which is a national system designated for 'independent workers' (Bertranou, 2007). They also have their own Health Service from CTEP, which is a workers' confederation that has successfully gained access to simple tax payment contributions and social security, and runs a health clinic in Buenos Aires. In Thailand, representatives of Informal Workers Network and HomeNet Thailand Association negotiated with the Social Security Office to obtain better social security for informal economy workers. The situation is quite different in Kenya where cooperatives do not really negotiate with social security agencies, but members can individually register for the National Insurance Hospital Fund by paying US\$5/per month. Finally, waste pickers' respondents from India stated that they benefit from *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna*¹⁴ which provides health insurance coverage for families below poverty line.

Very few cooperatives provide or facilitate housing for their members. A few surveyed home-based worker cooperatives provided or facilitated housing by allowing their members to sleep in the collective workspace or by providing them rented houses. For waste pickers in Brazil, for instance, housing support takes place in the form of helping their members register at the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* Programme or by advocating for housing through an association. In Thailand and Pakistan, home-based worker cooperatives rented a building as shared workspace and housing, where each member has their own room with shared kitchen and toilets. According to one of leaders of Jazba Group

¹³ Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV; My House My Life), a federal programme started in 2009 to fund housing for Brazil's poor and middle classes: Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21571893-scheme-promote-working-class-home-ownership-good-start-if-you-build-it>.

¹⁴ <https://india.gov.in/spotlight/rashtriya-swasthya-bima-yojana#rsby1>.

a home-based worker cooperative from Pakistan: “We provide rented house for our members in order to be in the same geographical area, so that it helps us in continuing the work and support our livelihood”. Finally, only two cooperatives reported helping improve the housing conditions of members through facilitating the provision of water and sanitation. Hence, the provision/facilitation of social benefits is often context-specific. In contrast to Brazil where waste picker cooperatives sometimes facilitate housing through governmental social housing schemes, in Thailand and Pakistan, home-based workers seem to have adopted mutual support solutions, through the provision of shared work space and housing.

As discussed above, although building alliances and affiliations was crucial in enabling workers in the informal economy to engage in negotiations with governments locally, regionally and nationally, it seems difficult to dissociate the social protection policies from the wider political context. These social gains were largely connected to wider labour and social struggles, particularly those of the waste picker movements in Brazil and Colombia, and to the governments in power favouring more distributive social protection policies. The surveys’ findings show that social struggles and progressive governmental policies often, but not always are in a dynamic interplay with each other.

4.4 Main challenges

Economic and market-related challenges

Although half of all the respondents considered that their organizations ensure income for their members, a similar number confirmed that their organizations are not economically sustainable and are unable to secure regular jobs and decent incomes for their members. There is no significant overlap between these responses, which could mean that cooperative members share different experiences or perceptions of their achievements and challenges. It is challenging to determine the principle factors underpinning this dichotomy, particularly because both responses are cross-sectoral and cross-context. But even members who are guaranteed a stable income through their cooperatives often experience decent work deficits and hazardous working conditions. As a staff member of the Brazilian COMARP waste picker cooperative, expressed: “We do not get a vacation; we work long hours, since our earnings depend on individual production capacity. This compromises our health and quality of life. We do not get medical check-ups and do not take breaks to rest”.

These economic challenges are mainly related to the difficulty in accumulating and achieving economies of scale. Indeed, a number of respondents highlighted their inability to secure their own venue/shed, pay their bills (electricity and water) and reduce their members’ insecurity and precariousness. The limited infrastructure sometimes impeded their capacity to expand their membership. As expressed by a board member of the Brazilian COOPERVESP waste picker cooperative: “the main challenge is to recruit more people into the organization. Limited physical space does not allow more people to work in the shed. There is a waiting list of those interested in joining the organization”.

Limitations around infrastructure are often correlated with limited bargaining power. Home-based worker cooperatives in Kenya and Thailand stated that they are experiencing difficulties in negotiating with suppliers and buyers to get raw materials for better prices in order to access and compete in markets. As a member of the Brazilian home-based worker Cooperative de Costura de Osacoputs noted “economically speaking, we

are not competitive. We have knowledge, space and competence, but we cannot access better markets. We do not have surplus in order to reinvest in increasing our production scale in equipment”. Some cooperatives resort to outsourcing services because they are not able to purchase basic equipment. They cannot secure “satisfactory income” for their members when they are not able to improve their infrastructure, increase their production capacity and make better agreements with the buyers (waste pickers) or compete in markets (home-based workers).

However, this challenge is not only related to limitations in economic and financial capacities. Competition with private companies is also a challenge and is sometimes exacerbated by government policies. Waste pickers from India and Argentina criticized the privatization of waste collection through contractors and companies, which reduces their livelihood opportunities and incomes. Even when waste management is open for bidding, waste picker cooperatives are not able to compete with waste companies in the absence of government support. This challenge is similar for home-based worker cooperatives whose products have to compete with larger companies selling at lower prices. Thai home-based worker respondents complained about free trade agreements that facilitate flows of cheaper products from Chinese enterprises. Hence, accessing markets is a common concern among waste pickers and home-based workers alike. Waste picker cooperatives suffer from middlemen who control the recycling markets. Home-based worker cooperatives are also experiencing difficulties in accessing markets nationally and internationally, especially in the light of fierce competition.

Policy-related challenges

The challenges faced by cooperatives in both sectors are exacerbated by the absence of government support in the form of policies and regulations that would ease their access to government tenders and bids. As a member of Garment and Leatherware Producers’ home-based worker cooperative explains, “When bidding for work orders from government agencies, it is virtually impossible for small cooperatives to win over large factories which can offer cheaper price units”. There are often no public procurement policies in place to provide cooperatives with quotas.

A major challenge at the policy level as identified by cooperatives in both sectors is the non-enforcement of laws and agreements. A number of cooperatives confirmed that the laws they had negotiated with governments were not implemented. “Although we participate in public bargaining channels, we understand that few advances have taken place to improve our working conditions. And even when we decide some issues in these spaces, there is no clear definition how, where or by whom a resolution will take place”, said a member of the Brazilian home-based worker Cooperative de Costura de Osaco.

Other challenges are attributed to limited government support and absence of legal identity and recognition. The latter is particularly relevant for home-based workers who pointed out that they are not legally recognized as workers, so they cannot receive support from governments. According to the respondents in Nepal, the cooperative sector is not regulated. A member of Nepali home-based worker cooperative Grihasramik Mahila Sitmulak Sahakari Sangh, stated, “The cooperative sector needs to be regulated. We invested our money in a big cooperative and they misappropriated our funds. There is no legal mechanism to curb this fraud”. Home-based workers are generally unable to expand and improve their activities without external support.

Waste picker cooperatives in Brazil suffer from curtailment of selective collection in the municipalities, as well as taxation on the sale of recyclable materials, which “makes the costs of operating cooperatives very high”. Thus, they demand the government to include them in the selective collection and to provide related industries with tax incentives for direct sales with the waste picker cooperatives, as they fulfil a social and political development function for their members beyond generating livelihoods. As pointed out, the provision of financial assistance is critical for the economic sustainability of vulnerable workers, since they often lack regular income and social benefits.

Finally, the responses of cooperative members reflect their awareness of the political dimension of improving their working and living conditions. In Argentina, home-based workers share a similar concern in maintaining the governmental support for informal economy workers cooperatives despite recent government change.¹⁵ Whereas respondents from Colombia and South Africa stressed the political corruption which affects their work and livelihoods, respondents from Nepal criticized the policy of neglect of home-based workers: “Home-based workers are not a key policy priority area. So we feel marginalized and our demands are not met”.

Internal challenges

“There is no perspective for the future, and we do not know what to expect, and this brings about many internal conflicts”. The words of a Brazilian waste picker from *Associrecycle* capture the ways in which structural problems interplay with inter-personal ones. The above-mentioned market and policy-related challenges are often aggravated by internal difficulties. In this regard, many respondents attributed internal difficulties to lack of governance, lack of a coherent vision among workers, absence of strategic planning, lack of technical and political capacity building, blurred division of work and tasks, and “no fixed dates for monthly meetings and no written record of meetings”, among other problems. Furthermore, home-based worker respondents from Nepal highlighted the issue of gender empowerment, stressing the difficulty of “building leadership and managerial skills amongst women as they are not willing to go forward and participate in elections”.

Furthermore, recruitment of new members, high turnover and the low sense of ownership and commitment amongst members constitute major internal difficulties. For instance, the chairperson of SIYACOCA, a South African waste picker cooperative, said that a lot of members have left when they got “better jobs or other opportunities towards formal employment”. This further indicates the importance of ensuring decent terms and working conditions for waste pickers so they do not consider their work as transitional. Additionally, respondents pointed out the absence of equal participation between members, which contradicts cooperative values and principles. This has sometimes generated credibility issues between members and cooperative leaders, which can be overcome by increasing awareness of cooperative governance.

¹⁵ Their fear appears legitimate with the victory of president-elect Mauricio Macri, which was considered “a tectonic rightward shift” (Watts & Goni, 2015) that would change Argentina’s political landscape and might affect the policies in favour of cooperatives of his leftist predecessor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Key Findings and Suggestions

5.1 General findings

Legal status

Although most of the cooperatives participating in the survey are legally registered, they experienced many difficulties in the registration process, such as bureaucratic obstacles, lack of information and financial costs.

Many reasons for registering were common to both waste picker and home-based worker cooperatives. However, home-based worker cooperatives cited financial reasons as the most important reason for registering, whereas for waste picker cooperatives accessing social benefits, including social protection, and improved bargaining power were most commonly cited. For waste pickers registration was seen as a way to defend their sector and activities.

Measures can be taken to facilitate registration through minimal documentation and lowering financial costs. Information on registration can be made available and accessible, with authorities being proactive. Incentives to encourage registration could be provided by governments at different levels and the private sector in the form of technical support, financing or joint projects, and wider networks, trade unions and NGOs could provide more support.

Activities and functions

The key functions and activities of the waste picker cooperatives are the collection, sorting and recycling of waste. These three activities are always interrelated reflecting the environmental implication of their work. Some cooperatives in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and India are already integrated into formal municipal solid waste management systems.

Integration of waste pickers into municipal solid waste management systems can be extended, in close collaboration and consultation with their representative organizations.

The achievements to date can provide the basis for solidarity support and sharing of knowledge and experience amongst waste picker groups across the regions. Governments, waste picker organizations and other stakeholders can also capitalize on the environmental role that waste pickers aim to play through engaging with them in environmental awareness campaigns.

The economic activities of home-based workers are much more diverse. A majority of the surveyed cooperatives work in garment production, clothing and craftwork, with others specializing in food, catering and farming. Home-based workers often combine subcontracting and own-account work, usually engaging in own-account work when they are not sub-contracted by firms or when they have completed the sub-contracted orders. The most common relationship is one that is directly between the worker and the buyer. Agreements are generally occasional and informal. Even where they are subcontracted by allied organizations, such as other cooperatives, trade unions or other NGOs, home-based worker cooperatives often have informal subcontracting agreements.

Organizations and enterprises working with home-based workers can collaborate to formalize work arrangements with home-based workers and not contribute to their informality. Governments can establish and implement mechanisms to formalize contracts for home-based workers, provide legal protection, supportive practical measures and policies including their inclusion in social protection schemes.

5.2 Economic viability and sustainability

Economic benefits

The majority of cooperative members earn their living through selling directly their products or the recyclables they collect. The main role of cooperatives therefore is to facilitate the earnings of their members by supporting them to access markets and providing them with the concrete space to carry out their activities, without acting as a fully-fledged enterprise paying wages. They also provide members with trainings and skills upgrading appropriate to the characteristics of each sector. Home-based worker cooperatives focus on developing the skills of their members in order to have better products and secure access to markets whilst the trainings of waste pickers mainly respond to the legal challenges they face. Training and support on accounting and business plans is common to both. There is a lack of training on occupational health and safety, although an important issue for both groups. Organizing and negotiating skills trainings are also not very common amongst the sample.

Whilst cooperatives themselves may not be able to provide all the required training to their members, networks, cooperative support organizations, unions and NGOs can all play a meaningful role. Governments can facilitate the provision of training on occupational health and safety, as well as employment insurance. Mitigating work-related injuries and health hazards would enhance the productivity of home-based workers and waste pickers, and reduce their health care costs.

The support of larger organizations and networks, including cooperative federations and other cooperative support organizations, can significantly increase the negotiation power

of cooperatives. The surveys show that the bargaining power of cooperatives increases if they negotiate through participating in cooperative networks, such as Redesol in Brazil, and it decreases if the cooperative deals directly with exporters, subcontractors, wholesalers and middlemen who act as an intermediary with the buyers. Home-based workers negotiate with international and local buyers, and waste pickers with scrap dealers, mainly to get fairer prices. Both negotiate with governments nationally and locally.

Finally, most cooperatives do not receive government support in terms of tax exemption or relief, despite the social, economic and political empowerment roles they fulfil, whereas training and technical support is more common.

It is important for cooperatives to affiliate with and form secondary-level cooperative federations. These, together with unions, NGOs and other support organizations and networks can play a role in providing support for negotiations with buyers to obtain a better price and to increase access to credit.

Governments are encouraged to consider measures such as special procurement provisions and quotas with waste picker and home-based worker cooperatives. This would mean giving the cooperatives priority in bids and granting contracts for home-based worker cooperatives to supply public institutions at fair prices. Provision of tax benefits for cooperatives would be important.

Economies of Scale and Access to Markets

Home-based workers and waste pickers can achieve significant economies of scale, i.e. lower costs of production, through joining or forming cooperatives. These can be in the form of buying cheaper inputs, sharing equipment, and attenuating costs through pooling of resources and joint selling of production, e.g. bulk recyclables.

Home-based worker cooperatives negotiate with their suppliers, for example for equipment and sewing materials; lowering costs of materials often depends on the size of the order, and thus the importance of membership size and orders that the cooperative receives. Waste picker cooperatives mainly negotiate with suppliers, middlemen and manufacturers of products. In Brazil, Colombia and Argentina, they also negotiate with big generators of waste to receive recyclables as donations.

Another form of economies of scale is the sharing of equipment that workers in the informal economy could not acquire by themselves. A majority of the home-based worker cooperatives provide and/or facilitate sharing sewing and cutting equipment and other related items whilst most of the waste pickers' cooperatives provide and/or share working space, collection carts, pressing and baling machines.

Governments, especially local governments, can contribute to decreasing costs through facilitating the provision of storage space, shared workspace and other facilities. For home-based workers shared workspace can also be used as a store where they can sell products.

Sources of funding

Cooperatives of the workers in the informal economy need sustainable sources of funding to be able to provide the necessary conditions for economies of scale, to assure

continuity of service and to be able to grow and sustain themselves. Although a majority of the cooperatives report that members pay dues or make contributions, these funds are generally insufficient as members usually have low earnings which prevent them from contributing significantly. This renders the support of external actors necessary in many cases. However, it risks making the cooperatives dependent on such external actors, compromising independent governance and decision-making.

Access to financial services and support by governments, cooperative networks and other support organizations are important in providing the cooperatives with the opportunity to accumulate and expand. This could be through direct grants, development of joint projects, provision of equipment and facilitating access to credit through easy financing, reduced interest rates and longer repayment periods.

5.3 Organizing and networking

Visibility, voice and bargaining power

One of the main achievements of cooperatives is the empowerment of members and their social visibility. Home-based workers and waste pickers experience marginalization, stigma and/or isolation in their work and livelihoods. Self and social recognition of their worker identity is a pre-requisite toward building collective voice and self-representation and in order to engage in negotiations with employers, suppliers, buyers or middlemen.

The mobilization strategies adopted by different cooperatives often emerge from workers' perceived realities and challenges. As they join cooperatives to economically sustain themselves, as they start to recognize their work as a meaningful economic activity, as they build relations of trust and consolidate their collective identity, they also politicize their struggle and begin to influence policies and legislations. Home-based worker cooperatives appear to be more inclined to adopt 'softer' mobilization strategies than waste pickers, as they are often isolated in their homes, work individually, lack clear employment relationships and face more constraints in terms of mobility. Blurred employment relationships often constrain their ability to bargain, for example when the buyer is also the employer.

Waste picker cooperatives seem to engage more than home-based worker cooperatives in negotiations with governments. This is probably due to their stronger associational power and their need to negotiate with local authorities on inclusion in waste management systems. Key issues for negotiation, advocacy and policy work in both sectors include firstly access to health services and pension schemes, followed by improving working conditions and income. Addressing gender inequalities and gender-based violence, housing, legal protection and provision of storage space and local market places are also important issues. They advocate for these demands through lobbying with local and national governments, public forums and city council meetings protests, and direct actions and occupations as well as direct negotiations.

There are growing organizing efforts within both sectors, as well as networking with other cooperatives, trade unions and social movements at the local, regional and national levels. These efforts are uneven across labour categories and countries. From the interviews conducted for this report, it appears that waste picker cooperatives are more

engaged in alliances and affiliations than home-based worker cooperatives, although in South and South East Asia home-based worker cooperatives were affiliated directly or through a “parent” organization to a regional HomeNet. This might be due to higher level of engagement in advocacy amongst waste pickers, and their quest for inclusion in the waste management systems. But it also reflects the contextual specificities as the majority of these alliances and affiliations took place in Latin American countries.

Although alliances with trade unions are low and limited to certain contexts, such as Argentina, Brazil, India and Nepal, those alliances are often associated with more negotiations with government within both sectors. This further confirms that cooperation between cooperatives, their representative organizations and trade unions can contribute to strengthening the bargaining power of workers in the informal economy, as well as providing mutual support.

There is a need to conduct more contextual, action research to improve the understanding on the complex labour realities within the two sectors. Allies such as unions, cooperative support organizations, international organizations, NGOs and academics and activists, can be encouraged to support and facilitate the expansion of networks and alliances. They could act as external catalysts through discussions and trainings on organizing, bargaining and networking, based on the workers’ own priorities and concerns.

Negotiation for social benefits

Whilst a number of cooperatives get support for social security and housing from their governments, the acquired social benefits are essentially related to the country-specific contexts. Although building alliances and affiliations is crucial in enabling workers in the informal economy to engage in negotiations with governments, it seems difficult to dissociate the social protection policies from the wider political context. These social gains were largely connected to wider labour and social struggles, particularly waste pickers’ movements in Brazil and Colombia, and to governments in power favouring more distributive social protection policies.

Allies could better support strengthening of organizations and networks, and provide relevant technical support on social protection and on negotiating skills for these cooperatives. They could advocate for improved working conditions and social protection regulations at national, regional and global levels.

5.4 Main challenges

Economic and Market-Related Challenges

Those interviewed for the report were divided on whether their cooperatives are economically sustainable and able to secure regular work and decent incomes for their members. Their responses cut across sectors and countries. However, even when cooperative members are able to secure a stable income they often still experience decent work deficits and hazardous working conditions.

Economic challenges are mainly related to the difficulty in accumulating and achieving economies of scale. Many respondents emphasized their inability to acquire their own

venue/shed, pay their bills and reduce their members' insecurity and precariousness. Their weak infrastructure is often associated with their weak bargaining power. When these cooperatives are not able to improve their infrastructure and increase their production capacity, they cannot make better agreements with their buyers and/or compete in the market. In these cases, they are eventually incapable of securing 'satisfactory income' for their members.

However, this challenge is not only related to limited economic and financial capacities. In addition to these many waste pickers are negatively affected by the privatization of waste collection through contractors and companies, thus reducing their livelihood opportunities and incomes. Even when waste management is open for bidding, waste picker cooperatives are not able to compete with larger and more established waste companies in the absence of governmental support. This challenge is quite similar for home-based worker cooperatives whose products have to compete with larger companies selling at lower prices. Both sectors have challenges in accessing markets and in dealing with middlemen.

Public policies and regulations favouring access by cooperatives to government tenders and bids are needed to circumvent the dominant roles of private companies and middlemen.

Policy-Related challenges

At the policy level the sectors share similar challenges. For waste pickers the major challenge identified is the lack of enforcement of laws and agreements regarding waste management plans; and for home-based workers weak government support and absence of legal recognition and regulations. In addition, home-based worker cooperatives in Argentina shared a similar concern: maintaining the governmental support for their cooperatives with recent government changes. They pointed out the ways the presidential elections could directly affect their working and living conditions.

Support of national and international allies would be important in assisting with policy change. Support could take the forms of documenting and advocating against the absence of regulations, lack of implementation, and for regulations in favour of cooperatives.

Internal challenges

Market and policy-related challenges are often aggravated by internal challenges. The latter are mainly attributed to weak structure, internal tensions, lack of a common coherent vision, absence of strategic planning, lack of technical and political capacity building, blurred division of work, and having "no fixed dates for monthly meetings and no written record of meetings", amongst others. Some respondents emphasized the difficulties of recruiting new members, the high turnover, and the low sense of ownership and commitment amongst members. Unequal participation between members was also raised, which challenges cooperative values and could generate credibility issues between members and leaders.

5.5 Recommendations by respondents for international organizations supporting cooperatives

- Provide technical support such as capacity building on cooperative management, self-development and skills upgrading, marketing, cooperative legislation, social benefits, accessing financial support, and gender empowerment.
- Help improve economic sustainability through financial support to secure equipment and basic infrastructure.
- Advocate for a better policy and regulatory environment for cooperatives. For waste pickers put pressure on governments that are favouring private companies for collection and recycling.
- Facilitate networking amongst cooperatives, and between cooperatives and trade unions, as well as helping to improve their bargaining and negotiation skills.

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WIEGO Secretariat
Harvard Kennedy School,
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

WIEGO Limited
521 Royal Exchange
Manchester, M2 7EN,
United Kingdom

www.wiego.org



Cooperatives Unit
Enterprises Department
International Labour Office (ILO)
4, route des Morillons
1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland
tel : +41 22 799 7095

www.ilo.org/coop
coop@ilo.org

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