

COOPERATIVES and TRADE UNIONS – an international perspective



There is a long history of trade unions in various countries of the world establishing or attempting to establish cooperatives, with varying degrees of success.

- The fact that trade unions remain responsible for the livelihoods of workers, forces them to seek solutions in the relatively unknown world of the Social/Solidarity Economy – sometimes called the People's Economy.
- Workers in the informal economy have been increasingly organising themselves into trade unions, cooperatives and other membership-based structures ever since the establishment of SEWA in India, in 1972.
- Unlike the formal trade union movement which originated in Europe with the development of industry, the informal workers' movements have predominantly grown up in the developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and increasingly in Eastern Europe.
- For such workers, when organising collectively for economic transformation, the Social Solidarity Economy is part of their vision for the future they aim to create.

StreetNet International adopted a resolution on the Social Solidarity Economy at its Third International Congress in Cotonou, Benin, in August 2010.



StreetNet's vision has been inspired by practical Solidarity Economy examples on the ground in Latin American countries.

ARGENTINA

Social Solidarity Economy took off during financial crisis, now about 10% of total economy.



BRAZIL

Four national general organisations of cooperatives – UNISOL, COOTRABALHO, ANTIAG and OCB – all affiliated to the ICA

- COOTRABALHO is linked to the UGT national trade union centre.
- UNISOL is an umbrella body grouped into an umbrella body by ADS (*Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário*) which was established by CUT national TU centre in 1999, based on:
 - supporting agricultural family enterprises to generate income through the development of their land;
 - promoting better education for enterprises in the solidarity economy;
 - producing feasibility studies and business plans in conjunction with agricultural families in the sectors of biofuels and honey production;
 - producing business plans and commercialisation projects for complex cooperatives;
 - creation of work and income in the monitoring and evaluation of cooperatives;
 - setting up, publicising, strengthening, and joining together solidarity establishments in a process of sustainable development.
- Brazilian government established a national Secretariat of the Solidarity Economy

MNCR – Brazilian National Movement (www.mncc.org.br)

Cooperative movement of the *catadores* (waste collectors) – interesting movement of marginalised workers in this sector of the informal economy



In 2009 StreetNet asked its 22 African affiliates to approach waste collectors in solidarity and find out if they were organised, and if not to assist them to organise collectively.

- An African regional meeting which they attended in Senegal in 2010 provided the opportunity to exchange their experiences, as well as to meet experienced organisations of waste collectors .
- Participants were from organisations of street vendors and waste collectors, from Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Zimbabwe in Africa, Pune in India, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in Latin America, and trade unionists from Chad and Burkina Faso – a combination of trade unions, associations and cooperatives.
- This experiment showed that it can be possible for members of trade unions and cooperatives to work together when their members identify with each other as workers.



- A previous African experiment was the SYNDICOOP project in which the ICA and the ILO Cooperatives Division partnered with the international trade union movement and the ILO Workers' Bureau ACTRAV in a project to promote cooperatives of workers in the informal economy for employment creation.

Policy and legislative framework

- Social Economy legislative framework developed in Spain and improved during the Zapatero regime – covers cooperatives, worker-controlled enterprises and autonomous workers.
- In Nicaragua and Cuba, policy and legislative frameworks have been adopted based on the recognition of own-account workers as workers whose contribution to the economy is recognised and whose activities form part of plans for economic development.
- These policy frameworks have all been developed outside of the neo-liberal capitalist paradigm.

Formalisation of the informal economy – what does this mean?

- Recognition in law of workers in the informal economy;
- Integration of indirect taxes and other revenues already paid by informal workers into official tax systems (in accordance with the principle of progressive taxation);
- Extension of social security to all;
- Statutory negotiating forums, including at local government level;
- Participatory budgeting, at both national and local government level;
- Formalisation into genuine worker-controlled cooperatives;
- Transformation of the informal economy into social solidarity economy.

Are cooperatives a tool of organising informal economy workers that could be promoted and supported by trade unions?

- For longer-term creation of decent work, trade unions do not have many alternatives but to work on the creation of a worker-controlled Social Solidarity Economy – of which cooperatives are an important part.
- In the trade union movement in the developing countries, the following positions have started to emerge:
 1. The adoption of the position of *autorreforma sindical* (trade union auto-reform) by TUCA (Trade Union Confederation of the Americas) which includes autonomous workers and workers in the solidarity economy;
 2. The position adopted by ITUC Africa (International Trade Union Confederation of Africa) at its 2nd Congress in 2011 on "Organising the Informal Economy and promoting a Solidarity Based Economy for Better Development of Africa".

Conclusions



1. The part of the trade union movement which recognises all workers (including own-account workers) as workers, can and should promote and support genuine worker-controlled cooperatives as a tool of organising workers in the informal economy. The rest of the trade union movement will follow over time.



2. The basis of this support should always be that all workers are entitled to represent themselves through their own democratically elected representatives – which may mean developing new models of statutory bargaining forums suitable to the new sectors of workers being organised, in line with the principle "Nothing For Us Without Us".



3. The working-class alliance of trade unions and worker-controlled cooperatives needs to work together for the promotion of legislative and policy change to support this organisational reality on the ground and promote the institutions of the Social Solidarity Economy to replace the current neo-liberal capitalist models existing in most countries.



Thank you

