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Organizing Workers in the Informal Economy in Selected African and Latin American Countries: The Potential of Trade Union and Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) partnerships

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ABSTRACT: The article gives an account of the result of the research developed in response to the call made by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF) in 2021 to carry out a project that would identify the potential of the link between unions and cooperatives to organize workers in the informal economy in African and Latin American countries. Researchers from ODI, London, with the collaboration of researchers and practitioners from Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, identified and documented partnership examples through which to shed light development processes, identify learning on successes and challenges, and inform recommendations for future support. A country case study of Colombia is provided to illustrate the variety, complexity and possibilities of the topic studied. Three nascent partnership experiences, linked in different ways to the social and solidarity economy, demonstrate the potential of this approach to promote fair trade, responsible consumption and local markets, boost entrepreneurship and create decent working conditions for workers who traditionally face informality.

KEYWORDS: Cooperatives, trade unions, social economy, social and solidarity economy, informal economy, entrepreneurship.

ECONLIT CODES: J5, J54, P13, O17.

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RESUMEN: El artículo da cuenta del resultado de la investigación desarrollada en respuesta a la convocatoria realizada por la Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT) y la Open Society Foundations (OSF) en el 2021 para llevar a cabo un proyecto que permitiera identificar los beneficios del vínculo entre los sindicatos y la Economía Social y Solidaria (ESS) para organizar los trabajadores de la economía informal en países africanos y latinoamericanos. Investigadoras de ODI, de Londres con la colaboración de investigadoras de Brasil, Colombia, Ghana, Kenia y Uganda, identificaron y documentaron casos que permiten analizar los procesos de desarrollo de alianzas, proporcionando aprendizajes a partir de los éxitos y desafíos como también recomendaciones para el futuro. Se revisa en especial el caso colombiano, para ilustrar la variedad, complejidad y posibilidades del estudio desarrollado; allí, se describen tres experiencias, todas en etapas tempranas, vinculadas con diferentes expresiones de la economía social y solidaria que demuestran los potenciales de esta relación para fomentar el comercio justo, el consumo responsable y los mercados locales; dinamizar el emprendimiento en los territorios y crear condiciones de trabajo digno para los trabajadores que afrontan tradicionalmente la informalidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: cooperativas, sindicatos, economía social, economía social y solidaria, economía informal, emprendimiento.

Resumen extendido

Organización de trabajadores en la economía informal de países seleccionados de África y América Latina: los beneficios de las alianzas entre las asociaciones sindicales y la economía social y solidaria (ESS)

Objetivos

- Identificar las iniciativas de sindicatos y organizaciones de la ESS para organizar y apoyar a los trabajadores de la economía informal.
- Sintetizar los aprendizajes clave, identificando los éxitos y los desafíos de las intervenciones seleccionadas
- Proponer vías prometedoras para aquellos que buscan apoyar alianzas entre las asociaciones sindicales y la economía social y solidaria (ESS)

Metodología

La investigación realizada fue de tipo exploratorio descriptivo con información cualitativa proveniente de diversas fuentes que permitieron la triangulación de hallazgos. Se hizo una revisión de literatura global, se realizaron entrevistas a informantes claves y se desarrollaron estudios de caso en profundidad. La selección de casos implicó la consulta a expertos de más de 60 organizaciones entre sindicatos, organizaciones de la economía social y solidaria (ESS) incluso las cooperativas, universidades, entre otros para mapear e identificar las experiencias a documentar. Posteriormente, se divulgaron y validaron los resultados y recomendaciones con los informantes claves y otros especialistas, incluyendo a los miembros de organizaciones de la ESS / cooperativas, académicos, representantes de gremios y del sector público en cada país. Se seleccionaron 4 casos considerando criterios clave, entre ellos, la diversidad de los grupos ocupacionales en los continentes y la factibilidad del estudio dada por el acceso a datos e informantes claves.

Resultados

Se puede apreciar que, aunque existen varios ejemplos de sindicatos y organizaciones de la ESS que apoyan a los trabajadores de la economía informal para iniciar, integrar y desarrollar instituciones de economía social y solidaria, desafortunadamente, muchos de estos ejemplos no están lo suficientemente documentados, siguen siendo de pequeña escala o no resultan en una transformación más amplia. En algunos casos, se pudo apreciar que el vínculo sindicatos

y organizaciones de la ESS está por reconstruirse, porque a pesar de tener orígenes históricos e ideológicos comunes, a través de los años ha habido distanciamiento. Sin embargo, en esta especial coyuntura derivada de la pandemia Covid 19 ha vuelto a considerarse la oportunidad y potencialidad de generar nuevas alianzas. Por lo cual, se abre una línea de investigación interesante que debe ser objeto de futuros estudios.

Limitaciones

Es evidente la falta de información que existe sobre el tema y la necesidad de documentar y sistematizar la existente, siendo ésta una de las conclusiones transversales del estudio en los diferentes países considerados.

Conclusiones

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha revelado hasta qué punto las economías y las sociedades dependen de las contribuciones de las personas que trabajan en la economía informal, a menudo en condiciones precarias, peligrosas, desprotegidas y mal pagadas. Una mejor normalidad requiere identificar y apoyar iniciativas innovadoras que favorezcan la propiedad colectiva, el control democrático de las empresas, mejoren los medios de vida, garanticen los derechos y aporten a la sostenibilidad. Por otro lado, se evidencia que las iniciativas prometedoras de organizaciones basadas en membresía de trabajadores de la economía informal, incluidos sindicatos y instituciones de la ESS y sus organizaciones centrales necesitan mayor visibilidad y apoyo. Dicho apoyo debería fomentar las alianzas y la colaboración entre los movimientos sindicales y de la ESS tanto a nivel local como global. Además, se deben priorizar iniciativas prometedoras que tengan como objetivo apoyar a los trabajadores de la economía informal, partiendo de su reconocimiento y la valoración de su extensión, heterogenidad y contribución a la economía general. De esta manera, se podrán co construir rutas de articulación y transición hacia escenarios más justos, equitativos y democráticos.

Originalidad

Dada la ausencia de información sobre el tema, los resultados del estudio y su publicación contribuyen a la construcción de nuevo conocimiento a partir de la reflexión teórica y la sistematización de experiencias. Con ello, se abre espacio para futuros ejercicios investigativos y de práctica social para explorar los éxitos y fracasos de las experiencias existentes y las posibilidades de articulación de actores para revitalizar estructuras organizativas que requieren nuevas dinámicas y mayor conexión con el cambio social.

1. Introduction

Over two billion workers, representing 61.2 per cent of global employment, are in informal employment (ILO, 2018a). The informal economy is highly heterogeneous. Workers' experiences differ significantly depending on their occupation, with women concentrated in the segments most likely to be associated with poverty, precarious working conditions and lack of labour and social protection (ibid; Chen, 2012; Carre et al., 2020).

Significant challenges to informal economy worker (IEW) power, collectivizing and shared ownership, which see many IEWs remain unorganized and without access to fundamental labour rights and social protection, have become increasingly acute in recent years as economic liberalization, labour market flexibilization and capital concentration have become entrenched and have increased informal employment. Recent trends, including the growth of the digitally mediated gig economy, are giving rise to a new cohort of informal and highly precarious platform workers globally (De Stefano, 2016; Hunt and Samman, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased ongoing challenges, with the long-standing lack of access to decent work and to quality and sustainable market opportunities experienced by many IEWs exacerbated significantly since the onset of the pandemic. During the Covid-19 crisis many informal economy workers have been particularly vulnerable to income loss or concentrated in sectors deemed "essential" but characterised by precarious, hazardous, unprotected, and low-paid conditions, including domestic and care work, waste picking and street vending (ILO, 2020a; 2020b).

At the same time, IEWs face myriad difficulties in organising (meaning that many remain unorganised), collective action and influence (see, among others, Bonner and Spooner 2011; Kabeer et al. 2013; Tchami 2007; and ILO 2019a). Despite this, the trade union and cooperative movements have a long history of successfully organising workers in the informal economy to address decent work deficits, improve livelihoods, practice workplace democracy and engage in collective negotiations. Yet, to date, across many contexts long-standing divides between the trade union and social and solidarity economy movements has limited collaboration and partnership between them.

This article is focused on the ways in which historic divides between the trade union and social and solidarity economy (SSE) units have been overcome, with new forms of partnership aimed at supporting IEWs emerging across Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).¹ It explores how cross-movement organising has taken place, bringing together multiple –and complementary– organisational forms to build collective worker solidarity and own-

1. *According to a definition proposed by the International Labour Office, and which will be discussed by the ILO Constituents at the International Labour Conference in June 2022, "The social and solidarity economy (SSE) encompasses institutional units with a social or public purpose, engaged in economic activities based on voluntary cooperation, democratic and participatory governance, autonomy and independence, the rules of which prohibit or limit the distribution of profit. SSE units may include cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, selfhelp groups and other units operating in accordance with the values and principles of the SSE in the formal and the informal economies." (ILO 2022a)*

ership and support transitions to decent work. In so doing, it identifies how partnerships can be critical for the scope and impact of IEW organisations (Bonner and Spooner, 2011). The ‘partnership approach’ can also support trade union revitalization, with trade unions increasingly embracing creative organising tactics, new coalitions and representation of all workers to meet the challenges of changing labour markets and decreased membership globally (ILO 2021; Moral y Brunet, 2021). In this same sense, Tattersall (2010) suggests, based on cases analyzed in several countries, that the coalition of unions with community organizations of different types contributes to their revitalization and, in turn, to social change. It also highlights that in this process success or failure depends on the effective leadership of its members and the achievements of the coalition will be more powerful if they relate to the mutual interests of contributing to social justice. This could be extended to cooperatives who share the interest of growing and generating a greater impact on society.

To do this, we present evidence from multi-stage research conducted in 2021, aimed at exploring how IEWs and their organisations are increasingly responding to the challenges posed by recent economic trends through new forms of organising, spanning trade unions and SSE units to develop innovative partnerships to enhance the visibility, voice and influence of IEWs as well as to extend new services and support to better meet their myriad needs. A research methodology was developed in collaboration with an expert advisory group, involving a wide-ranging literature review; snowball consultation with organisations of IEW, trade unions and experts in the SSE to map partnership examples globally; deep dives into selected partnerships through the development of four country case studies exploring promising partnership examples from Brazil, Colombia, Kenya and South Africa; and extensive validation of findings through focus group meetings with organisations of informal economy workers.

2. Analytic framework and definitions

In this section, we outline the conceptual framework developed for this study, which takes the core forms of collective organisation that have historically supported and furthered the rights and economic security of IEW as a point of departure for this study. By doing this, we provide an analytic entry point from which to identify and assess where and how partnerships have been effective in supporting IEWs, to better understand the ‘value add’ of the partnership approach, and identify the wider movement, structural and contextual dynamics which shape partnership development, strategy, impact and challenges.

The framework recognises that individual and collective gains in IEW rights and empowerment happen across different spheres, conceptualised here as “micro” (individual), “meso” (collective) and “macro” (structural). At the micro-level, and given the extreme precariousness of many informal livelihoods, understanding workers’ daily concerns, meeting their practical needs and building self-awareness and identity as a ‘worker’ are often the first priority of primary organisations to ensure immediate, visible returns to participation and provide space to consider longer-term goals (Kabeer et al., 2013; Duguid and Weber, 2019).

The meso level concerns relationships between IEWs and their active participation in the development of collective identity and organisations, which can often be the first time these workers view each other as a source of support rather than competition (Duguid and Weber, 2019). Critically, in the SSE, the process of developing collective structures and ways of working often emphasises principles of equality and democratic management, for example through cooperatives dispensing with the capitalist logic of competition and focusing instead on mutual help and equality of opportunity (Birchall, 2001). At this stage of the collectivising process, workers often start to engage in concrete mutual support actions, such as developing means for members to access financial support through collectively generated resources created by and for workers –thereby boosting individual capital and capacity as well as sense of agency (Duguid and Weber, 2019).

At the macro level the focus is on understanding and changing the structural and contextual environment which shapes the rights, economic opportunities and working conditions of IEWs (see below). Engaging in advocacy is central to this, for example for legislative and policy change or improved market conditions. During this process, primary collective organisations of workers often formalise relations with enabling organisations (discussed below) and develop a networked system as part of a wider social movement which can span the local, national and global levels. Scale-up of the collective and associated expansion of gains at the micro and meso levels can also emerge, highlighting the interlinked nature of the three spheres (ibid).

Collective organising among IEWs into primary organisations –including trade unions, cooperatives, associations, groups and networks, and other hybrid structures– has often been the key means through which progress occurs across these three levels. In this article, “partnerships” relate to forms of collaboration between two or more of these primary organisations, with a primary focus on partnerships which bring together entities usually classified as belonging to the ‘trade union’ and ‘SSE’ movements, thereby creating or adapting cross-movement alliances.

Critically, the structure and goals of these primary organisations are highly heterogeneous, and in some cases, they do not fall neatly into one category. They strongly reflect the structural and contextual environment in which they are founded, which can differ significantly according to country, sector and employment status, and have differing levels of formality depending on incorporation status and the extent and form of the governance structures and procedures adopted (Duguid and Weber, 2019). At the same time, there is significant overlap between them. For example, trade unions and cooperatives with links to the informal economy often share common principles and values, although they often have different strategic focuses. Trade unions, associations and groups often count both employed and own-account workers among their members and focus on labour rights and representation, while cooperative members are more likely to be own-account workers and focus on economic/business development (Bonner and Spooner, 2011).

Supporting workers’ primary organisations are a range of enabling organisations –including direct enabling organisations, which often form part of a wider social movement of organised primary organisations (Dias and Ogando, 2020), and indirect enabling organisations, which form part of a wider network of support.

Direct enabling organisations facilitate and actively support the collectivisation of IEWs, and often form part of a wider social movement of organised primary organisations (Dias and Ogando, 2020; Duguid and Weber, 2019). Their organisational structures are highly diverse in form, and include unions, networks (such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)), and other national and international organisations. This also includes NGOs, which may be a critical source of support and visibility where trade unions, associations or groups have little organisational profile or strength, and may facilitate campaigning, convening or establishing associations or cooperatives (Bonner and Spooner, 2011). Direct enabling organisations play varied roles, including supporting the development of collective identity and primary organisations at the meso level by providing practical or technical support, funding, assisting in developing organising models, acting as mentors and providing training and other movement-building assistance. They also work as partners and facilitators of macro-level rights and empowerment.

Indirect enabling organisations form part of the wider ecosystem of institutions and organisations with the objective of supporting collectivisation of IEWs, but are not clearly constituted as worker or social movement actors. They may include finance providers, funders/investors, international and national institutions, development agencies, organisations focused on developing knowledge and capacity building (including incubators or education establishments such as Mondragon University in Basque Country), as well as entities providing logistical and technical support to collectives (for example, tech developers creating apps for platform cooperatives).

Finally, the structural and contextual environment is the wider ecosystem within which organising occurs and workers' rights are determined, by shaping the rights, economic opportunities and decent market and working conditions of IEWs, as well as the extent to which wider social and cultural rights are enjoyed by workers (which in practice cannot be divorced from economic rights). Work to improve the structural and contextual environment spans the micro, meso and macro levels.

3. Findings: partnership among trade unions and SSE organisations to support workers in the informal economy

Through our literature review and primary research, we compiled a database of partnerships that have evolved between trade unions and SSE units. Our analysis of the most common processes of evolution and organisational forms of these initiatives enabled us to develop the typology of partnerships presented in Table One.

It is worth noting that we identified very few examples of partnerships initiated from within the SSE, as cooperatives and other SSE units appear to be less proactive in approaching trade

unions for partnership than vice versa. The more commonly observed way for cooperatives to address policy and structural issues is to use their overarching secondary or apex cooperative organisations, which can provide the vertical connection to the trade union movement. This has been discussed, for example, in respect to the waste picking sector, where –with a few exceptions– alliances with trade unions are less commonly reported than alliances with other local or national cooperative federations or alliances with other organisations within the sector (ILO and WIEGO, 2017).

Table 1. Typology of trade union and SSE unit partnerships to support IEWs

Type of partnership	Key characteristics	Examples
Establishment of SSE units by trade unions and organisations of IEWs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most common form of partnership across all contexts. • Partnership initiatives often led by/through formal trade unions as well as IEW-led associations and organisations. • Entities established take diverse organisational forms in the SSE, such as cooperatives, mutual societies and social enterprises. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Trinidad and Tobago the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) has established the Service Workers Centre Cooperative Society Limited (SWCC) worker cooperative (ILO 2018b). • In Dominican Republic, the National Union of Domestic Workers (FENAMUTRA) established the COOPFENAMUTRA cooperative (Imparcial RD 2021). • In India, Self-Employment Women's Association (SEWA) has developed multiple SSE units, such as VimoSEWA Cooperative Limited providing social insurance for SEWA members and other informal economy workers (ILO 2019b).
Partnership and collaboration established between established trade unions and SSE units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership and collaboration aimed at organising, representing, providing services and/or other forms of support to IEW. • Most commonly, trade unions seek out partnerships and collaboration with existing SSE units to extend support to informal economy workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Brazil trade union and SSE alliances were formalised through the creation of the Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários (UNISOL Brasil), a hybrid organisation of associations, cooperatives and other SSE units with the active participation of the national Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) (case study). • In Rwanda the Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs au Rwanda (CÉSTRAR) approached motor-taxi driver mutual fund members in Kigali to encourage them to join the union (Brioni, 2007).
Establishment of trade union and SSE partnerships through an enabling partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling partners play a lead role in the conceptualisation and foundation of new partnership initiatives to organise and support IEWs. • Role of the enabling partner varies according to partnership needs, and may be short-term, sustained or ad-hoc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In South Africa, Social Law Project has led the Digital Platform Cooperative Project, a burgeoning domestic worker-owned platform cooperative, established in partnership with South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and United Domestic Workers of South Africa (UDWOSA) (case study).

Source: ILO (2022b)

The varying types of partnerships worked through different strategies to achieve gains for members across micro, meso and macro levels.

Micro-level strategies/achievements

One of the most commonly cited positive outcomes for workers was self-awareness, personal growth and resilience across different aspects of their lives achieved through targeted activities such as training. The establishment of cooperatives and other SSE units as a means of increasing the visibility and recognition of labour performed in the economy is well documented in the literature (e.g., Gadgil and Samson, 2017; ILO and WIEGO, 2017) and a similar outcome was observed in our study. In Brazil, the UNISOL/CUT partnership reported increased income for many waste pickers linked to the partnership. This improvement was attributed to the multi-level strategic focus of its agenda, where successful policy influencing combined with cooperative membership had created the conditions for new and more stable income generation opportunities for members.

Partnership organisations played a critical role in addressing the widespread exclusion of IEWs from social protection and services. This includes efforts to ensure improved responsiveness within public social protection systems. In Brazil, for example, a key outcome of advocacy carried out by activists grouped under the Waste and Citizenship forum, which included UNISOL and partners, to secure the National Solid Waste Policy (Política Nacional de Resíduos Sólidos, or PNRS) has been increased social security coverage. Similarly during the Covid-19 pandemic in Argentina, the Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEPE), which is linked to various SSE initiatives including a healthcare mutual and workers' kitchens, played a leading role in dialogue with the Argentinian federal government's Emergency Social Committee (ESC), which led to expanded food purchases by municipalities and provinces and increased frequency of transfers to the Alimentar Card, thereby improving beneficiary households' cashflow and supporting budget management (WIEGO, 2020).

One of the most frequently recurring partnership strategies to promote the rights and empowerment of IEWs is supporting the development of skills and knowledge. An emerging priority in this area for many partnerships is to increase workers' digital skills and knowledge, both to support their direct involvement in partnership activities and as a route to personal empowerment through improved access to online information and ability to communicate, and even improved ability to access rights. Such skills are more critical than ever in the Covid-19 era. For example, the South Africa case study partnership which has seen unions collaborate with an enabling partner to develop a platform cooperative for domestic workers delivered digital trainings to founding worker-members, which facilitated their access to online government social security portals during Covid-19 lockdowns which saw government offices close.

Increasing workers' access to services to support immediate needs around finance, marketing or childcare, among others, is a key area of focus of partnerships, as evidenced by the increasingly prevalent establishment of, and interest in, supporting consumer/service cooperatives and other SSE units by trade unions and other organisations of IEWs. Concerted efforts

to extend services to IEWs are clearly in evidence as a core objective of many partnerships –with a particular focus on developing or adapting services to overcome the specific barriers faced by IEWs to accessing other “mainstream” services. For example, our Kenya case study identified how the Nairobi Informal Sector Confederation (NISCOF) established a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO) to provide a revolving fund for street vendors in Nairobi for expenses that the groups’ members were ineligible for at banks.

Meso level strategies/achievements

A key achievement reported by those involved in developing partnerships –including the workers themselves– is the interest and engagement generated among workers to learn, develop, share and to invest in themselves, as well as to create new forms of solidarity and collective economic opportunity. This is often the product of concerted efforts to invest in and build a shared identity and purpose amongst the workers by partnership organisations. The effort includes knowledge dissemination of cooperative and SSE principles which is often necessary since different occupational groups of workers are accustomed to working independently. Consequently, participating in SSE units based on principles of cooperation and participatory democracy requires skilling up in a new mode of work. The “value-added” of partnerships can be seen through improved working conditions in “traditional” sectors as a result of an improved regulatory and policy environment secured through the social dialogue and/or advocacy carried out via the union “arm” of the partnership, while the cooperative/SSE “arm” simultaneously prioritises the generation of job opportunities with better conditions than those often available via traditional means.

There is evidence that partnership activities involving a small group of workers are often amplified by participating workers passing them on to their peers, generating wider value and greater impact of those activities. Improved linkages and strategic collaboration with movement actors and allies outside the core partnership organisations were identified as a notable outcome across the case studies. For example, in Brazil UNISOL has strong ties with the wider waste picker movement, such as the Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis do Brasil (MNCR), MNCR’s sister organisation Unicatadores (the National Union of Wastepickers of Brazil), as well as the cooperative federation organisation Unicopas (the National Union of Cooperative Solidarity Organizations), among others.

These achievements have been secured despite frequent internal organisational challenges. Establishing fully independent, sustainable and scalable organisations remains a perennial challenge for many partnerships. Funding gaps emerged as a persistent challenge. Trade unions and other organisations of informal economy workers often experience limited capacity to service members and engage in advocacy linked to low membership density and limited revenue from dues. Partnership start-up costs were often significant, and in some cases difficult to justify for organisations seeking to set up innovative initiatives outside of their core mandate and experience, meaning dedicated and ringfenced funds to establish these entities and activities are often essential. Technical knowledge gaps and high turnover of personnel

also reduced capacity, efficiency and impact, spanning a wide range of organisational management and operational areas.

Macro level strategies/achievements

The policy and regulatory environment strongly influences the organisational type(s) selected by partnerships as a direct consequence of legal, regulatory, and policy-related enablers of and constraints on collectivisation. We also find that for partnership organisations, the partnership element can be both an asset (for example, when one partnership “arm” can help overcome challenges faced by the other) and a challenge (for example, when one “arm” of the partnership faces challenges stemming from lack of knowledge or experience in navigating the policy environment relative to the other). The absence of an established legal employment relationship among many groups of informal workers continues to exclude many organisations from registering officially as trade unions and forming sector-specific unions. Instead, many rely on other forms of collectivisation such as cooperatives, associations (including hybrid associations) or SHGs, or operate in organisations closely resembling union structures but remain unrecognised and unregistered legally. The ability of IEWs to organise into cooperatives appears somewhat greater than into trade unions, but even where cooperative legislation and the regulatory framework are conducive to partnerships’ registration of a cooperative, the environment is not always conducive to the thriving on the ground. Some unions express wariness of forming partnerships with cooperatives, in part because of the perceived possibility for state capture of cooperatives and/or engagement with cooperatives that represent large corporations at the expense of worker rights. However, partnerships have also been developed as a way of overcoming this challenge. In some contexts (e.g., in Benin, Burkina Faso and Tanzania) historical government capture of the cooperative movement for political reasons meant that membership lost its voluntary character, with cooperative association instead becoming a necessity to gain access to inputs and markets, thus eroding the concepts of democracy and solidarity in cooperatives.

At the same time, macro-level social dialogue, advocacy and/or policy influencing aimed at improving economic opportunities and working conditions is a priority for many trade union and SSE partnerships linked to the informal economy, and the advocacy focus differs by sector and occupational group. The development of a partnership did not appear to significantly alter the main social dialogue, advocacy and/or influencing priorities of the main partnership organisations, where these activities had generally already been a core part of at least one of the partners’ activities. For example, in South Africa the trade union partner organisation SADSAWU reported continuing with many of their core policy-focused activities, with their involvement in the development of the platform cooperative a complementary activity.

However, the ability of partnership organisations to engage in strategic advocacy alongside formal trade union organisations is highly mixed. There was broad agreement that the trade union movement often enjoyed relatively strong influencing power, and as such they were a partner of interest. In the best-case scenario, formalised relations between trade un-

ions –notably with national federations and confederations– lent considerable weight to IEWs' advocacy agenda, perhaps best exemplified by the UNISOL/CUT partnership in Brazil. Yet in other cases, formal trade union organisations were not seen as a supportive advocacy partner, notably for smaller organisations of IEWs that can find it difficult to exert policy influence in contexts where larger unions command strong political power and high visibility. Many key informants from across the case study countries concurred that union federations and confederations tend to represent many affiliates / members as well as a variety of sectors and often have relatively strong presence in policy debates, but organisations of IEWs are often not fully incorporated –or, in the worst case, are actively side-lined– from their agendas.

4. The Colombian Context

Trade unions and SSE units, including cooperatives, emerged in Colombia at the end of the 19th century to further the interests of the majority of the working population that did not find favourable working conditions in companies or have access to other decent work opportunities (Urrutia, 2015; Calderón, Cruz & Beltran, 2008). Therefore, trade unions and cooperatives share common foundations including originating from the working classes and being important entities to support improved conditions for workers. However, they have often pursued distinct organising models and objectives, and in some cases have been antagonistic to one another because trade unions are an important means of class-based resistance, confrontation and struggle for labour rights, while cooperatives unite the working class –including marginalised workers– to consolidate economic power as a means of competing with capital accumulation-focused companies, albeit without challenging the economic system per se (Cruz-Reyes & Callava, 2016).

Despite the above, Orsatti (2017) shows that Colombian national trade membership bodies have made statutory decisions to create structures for trade union organizations and SSE to engage, including on political advocacy, and have proposed strengthening relationships with the workers in the SSE. Yet participants in our research suggested that trade union support to SSE initiatives in practice has often been weak. It was reported that there is little recognition among the trade unionists that cooperatives and other SSE units can be a valuable source of fair remuneration and decent work for informal economy workers, including where takeovers of failing companies occur with solid management and cooperative business plans which enable workers to own the means of production and sources of finance. Furthermore, we were unable to identify documentation of evidence of such initiatives in relation to informal economy workers.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence that times of crisis have led to rapprochements and agreements for joint action between trade unions and SSE units. For example, several cooperatives were created in the 1960s following pressure from unions to provide better consumer services and credit for employees of large companies (Pardo & Mora, 2014). Many of these cooperatives continue to be important in their locality and the country due to the quality of

their services and the coverage they have achieved (eg Cooperativa Confiar; Cooperativa Utra-huilca). In addition, they promote spaces such as the multi-stakeholder Union, Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Forum which engages in collective reflection on the world of work and the contribution of the solidarity economy. In the 2021, the Forum agreed to consolidate their various visions, initiatives and commitments with a local-level approach as a key means of working together to meet the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic (Central de Integración y Capacitación Cooperativa, 2022).

Against this backdrop, we carried out extensive consultations among trade unions, informal economy worker and civil society organizations, national government, and academics to identify recent alliances. We quickly learnt that few formal partnerships have taken place and there is limited written documentation of experiences that have occurred. Several interviewees participating in our research recognized the common origins of the trade union and SSE units in terms of their objectives to secure improved livelihoods and working conditions of their members but confirmed that collaboration between them overall remains limited, as do specific joint efforts to support workers in the informal economy.

However, We were able to identify three current examples of burgeoning partnerships, suggesting that appetite for developing innovative alliances may be growing. Despite being in the early stages of development, these examples help shed light on the various forms of alliance emerging today and the value they generate at the micro (individual), meso (collective) and macro (structural) levels.

Initially, contact was established with the National Union Of Agricultural Industry Workers - SINTRAINAGRO, created in 1987, after the merger of several unions in the municipality of Apartadó in the department of Antioquia, the predominant banana and plantain growing region in the country. Their goals include the creation of cooperatives, savings banks, educational entities, research institutes, post-conflict reconciliation centers and other social organizations that provide quality of life for members and their wider communities (Sintrainagro, 2022). For example, they have been particularly successful at supporting micro-level outcomes for young people through its Fundamilenio Foundation; they work with children, youth, women, the elderly, and victims of violence in the areas of education, culture, occupational health, decent housing, tourism, and social cohesion. With the support of enabling partners, notably international agencies like PAR AOR, USAID Colombia and PAR ACDIVOCA, the “El Turno es Mío” Project is currently being implemented to promote post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding, and dialogue and to generate educational, entrepreneurial and employment opportunities for young people, notably on banana farms. Building meso-level links with international NGOs, educational institutions and other supportive partners has also helped increase knowledge and valorisation of the region’s banana growing culture and foster new business models based on association and solidarity among members. SINTRAINAGRO is also closely involved in macro-level policy dialogue towards the formal recognition of its members and their wider communities as victims of Colombia’s armed conflict.

Next, we identified a partnership facilitated by the Asociación de Trabajo Interdisciplinario (ATI) through the 2017-2021 “Decent Work” program financed by the Belgian cooperation

agency SOLSOC, whose objective is to promote decent work for sustainable, equitable, supportive and inclusive development through job creation, guarantees for the right to work and promotion of social dialogue between men and women. They form a multi-stakeholder partnership of trade union organizations representing agroindustrial, formal and informal workers (Sindicato Nacional de la Industria Azucarera 14 de Junio -SINTRA 14, Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria de Alimentos / National Union of Food Industry Workers-SINALTRAINAL, Unión Sindical De Trabajadores de la Industria Cervecera, Bebidas, Alimentos, Malteros y Similares (National Union) - USTIAM) and organisations focused on ethnic minority and peasant communities engaged in the informal economy (Red Nacional de Agricultura Familiar / National Network of Family Farming - RENAF, Comité de Integración del Macizo Colombiano - CIMA) and human rights organisations have collaborated and developing initiatives in the social and solidarity economy since 2017.

Focused on solidarity and social change, the partnership's objectives span the macro, meso and micro levels. This includes strengthening the union and rural associations' capacity to engage in policy dialogue; developing worker-owned food producer enterprises with decent working conditions; increasing the access of local communities to locally produced, healthy food products; and supporting improved market opportunities for the sale of food goods produced through the producer enterprises. The Covid-19 pandemic delayed the projects; nonetheless recent activities have included the organisation of large-scale purchases through an online platform. At the meso level, there is a dynamic link with national and international networks to influence public policies in favour of family farming, local markets, and public purchases, among other issues (Interdisciplinary Work Association - ATI, 2020).²

Finally, we developed a more in-depth case study on the Union of Afro-Colombian Domestic Workers (UTRASD), identified through the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) to which UTRASD is affiliated. UTRASD was established in 2013 to advocate for improved rights and protections of Afro-Colombian care and domestic workers throughout Colombia, as well as to tackle discrimination and offer support, training, and education to its 600 members. UTRASD has contributed to several important macro-level achievements such as the ratification by of ILO Convention 189 by the Colombian government in 2014 and the promulgation of Law 1788 in 2016 which brought increased protections for domestic workers, with their policy engagement since continuing to focus on the implementation of these instruments. Similarly, to the experience of domestic workers' trade unions in other countries there is still no formal institutional alliance between UTRASD and the national trade union centres, such as the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia (CUT Colombia). This can limit the political space and bargaining power; some participants reported that the government prefers to engage with the larger union federations than unions and other organisations of IEWs: "These unions historically steal the limelight and the ability to put political issues on the public agenda, they are the ones have political discursive power, and they end up relegating the demands of small unions" (key informant). Nonetheless, a few senior representatives

2. *Some of this information was obtained through direct correspondence with an ATI representative working directly with the partnership members.*

from CUT Colombia support care and domestic workers and their organisations, including by advocating on their behalf to the Ministry of Labour, and UTRASD has secured a place on a multi-stakeholder Convention 189 monitoring group which enables the organisation to engage directly with the government.

In 2019, UTRASD carried out a series of foundational studies on the working conditions of care and domestic workers which established a widespread lack of decent work, including that only 10% of the 600,000 workers in the sector in Colombia have an employment contract. At the same time, they identified the monopoly of existing intermediaries in the sector, such as domestic work placement agencies, offering poor quality employment with few protections and whose large commissions reduce workers' already low earnings (Utrasd et al., 2020).

This led UTRASD to expand the union's core activities of advocating at regional, national and local levels for improved labour rights for its core constituency of domestic workers by initiating development of the 'Corporación Union Cristal, servicios integrales de limpieza y de cuidado' project, with funding and technical support from several enabling partners including Care Latin America, Care France, Fundación Bien Humano, and the French Development Agency. This saw the development of a worker-led and managed social enterprise as a largely separate activity and a means of complementing UTRASD's core mandate of securing improved working conditions for domestic workers. According to its business plan, the social enterprise is based on three integrated approaches: gender equality, human rights / decent work, and economic and social rights; on which the design and operation of the company is based. From this perspective, the paid domestic workers who are members of the company will be in charge of managing, administering and leading the start-up of the business (ibid).

Throughout 2020 and 2021 Corporación Union Cristal focused on micro-level support by delivering training to 300 care and domestic workers to build their professional skills, knowledge in human and labour rights and self-esteem. The training was aimed at boosting the professional profile of workers and the business, and at increasing the valuation by clients and society of domestic work, therefore ensuring higher returns from the services provided (ILO, 2022b).

In 2021, Corporación Union Cristal created *IMA Limpia* as the public-facing brand to promote and deliver its services, emphasising its profile as the first social enterprise in the country administratively and operationally led by women who have been domestic workers. The social enterprise has begun to generate formal employment opportunities, with domestic workers involved provided with an employment contract, social security contributions and a living wage (IMA Limpia, 2021). IMA Limpia was launched in the city of Medellin, with plans to scale nationwide through new franchises or cooperatives, or through alliances with similar existing entities.

Towards the end of 2021 UTRASD participated in the Cooperative Platform course convened by the University of Mondragón and the New School of New York; following this the president of UTRASD, together with a team from the Cooperative University of Colombia generated a business idea to develop a new platform cooperative aimed at providing UTRASD, Corporación Union Cristal and the *IMA Limpia* brand to consolidate its efforts to develop a

collectively owned and democratic entity and harness digital technology and online access to markets to scale up the business. Efforts are underway to connect with similar projects in other countries and engage in mutual accompaniment and sharing of experiences, for example with the aforementioned domestic worker platform cooperative in South Africa and Up&Go, a New York-based platform cooperative owned by domestic workers which provides a highly successful example of a women- and minority-led initiative to improve the incomes and working conditions of domestic workers (Participedia, n.d.; Cannon et al., 2020). This initiative marks a milestone in terms of efforts towards collaboration between SSE, cooperative and trade union actors in Colombia, and in its embrace of digital technology to foster association and support access to quality work for a traditionally discriminated-against group of workers.

Several lessons can be drawn from this exploration of alliances between unions and SSE units to generate conditions for improved economic opportunities, working conditions and quality of life of associated informal economy workers:

First, partnerships between trade union and SSE units take several organisational forms, notably in the SSE where the establishment of various forms of associations, social enterprises and other units operating in accordance with the values and principles of the SSE have predominated over the formation of formal cooperatives. The pandemic has laid bare deep inequalities within Colombian society and an opportunity is opening up for social and solidarity organizations to play a strengthened role in fostering mutual aid, cooperation, decent work and democratic self-management. This offers potential to grow the membership base of both unions and SSE units, and opens the way to new business models where social innovation and the inclusion of young people at their heart.

Second, recent regulatory developments favour the development of the SSE (for example, the recently promulgated Law 2069 of 2020 on entrepreneurship; Document CONPES 4051. Public Policy for the development of the Solidarity Economy, 2021). However, challenges remain in achieving their full implementation and the ability of workers' groups to carry out advocacy around these provisions remains requires strengthening. There also remains a need to strengthen the gender-responsiveness of public policy, especially in the areas of health, education, care work and social protection (Quevedo, 2020)

Third, there is a need to develop a strong ecosystem to support the development of partnerships, including by strengthening financial, legal and technological support to trade union and SSE actors. This includes strengthening their links with government and national and international enabling partners. Educational processes, knowledge transfer and research around innovative approaches, such as the creation of cooperative digital platforms, offer promise to improve working conditions in the post-Covid digital age.

Finally, social dialogue remains a fundamental tool to create consensus, capacities, and commitments to meet the challenges of changing labor markets, ensure the conditions for decent work and contribute to the construction of a more inclusive democratic society. Ensuring the recognition, and inclusion of informal economy workers in social dialogue and related advocacy spaces is critical to ensuring the rights of this long-excluded group are met.

5. Promising pathways for those seeking to support partnerships among the trade union and SSE units

This research highlights the “value-added” of the partnership approach, within which multiple –and complementary– organisational forms are able to work to secure positive outcomes with and for IEWs across the micro, meso and macro levels. Partnership organisations have found ways to overcome the challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic and to extend critical support to IEW members in the face of the unprecedented crisis.

Yet significant challenges remain, including gaps in technical capacity and funding to develop new initiatives within organisations, ongoing reticence between some parts of the trade union and SSE movements to join forces and to support informal economy workers, and difficulties in establishing scalable and sustainable organisations. Furthermore, despite the important successes documented during this study, the Covid-19 crisis has posed unprecedented challenges to the economic security of IEWs and their ability to organise –with IEWs experiencing the acute effects of severely contracted economic opportunities as a result of the pandemic crisis in 2020– a situation which continues today in many countries.

Therefore, we propose a forward-looking agenda to ensure that partnerships between the trade union and SSE units are able to emerge, grow and thrive, and thus be in an ever-stronger position to build on successes to date in furthering the rights, decent work and collective ownership of IEWs. Underpinning this agenda is a recognition that establishing and supporting partnerships and collaboration among the trade union and SSE movements to support IEWs requires focusing on what is required by specific groups in a particular place and time –with these needs and priorities best articulated by workers themselves. Moreover, it is critical to recognise that processes and forms of worker collectivising are highly diverse in the informal economy; a flexible approach to organisational form is therefore needed. Not all will be formal cooperatives or trade unions (or want to be) and supporting partnerships in ways that offer support to a diversity of organisational forms will best meet the realities of collective action by and for IEWs.

Putting this into practice will require the commitment of a wide range of supporting partners, including policymakers committed to ensuring that global, national, and local policy and regulation provide an enabling environment for the recognition and collectivisation of IEWs, as well as comprehensive labour and social protections to meet the needs and priorities of IEWs located across diverse sectors and occupational groups.

Establishing solid organisational foundations –including strong leadership– from the outset is key to ensuring longevity of the partnership itself and its activities to support informal economy workers. Ensuring that IEWs are central to decisions around partnership models and operations is critical to fostering consensus, ownership, and solidarity, which in turn supports sustainability of partnerships. Creating this requires the development of a supportive ecosys-

tem of enabling partners to support the emergence, growth, and influence of partnerships –from global specialist networks supporting IEWs (e.g., Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and sector-specific networks (e.g., StreetNet International and the International Domestic Workers Federation), to technical partners such as specialist SSE/cooperative and trade union capacity-building institutes. Critically, this requires the engagement of funders who recognise the potential of the “partnership approach” to further the rights, power, and collective ownership of IEWs and commit to investing in a comprehensive programme of support to further their work at a time of unprecedented challenge in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

Finally, building a community of knowledge, learning and sharing is an important means of inspiring and informing partnerships. A wide range of knowledge-generating actors –including workers’ organisations, researchers and international institutions such as the ILO– are able to play complementary roles in building a community of learning and sharing, including by amplifying workers’ priorities and experiences; by engaging in mutual support and sharing of experiences with others; by documenting, collating and synthesising experiences; and through deepening the existing knowledge base to inspire and inform a wide range of actors with the aim of supporting and creating an enabling environment for trade union and SSE movement partnership and collaboration. Future avenues for research that could prove fruitful include exploring whether and how SSE-initiated partnerships have developed and how they may be supported, given that this research largely uncovered trade union-led partnerships.

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