

Informal Workers

in the COVID-19 Crisis

A global picture of sudden impact and long-term risk



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing

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Front cover photo:

Shop owner Kasturi Ben holds products sold at her tiny general store in Ahmedabad, India.
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage

Back cover photo: A year and a half ago, Hawa Latif left her hometown of Tulu, in Ghana's Northern Region, to come to Accra, Ghana to earn a living working as a head porter, or *kayayei*.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

WIEGO's Rapid Assessment: Getting the global picture

Anna Nkobele belongs to a community organization called Domestic Watch, which meets monthly to teach domestic workers to be aware and safe.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage



Overview

BETWEEN 23 March and 8 April 2020, WIEGO conducted a rapid assessment to understand how COVID-19 and the related public health measures were impacting informal workers in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The rapid assessment included interviews with 16 national or local membership-based organizations (MBOs), five regional and global networks of informal workers' organizations, WIEGO team members who have been communicating regularly with workers in several countries, as well as a research institute and an NGO that work closely with informal workers (see Annex 1).

The organizations interviewed represent mainly domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and market traders, and waste pickers. In most countries, these are highly feminized sectors characterized by vulnerable wage or self-employment. In addition, some membership-based organizations interviewed represent workers in other sectors such as shoe shiners in Mexico City and newspaper vendors in Lima.

As public responses to COVID-19 are rapidly changing, these interviews represent a specific moment in time.

The impacts on informal workers' livelihoods were sudden and severe, and in many cases, could lead to a permanent loss of income. In India, local governments began using the lockdown to break up street vending infrastructure. In Colombia, waste pickers feared stopping work because private companies can use this to justify transfer of waste management contracts to large private companies. Across South East Asia, home-based workers are concerned that tourism will not return to the region, leaving them no market for their products, while those who sew garments here and in South Asia will have no orders for as long as major markets in China, Europe and North

America are struggling with COVID-19. Domestic workers are anxious that as their employers lose their jobs, they will not have work to return to even after the lockdown measures are removed.

As the pandemic shifts over time, many of the economic impacts on informal workers' livelihoods will remain relevant as countries transition from full lockdowns to semi-lockdowns or physical distancing. The uncertainty of the situation, the likelihood of cycles of both infection and measures to contain that infection, will see many of these impacts continue and even worsen.

However, some positive developments mitigated the crisis for some informal workers. These were the result of advocacy efforts by their membership-based organizations and allies. In certain countries, food vendors and waste pickers were deemed essential workers and allowed to operate. Domestic workers' organizations called for their members to also be recognized in care worker packages as they provide homecare to the ill and elderly. In many places, home-based workers received contracts to produce face masks for local agencies and markets. Many organizations also developed safety guidelines and distributed personal protective equipment (PPE). These efforts highlight the capacity of organizations to react effectively to protect the health and livelihoods of their members.

Regardless of whether informal workers were recognized as essential workers by their governments, the crisis has shone a spotlight on the importance of these workers. Across a broad range of sectors including agriculture, healthcare, childcare and transport, they have been on the frontlines of national responses to the pandemic. This recognition underscores the importance



Liz Chapilliquem Bances is a member of one of the grassroots organizations of the National Federation of Waste Pickers of Peru (Federación Nacional de Recicladores del Perú, FENAREP). Membership-based organizations have been fighting for the right to work of waste pickers and their rights as workers. Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage

of informal workers to our economies and our societal ability to meet the challenges of a major crisis like COVID-19.

As a leader in a street vendor organization (RENATTA) in Peru explained:

“We feel protected now by the measures that we are following, but not by the economic strategies of the government; we’re waiting. We will feel protected when the lockdown ends and the authorities show their intention to include us in the public policies of the city...We hope they include us in employment policies, this reality is showing that we aren’t the problem, we are the solution. Without the informal workers we wouldn’t have food in the markets, and without the smaller markets, food wouldn’t get to the farthest districts.”

Impact of public health measures on income

The first impacts of the pandemic felt by informal workers were through public health measures that limited or prevented them from working. Informal workers noted income losses due to border closures, physical distancing, and semi or full lockdown measures. The economic crisis preceded the health crisis for most informal workers across the Global South.

Common challenges faced by informal workers

- Physical distancing is impossible in over-crowded urban neighbourhoods and informal settlements.

- Informal workers have limited access to information on the virus and how it spreads and have been the target of misinformation campaigns.
- Informal workers often lack soap and/or clean water to wash their hands.
- Informal workers require protective gear to undertake their essential work and daily activities; MBOs are working to acquire it themselves in the absence of government support and in the face of price-gouging and stockpiling by the middle and upper classes.
- Meagre daily incomes mean informal workers could not stockpile food and other basics ahead of the lockdown period.
- Mental health challenges are cited as a key concern due to the health and economic uncertainties and their current lack of income.
- Lockdown measures are increasing the threat of domestic violence among women informal workers.
- Women informal workers across all sectors are finding it more difficult to work due to childcare responsibilities as schools and daycare centres are closed.
- Police harassment of informal workers is common across all regions resulting in the confiscation of goods, fines or physical violence and abuse.
- Since many do not have digital bank accounts and/or access to mobile money transfers, restrictions on mobility make it difficult for informal workers to collect income support.
- Urban migrants returning to rural areas are losing their incomes and housing and have become targets of violence.

These tables reveal how different groups of workers were impacted by the public health measures.



Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage

DOMESTIC WORKERS

“The number of employers who have provided protections is minimal. They [domestic workers] ask for protections during the workday and the employers use the pretext that, ‘we barely have enough for ourselves.’”

– Interview with domestic worker organization SINACTRAHO, Mexico.



Yolanda Villanueva, a domestic worker, sings lullabies to a baby. Taking care of children is her passion and she provides this service in several households. In Peru, many domestic workers provide care services for households, without which women could not work. She is a member of Peru’s Domestic Workers’ Union (Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar del Perú, SINTRAHOGARP). Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage

<p>BORDER CLOSURES (i.e. between and within countries)</p>	<p>Migrant domestic workers in S.E. Asia are unable to return to work. When the Philippines closed its border unexpectedly in February, migrant domestic workers could not return to their employers in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Malaysia refused entry to returning migrant domestic workers on the grounds that they are not essential workers.</p>
<p>QUARANTINE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic workers returning from Malaysia or the Philippines lose out on 14 days’ worth of income when they are quarantined in Hong Kong. • Eight domestic workers in Hong Kong are in quarantine. • Live-in domestic workers are forced into quarantine with their employers when they fall ill. High exposure to COVID-19.
<p>PHYSICAL DISTANCING (i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic workers are being given heavier workloads as employers raise hygiene standards. Working without protective or preventive measures in employers’ homes increases exposure to COVID-19. • Employers who do not respect physical distancing are putting domestic workers at risk of catching COVID-19. • Seven domestic workers in Hong Kong caught the virus from their employers.
<p>SEMI-LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workloads are heavier as children are not in school and employers are working from home. • Employers use public health guidelines to justify requests for domestic workers to stay longer hours and go out and make purchases for the household (Mexico). • Domestic workers receive no provision of protective equipment (live-in domestic workers in S.E. Asia and Middle East, Mexico) and no preventive measures are taken in employers’ homes. • Live-out and part-time domestic workers in Africa, Middle East, Asia and Latin America have been dismissed because they are seen as unclean due to their use of public transport and living conditions in low-income communities. No compensation provided. • With schools and childcare centres closed, live-out and part-time domestic workers cannot go to work as they are caring for their own children (Mexico, S.E. Asia, India). • Employers are at home or are unemployed and no longer need a part-time domestic worker. Leads to lay-offs and lack of daily earnings for part-time domestic workers with multiple employers (Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, Cambodia, Mexico, Kenya and Uganda).
<p>FULL LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, all nonessential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massive layoffs without compensation for live-out and part-time domestic workers across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Not yet apparent in Africa, except South Africa. • No rest day for live-in domestic workers as they can no longer leave employers’ homes (S.E. Asia).

HOME-BASED WORKERS

“For our members...they are afraid of nothing to eat. They are afraid of economic issues, much more than health issues.”

– Interview with home-based workers organization HomeNet Thailand.



<p>MAJOR SHUTDOWNS in large global economies (i.e. China, Europe and N. America)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of raw materials rose across Asia once China closed its borders. • Europe and US cancelled contracts with garment factories in Viet Nam, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan leading to fewer or no orders, and no income.
<p>BORDER CLOSURES (i.e. between and within countries)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in demand for home-based workers' products catering to the tourist industry in S.E. Asia and E. Europe • Since the beginning of 2020, there has been a decline in the export market for handicraft and handmade products as products cannot be transported. • All international fairs and exhibitions have been cancelled leading to high debts among home-based workers who had bought production materials in advance, but now have nowhere to sell their goods (Uzbekistan). • Many home-based worker cooperatives and producer companies may cease to exist if the situation lasts.
<p>SEMI-LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work orders disappeared. • School closures and unemployment among men have increased care responsibilities for women at home, making it difficult to complete orders. • Decline in demand for traditional crafts as trade fairs and cultural events are cancelled in Cambodia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and E. Europe. Rising debts now as workers used credit to buy materials. • In Ethiopia and Kenya, where wearing masks in public is mandatory, home-based workers are now producing masks for the local market. • Kenya has reduced VAT, but no other support is provided to assist small producers like home-based workers.
<p>FULL LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, all nonessential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to collect payment for previous orders. • Unable to buy raw materials for production. • In South Africa, cooperatives who have been receiving monthly orders from social enterprises have been told that no work will be available during the lockdown period (i.e. April) and that the social enterprise would revert to the coops in May. • Registered home-based workers' coops in South Africa are attempting to register on the Department of Small Business Development portal for small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMME) relief. There have been no reports of successful registration and relief received yet. • In the Philippines, people are not allowed to leave home to buy food. The government delivers food. Home-based workers report that the food is not enough for bigger households and is not fresh. • In India, it has led to food scarcity. Ration shops have limited supply and a lockdown doesn't allow them to travel to procure food. Many don't have ration cards, especially the migrant workers, so they are dependent on cooked food provided by charity organizations. • Most home-based workers expect to have no work for at least the next 6 months. • In Uganda, customers indicate that there is no guarantee of orders for the rest of the year as some of them will also be adversely affected. • Many home-based workers reverted to subsistence farming on their urban land and in nearby villages. All the groups noted the importance of food production through the pandemic to ensure food security. However, their role in food security is not acknowledged or supported by government policies. • Ugandan groups are struggling to pay rent for workshops and trading spaces. Commercial banks have announced that they will not be accepting any new loan applications and home-based workers are worried about how they will repay existing loans.

Rattana Chalermchai works with her husband Mongkol at home. A former factory worker, Rattana was laid off during the economic crisis in 1997. She now supplies hand-made flip-flops to a resort. Photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage

STREET VENDORS AND MARKET TRADERS

“When you go out you also have problems coming home. All these people beat up by the police were informal workers who wake up early to work and go home in the evening. They have huge difficulties because of restrictions on inner-city transport.”

– Interview with food vendor organization SYGAS, Senegal Home-based workers.



Market vendor Vida Ofori stands proudly at her tomato stand in the Makola Market, Accra, Ghana.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

BORDER CLOSURES (i.e. between and within countries)

- Cross border traders cannot operate, leading to no sales and lower incomes.
- In Ahmedabad, India wholesale markets and small grocery (*kirana*) stores are operating but farmers cannot transport goods or cross village/state borders to sell what they produce; all street vendor markets, including Bhadra Chowk, are closed. If farmers are able to sell to big traders, the traders are gouging them on prices: they now pay only 1 rupee for cabbage which they used to buy for 10 rupees.

PHYSICAL DISTANCING (i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)

- Sales drop as fewer people go out in public spaces.

SEMI-LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)

- Stockpiling by the middle class has increased the price of inputs such as rice and eggs for food vendors in Thailand.
- Street vendors and market traders who sell products other than food can no longer operate. In Thailand, night markets are now closed, though food markets remain open.
- Diminished sales and loss of perishable good stock has led to rising debts (all regions).
- Forced evictions and police brutality reported against informal traders (Ghana, Liberia, India, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe).
- In Senegal, those who sold cooked foods from home are no longer able to sell for lack of demand.
- Market traders in Senegal can still work but are doing so with great difficulty – low demand, closed wholesale markets limiting their ability to source supplies, and lack of protective gear from government.

FULL LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, all nonessential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)

- Market traders selling fresh produce are considered essential workers in Ghana, Peru, and South Africa. However, all cite not receiving protective equipment from the government to work safely.
- In Peru, some market porters are ill, some are not coming in for fear of getting ill, and some are sleeping outside the market on the ground for fear of sleeping in crowded dorms or infecting their families. Market traders selling cooked foods are not permitted to work in Peru.
- Street vendors have nowhere to sell, cannot move out of homes to go to where people are (India, Peru, Senegal).
- Fresh food vendors in Ghana can work, but they have not received the same treatment as market traders. They were not consulted on their needs and do not benefit from handwashing stations or sanitizers like market traders.
- In Ghana and Peru, non-fresh food vendors cannot work and have temporarily lost their livelihoods. However, some are continuing to go to the market as it's difficult for authorities to regulate.
- Some wholesale markets are open in Delhi, India for limited hours, but natural markets are closed, resulting in a total loss of earnings for almost all market vendors and street vendors.
- Low demand has led to loss of perishable goods, leading to rising debts (all regions).
- Women garment makers and bead sellers (i.e. religious apparel and crafts) can no longer produce or sell their goods as these markets are closed in South Africa. No sales means they cannot buy the materials they need for production.
- Vendors on public transport can no longer sell their goods (Chile).
- Forced evictions and police brutality against informal traders has led to temporary or permanent loss of trading spaces (Ghana, Kenya, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe).
- Police confiscated and destroyed farmers' produce when farmers tried to take it to market (Zimbabwe).

WASTE PICKERS

“Women are bringing their children to work since there are no classes. They put them on their carts because they have to work.”

– Interview with waste pickers in Mexico City, Mexico.



MAJOR SHUTDOWNS in large global economies (i.e. China, Europe and N. America)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waste pickers in Colombia note that the prices of metal and glass have fallen while the price of paper remains stable for the moment. Some links in the value chains are broken as big industries are closed (at national and global levels).
BORDER CLOSURES (i.e. between and within countries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The collection warehouses have closed, driving prices down because of border closures as no one is buying internationally.
QUARANTINE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In India, municipalities have not identified which households are under quarantine (due to potential illness), so waste pickers cannot know when waste is hazardous.
PHYSICAL DISTANCING (i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waste pickers living in isolated waste picking communities in South Africa already saw their income drop as middlemen no longer wanted to buy up recyclables. As the virus can live on certain materials for up to a few days, the market for recyclables has collapsed. Middlemen are refusing to buy up more recyclables as they suspend operations impacting cooperatives and street collectors (South Africa, Brazil). Waste pickers' cooperatives are closing across Brazil as waste pickers are not allowed to collect recyclables and no new materials will be reaching cooperatives. Waste pickers work in cramped spaces in their recycling warehouses and also need to load heavy materials, which require teamwork. Lack of protective gear is a key issue across all regions. In Colombia, private companies are refusing to pay the recycling levy that goes to waste pickers. In Mexico, household waste has diminished and not all households are separating out sanitary waste as recommended.
SEMI-LOCKDOWN (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Landfills are closed so no access to recyclables. In Belo Horizonte, waste pickers' are concerned that they will not be paid for the month of April as they will not be working. Waste pickers cooperatives fear demobilization of the selective waste collection schemes as citizens will lose the habit of recycling. Waste pickers worry that municipalities will be more concerned about safety issues and revoke waste pickers' contracts after COVID-19, and that they will move to implement waste to energy technologies or opt for incineration measures. For reasons above, waste pickers fear having less material to recycle after the COVID-19 crisis. In Colombia, waste pickers remain on the streets without protective gear to retain access over recyclables as private companies continue waste collection. In Senegal, waste pickers are harassed by authorities at the dump site who stop them from working. Schools are closed and women waste pickers reported difficulty navigating childcare and work with their children out of school.

Carmenza Mora is a recycler and waste picker in Bogotá, Colombia and member of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB), Waste Pickers' Association of Bogotá. Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage

WASTE PICKERS (continued)

FULL LOCKDOWN
(i.e. schools closed, all nonessential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)

- Waste pickers fear losing important gains made with municipalities for recognition and contracts due to inability to operate during this period. Mounting fear that contracts could be given to private waste collection companies after the crisis (South Africa, Colombia, Brazil).
- In Ghana, sanitation workers are classified as essential workers and are exempted from the ban, but waste pickers fall in a grey area. Small groups are able to work because they live on or near the dump site in Accra. The majority are at home because they are either afraid of getting sick or do not think they can pass through security checkpoints.
- Those who continue to work have no market for their products – the buyers are gone, leading to a total loss of income (Ghana, Peru, India). In Ghana, they are stockpiling goods for when the lockdown ends.
- In Argentina, waste pickers are classified as essential workers and are receiving a stipend from the government to support their work. Many have stopped or lessened work to run community soup kitchens. Large companies have asked waste pickers to step up collection of cardboard as there is a local shortage.

OTHER WORKERS IN PUBLIC SPACE

“The economic impact is high for the lack of work, to make it day to day we’ve got to work.”

– Interview with shoe shiner in Mexico City

SEMI-LOCKDOWN
(i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)

- In Mexico City, Mexico shoe shiners are able to continue to work but there is a sharp drop in demand and their earnings have been significantly reduced.
- Many are not working because they cannot make in one day what the transport would cost to get to work, and others are taking up new activities.

FULL LOCKDOWN
(i.e. schools closed, all nonessential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)

- In Lima, Peru newspaper vendors have been given designations as essential workers. They continue to work but have not been given adequate protections by the papers they are distributing for (some papers have provided gloves and masks, but others have not).
- Transportation is hard – metro schedules are limited, and they must travel long distances to work.
- As their costs are rising because of transport and the need to purchase protective gear, their earnings are falling due to lower demand than before.
- Most newspaper vendors are older adults, and some are choosing to stay home to protect their health.



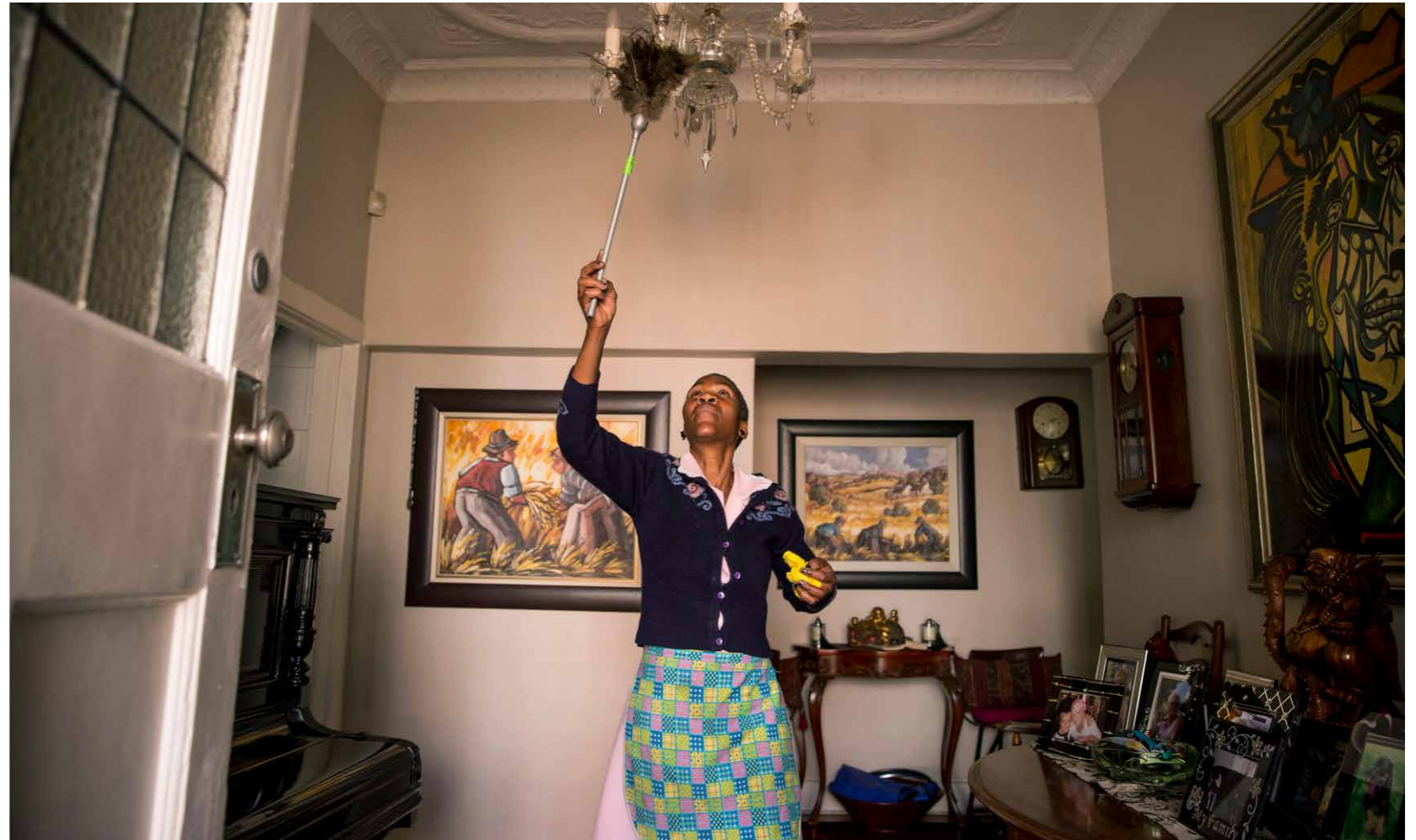
In Mexico City, Mexico shoe shiners are able to continue to work but there is a sharp drop in demand and their earnings have been significantly reduced. *Photo: Jane Barrett*

Possible permanent income loss for women and older workers

THE responses gathered during the rapid assessment draw attention to particular vulnerabilities faced by women and older informal workers. Both these groups are likely to face delays in returning to work and earning an income once lockdown measures ease. Women informal workers are also primary caregivers in their homes as they take on an unequal share of unpaid care work. School closures and the deepening health crisis will mean women spend more time than men caring for children, the ill and the elderly in their households. Older women, who helped with caregiving prior to the crisis, may stop due to their higher health risks. Therefore, even as lockdown measures ease, women informal workers may not be able to return to paid work or will seek more flexible – and even more vulnerable work – within the informal economy. This will deepen gender inequalities in the labour market unless economic recovery packages make specific provisions for greater investments in public care services and support to women informal workers' livelihoods.

Older workers are expressing their reluctance to return to work due to the higher health risks they face during the pandemic. The spread of coronavirus exposes existing vulnerabilities for women and older informal workers and calls for universal social protection systems that recognize these systemic risks. A social pension can allow workers to stay safe at home and reduce pressure on the public health system. Universal access to cash transfers and quality services including health care and childcare can help to address these intersecting inequalities due to class, gender and age.

Read [Three ways to contain COVID-19's impact on informal women workers](#) in the *UN Women* blog.



Domestic worker Dorothy Khosona has worked for her employer of nine years, in an affluent Johannesburg neighbourhood, cleaning and doing laundry. She likes her working arrangement, but says the high cost of living is difficult on her salary and paying rent for a small nearby flat uses a large portion of her earnings. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

Policy implications

“WHILE the safety nets [cash transfers] currently being put in place are vital during this time of immediate crisis, it is critical that longer-term thinking about how informal incomes can recover and broader thinking about how income security may be achieved are a part of the policy response,” the WIEGO Team rapid assessment authors Laura Alfery, Rachel Moussié, and Jenna Harvey wrote in an OECD Development Matters blog.

Their analysis examined the policy implications:

Responses to secure incomes must include longer-term inclusion into social protection systems, while simultaneously supporting livelihood recovery tailored to the needs of different groups of workers in the informal economy, and ensuring the inclusion of the most vulnerable. This will require creative collaboration between governments and organizations of informal workers. Finally, the principle of “Do No Harm” must extend to informal livelihoods. It is critical at this time that governments do not use the health crisis as an excuse to threaten the policy gains, relationships, contracts, structures and infrastructure, which informal workers have built up over the years to better secure their incomes.

Read [The COVID-19 crisis: income support to informal workers is necessary and possible](#) in *Development Matters*.

For more information on how the pandemic continues to impact specific sectors within the informal economy, visit [WIEGO’s special COVID-19 section on our website](#).



Bhavna Ben Ramesh sews handmade purses out of her home in Ahmedabad, India. Her work is essential to her family’s income, though women’s home-based work often goes unrecognized.

Photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage

WIEGO's Informal Economy Podcast – Special Pandemic Episodes



WIEGO's Social Protection podcast has explored the impacts of this unprecedented health, economic and social crisis on informal workers.

EPISODE #13: In April, WIEGO's International Coordinator, Sally Roever, spoke to the policy responses and the challenges that governments will face in order to protect informal workers' health and livelihood. Sally analyzes the immediate responses, including emergency cash grants and other strategies, and the challenges that lay ahead for governments and workers. She also speaks to how the different groups of informal workers are being hit very differently by the crisis.



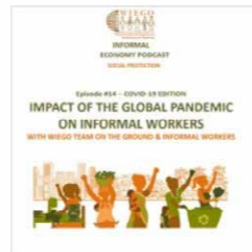
 Informal Economy Podcast: Social Protection
#13 Protecting informal workers amid the global pandemic - Covid-19 edition



[Listen](#) (English only):

EPISODE #14: In May, the podcast delved into the concrete impact on the lives and livelihoods of informal workers with brief updates from WIEGO team members and informal worker leaders in nine cities in Africa (Accra, Dakar and Johannesburg), Asia (Delhi), Latin America (Belo Horizonte, Bogota, Buenos Aires and Mexico City) and North America (Portland, Oregon, USA). They describe how the lockdown is affecting lives and livelihoods, and how workers' organizations are supporting their members and taking action to impel governments to support informal workers.



 Informal Economy Podcast: Social Protection
#14 Impact of the Global Pandemic on Informal Workers - Covid-19 edition



[Listen](#) (English only):

EPISODE #15: Valentina Barca, independent consultant specialist in social protection delivery systems, explores how governments are responding to the crisis to address the needs of informal workers. She discusses the challenges governments have faced in reaching informal workers and the lessons we can take from the policies being implemented. The podcast analyzes issues related to targeting informal workers, patterns in government responses, implementation problems that are emerging, and why some countries are responding quicker and more effectively than others.

[Listen](#) (English only):



 Informal Economy Podcast: Social Protection
#15 Lessons From Government Responses to Protect Informal Workers



Health Risks and Responses

Carmenza Mora is a recycler and waste picker in Bogotá, Colombia and member of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB), Waste Pickers' Association of Bogotá.

Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage



Overview

INFORMAL workers face more than a severe economic impact in this crisis—their health risks are also significant. Prevention is the best strategy for those with no access to health care. But for workers who depend on their daily earnings to survive—whether they are self-employed, wage workers, casual day labourers or dependent contractors—not working is no option. Thus they must decide between staying home and falling into extreme poverty, or risking infection to earn their livelihood.

Many informal workers live in marginalized urban communities where physical distancing is difficult and access to water and sanitation is inadequate. These factors make it harder for them to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19. However, informal workers are also vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 because of the nature of the work that they do. For example:

- **Domestic workers**, who continue to work in their employers' homes, face a high risk of contracting the virus through interpersonal contact, especially if they are caring for an ill person and children.
- **Home-based workers** often live in marginalized urban communities with limited access to water and sanitation and may find physical distancing an impossibility. Isolation may also aggravate mental health challenges as well as their exposure to domestic violence.
- **Street vendors and market traders** work in public spaces with limited access to water, sanitation and cleaning equipment and come into contact with large numbers of people on a daily basis.

- **Waste pickers** collect unsorted household waste; if households have the virus, it can potentially live on the surface of discarded material for days.

All respondents highlighted the lack of access to quality healthcare among informal workers and challenges in accessing testing services. Many informal workers did not have enough information on the virus and where they could be tested if they started to show symptoms.

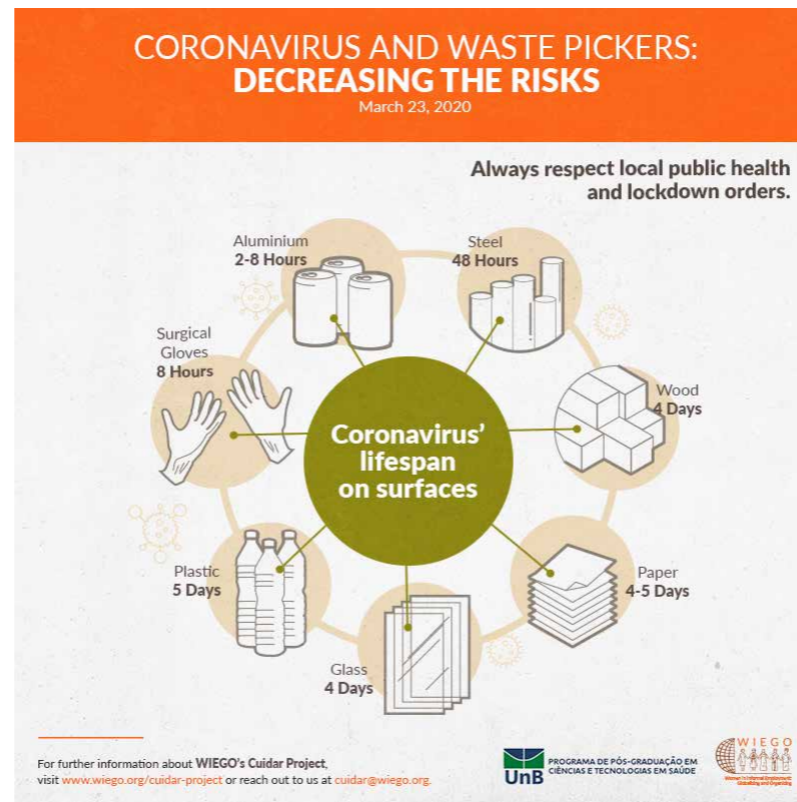


Photo credit: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage

MBOs provide crucial support to informal workers during the pandemic

IN the face of these risks, many worker organizations have mobilized to provide support to their members. This has included:

- **Providing health advice:** running community health campaigns and setting up awareness sessions with medical professionals.
- **Assisting workers to access protections:** distribution of water points, soap, and masks. Some MBOs are working with home-based workers to produce personal protective equipment (PPE) for essential workers and community members.
- **Providing mental health support:** setting up communication networks within MBOs to check on members and to provide support where needed.
- **Information sharing:** Worker organizations have developed extensive WhatsApp networks for sharing information on prevention strategies, natural health remedies, and where to acquire protective equipment.



Christine from Ground Score Association in Portland, Oregon (USA) reviews WIEGO's COVID-19 guidelines for waste pickers before her work shift. Photo: Taylor Cass Talbott

Health Guidelines for Domestic Workers, Street Vendors and Waste Pickers

THE original health guidelines for COVID-19 developed by international organizations were not well suited to low-income contexts. For example, most did not consider the difficulty of social distancing or isolating and the lack of access to running water in informal settlements. Also, they often failed to take literacy levels and local languages into account. Where health and hygiene guidelines had been developed for workplaces, these focused almost entirely on formal workplaces.

To address this gap, WIEGO embarked on a collaboration with public health professionals and worker organizations in Brazil and South Africa to develop sector-specific health and hygiene guidelines for waste pickers and street vendors – groups of workers who had, in some places, been designated as essential workers. WIEGO also worked with the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) to develop guidelines for domestic workers and their employers.

All guidelines were specifically designed to be shareable in hardcopy and electronically, with WhatsApp-friendly versions also available and translated into many languages.

LA ENFERMEDAD POR CORONAVIRUS Y LAS RECLICLADORAS Y LOS RECLICLADORES: DISMINUYENDO LOS RIESGOS

23 de marzo de 2020

El Proyecto Cuidar de WIEGO se enfoca en comprender los riesgos de salud que las recicladoras y los recicladores enfrentan en su lugar de trabajo. Dado que las personas recicladoras corren un mayor riesgo por el brote de COVID-19, para ayudarles el Proyecto Cuidar se ha asociado con personas expertas en epidemiología y medicina laboral de la Universidad de Brasilia y de la Fundación de Salud de Minas Gerais para ofrecer recomendaciones de salud para las personas recicladoras.

Por favor siempre respete las disposiciones de salud pública local y del cierre completo.

Supervivencia del coronavirus en superficies*

- Aluminio: 2-8 Horas
- Acero: 48 Horas
- Plástico: 5 Días
- Vidrio: 4 Días
- Químico: 24 Horas
- Superficie: 2-4 Días

Recomendaciones para evitar la propagación del coronavirus entre personas recicladoras*

Prepara los áreas de trabajo:	Para las trabajadoras y los trabajadores:	Consejos para tener las manos limpias:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suministrar jabón y agua para que las trabajadoras y los trabajadores puedan lavarse las manos frecuentemente. Limpia frecuentemente con alcohol de 70% o hipoclorito de 1% los objetos que se emplean a menudo, como los equipos de seguridad personal, casaca, guantes, zapatos, botas, paños, y cestos y almacenamiento en vehículos y cafeterías. Informar a las personas recicladoras que los materiales reciclados y desperdicios pueden estar contaminados. Estudios recientes demuestran que el virus puede sobrevivir horas y hasta días en materiales como el aluminio y el papel. Por tanto, estos materiales deben ser tratados como si hubieran sido contaminados. Asegurar que los espacios laborales estén bien ventilados. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No saludar a las personas con un apretón de manos, un abrazo o un beso. Tratar de mantener una distancia de por lo menos un metro de las demás personas. Cubrirese su cara con la parte inferior del codo al toser o estornudar. Utilizar mascarilla, y cambiarla con frecuencia en el transcurso del día. Nunca tocar la parte delantera de la mascarilla, y lavarse las manos antes y después de tocar las mascarillas. No compartir objetos personales con otras personas. Nunca tocar la cara con la mano o el guante. Evitar guardar guantes en una bolsa o en los bolsillos. Atarse el cabello para evitar que se contamine la cara. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lavarse las manos con jabón durante por lo menos 20 segundos. Se deben limpiar todas las partes de la mano y los dedos. Lavarse siempre las manos: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> antes de empezar a trabajar y durante los descansos después de estirarse las guantes antes y después de las comidas cuando se vuelva a la casa después de tocar o estornudar después de tocar objetos que se usan frecuentemente, perfumes, recicladores en el autobús o metro. También se puede usar alcohol con una concentración de 70% de para limpiar las manos. Pero hay que recordar que no es tan eficaz como lavarse con jabón y agua, y tal vez no funcione bien si las manos están demasiado sucias o llenas de grasa.

SÍNTOMAS

- FIEBRE
- TOS
- DOLORES DE CABEZA Y/O GARGANTA
- DISFICULTAD PARA RESPIRAR

¿Cuándo tiene que buscar ayuda?

Si desarrolla síntomas como fiebre, tos y dificultad para respirar. Siga las directrices de las autoridades locales.

Asíciase con aliados, amigos, o pida a líderes y funcionarios del gobierno que proporcionen condiciones básicas de seguridad como surtidores de agua, jabón, equipo de protección, etc.

En algunos países están ofreciendo subsidios sociales para compensar por la pérdida de sustento. Contacte a sus aliados y pida apoyo.

Para obtener más información sobre el Proyecto Cuidar de WIEGO visite www.wiego.org/brasil/projetos/cuidarwiego

1 Estas recomendaciones provienen de "Recomendaciones para la prevención de la enfermedad por el coronavirus COVID-19 entre los trabajadores y trabajadores del sector de los residuos sólidos" (Recomendaciones for the prevention of the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19 among solid waste workers), una nota técnica preparada por la Universidad Nacional de Brasilia (UNB) y el Proyecto Cuidar de WIEGO (Brasil) con información adicional basada en operaciones de recicladoras y recicladores a través de la Alianza Global de Recicladoras. También tienen en cuenta las recomendaciones de la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) y de la Asociación Internacional de Residuos Sólidos (AIMRA), por no estar en inglés y haberse traducido por el Ministerio Nacional de Recicladores de Brasil (MNRB), por no estar en portugués.

2 Kaur et al., "Use of Plastic in Street Vending: The Potential for Contamination and Public Health Implications" (Promoción del comercio en superficies comerciales y la contaminación con agentes biológicos) / Heng et al., "COVID-19 and Street Vendors in Brazil" (2020, 2020, 2020, 2020, 2020).

3 Tenga en cuenta. Estas recomendaciones se basan en la situación del brote de COVID-19 y la naturaleza de los servicios de residuos sólidos en Brasil. Quédate atento a las recomendaciones en función de las condiciones locales.

Directives sanitaires sur la COVID-19 pour les commerçant·e·s de l'informel

La maladie COVID-19 est hautement contagieuse. Le virus se propage par contact avec des personnes qui font déjà - même celles qui ne présentent pas de symptômes - ou en touchant des surfaces contaminées, et en se touchant ensuite les yeux, la bouche ou le nez. Le coronavirus se colle aux surfaces - plastiques, cartons, métal, bois et argent. Il peut survivre jusqu'à cinq jours.

Les recherches montrent que dans l'ensemble des pays du Sud, les opératrice·eurs de l'informel sont indispensables à la sécurité alimentaire des ménages à faibles revenus. Plusieurs pays font reconnaître et ont déclaré que les commerçant·e·s de services alimentaires de l'état doivent être prestataires de services essentiels.

Dans la mesure où les directives de sécurité sont respectées, les commerçant·e·s de l'informel peuvent travailler en toute sécurité, comme les supermarchés.

Les symptômes les plus fréquents de la COVID-19 sont :

- Toux
- Fièvre
- Mal de gorge
- Respiratoires

RESTER À LA MAISON:

Les médecins conseillent de rester à la maison si cela est possible. C'est pourquoi il est crucial que le gouvernement apporte un soutien direct au revenu de tous et tous les travailleurs de l'informel.

- Les personnes âgées sont particulièrement à risque si elles contractent le virus. Si vous êtes âgé·e ou si vous vivez avec des personnes âgées (plus de 60 ans), vous devez rester à la maison.
- Si vous ne vous sentez pas bien et que vous avez une maladie préexistante, ou si vous avez plus de 60 ans, vous devez demander à quelqu'un d'autre de gérer votre activité commerciale à votre place pendant l'épidémie de la COVID-19.

SI VOUS FOURNISSEZ DES SERVICES ESSENTIELS:

- Lavez-vous les mains avec de l'eau et du savon:**
 - Lavez-vous les mains pendant au moins 20 secondes.
 - Nettoyez toutes les parties de vos mains et de vos poignets, en vous lavant entre les doigts et le bout des doigts et à mi-tourner après avoir fini.
 - Lavez-vous les mains avant de commencer votre journée de travail, tout au long de la journée, et surtout avant de manger.
 - Lavez-vous les mains après avoir toussé ou éternué.
 - Lavez-vous les mains après avoir touché tout objet que d'autres personnes touchent régulièrement.
 - Lavez-vous les mains dès que vous retirez votre casque.
- Évitez de vous toucher le visage, en particulier les yeux, la bouche et le nez.** Lorsque vous toussiez ou éternuez, couvrez votre visage avec la face intérieure de votre coude.
- Portez un masque en tissu qui couvre toute bouche et votre nez.** Évitez de toucher le masque. Lavez et repassez après utilisation. Avec quelques respirateurs pour en avoir toujours un propre à portée. Encouragez les clients à porter des masques avant des masques.
- Évitez de toucher les gens.** Ne sautez pas les gens et les touchez. Tenez-vous à deux mètres des personnes. Si cela est impossible, tenez-vous au moins à la distance de la longueur d'un bras.
- Les commerçant·e·s de rue et de marché doivent travailler à deux mètres l'un de l'autre.** Les autorités locales doivent donc se montrer flexibles en ce qui concerne leur disposition et leurs emplacements.
- Les client·e·s doivent garder une distance de deux mètres entre elle·ux·es,** en faisant la queue le long des étals ou devant les magasins. Tracer des lignes sur le sol est un moyen simple de faire savoir aux gens comment il doivent faire la queue et à quelle distance ils doivent rester de vous et de votre étal/magasin.
- Demander la priorité aux client·e·s à haut risque** tels que les retraité·e·s, les personnes handicapées et les femmes enceintes en leur accordant la préférence dans les files d'attente.
- Demandez aux client·e·s de ne pas toucher les produits (dans la mesure du possible).**

PROBLÈMES DE POLITIQUE:

Ces directives ont été élaborées par WIEGO en collaboration avec des expert·e·s en santé publique (chercheur·e·s Rajeev Nijjar et Leticia London da Universidade de Fortaleza, Natal et de Ceará) et des économistes (chercheur·e·s et économiste de l'Université de Fortaleza). Elles tiennent compte des réalités locales et des besoins des personnes âgées, des personnes handicapées et des femmes enceintes en fonction de vos conditions locales. Avril 2020.

WIEGO
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Domestic Workers & Employers: Fighting COVID-19 Together

Negotiate with your employer on your own terms. You should continue to be paid if you are sick and not allowed to work if you are working, determine with your employer which non-physical tasks can be performed on an individual basis, and use responsibilities associated with COVID-19 prevention.

General household cleaning:

- When cleaning heavily soiled items (e.g., bed sheets, curtains, towels, etc.), use hot water, detergent, and use a disinfectant.
- Use gloves to protect yourself. Always wash your hands before and after handling soiled items. Disinfectant gloves should be safely disposed of after use and should not be reused after each use.
- In bathrooms, clean the toilet bowl and flush. Wipe down the counter top and clean the shower when done.
- Essize good ventilation while you clean by keeping windows and doors open.

Domestic Workers & Employers: Fighting COVID-19 Together

When someone in the household is in quarantine or sick, they will not be coming to work. Health guidelines will tell you about what employers and other domestic workers to fight COVID-19 together. Do not panic - understand the risks and develop a safe plan to continue with your employer.

Your employer should provide:

- 15-20 minutes of paid sick leave per week.
- Masked personal hygiene (gloves, hand sanitizer, etc.) and other protective equipment.
- Keep all shared items (e.g., dishes, towels, etc.) in a well-ventilated area.
- Wash your hands during your cleaning and do work. Remember to always wear a mask.
- Household members should be told to stay away from the person who is sick with COVID-19. Always wash your hands after contact.
- When you are handling items, wear gloves while handling dirty clothes.

Domestic Workers & Employers: Fighting COVID-19 Together

Washing hands with soap and water is best. If you soap is available, use an alcohol-based (70%) hand sanitizer.

Always wash your hands:

- When arriving at work or home.
- After coughing or sneezing.
- After touching household and personal items.
- Before and after meals.
- After providing customer care to anyone at risk.

When being in a public place or using public transit, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. You should clean all parts of your hands and wrists.

Some examples of WIEGO's sector-specific guidelines.

WIEGO Blog on essential workers at risk

Informal workers on the frontlines of COVID-19: Providing critical services without adequate protections and pay

7 April 2020

By Jenna Harvey, in collaboration with the Focal Cities Team

AS cities across the world shut down to stop the spread of COVID-19, governments are depending on a set of essential workers to continue to go out and work: to keep the public fed and informed, to care for the sick and vulnerable, and to maintain a clean and safe urban environment, among other critical services.

In the Global South, many of these workers – such as street and market vendors, newspaper sellers, waste pickers and domestic workers – work in the informal economy. Their economic and working conditions were already precarious before the crisis. Now, without legal and social protections, they are working to sustain their families and ensure their communities have the food and basic services they need to survive – all at great personal risk.

Juana Corman Pérez sorts and collates inserts into newspapers on the street at dawn. Photo: Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage



From evicted to “essential” overnight

Although many informal workers are now considered to be “essential workers,” that was not always the case. Before the crisis, [ongoing harassment by authorities](#), vilification in the media, and discrimination from the general public was commonplace. Their organizations were often not recognized as stakeholders in urban governance and not consulted on decision-making impacting their livelihoods.

In other words, they were treated as anything but essential – despite the critical contributions they have always made to urban food, care, and sanitation systems.

However, the economic and public health emergency caused by COVID-19 has created a shift – there is a growing recognition among policymakers and the public alike that without these essential workers, entire urban systems could collapse. As a result, many cities have made exceptional provisions for some informal workers during mandatory lockdowns.

Read [This new crisis underscores old injustices in the informal economy.](#)

Dire need for safety protection and income support

Although the recognition of informal workers as essential service providers is long overdue, they cannot be asked to continue their work without adequate protections and compensation. Accounts from essential informal workers in two of [WIEGO's Focal Cities](#) shine light on the need for government and private sector action to ensure their physical and economic security as they continue to provide invaluable public services in a time of crisis.



Juana Corman, a union leader of FENVENDREL (Federación Nacional de Vendedores de Diarios, Revistas y Loterías del Perú), has been working to raise awareness of the needs of her sector during the crisis. She is pictured here picking up papers from the distribution center, saying, “The streets are silent, with only a few *canillitas*, like little ants, making our rounds and later going back to our homes to do our part as citizens and comply with stay at home orders.”
Photo: Juana Corman Pérez

Informing an anxious public: Lima’s *canillitas* keep the news coming

Juana Corman wakes at 2:00 a.m., as she has for decades, to travel across town to the distribution center where she picks up stacks of newspapers to sell. Normally, she would sell from her dedicated kiosk to passersby on Lima’s busy streets, but under Peru’s mandatory stay-at-home order, her work has changed. Now, she sells the daily paper house to house – delivering critical information to a city on edge.

During the crisis, Lima’s newspaper vendors, or *canillitas*, have received [special permissions](#) and praise from some of Peru’s best known journalists for the service they are providing. However, continuing their critical work during the crisis implies serious risks and costs. For example, public transport is difficult to access with drastically reduced metro schedules, and many

canillitas are forced to hire taxis to travel long distances to work, cutting into their already reduced earnings.

To provide *canillitas* with economic stability during the crisis, and to allow them to stay home if they are high risk, or if they become ill, Juana’s union has been advocating for the government to include them in the list of beneficiaries for the cash grants, or “bonos,” of 380 soles (or USD 110), which will be made available to vulnerable populations every two weeks during the crisis. As of April 5th, Juana’s union still did not know whether they would be included in the benefit.

The vast majority of *canillitas* are over fifty years old and urgently need access to protective gear – masks and gloves – to provide some measure of protection at work. While some of the publishing companies they distribute papers for have made efforts to provide these, others have not, denying any employment relationship or responsibility for the *canillitas*’ occupational health and safety. In response, some *canillitas* have been confiscating the advertisement section of the paper – a silent protest against papers who refuse to cede a fraction of ad revenue to protecting their foot soldiers.



Market porters from the organization FETTRAMAP sleeping outside the market to avoid crowded dormitories and to protect their families from infection.

While some of the publishing companies they distribute papers for have made efforts to provide these, others have not, denying any employment relationship or responsibility for the canillitas' occupational health and safety.

In addition to the responsibility of the publishing companies to recognize the responsibility they owe to their distributors, and provide protections accordingly, Juana calls attention to the need for government action to provide health resources for the canillitas if they were to fall ill. "The government should consider canillitas, because of their high exposure at work, to be provided priority treatment in health centers – the same as doctors, nurses and police."

Read about [COVID-19's impact on street vendors](#).

Preventing food shortages: Wholesale market vendors and porters work around the clock to keep Lima's food distribution networks running

At Lima's largest wholesale market, Santa Anita, informal market porters and vendors provide a critical link in the city's food distribution network. Every day, they receive and unload trucks full of produce from the countryside and sell it to groceries and vendors who fan out across the city to supply Lima's massive metropolitan area with fresh fruits and vegetables. And every day comes with the uncertainty of whether they are exposing themselves to the virus in the process.

Since the start of the crisis, EMMSA, the public company that administers the market, has provided some protection by adding hand washing stations, but has denied responsibility for the provision of gloves and masks to market workers, insisting



Patricia making her rounds door to door to collect household waste. "There are many of us *voluntarios*, but the government hasn't done anything to support us."

Photo: Los Rifados de la Basura campaign

Patricia is part of an army of approximately 10,000 waste pickers in Mexico City who work within the solid waste management system – often side by side with formal sanitation workers – but receive no pay, social security or protections from the city for their labour.

that the market workers' organization, FENATM (Federación Nacional de Trabajadores en Mercados del Perú), use their own funds to purchase and supply this equipment to their members.

FENATM has made an effort to protect members as best they can – purchasing cloth masks from a fellow market worker who is producing them himself, for example. However, with limited resources, the purchase of disposable gloves and other necessary equipment is difficult. Since the crisis began, several members have fallen ill, while others have stopped coming to

work for fear of getting sick. Others still are sleeping outside the market to avoid sleeping in crowded dormitories or going home and possibly passing the virus to their families.

The Federation continues to negotiate with EMMSA for protections and is attempting to appeal to the government labour inspection office to support the workers in their demands for a safe work environment, but so far, the only source of support for market workers is the Federation itself. As FENATM Secretary General explains, "We don't have holidays, social security, pensions, none of that. Each worker does what he can with his job. The market workers are confronting this onslaught alone. This isn't visible in the public sphere." When asked if the workers in his sector felt protected, he said, "We don't feel protected by the government, but rather by our own initiative."

Keeping the metropolis clean: Waste pickers fill critical gaps in Mexico City's sanitation infrastructure

Patricia Angeles has worked as a waste picker (or *trabajadora voluntaria*, as workers in her sector are called in Mexico City) for thirteen years. She is an expert at her trade – collecting household waste door to door and skillfully extracting recyclable material that she will later attempt to sell.

Patricia is part of an [army of approximately 10,000 waste pickers in Mexico City](#) who work within the solid waste management system – often side by side with formal sanitation workers – but receive no pay, social security or protections from the city for their labour. They earn a living only on the basis of voluntary tips from households and the occasional sale of recycled material.

Even if waste pickers like Patricia had the luxury of savings to allow them to stay safely at home during the pandemic, their absence would put one of the biggest sanitation systems in the world under enormous strain at a critical time.

So Patricia continues to set out to work every day at 5:30 a.m., armed with her cart and her vast experience, but lacking critical protective equipment. The crisis only deepens the urgency of unmet needs that Patricia has dealt with for the past thirteen years, principal among them a contract with the city that would provide her with income and social security, paid sick leave, and other employment benefits.

Protective gear such as gloves and a mask have always been essential for protecting Patricia against hazardous materials. Now, they are even more so as she must deal with material that could be contaminated with the virus (the Mexico City government has failed to provide even [formal sanitation workers](#) with this gear during the crisis).

“The pharmacies don’t have masks, there is no hand sanitizer. I understand maybe people want to protect themselves, but the shortages are bad because the things we need to protect ourselves and our families aren’t there.”

Patricia has had to acquire protective gear herself and it has been difficult because of runs on supplies: “The pharmacies don’t have masks, there is no hand sanitizer. I understand maybe people want to protect themselves, but the shortages are bad because the things we need to protect ourselves and our families aren’t there.” She has made do with homemade masks and sanitizer her sister is producing, and she takes her own soap to work every day to wash her hands.

Because of the social distancing guidelines, fewer people are coming out to tip Patricia for her services, and her income has fallen at a time when her costs are rising.

The crisis has presented new challenges, as well. Because of the social distancing guidelines, fewer people are coming out to tip Patricia for her services, and her income has fallen at a time when her costs are rising. Her daughter’s school has closed and Patricia is trying to ensure she can access classes online, but doesn’t have the resources, “It’s difficult for me because we don’t have a computer, and we can’t use the phone for the classes, so we have to go to a cyber cafe and spend 30-40 pesos (USD1.20-1.60) on internet, which I don’t have right now, because there’s no people [to tip].”

Read about how the [pandemic is impacting waste pickers](#).

Waste Pickers can not work from home!
They collect the city's waste and protect our health. Please help protect theirs.

Support them and fight COVID 19 together.

Please keep your organic, dry and sanitary waste in three separate bags for better handling.

#Donate gloves, soaps and hand sanitizers

#Please let them access the common water taps in your buildings to wash their hands

#Please contribute generously towards kits of dry rations (wheat, rice, lentils, pulses, oil, sugar, tea) as their family members lose work during the lock down.

In Pune, India, the SWaCH Cooperative has developed posters to help residents help waste pickers.

Government and private sector must take action to protect frontline informal workers during the COVID-19 crisis

As these workers’ stories show, companies and governments continue to download costs and risks onto informal workers who are earning them profit and securing critical services for their constituencies in a time of crisis. Where informal workers are continuing to provide essential services, governments and private companies must treat their organizations as valued partners in the emergency response – consulting with them on the needs of their members and ensuring these needs are quickly and adequately met.

Informal workers have always been essential. They made invaluable contributions to their communities before the crisis, they continue to do so now at significant risk, and they will form a critical part of the recovery. However, their ability to do so safely and securely depends on the degree to which they and their organizations are supported with measures including those mentioned in these accounts: adequate protective equipment, income security such as [emergency grants](#), social protections, and institutional recognition as critical stakeholders. This is an opportunity for governments to provide these essential workers with measures that always should have existed, and that should be kept in place after the crisis subsides.

Read [all the latest news and information related to informal workers and COVID-19](#) in our crisis information hub.

Mobilization and Organization



Neighbourhood women gather outside their homes to discuss the area upkeep and work issues in Ahmedabad, India.

Photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage

Overview

INFORMAL workers and their organizations are rooted in their communities and are proving that they can respond rapidly as the pandemic strikes. This section highlights the many ways in which MBOs are providing support to their members and communities and the key demands for policymakers arising from the ground.

At the time of the rapid assessment, many of the worker organizations interviewed had already developed a set of short-term and longer-term demands.

In the short term, demands which were common across all sectors included the **provision of PPE, emergency income support in the form of cash grants, and a moratorium on the payment of rent and utilities.**

In the longer term, demands centred on the **inclusion of informal workers in economic recovery packages and in the policy-setting processes that affect them.**

Sector-specific demands

DOMESTIC WORKERS

Short-term

- Decentralized information on social security registration
- No layoffs without pay – appeal to labour ministries and employer associations
- Negotiating with employers to avoid having to use public transport

Longer-term

- To be understood as care workers with the understanding that domestic workers should be included in care-focused economic recovery packages
- Recognition of domestic workers in national laws

See the [International Domestic Workers' Federation statement](#).

HOME-BASED WORKERS

Short-term

- Water point and soap in communities
- Lower interest rates and delay debt repayments
- Access to health care, free testing
- Access to emergency services in case of domestic violence

Longer-term

- Recognition in policies and laws
- Access to credit with no interest and tax exemptions for coops
- Recovery fund for informal workers that includes home-based workers
- Global brands take responsibility for all workers in their supply chains

See the [HomeNet International Working Group's statement](#)

(Left) Mokhele's physically demanding workday in a private home involves cleaning and cooking for her elderly employer and other family members in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

(Right) Viboonsri Wongsangiyim and her husband, Bang Aree, produce Muslim garments in their home in suburban Bangkok, Thailand. Photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage



STREET AND MARKET VENDORS

Short-term

- Water points and soap
- Safer market infrastructure/layout
- Essential worker designations for food vendors
- Exemption from utility payments and rent
- Priority attention in health centers

Longer-term

- Universal Health Coverage
- Support for the development of mutual social solidarity funds

See [StreetNet International's statement](#)



Informal worker Rebecca Paintsil selling bananas at Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

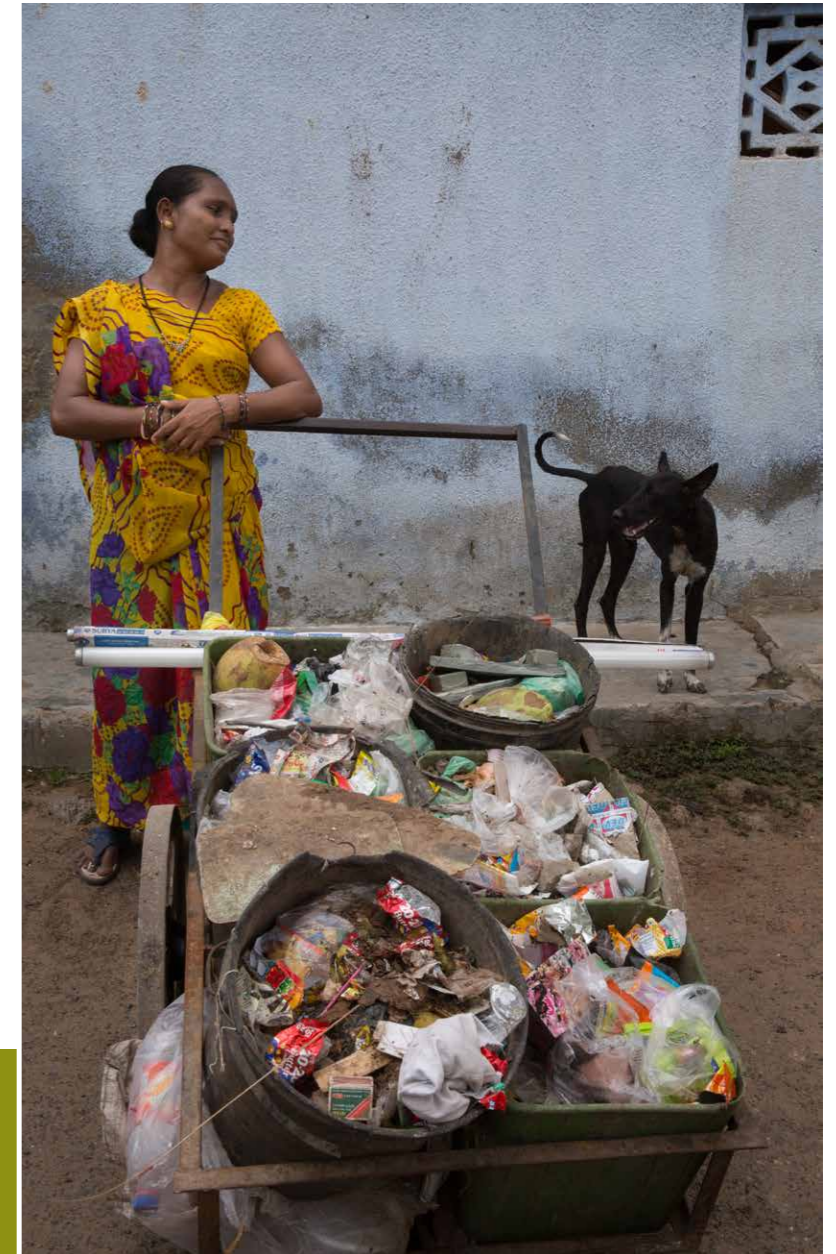
WASTE PICKERS

Short-term

- Proper segregation at household source to reduce risk
- Water points and soap in or near places of work
- Food rations

Longer-term

- Protection of existing contracts with municipalities
- Continued access to recyclables – access to landfills, household waste collection
- Formalization from the ground, strongly focused on OHS and payment for services



Sangeeta Ben walks her daily route working as a waste picker in an Ahmedabad slum in India.

Photo: Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage

A WIEGO Network Global Solidarity Platform

ON May 1, members of the WIEGO Network, who represent domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers and waste pickers on almost every continent, sent a [Global Platform of Demands](#) to decision makers around the globe, demanding that all policies and plans, during COVID-19 and afterward, recognize, protect and include these vital economic and social contributors.

Support MBOs provide to informal workers during the pandemic

IN response to the economic crisis informal workers are facing, MBOs are supporting their members through:

- **Legal advice:** Domestic workers' union in Mexico City has opened up channels to non-members dealing with work-related challenges.
- **Securing a livelihood:** In Ethiopia, Women in Self Employment (WISE) is supporting home-based workers to access orders from the public health system and from NGOs for making masks.
- **Cash assistance:** Where possible, MBOs are providing some funds to members who are dealing with unexpected illness or funeral expenses.
- **Savings groups:** In Uganda, home-based workers' groups that engage in joint savings used their savings to stock up on basic necessities when the lockdown was announced by sharing savings equally and providing additional support to those most in need.
- **Protecting older workers:** Waste cooperatives in Brazil and Colombia are supporting members to stay at home by giving them cash and food.
- **Food baskets/soup kitchens:** In Argentina, Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP) registered with the government to run soup kitchens in low income neighbourhoods. In Ethiopia, WISE is complementing

the government's distribution of basic foodstuff and sanitation products to the most vulnerable households among their 19,000 credit and savings cooperative members. In Ahmedabad, India, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the municipality developed [an innovative food delivery programme](#) involving street vendors and rickshaw drivers.

- **Crowdfunding campaigns:** A national solidarity campaign in Brazil was created for waste pickers and street vendors.
- **Registration for government schemes:** MBOs are supporting members to register for cash transfers, cash for work programmes, and food rations. In India, the [Self Employed Women's Association \(SEWA\)](#) is drawing on worker leaders to share information about government schemes while supporting the distribution of food rations and health kits.

MBOs, however, have said that it is beyond their capacity to adequately provide PPE for their membership. They are not able to provide cash grants to their members and therefore are advocating for national cash transfer programs to reach their members.

A WIEGO Network Global Solidarity Platform

May 1, 2020

PLATFORM (PDF)

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Informal economy workers' organizations across the global economy call on governments at all levels to partner with us on relief, recovery and resilience efforts that are emerging from the grassroots during this time of unprecedented crisis.

Informal Economy Workers Are — and Have Always Been — Essential Workers

Street vendors and market traders are a crucial link to food security and basic necessities, especially for the poorest segments of society. Waste pickers / recyclers provide sanitation and solid waste services that contribute to public health, lower landfill costs and a healthier environment. Domestic workers are on the frontlines of meeting hygiene standards and providing care, including for the sick and elderly. Home-based workers keep supply chains running and are sewing masks and medical coveralls for the frontline workers. Economies everywhere depend on our work.

The Global Economy Can't Recover Without Us

Lockdowns and other restrictions to contain COVID-19 are negatively impacting 81% of the world's 3.3 billion workers, according to [the International Labour Organization](#). Fully 61% of that global workforce — some two billion workers — are informally employed. In developing countries we make up 90% of total employment.

WIEGO Blogs on Mobilization and Organization

Innovation and unity: How home-based workers are adapting to the COVID-19 world

11 May 2020

By Leslie Vryenhoek, with files from Laura Morillo

FOR millions of home-based workers around the globe, their livelihoods didn't vanish when government-issued lockdowns were announced. Instead, both self-employed and subcontracted workers say those earnings began to disappear weeks, even months, earlier as buyers and markets—especially export markets—dried up. In Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, home-based producers [told WIEGO that orders had stopped coming](#) for their products long before a global pandemic was officially declared.

Home-based workers, most of whom are women, are among the world's most invisible and overlooked workers, and they are all too familiar with insecure earnings and isolation. Increasingly, however, they have been organizing. This crisis has underlined just how valuable that collective association can be for individuals—and for communities.



Television news covered the story of SUA members making essential masks during COVID-19.

Lucrative and lifesaving skills

In Uruguay, home-based workers acted fast to turn their valuable sewing skills into a lucrative venture—one that helps others survive, too. El Sindicato Unico de la Aguja (SUA) in Uruguay has been organizing workers in the clothing sector for more than a century. As soon as the first case of the new coronavirus was announced in Uruguay, the Women's Commission of the SUA, Rosita Iglesias, made the decision to start sewing reusable masks, Flor de Liz Feijoo, General Secretary of the SUA, told WIEGO's Laura Morillo [in this interview](#).

After consulting with the Faculty of Medicine and Occupational Health at the University in Montevideo to establish a design and criteria, they went to work. On March 19, SUA announced [in a television interview](#) that they had completed the first 30,000 masks for the Montevideo Police Union.

Orders from other institutions soon followed; the Judiciary first requested 6,000 masks to be used in trials and hearings, then increased its order to 20,000. Subsequently, the Montevideo Municipal Intendency asked for 20,000 masks then upped its order to 100,000. The Air Force contacted SUA and asked them to develop 300 kits containing surgical robes, masks, caps and shoes. And the Vice President of the Republic of Uruguay personally contacted Flor de Liz Feijoo to offer thanks and ask that masks be made for all parliamentarians. In addition, the SUA has donated some 3,800 masks for those who do not have the resources to buy one, such as children in shelters and those suffering from cancer or other illness.

The project has received considerable media attention. After SUA's work was broadcast on television, many home-based



Home-based workers in Uruguay are sewing masks for police and other essential workers. Photo courtesy of SUA

workers with the necessary skills called SUA to join in. By April 23rd, 60 homeworkers had been engaged across the country in making both washable and disposable masks. They are organized by geography and the work is spread, with one person in charge of receiving the orders and distributing them among the workers in each location.

Each homemaker makes a minimum of 100 masks per day, Flor de Liz Feijoo says. Since the masks are valued at 15 Uruguayan pesos each, they receive 1500 Uruguayan pesos per day—the minimum wage for the sector.

“Union organization is essential. For us, this crisis marks a before and after for SUA and homeworkers,” Flor de Liz Feijoo says. “Now it is being shown that homeworkers do important work—they can be suppliers of the state and companies, and they can receive fair wages.”

SUA is not the only home-based worker organization to quickly recognize that the world’s hunger for apparel was fast shifting to a need for protective masks. In Ethiopia, home-based workers are also securing orders from the public health system and from NGOs. In India, SEWA Mahila Housing Trust has [engaged home-based workers in making surgical masks](#) and medical gowns to help with the medical relief efforts. In Cambodia, home-based workers have been using social media such as Facebook to sell the masks they produce. But as this [story of a Thai home-based worker](#) demonstrates, this work is short-term.

The value of organizing in East Africa

In Kenya, where masks became mandatory as soon as the virus entered the country, home-based workers with the requisite skills—most members of self-help groups and cooperatives—have been producing masks for the informal market. Sold by street vendors, they make the required gear readily available in local markets.



With borders closed during the global pandemic, the sisal baskets sold by Machakos Cooperative Union in Kenya cannot be exported to markets - and the home-based workers who weave them cannot come together to dye fabric or ensure quality. *Photo: Leslie Vryenhoek*

Now, however, that production has halted, says Edwin Bett, HomeNet Kenya coordinator. However, it isn’t the disruption in supply chains but rather restrictions on gathering that pose the problem. Traditionally, women have worked in groups to dye the sisal and weave it into products. Working together is key to achieving the uniform colour and quality that export markets want, Bett explains, so for now the work is suspended.

Many producers, Bett says, went back into farming—either in the cities or by returning to their rural villages—because they knew food security would quickly become an issue.

Nonetheless, Machakos Cooperative Union continues to play a crucial role for these women workers and their households by helping them receive necessary relief. In fact, the cooperative’s registration system for its 81 primary societies and their thousands of members has been used to help the Kenyan government distribute emergency funds.

Organizing has proven just as critical in Uganda, where home-based workers say orders were already declining by the end of 2019, and they have been told orders might not resume when the pandemic is controlled; groups that have joint savings initiatives used those savings to stock up on basics when the lockdown was announced. Solidarity among members means the savings and stocks are shared to help those who are most in need. In Ethiopia, the organization Women in Self Employment (WISE) has augmented the government distribution of basic food and sanitation products to the most vulnerable households among its 19,000 credit and savings cooperative members.

That work is particularly important in a region where many women rely on the sale of home-based handicrafts. For these producers, COVID-19 hit fast and hard. Open-air markets closed; hotel gift shop sales disappeared with the tourists. Of course, schools closed too, which meant women had greater care duties to attend to, and less time to create their products.

But organizing of home-based workers has been gaining ground in Africa, too. HomeNet Kenya, a network of organizations, was formed in early 2019. That development was spearheaded by the Kenya Federation for Alternative Trade (KEFAT), which has worked for years in partnership with WIEGO to identify and help strengthen home-based worker groups of all kinds.

Machakos Cooperative Union is one of those strong organizations. Among its affiliates are groups of home-based workers who weave sisal baskets, mats and other products for local markets and for export.

Collective voice and innovative vision in Eastern Europe & Central Asia

Since the onset of this crisis, home-based workers in several countries have advocated for low-interest loans and a reduction in payments. This was true in Bulgaria. But when business began to decline precipitously, the Association of Home-Based Workers adopted an unusual strategy: they sent their demands to governments accompanied by gifts of their members' wares, to remind officials of just how important their products are to people, local economies and traditions. It worked.

The Council of Ministers, the President, and the mayors of municipalities soon agreed to provide small interest free loans with a five-year grace period as well as larger loans from the Development Bank to the self-employed. In addition, the government funded an initiative that would distribute basic food to the most vulnerable—with food provided by small-scale farmers—and legislated that large food chains stock items from local Bulgarian small producers. Since many home-based workers are also small-scale farmers, they can now earn extra income by selling their produce in this scheme.

“Unfortunately, COVID-19 had to appear for events and laws to occur, for which we have been (advocating) for years,” said Violeta Zlateva, President of the Association of Home-Based Workers, part of the Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers (“Unity”) since 2014.

The association is also an affiliate of HomeNet Eastern Europe and Central Asia (HNEECA), a growing network of national organizations that is part of the global movement of home-based workers. Another HNEECA affiliate is Hunarmand, an association of artisans in Uzbekistan. They share their Bulgarian counterpart's predilection for innovative solutions.

In Central Asia, home-based workers and artisans have been working together to revive traditional crafts. During the Soviet rule, they lost their identity. Now, with the help of local and central government, they are returning to these traditions to help create a livelihood for women.

In May, an annual Silk and Spices International Festival would have brought artisans from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Turkey, Mongolia, Russia and Europe together in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. But the event's organizer, Matluba Bazarova, regrettably announced that COVID-19 has cancelled the festival, which was to include bazaars, processions, demonstrations and round table discussions about the development of tourism and handicrafts.

But this group is undaunted, because they long ago secured support at the highest levels of government. The country supports those who produce crafts by giving them a 20-year tax exemption and Uzbekistan's President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, offered financial support to help Hunarmand create an Art Center in Bukhara.

That support and the group's innovative thinking has helped them shift from cancelled festival to spectacular public display. Bazarova has arranged artists and artisans to place images on the exterior walls of the museum through May.

Looking forward

The pandemic will end, businesses and borders will open, and supply chains will resume. But not all things should return to how they were before.

In this crisis, home-based workers and their organizations have proven to be inventive and adaptable. Their fast, forward-looking thinking has benefitted their livelihoods and made them invaluable partners in their communities. With sustained recognition and increased organizational strength, home-based workers globally could play a vital role in building a more vibrant, more just economy in the future.



In Bukhara, Uzbekistan, the work of home-based artists and artisans is on display to keep interest and spirits high during the lockdown.
Photo courtesy of HNEECA.

How cities can support informal workers: COVID-19 and beyond

14 April 2020

By Jenna Harvey, in collaboration with [WIEGO's Urban Policies Programme](#)

THIS blog expands on workers' demands for how city governments should provide them the support they need now, as one step in the necessary process of creating a transformed social contract for the future.

Decades of exclusionary planning is proving deadly for cities

The legacy of 21st century cities is fast becoming one of exclusion and vast inequality. In cities big and small across the globe, decisions about allocation of resources and space have been made on the basis of profit, not people — and the effects are proving disastrous.

As COVID-19 has tightened its grip on cities, the immense social and economic cost of this exclusionary status quo has been thrown into sharp relief. It is clear now that city governments are less equipped to address the dual health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 because of an approach to urban planning and policy-making that has marginalized and exploited the working poor for decades, even as cities reaped benefits from their labour.



The current situation has laid bare the plight of informal workers, [who account for the majority of urban workers](#) in most cities of the Global South and who do not have the luxury of living on savings, retreating to home offices, [or protecting themselves through social distancing](#). As the [ILO reports](#), because of the existing inequalities that shape the work and lives of the world's two-billion informal workers, they will experience the harshest health and economic impacts of COVID-19. But actions can be taken now to change that trajectory.

All eyes are currently on national governments to develop and deploy policies, such as income replacement measures, to support these workers through the crisis. However, less attention has been paid to the critical role that cities should play in developing responses to support informal workers during the crisis and in building a foundation for more resilient and equitable urban systems in the future.

Informal head load porter (or kayayei) Mamuna Mohammed carries bananas through Agboghloshie Market, a thriving central market for fruits and vegetables in Accra.

Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

However, less attention has been paid to the critical role that cities should play in developing responses to support informal workers during the crisis and in building a foundation for more resilient and equitable urban systems in the future.

How cities can support informal workers now

The right solutions cannot just be imposed from the top down. Membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers in WIEGO's network have ideas for how cities could take steps to support them now. To start, city governments need to recognize that their labour and insights are vital resources in the crisis response. As Lima street vendor leader Gloria Solórzano explains, "They have treated us like the problem, but we are the solution."

1) Do no harm

Police harassment, stigma and scapegoating, xenophobia and class-based discrimination, and workplace evictions are commonplace for many informal workers. Unfortunately, it is already evident that in many cities the COVID-19 crisis is being used as a pretext to double down on, rather than remedy, this existing abuse.

For example, while wealthy Ghanaians returning from abroad were quarantined without cost in expensive hotels, migrant workers fleeing Accra for their home villages in cargo trucks were [apprehended and turned back by the police](#) to a city where they have no means to meet basic needs during the lockdown. Informal workers in Delhi [have reported violent retaliation](#) from the police for working out of necessity, even when this work is permitted as an essential service. Police brutality has also been reported in Dakar, where long hours and transport restrictions make it difficult for informal workers to meet curfew.

As one street vendor leader, N'Dagou Dia, explained: "When you go [to work] you have problems coming home. All these people beat up by the police were informal workers who wake up early to work and go home in the evening."

City governments must put an immediate stop to this violence as a first order commitment during the crisis.

City governments must put an immediate stop to this violence as a first order commitment during the crisis. "Do no harm" also means the crisis must not be used as an excuse to place permanent restrictions on the use of space. Workers must be allowed back to their places of work – including dumpsites and public spaces – when the crisis is over, with more protections than before and a commitment to collaboration, not further repression. As Gloria Solórzano explains, "We hope that now they will help us to return, and that they stop the [previous] evictions. If they continue repressing us, we won't be able to recuperate economically."

2) Provide direct financial relief

Cities have a major role to play in getting cash into the hands of those who need it most right now. Even where income-replacement measures are being developed at the national level, municipal leaders have an opportunity to complement these measures, potentially reaching informal workers faster through actions that aim to both provide informal workers with liquidity and relieve debt burdens at the same time.

For example, national income replacement measures may take too long to reach those who need them, and they may leave out groups of informal workers whose earnings may, under normal circumstances, be only slightly higher than the income cut-off for assistance. Municipal governments could step in to fill these gaps by providing support more quickly and directly to urban informal workers through existing municipal registries or other measures.

Additional support measures should be used to complement income replacement, including a full moratorium on rents paid

As Lima newspaper vendor Juana Corman points out, cities must also be flexible about permit requirements and payments.

to the city at places of work, for storage sheds, market stalls or vending space, for example. As Lima newspaper vendor Juana Corman points out, cities must also be flexible about permit requirements and payments: "Renovation of annual permits must be more flexible in this time of crisis. They [the city] should not charge and should extend the validity of existing permits."

Finally, some cities have launched zero-interest loan programs for small businesses – these could be extended to cover informal enterprises, as well.



Organ players protesting for direct income replacement at Mexico City's central plaza. The sign pictured reads: "I can't stay at home, I have to obtain sustenance for my family."



Doña Sabina received support from the Street Vendor Project in New York City to adapt to social distancing and to share critical public health information with customers. Cities have a role to play in paying workers directly for these services as public health ambassadors. Credit: Street Vendor Project

3) Provide clear, accessible information

It's becoming increasingly obvious that mainstream guidelines for COVID-19 prevention are completely irrelevant and inappropriate for the vast majority of the poor in cities of the Global South. Cities have a key role to play in quickly developing guidelines that are accessible and appropriate for groups who do not have access to running water for washing hands, for example, or who live and work in crowded settlements where it is not possible to self-isolate.

Informal workers could play important roles as public health ambassadors, given their proximity to the communities that need this information, especially in the context of misinformation campaigns that are targeting the most vulnerable. Interviews with MBO leaders in WIEGO's Focal Cities show that they are using WhatsApp with member networks to combat dangerous misinformation, to share resources and to provide mutual aid and emotional support. Cities could build on these existing efforts by working with organizations of informal workers to disseminate critical information about prevention and access to resources.

Where informal workers are still operating as essential workers, they could be paid to disseminate information and supplies directly to customers. In Washington D.C., for example, street vendors were paid by the city to disseminate guidelines and hand sanitizer.

4) Provide necessary protections

Guidelines and information mean nothing if the working poor do not have the means to follow them. Years of lack of investment in basic infrastructure services in markets have left informal workers, who are continuing to provide essential services, in dangerous environments.

However, this is a temporary measure – in the longer-term, cities must invest in the provision of basic sanitary infrastructure in informal workers' places of work.

Hand-washing stations and other water points must be provided in workplaces where informal workers are continuing to work and within communities where access to running water is limited or non-existent. However, this is a temporary measure – in the longer-term, cities must invest in the provision of basic sanitary infrastructure in informal workers' places of work.

Cities must also ensure that essential informal workers – street vendors, waste pickers and others who are providing services to city residents on the frontlines – have adequate protective equipment and technical training on prevention.



"Veronica buckets" in a market in Accra, set up as a temporary measure for hand-washing.

5) Involve informal workers' organizations in the response

Informal workers know best what their worker members and communities need to stay safe. Many informal workers' organizations in the WIEGO Network have already mobilized to develop detailed [platforms of needs and demands](#) for cities to take into account in the crisis response — to protect both essential informal workers who are continuing to work through the crisis and those who have been asked to stay home and sacrifice their livelihoods.

This intelligence from the ground is an enormous asset to cities who are struggling to care for diverse constituencies — and who can't possibly have all the answers on what these constituencies need. For years, informal workers' organizations have been trying to convince cities to treat them as knowledgeable and adept partners in the city-making process. Now is the moment for cities to take them up on the offer, and to create a foundation for collaborative urban governance that will be essential for navigating the crisis and beyond.

The crisis is a moment for transformation

Cities face unique risks in the context of COVID-19 because of their large populations and density, which are and have always been conducive to spreading contagion. Beyond COVID-19, the risk of health and environmental disasters wreaking havoc on cities in the future will only grow with the advance of climate change. But the density and heterogeneity that characterizes cities also represents an asset for building resilience in the face of future disasters.

Informal workers already make cities more resilient by filling critical gaps in systems. Street vendors [promote food security](#)

For years, informal workers' organizations have been trying to convince cities to treat them as knowledgeable and adept partners in the city-making process. Now is the moment for cities to take them up on the offer, and to create a foundation for collaborative urban governance that will be essential for navigating the crisis and beyond.

[for economically vulnerable populations](#) who cannot afford to shop in formal supermarket chains. Waste pickers are often the only source of waste collection available for informal settlements where private or municipal collection trucks cannot, or will not, go.

Systems are more resilient when there are redundancies — that is, where one system can kick in where another one fails. The profit-driven capitalist approach to building and managing cities has repeatedly failed most people who live in them, especially the most vulnerable, and the informal economy has consistently “kicked in” to meet the needs of those left behind. This is glaringly obvious in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

This crisis can also be a moment for cities to think of transformations that begin addressing the structural inequalities that have left them so vulnerable to crisis in the first place. While mitigation may be the mode of action at the moment, cities will need to start thinking of medium- to longer-term actions to strengthen their resilience in the future. Informal workers should be considered partners in this process of rebuilding. Cities must consider how temporary support measures and dialogue platforms forged for and with informal workers during the crisis could be made permanent to create a more resilient and equitable urban future.

The profit-driven capitalist approach to building and managing cities has repeatedly failed most people who live in them, especially the most vulnerable, and the informal economy has consistently “kicked in” to meet the needs of those left behind.

Street vendor leader Gloria Solórzano summarizes the challenge facing her city of Lima, saying, “We feel protected now by the measures that we are following, but not by the economic strategies of the government; we’re waiting. We will feel protected when the lockdown ends, and the authorities show their intention to include us in the public policies of the city.”

How are Peru's street vendors facing COVID-19?

7 June 2020

By Ana Carolina Ogando, Olga Abizaid, with Carmen Roca and Edith Anampa

WITH a budget equivalent to 12% of its GDP, Peru put together the largest COVID-19 pandemic response package in Latin America. Its main intention was to provide some relief to the people most vulnerable during the pandemic. As of March 16, 2020, the country implemented a strict lockdown to combat the spread of the disease. Despite the government's willingness to address the health and economic crisis, informal workers are being hit hard.

The concrete challenges of adapting to the lockdown and accessing aid from the government have cost vendors needed earnings, while intensifying the stigma against these workers. Narratives that [dehumanize and blame street vendors](#) for spreading coronavirus are on the rise. These draw from historic negative perceptions of street vendors, and are all too often used to push for exclusionary urban policies, as was the case with the mass eviction in Aviación Ave the district of La Victoria in the lead up to the PanAm Games in 2019.

As the pandemic is used as a further exclusionary artifice, WIEGO Focal City Lima, along with workers and other partners, are calling for fairer ways to collectively find solutions to the challenges created by the pandemic.

In this Q&A, [WIEGO's Focal City Lima](#) team members Carmen



Roca and Edith Anampa sat with us to share reflections on the situation of street vendors in Lima, barriers to accessing the federal government's relief measures for these workers, recent advocacy efforts, and strategies for challenging narratives that serve to further penalize vendors during the pandemic.

Could you briefly tell us what is happening in Lima right now with the government's sanitary measures to control the spread of COVID-19?

LIMA TEAM: Since March 16th – and valid until June 30 – the government has implemented strict lockdown measures enforced by police and army patrols. We cannot leave our homes, except to go out for food, medicine or to the bank. The government has also worked to increase ten-fold the number of hospital beds that have a respirator. And while this was a

proactive and quick effort for a country like ours, the hospitals have already collapsed.

The government has spoken about cash grants to compensate vulnerable people for the loss of incomes due to the sanitary measures. Could you tell us about the government's proposal? Can street vendors benefit from this relief measure?

LIMA TEAM: Most of the people who we work with that make their livelihoods in public spaces have low incomes. While they are not in extreme poverty, they do live in conditions of poverty.

Initially, the government released a cash grant of about US\$110 for people who are in poverty and extreme poverty so that they would stay at home. The population could confirm their eligibility by using their national identity card

number in a government set-up webpage. The main challenge was that, contrary to the data on rural areas, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion did not have complete lists in urban areas to distribute the cash grant, because there was no more extreme poverty there. Only a handful of workers with whom we work have received this first cash grant.

Given the widespread understanding that own-account informal workers, including street vendors, were the ones most adversely affected by the lockdown, multiple actors, including WIEGO, and people in the media, pushed for extending the cash grant to them. The government responded with a cash grant for own-account workers called *bono independiente*.

However, to identify the beneficiaries for this grant, the government had to resort to multiple ministries' lists to ensure that potential beneficiaries were not already being covered by other government programmes (Ministry of Social Development); were not working in the private or public sector (Ministry of Labour); were not earning more than US\$330/month (Tax office and through the entity supervising banks); or did not have a public contract (Ministry of Finance). Unfortunately, the government's decision to use only its official data to define the beneficiaries limited the outreach of the cash grant, leaving many informal workers out.

Now, the government has said it will issue a universal family cash grant for households with no salaried family members, amounting to about US\$220 if paid in one installment or US\$110 if paid in two installments at 15 day intervals. The good news is that this process has started up. The government has also committed to distributing food aid to the poorest areas. Despite the fact municipalities received funds early in the lockdown, transparency issues have limited this outreach.



A customer waits at a distance in the Coop San Pedro market, where workers have self-organized to provide protections to customers and vendors, without government support.

As a result, many people can no longer abide by a quarantine due to financial and social issues.

What have been some of the immediate implications for street vendors in Lima?

LIMA TEAM: It's a very complicated situation. Depending on what they sell, the situation is different. Only those selling essential products, such as food, are allowed to work – be it on the streets or in markets. Among those selling non-essential goods, many are facing important losses or have switched to selling produce to be able to work. But even vendors selling food are facing challenges. In the area of Aviación Ave – still an important commercial hub for food – street vendors were evicted and had their merchandise confiscated and destroyed.

There are older merchants who are afraid of going out to sell in the streets and getting infected. They likely are some of the few who have small savings or can rely on family members. These workers are concerned about the growing difficulties of selling on the street with the authorities and the army chasing them away under the premise that they are the ones spreading the virus – the same is happening to the market vendors.

Municipalities are reacting differently. In Lima North, in the municipality of Carabayllo, vendors have been given a good space to work and are paying an affordable fee, whereas in the municipality of Comas, street vendors from a street market (paradita) were told their space was going to be sanitized, and instead saw their stalls bulldozed, despite the existence of an ongoing dialogue between the municipality and the vendors.

Street and market vendors also feel that they are facing unfair competition from supermarkets during the pandemic. While they can only sell essential goods, supermarkets can sell all sorts of products. And even if there have been cases of COVID-19 contagions among supermarket workers, they have not been labelled as “hubs of infection” the way informal vendors have been.

Could you tell us about street vendors' relevance in the daily life of Lima's different districts?

LIMA TEAM: Some leaders have mentioned that many workers go out to work, but that many of their clients don't have enough money to pay for the goods. And the street vendors can't stop handing out food because these are the workers' lifelong customers.

This reveals how important street vendors are for all citizens in the city. They guarantee food security for the poorest people. And, often, these vendors sell their products in locations that connect

people in the city because they are located halfway between the population that lives in peripheral areas and the markets.

What are street vendor organizations doing in response to the pandemic and the restrictions they face?

LIMA TEAM: In many cases, vendors have implemented innovative efforts to protect workers and the public. Some merchants are using chlorine and also practicing social distancing at the worksite.

But this is very different from what is being said in the media or even what the authorities are claiming. In both these cases, we only hear that workers are a serious source of contagion.

Vendors from La Victoria have also filed a complaint for abuse for the confiscation of their goods before the Prosecutor's Office. Some street vendors have mobilized to demand from the municipal government the restitution of their merchandise, and to attract media attention. However, authorities want to impose fines equivalent to nearly US\$700 to recuperate confiscated goods, which is impossible for workers to pay.

Market vendors, with Lima Focal City support, held a press conference on May 20 to demonstrate their willingness to share responsibilities in managing the propagation of the disease and demand their inclusion in the commission overseeing markets.

Could you share with us some of the work that WIEGO Focal City Lima has been doing in support of street vendors?

LIMA TEAM: We advocated with authorities for the Bono independiente and shared MBOs' lists of workers – including 10,000 names of workers from multiple sectors – with the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Development and Social

Inclusion and the Ministry of Environment to seek their inclusion.

We also launched a media campaign. Given existing mobility restrictions, media is shaping public perceptions, and can influence government decisions. Our goal is to demonstrate that street vendors are organized, willing to work with the authorities, and that they have implemented sanitary measures.

WIEGO's Media Statement: [Informal workers can help stop COVID-19 infection spread in Peru and throughout Latin America](#) [in Spanish].

We are working closely with various experts on street vending and markets to share experiences. We have also advocated to allow organized street markets (*paraditas*) to work in open spaces to reduce overcrowding in markets. And we are currently planning three events on Facebook Live and hoping the media can join. We see this as an opportunity to share good practices and begin a more informed debate on street vending.



In April 2020, worker leaders across occupational sectors joined hands to create the “Workers Combating COVID” campaign, which calls for a set of common and sector-specific demands, including: access to the cash “bono,” personal protective equipment, and dialogue and cooperation with authorities, among other demands.

Building a more resilient city together

Vendors in Lima, Peru, have a deep understanding of the risks associated with working on the streets and in markets during the pandemic. Many have had to navigate these risks as they continue to provide essential goods and services during the public health crisis. They have already been taking measures to reduce risk for customers and vendors alike and are advocating to be part of the solution.

But they are calling for the government to work with them as legitimate collaborators in finding solutions to keep critical food supply chains functioning, and ensure safety and security in the process.

As the municipality works toward building a more resilient city post COVID-19, it is essential to ensure the fundamental right to work. Informal workers depend on their daily earnings to survive – and the public depends on them to make food available. Hence, the right to work must reflect both the space to exercise this right and the implementation of health protocols to mitigate risks.

But this can only happen if there are municipal investments and coordinated actions with workers to ensure healthier, safer public spaces that serve all residents of the city. Street and market vendors in Lima have been calling for these investments for years. While the pandemic exacerbates deep-rooted structural inequalities in cities, it can also serve as a moment to rethink practical and appropriate interventions that involve the grassroots community and worker groups who are getting hit the hardest. Ultimately, it is an opportunity to re-envision cities where the needs of all citizens are placed front and center.

Read more about how street vendors globally are being impacted by the pandemic in [WIEGO's global news review and analysis](#).

TRABAJADORES COMBATIENDO AL COVID

@trabajadorescvd

PARADITAS
Oportunidad para reducir contagios en los mercados.

Planteamos: Alianza entre autoridades y vendedoras/es.

Beneficios

- 1 Seguridad alimentaria, abasteciendo a las familias.
- 2 Reduce aglomeraciones en mercados y están al aire libre.
- 3 Reduce desplazamientos por abastecimiento.

Municipalidad Provincial de Morropón-Chulucanas

CETRAFOR
Central Única de Autoempleados de la Victoria Rumbo a la Formalización

RENATTA
Red Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras Autoempleadas

CONFIAR
Confederación de Instituciones de ambulantes y afines de la región Lima y Callao

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

WIEGO
WIEGO
Wirtschaft und Erwerbsorganisation

FOS

Estudios y Cooperación
Fundación Estudios Sociales y Promoción de Actividades

SOLIDARITY CENTER

Image of the campaign advocating for partnerships between the authorities and street vendors' organizations for the establishment of street markets (paraditas) as a means to ensure food security, reduce overcrowding and the need to travel long distances to buy supplies.

Conclusion



Informal head load porter (or *kayayei*) Rebecca Litey sells fish in Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana.
Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

Conclusion

THE pandemic highlights the need for both **immediate relief** to protect informal workers and a **long-term economic and social plan** that integrates livelihood recovery with stronger and more equal labour and social protections for informal workers.

Many governments have responded to the crisis through emergency social assistance measures, which have been expanded to incorporate informal workers. While such measures are to be lauded, they are short-term and will be insufficient to curtail the adverse long-term impacts of this health, economic and care crisis. Active, longer term interventions that combine work security with social security for all are needed.

Five truths

The pandemic reinforces five truths about informal workers, their status within societies and the contributions they make to their communities and countries:

1. **Informal workers' livelihoods are incredibly vulnerable to shocks.** Low earnings, lack of savings and no or limited social protection led to an immediate fall into desperate poverty for most of the two billion people working in the informal economy. In the rapid assessment, food security emerges as a key concern for informal workers, along with the permanent loss of earnings.
2. **Public health measures must consider income security.** Unless other forms of income support are available, informal workers face no choice but to breach public health guidelines to earn an income and ward off starvation. This puts them at greater risk of contracting and spreading the virus, despite diligent efforts at prevention.

3. **Unequal access to healthcare services and social protection is a risk for us all.** Societies are only as well protected as the poorest and most vulnerable among them.
4. **Informal workers are central to all economies.** They are care workers, food vendors selling in low-income areas, home-based workers stitching masks, or waste pickers who clean up communities and reduce budgetary and environmental pressures. In some instances, informal workers have officially been deemed essential workers (while most others have not). Yet these workers do not receive the earnings and protections that reflect the value of these contributions.
5. **Informal workers are on the frontlines.** Governments are relying on informal workers' organizations and networks to share public health messages, extend cash transfer programmes and distribute food rations. Building stronger organizations of informal workers can prepare communities for future health and climate change crises.

As this coronavirus continues to challenge us globally and as countries experience second and third waves of infection (or new pandemics), the results from WIEGO's rapid assessment in March/April 2020 can shed light on the potential impacts of policies on workers' livelihoods and health. Ultimately, this can assist policymakers and informal workers' organizations to weigh the pros and cons of different public health measures and economic recovery plans to help determine what is best for informal workers.



Fundraising campaigns to help informal workers

Despite the challenges, informal workers in cities around the globe are providing essential services. But they need help. WIEGO has compiled a list of fundraising campaigns led by membership-based organizations of informal workers and their allies. [Learn more and give your support here.](#)

Annex 1: Rapid Assessment Interviewees

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Organization	City/Country/Region Represented
AAR AK SUXALI	Dakar, Senegal
Alliance of Indian Wastepickers	India
Asiye eTafuleni (AeT)	Durban, South Africa
Bokk Diom	Dakar, Senegal
FENATM (Federación Nacional de Trabajadores en Mercados del Perú)	Lima, Peru
FNRAP (Frente Nacional de Recicladores Ambientalistas del Perú)	Lima, Peru
FENVENDRELP (Federación Nacional de Vendedores de Diarios, Revistas y Loterías del Perú)	Lima, Peru
Global Alliance of Waste Pickers	Global
HomeNet Eastern Europe	Eastern Europe
HomeNet Philippines	The Philippines
HomeNet South Asia	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka
HomeNet South East Asia	Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, The Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam
HomeNet Thailand	Thailand
HomeNet Viet Nam	Viet Nam
International Domestic Workers Federation	Global
International Domestic Workers Federation	Africa
International Domestic Workers Federation	Asia
International Domestic Workers Federation	Latin America

Organization	City/Country/Region Represented
IHVAG (Informal Hawkers and Vendors Association of Ghana)	Ghana
Indian Institute of Human Settlements	India
Kpone Waste Pickers Association	Accra, Ghana
RENATTA (Red Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras Autoempleados)	Lima, Peru
Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)	India
SINACTRAHO (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar)	Mexico
StreetNet International	Global
SYGAS (Syndicat des Gargotières du Sénégal)	Senegal
Waste pickers in conversation with WIEGO representatives	Brazil and Colombia
Home-based workers in conversation with WIEGO representatives	Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia
Unión de Aseadores de Calzado	Mexico City, Mexico
Trabajadores voluntarios y desempleados de la CDMX, A.C.	Mexico City, Mexico
Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP)	Argentina

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies.

**Stay up to date on WIEGO's
COVID-19 response:**



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing