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A Just Transition for Workers in Informal Employment

In June 2023, the International Labour Conference will hold a General Discussion on a “**just transition**”. This is an opportunity for workers in informal employment to be included in the just transition framework by the International Labour Organization (ILO). For the ILO, a just transition means greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive, creating decent work opportunities, and leaving no one behind.

The commitment to leaving no one behind must include workers in informal employment – more than two billion workers who make up 61% of the global labour force.

Workers in informal employment are found at multiple points in global and national supply chains that will be impacted by climate change and labour policies aimed at a just transition. The transition framework must consider labour policies and social protection for workers in informal employment, who require a seat at the table to negotiate and bargain collectively.

The membership-based organizations of workers in informal employment must be involved in decision-making and planning processes and policies on a just transition. They are already engaging with national governments to seek meaningful inclusion. For example, national waste picker organizations in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, India, Kenya and South Africa are supporting waste pickers in their transition from dumpsites to doorstep materials collection. These efforts would be enhanced through a clearer mandate from the ILO to integrate the risks faced by workers in informal employment as they grapple with climate-induced disasters as well as climate-related policies and investments.

Some ways in which a just transition framework can be more inclusive are:

- Recognition of the work of workers in informal employment and their tremendous current and potential contributions to reducing carbon emissions, as well as to mitigating the impacts of climate change.
 - Introducing a mix of social protection measures, including social assistance and social insurance. These would function as climate-change adaptation mechanisms, enabling workers in informal employment to face climate disasters and resultant job losses or displacement.
 - The ILO can support member states to extend safe and healthy working conditions as a fundamental principle adopted in 2022 so that they consider the impact of the climate crisis on the wellbeing of workers in informal employment.
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Extreme weather conditions, rising pollution and lack of access to energy and water will impact workers with low and unstable incomes most severely because, for most, their homes or public spaces are their workplaces. Informal employment is characterized by low earnings and exclusion from occupational safety and health protocols. An inclusive just transition framework would support the legal recognition of workers in informal employment – including waste pickers, street vendors and market traders, home-based workers, and domestic workers – in labour and social protection regulations.

Though more men than women are in informal employment, women workers are more likely to be informally employed than men who work across sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Workers in informal employment serve as climate change mitigation agents in many ways.

Mitigation is a human intervention that reduces the sources of greenhouse gas emissions (to prevent the planet from warming to more extreme temperatures) and/or strengthens the sink, which is any natural environment able to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Some examples are: Recycling done by waste pickers contributes to reducing carbon emissions as well as pollution. Many home-based workers make goods with environment-friendly raw materials, reuse discarded materials, and are involved in the sorting of electronic and other waste. Street vendors and market traders make food more accessible and affordable in low-income areas and have a comparatively low carbon footprint. Domestic workers are the backbone of care systems and, in the absence of adequate public services in many regions, they directly shoulder the care work brought on by more frequent and severe climate disasters and environmental pollution.

Rising incidents of heat-related stress and floods due to climate change, coupled with a lack of basic services, are harming workers' wellbeing and income security. Workers in informal employment are already facing the effects of higher energy and commodity prices, which not only reduces their households' incomes but can also limit their access to paid work.

Support in adapting to climate change – and reducing the impact of heat and floods on workers in informal employment – is needed to protect their incomes and livelihoods. **Adaptation** refers to changes in processes, practices and structures to moderate potential damages associated with climate change.

The costs to low- and middle-income member states of climate disasters and structural transformation as part of a just transition is impossible to bear alone. The ILO should play a role in the global fund for “loss and damage” (providing financial assistance to poor nations stricken by climate disaster) that was agreed on at the recent COP27 UN climate summit in 2022. The ILO is best placed within the UN system to highlight the prevalence of informal employment in these countries' labour markets and understand the implications this has on financing an inclusive just transition.

Without a just transition, the jobs that the green economy promises will not benefit workers in informal employment. For a just transition, the move towards a more environmentally sustainable economy must generate and preserve decent, inclusive jobs, and workers impacted by such shifts need to be integrated into new systems or retrained into other occupations.

Inclusion in just transition processes should include advocating for the use of public finance for investment in green infrastructure that is sensitive to gender equality and the realities of workers in the informal economy.

The upcoming General Discussion on a just transition also provides an opportunity for workers to collaborate in assessing and disclosing climate-change-related risks and opportunities by status of employment, sector and gender, and experimenting with solutions. Cross-sectoral international organizing may add considerable strength to this work on just transition.

Questions in formulating contributions to just transition processes could include:

- How are climate change and related pollution issues affecting your work?
 - How are the policy and investment responses to climate change and pollution affecting your work?
 - In what practical ways can workers engage with the just transition debate and action at national and global levels?
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About StreetNet International

About StreetNet International is a global organization of committed informal traders, with the goal to promote and leverage an autonomous and democratic alliance of street vendors, hawkers, and cross-border traders in over 50 countries. Visit www.streetnet.org.za.



About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing
