

How to support sanitation workers to claim their rights: lessons from other marginalised workers' movements



Research report



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Executive summary

Sanitation workers provide an invaluable public service, yet often work in conditions that expose them to the worst consequences of poor sanitation, their human rights to safe work unmet. A key element that explains the poor working conditions these workers face is their weak articulation as organisations or movements to be able to claim their rights. One strategy that is being considered to address this is to provide financial and brokering support to grassroots sanitation workers' organisations and representatives. To do this in an effective way, not generating dependence and meeting their needs, it is useful to learn from similar experiences of support to other informal or marginalised workers across different sectors. The main findings from each sector are listed below:

Waste pickers

- Like waste pickers, sanitation workers have some leverage as providers of an essential public service. They can claim recognition for their work being both worthy and useful within society.
- Awareness-raising within the community is fundamental, since it can decrease harassment faced by sanitation workers and help to improve the usage of latrines and disposal of hazardous solid wastes that currently put sanitation workers at risk.
- It is important to provide spaces where the community and the workers can come together to discuss and devise strategies for improvement.
- In the case of Brazilian waste pickers, in 2012 a state law was passed that gave a monetary incentive for workers who organised, promoting their inclusion into municipal waste management and improving their livelihood opportunities. Waste picking started to be seen as a strategy for the social and economic inclusion of people who are marginalised and very poor.
- Informal workers' organisations often need support in union training and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH). They have limited bargaining power and benefit from linking to larger organisations or trade unions.

Sex workers

- The greatest barrier towards organising when there is so much stigma attached to a profession is the reluctance to self-identify as having such a profession – which is a prevalent feeling amongst many sex workers. It is fundamental to transform the discourse around sanitation work as a legitimate and dignified profession if decent working conditions are provided.
- Sanitation workers' movements must strive for synergies with other social movements, in the way that Cambodian sex workers have found effective synergies with LGBT+ movements in the country.
- It is key to stimulate exchanges between established and emerging organisations, and to involve the workers in every level of decision-making. Capacity building must include strategies for workers to become leaders.
- Workers can be involved as both community members and trainers to spread messages of good practice in health and safety more effectively.

Migrant workers

- The cornerstone of the migrant workers' movement has been its ability to develop a base of workers who can rise to action on their own behalf.

- It is fundamental to involve workers in the leadership and management of their movements. Training programmes can be developed to improve management and leadership skills of sanitation workers, so that they can become relevant actors within their own movements.

Domestic workers

- The ability of organisations to form alliances at the national level with other trade unions and rights movements has been decisive in the sustainability of domestic workers' organisations.
- Raising support of policymakers and other influential actors is of vital importance for a workers' rights movement to succeed.
- International organisations can provide immense support to workers' rights movements by producing research to support advocacy and gathering data about workers and the value of their work. This support can then be amplified by these organisations publicising any findings at a local and international level to gain more supporters for the cause.
- Workers' movements can benefit from guidance away from simply talking about the abuse and injustice they face towards a discourse of constructive change.

Street vendors

- Informal workers tend to have limited access to credit and financial services. Support for acquiring equipment and basic infrastructure at affordable rates can help informal sanitation workers improve their health and safety practices, introduce mechanised or semi-mechanised technologies and even begin a process of formalisation for the formation of small enterprises.
- Governments can benefit from the organisation of informal workers. As a strategy to include sanitation workers in municipal faecal sludge management (FSM) and guarantee that their services are provided in a safe and adequate manner, it might be in the government's interest to give financial incentives to workers who organise.

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Introduction

Sanitation workers provide an invaluable public service, yet often work in conditions that expose them to the worst consequences of poor sanitation, their human rights to safe work unmet. A key element that explains the poor working conditions these workers face is their weak articulation as organisations or movements to be able to claim their rights. One strategy that is being considered to address this is providing financial and brokering support to grassroots sanitation workers' organisations and representatives. To do this in an effective way, not generating dependence and meeting their needs, it is useful to learn from similar experiences of support to informal or marginalised workers in other sectors. This document presents an overview of the main findings of a literature review of academic, policy and knowledge institution resources on the learnings that can be gained from experiences of labour movements and grassroots support organisations across various sectors of marginalised and informal workers. The marginalised groups analysed in this research are waste pickers, sex workers, migrant workers, domestic workers and street vendors.



Gangalappa, 50, (centre) is a sanitation worker who performs manual sewer servicing to clear residential blockages in Bangalore, India, 2019.

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It is possible to draw out interesting insights from general good practice in supporting marginalised and informal workers in their struggles for better working conditions and dignity. Representation of informal workers tends to be low because it is harder to organise informal-sector workers under one banner than formal-sector workers.¹ Traditional unions have tended to fail in addressing the needs of informal workers, since their primary focus has often been on wages and salaries. Meanwhile, informal work has several characteristics that make unionisation even more difficult. To begin with, there is no recognised employee-employer relationship, which leads to confusion of who the parties involved in the bargaining process are. Furthermore, informal workers tend to be extremely heterogeneous in characteristics, as well as physically dispersed.

The first barrier of grassroots organising of informal workers tends to be the lack of self-identification as workers.² Self-identification conditions the organising process, and the process of organising contributes itself to forming and strengthening the identity as workers. Many workers say that they started to think of themselves as workers only after joining a union and receiving identity cards, uniforms, or similar. It is also worth highlighting that the organising of self-employed workers in the informal sector has increased the recognition of their role in society and the local economy, but without links to trade unions, associations of informal workers are particularly weak to negotiate any improvement in working conditions and wages.³ Evaluations of interventions to strengthen worker representation show that organising worker representatives outside of existing unions, but maintaining links and synergies with them, had the most success in improving working conditions and wages.³

Furthermore, informal workers' organisations face many challenges both at a local and network level that go beyond recruitment of members. Internal challenges include capacity, representativity and sustainability, while external challenges include relationships with trade unions and the international labour movement, inappropriate or hostile institutional environments, competing vested interests, and the 'mindsets' of influential stakeholders.⁴ Experts recommend a set of strategies to overcome these challenges and incentivise the organisation of informal workers: tackling stigma by policymakers as workers who perform illegal and non-productive activities, promoting a united front between formal and informal workers' movements, and inviting representatives of informal workers' organisations to relevant policymaking and rule-setting processes.⁴



Muniraju, 37, helping Kaverappa, 54, manually empty a pit, in Bangalore, India. August, 2019.

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Experiences of supporting grassroots efforts to improve safety and health in informal economy workplaces in Asia demonstrate that using relatable and actionable strategies is fundamental to achieve the engagement and participation of the workers.⁵ Successful programmes in Cambodia, Mongolia and Vietnam provide very practical training tools such as action checklists, clear-cut illustrations for improvement points and photo sheets showing local examples of good practice. Furthermore, local volunteers were trained on to how become trainers themselves – extending the participatory training programmes to more workplaces in their networks and communities.

Other common strategies that have been implemented to strengthen informal workers' representation are as follows:³

- Support to help start and build the capacity of workers' organisations. However, it is important to recognise when to hand over the leadership and administration to the leaders elected by the membership.
- Building alliances or a platform for dialogue and cooperation. The importance of links to trade unions is emphasised as a mechanism to include informal workers into the legal framework that structures the collective bargaining regime and by organising an employing entity with which to bargain. Trade unions can also provide significant support such as use of premises and assistance during negotiations, as well as access to trade union education and training on collective bargaining and negotiation.
- Facilitating spaces in which representatives of organisations of informal workers can be included in relevant policymaking and rule-setting processes.
- Capacity building focused not only on workers but on training middle management to deal with workers' demands and needs.

However, success is often conditioned by context. For example, informal workers in three Indian states have been most successful in improving their quality of life by giving up on trying to bargain for better working conditions with their employers and instead demanding state-provided social benefits such as housing, education and healthcare, leveraging their political power.⁶ In states where the success of at least one political party depended on addressing the concerns of the poor, but where that party also supported economic liberalisation policies, informal wage workers were able to succeed in their demands for benefits.

Organisations that intend to support grassroots movements must consider that delivering a comprehensive package of support services has a greater impact in enhancing community-based socioeconomic change efforts than implementing individual support strategies. For example, successful environmental management movements in Bangkok received assistance in four areas: building community organisations, improving their access to financial resources, training on managerial and monitoring practices, and coalition building between communities. While each of these strategies addressed key, individual problems of the movements, their overall success was determined by the synergistic impact of the four strategies combined.⁷

Findings by sector

Waste pickers

Commonalities with sanitation workers	Differences with sanitation workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Not recognised as workers.- Stigmatised profession/caste dimension.- Supply essential public service.- Potential impact of community awareness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Waste pickers have greater incentive towards unionising by getting better sale prices.- Waste picking is infrastructure-intensive work (storage space).- Gender dimension to waste picking, largely female workers.

Figure 1. Commonalities and differences of waste pickers and sanitation workers.

Waste pickers are perhaps the worker group that shares the most similarities with sanitation workers. In countries like India, not only is this a caste-dependent profession, but there is stigma and untouchability surrounding waste picking.⁸ Nevertheless, both waste pickers and sanitation workers provide an essential public service for communities, that can be leveraged upon to gain recognition and visibility as a useful and worthy profession. Contrastingly, while sanitation work tends to be mostly male-oriented, women also tend to make up large numbers of waste pickers worldwide.

As shown by an EU study in Colombia, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Vietnam, waste pickers can greatly benefit from public awareness-raising and creating links with the wider society.⁹ Not only can harassment be decreased but waste sorting can be improved, limiting the presence of hazardous waste that put waste pickers at risk of direct harm. Similarly, sanitation workers are often affected by the poor usage of latrines, where wrongly disposed of solid waste makes their work more difficult and hazardous – with sharp objects such as syringes putting them at unnecessary risk of harm. Therefore, strategies that generate public awareness of the consequences of wrong use of sanitation infrastructure (e.g. through targeted storytelling and creating shared spaces in which links may be established between workers and the community), may prove useful in improving the working conditions of sanitation workers.

Experiences of support projects for enhancing the livelihoods of waste pickers in Colombia, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Vietnam have demonstrated that multi-level advocacy strategies are useful for gaining recognition of the workers. These projects have also proven to transform the workers' self-image, shifting their internal stigma to an image of self-worth, as workers who have a positive impact on society through their essential labour. Additionally, the creation of an Observatory of Public Policy on Waste Management in Colombia provided a space for joint discussion with community representatives, public authorities, private businesses, universities, waste pickers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives. It also contributed to spreading knowledge on the quality of life of these workers, which led to the organisation of events that brought together citizens and workers to discuss

how to limit harassment and improve waste sorting, ultimately contributing to the inclusion of waste pickers into municipal waste management systems.⁹

In 2012, as a mechanism to improve waste pickers' living and working conditions, Minas Gerais state in Brazil approved a law establishing a monetary incentive to be paid by the state government to waste pickers who were members of a cooperative or workers' association.¹⁰ This incentivised not only the formalisation of waste pickers, but also their inclusion in the state waste management system and guaranteed fair prices for the collected materials. It is worth noting that in Brazil, waste picking was seen as the best strategy for promoting the social and economic inclusion of street dwellers and other categories of marginalised people, much more than as a strategy for sustainable development due to its positive impact in municipal waste management.

An analysis of the activity of cooperatives and workers' associations in Minas Gerais demonstrated that although independent waste pickers were not formally represented by the leaders of waste pickers' associations, when acting at the political level, the movements presented their causes and demands for the group as a whole and not only for the organised workers.¹⁰ In all cases, the leaders who represent the waste pickers come from organised waste picking and, while performing the representative role, they stop contributing directly to the work that generates income for the group. In Minas Gerais, it became common to provide a monthly salary for professional leaders by governmental agencies and NGOs, however this is a terrain that must be tread lightly to avoid rent seeking and corruption.

An International Labour Organization (ILO) report states that within a group of waste picker cooperatives in India, almost all provided access to technical or legal training for their members, along with training on accounting and business planning, legal recognition, and technical skills related to waste management – but important gaps were identified in OSH and union training.⁸ Furthermore, many cooperatives had weak bargaining power and limited economic and financial capacities, so primary cooperatives needed to join or form cooperative federations that could support them in improving operations, accessing services and skills training and increasing bargaining power, in partnership with trade unions and other support institutions. A major challenge at the policy level was the lack of enforcement of laws and agreements that the waste pickers' cooperatives negotiated with governments.

An ILO and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) report (2017) recommends the following strategies for supporting grassroots waste pickers' organisations:^{8,11}

- Helping waste pickers' cooperatives engage in policy-making processes and multi-stakeholder debates on waste management, particularly through data collection and knowledge generation on the role of waste pickers and the inclusive waste management model.
- Supporting capacity building of members including on OSH, policy advocacy and cooperative governance and management.
- Helping to improve economic sustainability through financial support for securing equipment and basic infrastructure.

- Advocating for a better policy and regulatory environment for cooperatives, for example by putting pressure on governments that are favouring private companies for collection and recycling.
- Facilitating networking amongst cooperatives, and between cooperatives and trade unions, as well as helping to improve their bargaining and negotiation skills.

Sex workers

Commonalities with sanitation workers	Differences with sanitation workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not recognised as workers. - Stigmatised - Reluctance to self-identify as working in that profession. - Criminalisation of profession. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant gender dimension in sex work, mostly female workers. - Taboo of sex work, lack of a sex work discourse.

Figure 2. Commonalities and differences of sex workers and sanitation workers.

Although the unionisation of sex workers gained international traction in the Global North in the 1990s and early 2000s as an attempt to move away from the sex workers' rights groups of the 70s and 80s – which were criticised as only catering to small elites – it has been argued that unions have been forced back into acting as rights groups, focusing on lobbying on public policy, projects of legal reform of sex work, and provision of individual assistance on health, business and criminal matters.¹² Some of the issues of unionisation movements across the world have been:

- **Canada:** The activity on sex workers' rights has never transcended a city-wide or province-wide scope, resulting in multiple organisations that are poorly resourced and in competition with one another.
- **Germany:** Sex workers' unwillingness to be publicly identified as working in that profession through fear of stigmatisation has been a significant barrier against unionisation, especially since registration with public authorities is necessary to be part of the union. Therefore, Ver.di organisation has spent most of its resources trying to convince sex workers to join, rather than working for structural change.
- **The Netherlands:** Union membership has hardly been seen as necessary or helpful since many sex workers are self-employed businesspersons. Fear of stigmatisation and monetary loss by publicly identifying as a sex worker has also hindered organisation.

Overall, the greatest factor affecting the unionisation of sex workers has been the lack of a sex work discourse that tackles internal stigmatisation and increases self-confidence through legitimisation of the profession. Without it, it is unlikely that workers will be able to overcome the idea that the work they do is degrading.¹²

Considering the stigma faced by sanitation workers and the fact that many refuse to publicly identify as such, in some cases even hiding their work from their families, it is important that there is a well-developed sanitation work discourse that highlights the social importance of sanitation work so that it can be considered a dignified and worthy profession. This will need to be balanced where sanitation work is descent-based and forced upon those affected due to discrimination and lack of alternative livelihoods.

Sex workers in Cambodia have achieved great advances in their labour rights movements thanks to the distinct overlap in the country between sex workers' rights movements and the movements of LGBT+ communities in their pursuit of social inclusion, sexual/gender rights and destigmatisation.¹³ In particular, the Internet, social media and smartphone technology have changed the landscape of grassroots organising in the country, where marginalised populations are finding their voices, ending with some of the social isolation they experience. In line with this, in countries where social media usage is significant, awareness and appreciation campaigns such as the one led by Sweepers are Superheroes in Pakistan might prove to be useful in destigmatisation and improving self-worth of sanitation workers.

Aidsfonds NGO also highlights the main learnings from their programme implementation in sex workers' rights movements:¹⁴

- Providing infrastructure such as professional and safe spaces for sex worker-led organisations to operate is important.
- 'Sex workers know best' – stimulating learning exchanges between established and emerging organisations is key.
- Engaging sex workers in all aspects of decision-making and funds management increases impact.
- Capacity building for sex worker-led organisation needs to include strategies for sex workers to become leaders and to be confident in formal management roles.
- Training of sex workers as trainers in health and safety not only led to empowered sex workers, but an increased awareness of health and safety good practice.

Considering that sanitation workers often live in tight-knit communities that share the profession, the latter might prove useful in generating conscience of better health and safety practices by training a few key individuals among those communities.

Migrant workers

Commonalities with sanitation workers	Differences with sanitation workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Marginalised- Segregated into neighbourhoods.- Employed on short-term contracts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- No citizenship rights.- Language barrier- Great diversity of employment areas (garment industry, hospitality, domestic work, etc.).- Complete lack of network.

Figure 3. Commonalities and differences of migrant workers and sanitation workers.

Migrant workers face great challenges, since they are not protected by any citizenship rights, often have language barriers and are hired in precarious jobs, with low pay and long, unpredictable hours. Much like sanitation workers in Bangladesh who are segregated into distinct neighbourhoods, migrant workers tend to be isolated, almost ghettoised, in co-ethnic neighbourhoods where the absence of migrants from civic and political life is normalised.^{15,16}

Migrant labour movements have combined high-profile strategies such as national boycotts, public shaming campaigns, and national coalitions and alliances that have scaled up the power of local community groups. Strategies that have been implemented by NGOs include:¹⁷

- Provision of legal advice and other support in cases of worker abuse.
- Provision of training and setting up programmes for workers and their communities.
- Promoting and supporting data collection and research.
- Policy advocacy at the national and international level.
- Promotion of discussion spaces and national and international meetings, which support network-building.

However, critics argue that there has been a noticeable dominance of educated and professional elites as organisational decision makers within worker centres and NGOs in the migrant labour movement – excluding the populations that they claim to fight for and merely reducing them to a symbolic role, which has affected the capacity of the movement to effect change.¹⁶ In fact, the ‘cornerstone’ of successful migrant labour struggles has been the capacity to develop a base of workers who can rise to action on their own behalf.¹⁸

The methodology implemented by the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) to promote grassroots leadership in the struggle for the rights of immigrants in Oakland, California, stands out. AIWA has developed a systematic approach to community organising for migrant women workers, which combines seven steps that empower low-income, Asian immigrant women workers to be their own advocates for social change.¹⁶ The steps, listed below, create spaces for social learning and connection that help to overcome the isolation, competition and disempowerment faced by migrant workers, while establishing social links and promoting self-confidence:

1. Awareness of the programme.
2. Participation in community event.
3. Self-education.
4. Leadership training.
5. Committee involvement.
6. Organisational leadership.
7. Leadership in the community and the broader society.

As the women progress in these steps, or levels, they become more involved in strategic problem-solving and multi-stakeholder negotiations. Interviews carried out with AIWA members demonstrated that workers at the higher levels were able to express well-articulated views about the value of civic and political engagement and spoke with passion and authority about the migrant workers' movement. It is worth noting that AIWA's efforts have had a limited spill over effect, stressing how costly and time-consuming relational and participatory models of social movement organising can be.

Domestic workers

Commonalities with sanitation workers	Differences with sanitation workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Invisible (hidden in homes/hidden by night). - Not recognised as workers. - Not protected by labour law. - Marginalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant gender dimension, mostly female workers. - Significant link to migrant workers. - Dependent on employer for housing.

Figure 4. Commonalities and differences of domestic workers and sanitation workers.

Domestic workers have common struggles with sanitation workers. Both are subject to a significant power imbalance between employer and employee, with traditional low regard for the economic value of this type of labour and a lack of recognition as a legitimate form of employment.¹⁹ Their invisibility, as workers hidden away in homes, relates to the invisibility of informal emptiers who work under the cover of night.

However, there is a noticeable gender dimension to domestic work, since the vast majority are women. There is also a strong link to migration, with millions of women worldwide migrating from rural areas towards cities and from lower to higher income countries to work as domestic workers.²⁰ Further still, domestic workers are made more vulnerable by depending on their employers for housing, making the consequences of losing their employments more severe than for other worker groups.

Due to the prevalence of domestic work in Latin America, there is a tradition of trade union organisation among domestic workers in the region. Although domestic workers' organisations from the beginning complemented trade union activities with advice on a range of practical issues and learning opportunities, many organisations remained local or disbanded after a short time.¹⁹ A decisive factor for organisations'

success proved to be their ability to form alliances at the national level with other trade union organisations and/or the women's movement, creating synergies with other rights movements. Furthermore, the support of allies in governments and parliaments who expressed solidarity with the movement and took up demands for the reinforcement of the employment rights of domestic workers proved to be fundamental.

In 2011, the world's domestic workers achieved a major step towards improving their worker and human rights: representatives of government, employers and trade unions, meeting at the International Labour Conference in Geneva, voted for a new convention to protect the world's domestic workers. WIEGO highlights the key lessons learned from domestic workers' struggles and the support they provided to the movement.²⁰

- The organisation played many roles along the way, helping to strategise, plan and provide practical support for the developing network.
- They identified groups of domestic workers around the world through the organisation's contacts among informal workers' organisations, helping to expand the network on an international level and providing communications support.
- They placed a strong emphasis on producing research to support advocacy, gathering statistical and other data on domestic workers and the value of their work. All findings were publicised through the websites of WIEGO and other key organisations, positively impacting movement-building efforts and gaining more supporters for the cause.
- They guided domestic workers' away from simply talking about the abuse and injustice they face towards winning interest and support based on the real possibilities for constructive change.

Street vendors

Commonalities with sanitation workers	Differences with sanitation workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not regarded as workers (by selves and others). - Competition makes it difficult to organise. - Time spent on organising means loss of income. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Issues of use of public space. - Face exploitation by moneylenders and wholesalers.

Figure 5. Commonalities and differences of street vendors and sanitation workers.

Much like sanitation workers, street vendors are rarely regarded as workers by themselves and the wider society. Efforts to organise are hindered by competition amongst themselves, and they are vulnerable to competition with the formal sector as well. Furthermore, any time spent on organising is time where productive activities cannot be carried out, which thus becomes a loss of income.²¹

A study found that for street vendors, family and work duties often led to workers unaffiliating from unions, even within members that had been significantly active and involved as leaders of the movements.²¹ For a person barely earning enough to cover rent and support children, meetings that detract from work and childcare represent a substantial cost. The study proposes that governments can benefit from encouraging organisations where unorganised people generate negative externalities and punitive enforcement is materially and politically costly.²¹ This case might be extended to sanitation workers who, by providing faecal sludge management services in poor conditions and not complying with safe disposal practices, may end up generating public health issues that affect not only them but the wider population. Therefore, the study recommends brokering with the state to give financial incentives to informal workers that organise. Once workers organise, governments can negotiate with a group of representatives, instead of having to chase down thousands of individuals, thus incurring in lower enforcement costs.

However, an important dilemma is raised: leaders of street vendor movements lose their incomes by becoming leaders. Governments may offer incentives for individual vendors to become leaders, but this can prove to be a slippery slope, generating opportunities for leadership as well as for rent-seeking and power grabbing.

Experiences of street vendors in Kolkata, India, highlight the importance of gaining support from all sections of society in order to achieve long-term change.²² The Hawker Sangram Committee launched a multi-pronged strategy that involved soft strategies and civil disobedience movements. Soft strategies employed included seminars attended by academics and journalists to discuss issues such as unemployment and economic vulnerabilities and launching campaigns amongst clients to gain supporters. The civil disobedience movements encompassed protest rallies across the city and blockading key road junctions through sit-in demonstrations.

Experiences with street vendors in Mumbai highlight the importance of involving insiders in the struggle for labour rights.¹ Not only can insiders understand the problems associated with the profession and devise solutions to them, but they can directly associate with other workers and can more easily gain their fellow workers' trust.

Indian street vendors face important barriers to accessing credit, and are grossly exploited by moneylenders and wholesalers, leading them into debt-traps. To address this, some unions have begun savings and credit groups to provide low-cost credit to vendors, some even providing micro insurance services. Furthermore, they have achieved the creation of a cooperative credit society registered under and financed by the Maharashtra State Government, which provides loans (personal, educational and professional) to membership-based organisations – with the member-based organisations acting as intermediaries between street vendors and the credit cooperative.

Some trade unions have launched strategies to provide upward mobility and restrict the number of vendors entering the market, especially by proving credit and social security programmes, and by encouraging the children of member vendors to study

and find formal sector employment or licensed trades, so that they do not need to resort to street vending as their livelihood.¹

Successes of the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) have been due to its capacity to build cohesion among members, ensured by attending to vendors' calls, supplying them with requisite documents, arranging for material resources, providing them with legal aid and, most importantly, by building their capacities through awareness, skills training and exposure visits.²³ Furthermore, their networking efforts were reflected in partnerships with pro bono lawyers to fight for street vendor issues, researchers who have helped to provide evidence to frame issues and feed into public debates, and administrators and policymakers who are sympathetic to the cause.



Senzi, 32, member of an eThekweni Municipality sewage blockage crew at work in Durban. Senzi's team uses flexible rods to clear blockages in pipes leading to the main sewer lines in South Africa. March, 2019.

WaterAid/Nyani Quarmyne

Conclusions

Valuable lessons can be learned from global experiences supporting grassroots struggles for better work conditions of marginalised and informal workers. Some insights were recurrent across several of the sectors studied, while others, despite being quite sector-specific, may be effectively translated to the case of sanitation workers.

- **Importance of self-identification and constructive discourse.** In order for workers to organise, it is essential that they identify themselves as workers, as well as valuable members of society, who contribute positively with their work. This can be achieved through physical strategies such as union membership cards and uniforms, or by developing a constructive discourse around sanitation work. This discourse can build upon the fact that sanitation workers provide an essential public service that is socially beneficial.
- **Necessary brokering between workers' organisations and policymakers and political institutions.** International institutions need to support networking efforts, interlinking representatives of sanitation workers' organisations with policymakers and other influential actors that can help make their voices heard. Knowledge generation on the role of sanitation workers and inclusive municipal FSM can be advantageous.
- **Simple is better.** Actionable and relatable materials and involvement of community members and workers by training them to become trainers themselves can have far-reaching influence among vulnerable workers.
- **All-around capacity building.** Informal workers can greatly benefit from targeted capacity building in areas that transcend wages, including OSH, entrepreneurial skills, union and bargaining training, as well as training of employers to deal with workers' needs.
- **Context-based solutions are essential.** There is no one-size-fits-all model for supporting informal workers in their efforts. All solutions must adequately consider the specific context, especially in a sector as regionally diverse as sanitation work, in which cultural factors can be aggravating in certain regions and countries.
- **Strive for synergies.** Synergies can occur between support services provided to workers' organisations, or between broader workers' rights movements within a country or a region. It is important to look for synergies of efforts in order to increase impact.
- **Communities need to be involved.** Considering the potential impact that community awareness can have in decreasing sources of risk and harassment for sanitation workers, it is vital to implement strategies such as storytelling campaigns and creating shared spaces in which the community and workers can interact with each other and come up with approaches for improvement.
- **Organisations need networks to thrive.** Establishing links between emerging organisations and established organisations and trade unions, or the creation of association or cooperative federations, can increase their bargaining power. These links can also provide them with a location for meetings and access to advanced training, among other important tools.
- **Informal workers need financial support.** These workers tend to have limited access to credit and financial services. Support for acquiring equipment and basic infrastructure at affordable rates can help informal

sanitation workers improve their health and safety practices, introduce mechanised or semi-mechanised technologies and even begin a process of formalisation for the formation of small enterprises. Furthermore, organisation is a time-consuming process that decreases the number of hours that workers can spend on generating income, so solutions must be devised – for example, in the form of governmental financial support to promote the organisation of workers.

- **Workers know best.** Sanitation workers need to be leading their own movements and all aspects of decision-making and funds management. Training programmes can be developed to improve management and leadership skills of sanitation workers, so that they can become relevant actors within their own movements.
- **Movements must strive for constructive change.** It is important to keep workers' organisations on a path towards constructive change, rather than simply complaining injustices and abuse without providing actual solutions.
- **Governments can benefit from the organisation of informal workers.** As a strategy to include sanitation workers in municipal FSM and guarantee that their services are provided in a safe and adequate manner, it might be in the government's interest to give financial incentives to workers who organise. By motivating them to become a single entity with which the government can broker, rather than chasing down individuals who are breaking the law or generating negative externalities with their work, states can benefit from the organisation of sanitation workers.

Despite the efforts of NGOs, civil society and governments to improve the conditions of sanitation workers, the effect has so far been small. However, as we have seen in other sectors, there is a lot that can be done. By giving visibility to the struggles of sanitation workers, helping to give them the recognition they deserve, these workers can be empowered to rise to action and begin to join forces. If sanitation workers receive support in capacity building, networking and advocacy, they will be able to build stronger movements and lead the way towards societal and governmental behaviour change.



Inoussa, 48, manual emptier, inside the pit, emptying a family latrine, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, July 2019.

WaterAid/ Basile Ouedraogo

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Front top: Julius, 49, sanitation worker, standing outside a latrine after emptying and cleaning it, Kigambon-Umawa, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, June, 2019.

Front bottom: A sanitation worker putting on gloves to protect themselves while servicing sewers in Delhi, India, 2019.

Back bottom: A sanitation worker cleaning the female section of the public toilets. Azampur Bus Stop, Uttara, Dhaka. November, 2019.

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