



STREETNET INTERNATIONAL

Street Vendors' Barometer Project

**Monitoring and Documenting the Conditions of
Street Vendors and Market Traders**

Executive Summary

Buenos Aires, Argentina



About the Barometer Project

It is estimated that **informal employment accounts for 58% of total employment, comprising nearly 2 billion workers**. Street vendors and market traders are an important part of the informal economy, providing essential goods and services and making significant economic and social contributions. However most work in precarious conditions with unstable incomes, a lack of social protection, poor health and safety protections, and at risk of violence and harassment. Their work goes unrecognised in official statistics and policies. In 2015, the **ILO adopted Recommendation 204 to guide governments for transitioning informal economy workers into the formal economy while safeguarding livelihoods and rights**.

In 2024, Street Net International (SNI), together with the Global Labour Institute (GLI) launched the **Barometer Project** to monitor and document the conditions of street vendors and market traders, including livelihoods, characteristics and key issues, and to inform SNI on key thematic areas with particular reference to opportunities for the formalisation of informal employment. The project also set out to strengthen the research and monitoring capacity of SNI affiliates. Framed within the ILO Decent Work Agenda, the project set key benchmarks to frame monitoring including social dialogue, protection from violence and harassment, right to work without restrictions, access to social protection, formalisation opportunities and decent employment conditions.

Two cities were selected as pilots for the Barometer Project - Harare, Zimbabwe, in partnership with the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA) and Buenos Aires, Argentina, in partnership with the Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (UTEP). This report provides an executive summary of findings from work undertaken in **Argentina**.



Picture of participants of Barometer Project inception meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2024.

Methodology

The Barometer Project began with an inception meeting in November 2024 in Harare, Zimbabwe facilitated by the GLI. Representatives from SNI and participating affiliates discussed the project's goals, approved research tools, and agreed priorities and workplans. The study methodology included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data through questionnaires, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and stakeholder interviews. Research tools were drafted around six project benchmarks, then refined through training, field observations, consultations with UTEP, and testing.

Fieldwork was conducted in **March 2025 by a team of eight local volunteer researchers nominated by UTEP, all of whom were vendors and activists familiar with the sector.** Additional guidance and data analysis was supported locally-based research partner **Universidad Latinoamericana de las Periferias (ULPE).** Before beginning data collection, the survey team participated in a training workshop which provided the opportunity for review and testing of the questionnaire survey and enabled the team to develop the skills and experience to conduct the research. The survey questionnaire was designed with a mix of open-ended and semi-structured questions.

The survey was conducted across **18 markets within Buenos Aires. Markets were ranked by vendor size to proportionally allocate surveys across a target sample of 500, ensuring representation across genders, ages, and types of vendors. A total of 415 validated surveys were collected from 19 locations, covering vendors selling diverse goods in both informal and formal markets.** To complement surveys, five focus group discussions were held, including a women-only group and one for migrant workers, to explore workplace challenges, industry issues, and ideas for improvement in more depth. Seven confidential in-depth interviews with vendors from varied setups provided detailed insights into daily incomes, costs, employment relations, and livelihoods. Supplementary stakeholder interviews gathered expert perspectives on key issues and potential improvements in the informal economy. Data analysis involved quantitative and qualitative methods, and was supported by local research partners.

Informal Street Vending and Market Trading in Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, is part of a metropolitan area with around 14 million people. Argentina, once among the world's wealthiest countries, has faced economic instability since the late 20th century, including high inflation and a major financial crisis in 2001 that led to mass unemployment, rising poverty and an expansion in the informal economy. Since 2023, President Javier Milei has implemented austerity and deregulation policies, cutting subsidies and social protections, which have worsened poverty and inequality. Economic conditions are deteriorating, and the informal economy is growing.



Workers in public spaces members of UTEP in June 2025 |

Source: [FETEP-UTEP Facebook page](#)

The informal economy is often referred to as the “**popular economy**” in Argentina, highlighting systemic economic failures to provide decent formal jobs. Popular economy workers are those excluded from formal labour markets who create their own livelihoods through informal, often self-managed, community-based work, including cooperatives and self-employment. **This sector is estimated to include at least 6 million people, or about 30% of the active population.**

Many workers enter the informal vending economy due to the lack of formal job opportunities and economic necessity, often driven by crises, inflation, austerity, or life changes such as migration or job loss. Some supplement formal earnings with informal work, while others rely on it entirely.

Women and migrants are especially represented in this sector, often facing barriers to formal employment, including childcare challenges and discrimination. Many women, including single mothers, turn to street vending as a means to support their families. **For many workers, informal economy work offers more than just income—it provides self-management, community support, and collective solutions to shared challenges. For some, participation in the popular economy is a way of life, offering social and educational opportunities alongside economic survival.**

Worker Organisation

The **Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP)** is a national union representing Argentina's informal or "popular" economy workers. It evolved from various grassroots movements, cooperatives, and associations formed in response to exclusion from formal employment and rural displacement since the early 2000s. In 2019, these movements came together within UTEP. UTEP organizes workers by productive sectors reflecting the cooperative and self-managed nature of work. **The union currently has around 500,000 members nationwide and was officially recognised by Argentina's Ministry of Labour in 2021.**

UTEP's core mission is self-organization and defending the rights of workers excluded from formal labour markets. It advocates for systemic recognition of popular economy work as a third pillar of Argentina's economy. The union's political vision includes **eight key objectives: decent work, supplementary social wages, union recognition, negotiation mechanisms with the state, unity with formal trade unions, community-based popular economy, popular public policies, and building people's power to resist exploitation.** UTEP has prioritised strengthening unity within and across sectors to better coordinate strategies and negotiations. It is also actively building stronger links with formal trade unions aiming for unified programs that bridge informal and formal economy workers.

Key Findings

Workforce Characteristics

Vendors work in various settings – mobile, public spaces, informal and formal fixed markets – though are mainly found in informal fixed markets and public spaces, with women more often in fixed markets and men in mobile vending. Some rely on informal vending to supplement insufficient pensions or formal wages, especially amid economic challenges. The majority sell clothes and shoes, with smaller numbers selling food, crafts, electronics, and other items.

The workforce is diverse in age and experience, although many vendors are over the age of 40. There are also a significant number of newcomers, often young and drawn by limited formal employment opportunities. **Women constitute over half of vendors, reflecting higher female participation in the economy.** Many vendors live near their workplaces in working-class or informal neighbourhoods and rely heavily on public or active transportation. Education and training levels vary, with gender norms influencing access to skills development and work opportunities. **Most have primary or secondary education; very few have higher education.** Only about a quarter have received job-related training, often gender-segregated by skill type. Tenure of vendors varies widely, with many new entrants but also a significant portion with long-term experience, showing informal economy vending as a both short- and long-term livelihood. **About half of the vendors are locals, with many migrants also from neighbouring countries** who often turn to informal vending due to barriers in formal employment. **Worker organisation remains limited, although progress that has been made shows the potential of collective organisation for improving conditions.**



Street vendor in Argentina in 2024 | Source: [FETEP-UTEP Facebook page](#)

Livelihoods

Vendors use a variety of trading setups, with many selling directly from the ground on blankets, which requires little investment but offers little security or protection. Others use tables or fixed stands, which usually reflect greater stability and resources. Women are more likely to work in these less secure and lower-capital positions, while men often have access to better infrastructure and mobility. Most vendors do not pay for their trading spaces, though those working in formal markets are more likely to pay fees. **These payments are collected by a mix of local government agents and informal actors, resulting in fragmented and sometimes exploitative arrangements.**

Formal registration and permits are rare among vendors, especially outside of formal markets. Many who report being registered are actually part of informal or provisional systems, showing a lack of consistent recognition and regulation.

Few vendors take out loans, mostly relying on self-financing. Women tend to use more formal lending sources but also carry heavier debt burdens. Men often borrow from informal money lenders. **Incomes is generally low and unstable, with many earning well below the national minimum wage.** Daily earnings can vary significantly, and expenses—especially payments to suppliers—consume most of vendors' income. Vendors in public spaces face additional informal payments and fines, while those in formal markets handle more official costs like taxes.

Most goods sold come from wholesale markets, but there is a strong connection between formal and informal economies, with some goods sourced for free or from other vendors. Community kitchens, run by grassroots groups, provide important food support for many vendors, highlighting the role of local solidarity networks in the face of limited government assistance.

Many vendors depend entirely on their vending work as their household's main source of income. This heavy reliance on vending earnings makes households especially vulnerable to economic shocks and disruptions, which are common in Argentina's current climate. Alongside low earnings, vendors face substantial household expenses, further putting strain on their economic stability.



Street vendor in Argentina in 2025 | Source: [FETEP-UTEP Facebook page](#)

Working Conditions and Key Issues

Vendors work varied hours, depending on selling location and work set-up. Workweeks vary widely: some vendors work only a couple of days a week, while others work nearly every day, reflecting a split between inconsistent access to work and economic necessity to work long hours. Women tend to work fewer days per week than men, possibly due to domestic responsibilities or challenges in accessing market spaces.

The vast majority are self-employed. Paid employment is rare, and some vendors work in family arrangements to share responsibilities. Formal work agreements are almost non-existent, especially outside formal markets. Where they do exist, they tend to be verbal agreements rather than written contracts.

The main challenges faced by vendors include poor infrastructure and lack of basic services, and social and institutional barriers. Vendors often work without guaranteed or sheltered trading spaces, exposing them to harsh weather and unsafe conditions, which harms their health and reduces sales. Public spaces frequently lack essential facilities like water, electricity, toilets, and storage.

Vendors experience serious physical health problems from long hours and heavy labour, compounded by limited healthcare access. Mental health issues and substance abuse are common, fuelled by financial stress and public hostility.

Vendors face **widespread mistreatment, including harassment, police repression, evictions, and illegal confiscation of goods, leaving many in fear and economic precarity.** Competition and internal conflicts among vendors, as well as tensions with formal traders and local groups, further complicate their situation.

Legal recognition and stable workspaces are rare, and bureaucratic obstacles limit access to permits. Economic insecurity is widespread, with low, unstable earnings exacerbated by political instability and rising living costs. There is little meaningful dialogue with authorities, who are often seen as unsupportive or corrupt.

Social protection coverage is minimal, with most vendors lacking health insurance, pensions, or other benefits, a situation worsened by recent policy changes. Consequently, vendors often rely heavily on informal community support to cope with ongoing vulnerabilities.

Vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and migrants, face challenges including higher exposure to harassment and balancing caregiving responsibilities with work, vulnerability to discrimination, racism and social and legal exclusion, and poor accessibility in vending spaces. Increasing numbers of young people are turning to informal vending due to limited access to quality education, job training, and formal employment. Economic pressure can force them to drop out of school.

Despite systemic barriers to formalising work and accessing support, many find empowerment, community, and identity through vending.

Formalisation

Some markets have been successfully formalised through persistent advocacy. Other municipalities have established structured systems that provide official permits to vendors, reducing harassment and fostering dialogue with officials. **However, many vendors still operate informally, often without formal agreements, leaving them vulnerable.**

Despite some progress in recognising informal economy vendors, **public policies and political commitment to formalisation are weak, and many supportive programmes are being rolled back.** Dialogue between vendors and authorities is limited, fragmented, and inconsistent, leaving vendors largely excluded from policy development and formalisation processes. Municipal regularisation efforts have improved conditions for some but fail to fully address the complex challenges vendors face. **Effective solutions require legal recognition, improved infrastructure and services, protection from harassment, access to credit and training, and stronger collective organisation to engage with authorities and support workers amid ongoing economic and social uncertainties.**

Vendors face significant barriers to formalising their businesses, including financial constraints, complex bureaucratic processes, lack of trust in authorities, and limited access to information or support. Many experience harassment and intimidation from police, which discourages efforts toward formalisation. Social stigma and the absence of labour protections further marginalise vendors and undermine motivation to formalise, especially when informal vending is seen as more flexible and accessible.

Dialogue between vendors and government is limited, especially at the national level, with more progress seen in some provincial areas. **There are few government programmes supporting informal economy workers, and many existing initiatives have faced budget cuts or have been dismantled in recent years.** Despite challenges, organisations like UTEP play a key role in advocacy and supporting vendors, and assistance often comes from community and social groups within the informal economy.



Workforce Proposals

Vendors most commonly propose the need for legal recognition and formalisation to gain stability, protection, and dignity in their work. They seek stable permits that allow them to work legally without fear of harassment or eviction, alongside affordable and standardised fees. Vendors want their work to be formally recognised, granting them access to labour rights and inclusion in social and economic policies, which would improve dialogue with authorities.

Improving infrastructure is also a key demand, including better market spaces with fixed stalls, shelter, lighting, security, sanitation, and access to utilities. Vendors want markets to be better organised, expanded, and operate for longer hours or more days.

Reducing police harassment and arbitrary confiscations is crucial, alongside ensuring the ability to work peacefully and without repression.

Vendors also call for accessible training programs on financial literacy, legal rights, and business skills to help improve their operations.

There is a strong desire to improve social protection and to reinstate government programmes that have been cut. Vendors also seek broader economic policies to reduce inflation, increase sales opportunities, and provide access to low-interest credit.

Finally, **vendors want more opportunities for frequent dialogue and negotiation with government authorities, particularly at the local level.**

Recommendations

In 2015, the ILO issued Recommendation 204 to guide governments in transitioning informal economy workers to the formal economy in a way that protects livelihoods and respects workers' rights.

Immediate priorities include ensuring vendors have safe, regulated selling spaces, investment in essential infrastructure, prevention of harassment and evictions, and expanding inclusive social protection programmes.

Recognition of vendors as legitimate workers is crucial to reducing conflict, securing labour rights, and enabling access to legal protections. Simplified, transparent registration and permitting systems, improved access to credit, financial literacy, and targeted training—especially for women—are also needed.

Formalisation must be **inclusive, gradual, and adapted to local contexts, avoiding harmful policies like forced evictions or excessive fees.** Strong vendor organisations and formal dialogue mechanisms between vendors and authorities are essential to shape policies and build trust. The process should be flexible and ongoing, prioritising the needs of marginalised groups and reflecting the diverse realities of informal economy vendors.



media@streetnet.org.za



+351 938 291 185



www.streetnet.org.za



[@StreetNetInternational](https://www.facebook.com/StreetNetInternational)



[@street_net_international](https://www.instagram.com/street_net_international)



[@Streetnet1](https://twitter.com/Streetnet1)