



World Class Cities for All: Inclusive Urban Planning for the Urban Working Poor

“The challenge is to convince the policy makers to promote and encourage many sub-economies whereby micro-businesses can coexist alongside small, medium, and large businesses: in which the street vendors can coexist alongside the kiosks, retail shops, and large malls. Just as the policy makers encourage bio diversity, they should encourage economic diversity. Also, they should try to promote a level playing field in which all sizes of businesses and all categories of workers can compete on equal and fair terms.”

Ela Bhatt, Founder, SEWA Member, The Elders

Thirty years ago, the percentage of the global population living in urban areas was less than 40 per cent. 2008 marked a “tipping point”: more than half of the global population now lives in urban areas. In developing countries, 75 percent of the urban population live in slums or squatter settlement and eke out a livelihood in the urban informal economy. Yet cities, pre-occupied with competing for ‘world class city’ status tend not to integrate informal workers and informal enterprises in their urban planning and economic development strategies.

To counter the exclusionary trends in modernizing cities today, what is called for is a fundamental re-thinking and reshaping of urban plans, regulations, and policies to incorporate the working poor. What is needed, first and foremost, is to recognize that the urban informal economy is part-and-parcel of the economy of towns and cities of the developing world and is here to stay; and that the towns and cities of tomorrow should – indeed must - remain “hybrid” if urban poverty – and urban violence – are to be reduced. Towns and cities should allow street vendors, hawkers, small kiosks and shops to exist alongside large retail shops and malls; should incorporate waste pickers into modern solid waste management systems; and should support home-based production through basic infrastructure and appropriate zoning policies.

The living conditions of the poor often determine their work conditions and growth of urban infrastructure needs to take into account the basic needs of this large population. This will require inclusive, rather than exclusive, urban infrastructure and services; urban zoning; urban regulations and laws; and urban plans and policies. This, in turn, will require inclusive urban planning processes in which representatives of the working poor have a voice.

There is a growing global movement of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. Much of the impetus and inspiration for this growing movement has come from the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of India, a trade union of low-income women founded in India in 1972. In 1997, SEWA helped found the global action-research-policy

network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). With support from WIEGO, SEWA has been a founding member of two regional organizations of home-based workers (HomeNet South and South East Asia) and an international alliance of organizations of street vendors (StreetNet International).

In April 2006, members of this growing global movement of the working poor in the informal economy met in Durban, South Africa for a two-day policy colloquium called “World Class Cities for All: Inclusive Planning for the Working Poor in the Urban Informal Economy” with a focus on street vendors, waste pickers, and home-based workers. Present at that meeting were SEWA, StreetNet International, HomeNet South and South East Asia as well as representatives from waste picker associations and other groups engaged in the urban informal economy. The meeting was organized by WIEGO in collaboration with StreetNet and the University of KwaZulu Natal. The Durban meeting crystallized the thinking and work of these organizations on issues related to the urban informal economy. Those present at the meeting emerged with a common understanding of the trends and issues facing urban informal workers and a common commitment to work together to demand recognition and support of the working poor in the urban informal economy.

As part of this commitment, in March 2008, WIEGO helped organized the first international conference of organizations of waste pickers: national and regional associations of waste pickers and their allies from over 40 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America met for the first time.

In the pursuit of “World Class Cities for All”, this movement of the working poor in the informal economy seeks:

- A vision of cities that incorporates the informal economy as a valuable asset that not only adds colour and life to cities, but contributes significantly to the economy.
- A vision of the city which recognizes that the living and working needs of the urban working poor and builds the city around them.
- A creative approach to planning that accommodates the dynamic working and living needs of those working informally through their involvement in decision-making and implementation processes.
- Workers that are organized enough to shape the trajectories of cities and a State that proactively seeks to hear the voices of more marginalized groups within the informal economy.

WIEGO, SEWA and Realizing Rights have shared the authorship of this policy brief as a part of their growing partnership on supporting women workers around the world. We join forces with many others who aim to explore and establish different economic and social pathways to ensure that the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international labor conventions are realized in practice.

