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Combining our Efforts – from Ahmedabad (2003) to Accra (2006)

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on behalf of the

International Co-ordinating Committee (ICC)
on organizing workers on the informal economy

Background

From 3 – 6 December 2003 a conference was convened in Ahmedabad, India by an international organizing committee comprising the following organizations:

HomeNet Thailand

Nigeria Labour Congress

SEWA India

StreetNet International

Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana

The purpose was to convene an international conference of as many membership-based organizations (unions, co-operatives, associations, alliances or networks) as possible who are already practitioners organizing workers in the informal economy, with the following objectives:

- to share experiences between organizational practitioners, and identify the issues affecting informal workers;
- to develop strategies to intensify organization in the informal economy;
- to identify existing and new partnerships and alliances;
- to identify processes of representation at international forums (e.g. ILO, WTO, etc.)
- to discuss future co-ordination between organizations of workers in the informal economy, and develop mechanisms for such co-ordination.

60 participants from over 36 organisations, mainly from membership-based organisations (both mainstream trade unions and specifically informal economy organisations) gathered together to discuss their work and strategise on ways of promoting the organisation and more effective representation of workers in the informal economy world-wide.

The following way forward was developed:

- It was decided to participate in the ILO International Labour Conference 2004 in the Committee on Migrant Workers in order that there should be representation on the issues facing informal migrant workers such as cross-border traders. It was decided also to arrange a follow-up meeting of the representatives of the Ahmedabad conference in Geneva during June 2004;

- It was agreed to continue to work with ILO at country level, and lobby ILO to directly support the unions and organizations of workers in the informal economy in countries like Hong Kong and S. Korea;
- It was decided to document successful collective bargaining efforts from different parts of the world and disseminate this information – and also to document new labour laws of different countries being developed to take into account workers in the informal economy, and methods of capacity building;
- It was agreed to take up the Conclusions on Decent Work and the Informal Economy adopted at the 90th session of the ILC 2002 and interact with the ILO on follow-up action.
- It was noted that other UN documents make no mention of workers – only talk of the ‘poor’ without recognition of their status as workers – therefore it was decided to campaign internationally on
 - a. the poor as workers
 - b. informal workers as workers
- It was agreed to build a database of organizations in the informal economy, with a focus on unrepresented sectors;
- It was agreed to ask WIEGO (the international research coalition “Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising”) to take on the following role:
 - o Document and disseminate labour and other laws and policies (and legal and policy reforms) directly concerning informal workers;
 - o Social Protection – documenting what works and perhaps promoting micro-insurance consultation;
 - o Statistical services.
- It was agreed on the need to create awareness among those working with the poor about their status as workers.
- Where possible it was agreed that exchange visits should be organized between organizations organizing workers in the informal economy for the purpose of learning from one another’s experiences.

Networks and alliances

It was agreed that there is a necessity to expand existing alliances by bringing in other types of informal sector workers not represented at the conference, and to network with other groups who are working with informal workers but have not organized them. It was also agreed to work with GUFs and international confederations of national centers (global unions) and their regional formations.

Mechanisms

The conference agreed that the conference organizing committee, with the addition of representatives from the Americas and Europe, should act as a working group to drive the

process, and that regional-level committees should be constituted to carry the work forward. It was proposed that regional-level networks should be promoted which would bring unions of formal and informal workers together. A representative from ORIT-ICFTU (the Latin American regional structure of the ICFTU) has since joined the ICC.

It was agreed that co-ordinating structures could be formed where necessary – but in due time. In the meantime more systems should be established for communication within the network.

Geneva 2004 follow-up

Members of the International Co-ordinating Committee attended the International Labour Conference of the ILO 92nd session in June 2004 as planned to participate in the Committee on International Labour Migration: Challenges and Responses, with the following informal economy organisations working with migrant workers:

- AZIEA (Alliance of Zambian Informal Economy Associations)
- NFSVK (National Federation of Street Vendors of Korea)
- Indonesian Migrant Workers Union

Other meetings were also convened in Geneva during that time, to take advantage of the presence of a large number of the organisations we hope to work with on initiatives to promote the organisation of workers in the informal economy. A meeting was arranged for all the trade unions invited to the Ahmedabad meeting, as well as some others we hoped to involve in the follow-up. The meeting was attended by 56 participants (many from Africa who had not been in Ahmedabad). In discussions from the floor, participants from Benin, Chad, Hong Kong, Liberia, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Zambia and OATUU (Organisation of African Trade Union Unity) talked about their experiences and about the importance of organizing workers in the informal economy on a greater scale. There was general consensus on working together, learning about new ways to organize in the informal economy through sharing experiences and through the organizing manual which the ICC was proposing to produce, and on working on making governments get rid of legal barriers to organizing informal workers.

The group also met with the ILO's Integration department to find out the details of the ILO's follow-up programmes on the Conclusions on Decent Work and the Informal Economy passed at the 90th session of the International Labour Conference in 2002.

Future plans of the ICC

The general idea of the ICC is to continue to build the momentum of bringing in more organisations which are organising workers in the informal economy into this network. We have realised that there are many initiatives already ongoing to organise workers in the informal economy – but isolated from each other. It is our belief that by consolidating and combining our organisational efforts, we can strengthen the organisation of workers in the informal economy and make some positive impact on legal and policy frameworks globally and in many different countries.

It is also by strengthening and uniting our organisational efforts that we believe that we will contribute to the development of the necessary institutional frameworks for the organisation and representation of workers in the informal economy – wherever current frameworks are found to be excluding the participation of workers in the informal economy – based on direct participation by informal workers themselves in determining the appropriate structure of such institutions.

Next international conference

The ICC has decided to convene a second international conference with the theme “*Combining Our Efforts*” of as many membership-based organizations (unions, co-operatives, associations, alliances or networks) as possible who are already practitioners in organizing workers in the informal economy, with the following objectives:

- to share experiences between organizational practitioners, and identify the issues affecting informal workers;
- to develop strategies to intensify organization in the informal economy;
- to identify existing and new partnerships and alliances;
- to identify processes of representation at international forums (e.g. ILO, WTO, etc.)
- to discuss future co-ordination between organizations of workers in the informal economy, and develop mechanisms for such co-ordination.

This second conference will aim to bring in more organisations than the first one, to further consolidate the work which is being done in organising workers in the informal economy and to further extend the alliances and partnerships which are in force between different kinds of trade unions and other workers’ organisations in this field of organising.

This conference will be more issue-based, focussing on the following issues:

- Trade issues
- Organisational strategies
- Social protection
- Laws and policies
- Collective bargaining
- Workers’ education manual

A conference of about 80 participants is envisaged (both financed and self-financed as in 2003) to take place probably during the first quarter of 2006, hosted by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana.

It was decided that regional workshops would be arranged leading to the Conference in Ghana in December, where possible. The purpose would be as follows:

- regional preparation for the international conference;
- collecting inputs for the organisers’ manual;

- gathering the needs of the participant organisations for policies and labour laws for the WIEGO Organisation & Representation (ORP) programme;
- exploring ways of using the WTO and international trade issues to enhance development and, thereby, promote stronger organisation;
- developing partnerships for working together on the ground.

This workshop is one such regional workshop. It was hoped that we would be able to organise a second one in the Caribbean region, but this has not yet materialised.

Manual

A proposal came out of the meeting in Geneva that we should develop a manual for organizers of workers in the informal economy, and this has been very widely supported. This is intended to contain strategies for organising and collective bargaining in the informal economy. It should also contain a section on international trade issues (*international trade and development, working with the WTO, etc.*)

Role of this regional seminar

We hope that this regional seminar is going to further widen the international network of practitioner organisations organizing workers in the informal economy. In addition, the information which we are going to share at this seminar on systems of social protection operating in Africa which are effectively reaching the workers in the informal economy, and effective organizing strategies which are working in Africa, will be added to the global information which strengthens our organizational efforts. We are also looking for best practice examples and case studies which we may not have been aware of before, and further material for the manual for organizers of workers in the informal economy.

There are other joint projects on the organization and representation of workers in the informal economy – in Africa and elsewhere. Just one month ago some of you were present in Cotonou at a seminar of a joint UNI – StreetNet programme in 8 francophone West African countries (including 6 of those represented here). Our hope is to support and co-operate with all such programmes, and to ensure that they all form part of the overall aim to promote stronger and more united organization of workers in the informal economy.
