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Making an argument

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Abstract

More often than not, emergence of solidarity in contemporary world can be traced into various forms of informality - mushroomed up amidst ruthless neoliberal economic policies. Labour solidarity is not a new phenomenon, nor is the existence of informality. However, the drastic shift in labour relation that followed the new economic regime and changing production structure has brought labour informality as well as organizing at the centre stage. It is observed that much of informal workers' organizing is not necessarily based on confrontational framework of a class - struggle and instead adopts an approach of 'pragmatism' that aligns with the new social movement. It is this pragmatic framework of organizing that this paper concentrates on and attempts to contextualize.

While much is known about organizing processes and micro level strategies therein, relatively less is understood on contextual dynamics that foster or constraint organizing amidst informality. This paper attempts to inquire into the socioeconomic and political contours at local and transnational levels that together encourage or inhibit organizing activities. The central concern is to contextualize the variation in extent and nature of organizing – in terms of political manoeuvring and economic impulses. Methodologically, it is a theoretical exercise based on reflections from secondary data, individual interactions and their triangulation. Situated in context of the global south, with comparative references to India and Thailand, the paper establishes a broad link between – national socioeconomic -political framework on one hand and international economic and development relation on the other - as far as they converge to produce the environment for the given dynamics of informal workers' organizing. In the process the paper also delves into ideological contestations, the new organizing faces vis.-a-vis. radical paradigm on resistant movements.

Key words: informal, solidarity, organizing, context, movement, civil society

Introduction

While the global economic forces came to dominate, they (people) did not sit on their hands: they expressed themselves in domestic life and organized informally in the cracks of the economic system, they made associations for their own protection, betterment and recreation (Hart et el 2010). And 'they' include millions of informal workers – the metaphor for a weakened labour relation - of the neoliberal world order. Labour informality is not necessarily a neoliberal phenomenon, neither is organizing of labour. Yet, the all pervasive globalization of economic relations and associated change in production structure in past few decades, while has reinforced a skewed labour relation, has also invited responses from the [informal] labour – albeit in an entirely different form. There is a huge body of research on organizing among informal workers that explain exquisitely how the nature, forms as well as strategy of this organizing have transformed (see for example- Estlund 2016, Sarmiento et al 2016, Chen et al

2015, Feingold 2013, Sen 2012, Shyam Sundar 2011, Agarwala 2013, Kabeer et al 2013, Lindell 2009; 2010, Scully 2008, Sandoval 2007, Baruah 2004, Sanyal 1991).

It emerges that the new form of organizing is not necessarily based on the ideological charisma of Marx, where the labour confronted the capital within the framework of a class - struggle and which for long defined the trade union movements across world. What much of informal workers' organizing reflects today is an approach of 'pragmatism' – it manifests out of neoliberal discontents but it does not necessarily challenge the capital hegemony. Instead, it does attempt to carve a space for its lot – through resistance as well as through cooperation[3]. One aspect of this organizing can also be seen as seeping into the space that has been perceived to be occupied by either the market or the state – with a potential to foster a third type of economic system (solidarity economy?) that many of us have begun to put much faith in (Dash 2014, Laville 2013, Hart et. el 2010, UNRISD 2012, Laville et al 2007, Neamtan 2002). This new dynamics of organizing must be situated in context of the growth of international anti-globalization movements such as the World Social Forum that are critical but do not advocate militancy to change the world order (see Bavadam 2004). This new social movement (NSM) as Veltmeyer (2004) explains, does not seek radical transformation, what it strives for is 'reformism'. However, this does not necessarily preclude the existence of more aggressive movements that seek structural changes in existing economic order. As far as informal workers' organizing is concerned, the literature indicates its alignment with the strategy of the NSM (see for example Veltmeyer 2004). It is this pragmatic framework of informal workers' organizing that this paper concentrates on and attempts to contextualize.

There is a seminal body of literature on informal workers' organizing and their solidarity initiatives, but they often have a regional focus limited to Europe, North America and South America (Tremblay 2009). Also much of this writing is infused with idealistic optimism, which often ignores the political economy surrounding the solidarity practices (UNRISD 2012). Evidently, there is wide variation in extent of organizing (even for temporary protests) among informal workers across countries and regions. What explains such variation in number and scale of organizing activities of informal workers, across the global south? Why workers' organizing is relatively much more active in one country than the others? What political environment encourages associational activities on the part of informal workers? Do they root in poverty of nations and communities? And so on. Moreover, reciprocity and sense of solidarity vary across communities and populations and it is important to understand precisely under what circumstances communities can produce the kind of solidarity underlying active unionism (Camou 2012). Several studies do incorporate contextual considerations, but the central concern has been on understanding the day to day manoeuvrings and micro level dynamics of organizing. This is important but does not answer the questions raised above. This paper attempts a theoretical inquiry into some of these questions. The objective is to obtain a holistic understanding on the role of contextual factors towards the given extent and strategy of informal workers' organizing, rather than engaging with the organizing dynamics per se.

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[3] See agarwala (2013)

Methodologically, this is a qualitative reflection based on a review of data from the International Labour Office and WIEGO, interviews with some of the trade union and civil society representatives from several countries including India, Ghana, Brazil, Thailand and Uruguay, author's experiential observations and their triangulation with existing literature. The discussion draws upon experiences from several countries in the global south but makes particular reference to India and Thailand. Despite the asymmetry in their geographical area, the fact that these two countries provide contrasting political context, proves helpful in contextualizing labour solidarity. The paper is structured in five sections. Starting from this section of introduction, section two captures the extent and forms of informal workers' organizing across the developing world. Sections three explores solidarity among informal street vendors while section four attempts to contextualize the organizing of workers. Finally, the paper winds up in section five.

Informality and organizing: forms and extent

While informal workers have had a greater need to make their voices heard by those with the power to affect their lives, their ability to have a strong voice and to challenge their situation has been limited (Bonner-Spooner 2012). Nonetheless, in recent years, millions of street vendors, domestic workers, home-based producers, waste pickers, and other low-income informal workers have begun to mobilize and express solidarity at the local, national, and transnational levels. Today, new models of group cooperation are appearing within the informal sector that may gradually become models for the organization of cooperative work in the formal economy as well as provide alternative forms of organization for political action in defense of these workers' rights (Sandoval 2007). Recent literature explores well about how informal workers have begun to assert their class identity based on their work status (Kabeer et al 2013, Agarwala 2013, Schurman and Eaton 2013, Sen 2012, Sundar 2011, Lindell 2010, Sandoval 2007, Baruah 2004, Sanyal 1991). Although, there is a growing body of experience of organizing workers in the informal economy, data on informal economy in general and informal workers' organizations in particular, remains sporadic. It is therefore difficult to arrive at a comprehensive and cross country picture on organizing among informal workers. This section, attempts to address this challenge by utilizing the database on informal workers' organizations, compiled by Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

Table 1 gives the number and forms of informal workers' organizations across selected countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America drawing upon WIEGO's latest database. Although, these numbers are in no means, exhaustive, it is argued that they are helpful in at least projecting some picture on the scale as well as the vibrancy of organizing across countries. As seen from table 1, there is wide variation in the number and nature of informal workers' organizations across the selected countries. Latin American and Asian countries seem to have done relatively better in terms of organizing informal workers, as far as number of organizations is concerned. India and China in Asia, Brazil, Colombia and Peru in Latin America

and South Africa in Africa, have relatively larger number of organizations. What explains this variation? One can expect countries with relatively smaller size or, smaller proportion of informal employment, to have smaller number of organizations and vice versa. However, Tanzania and South Africa are close in terms of geographical size as well as population, yet the number of informal organizations in the former is only 9 as against 36 in the latter. Similarly, China is geographically bigger than India but number of informal workers' organization here is less than half of that in India (table 1). Argentina also has 13 informal organizations whereas Columbia has 30, even though both these countries share similar population size while Argentina is geographically bigger than Columbia.

Table 1: No. of organizations for informal workers in selected countries

	No. of organization	Forms of organizing			Sector				
		Network/ Association / NGO	Trade Unions	Co - operatives	Home based worker	Street vendors/waste picker	Construction / transport worker	Domestic worker	Other
Argentina	13	1	4	4	3	6	--	2	2
Brazil	45	2	9	31	2	34	1	6	2
Columbia	30	4	9	16	0	23	2	3	2
Peru	52	43	5	4	10	32	10	0	0
Mexico	9	3	5	1	1	2	0	4	2
Zimbabwe	7	4	3	0	1	3	1	1	1
Ghana	20	9	11	0	1	9	4	2	4
Kenya	20	17	2	1	0	16	0	1	3
South Africa	39	26	8	5	2	29	2	2	3
Uganda	9	6	3	0	1	4	1	1	2
Tanzania	6	1	4	1	0	2	1	2	1
Mali	5	3	1	1	0	4	0	1	0
Thailand	7	7	0	0	2	0	0	2	3
Indonesia	14	9	5	0	1	2	1	8	2
Philippines	17	13	2	2	3	11	3	0	0
India	60	24	28	5	4	30	3	12	11
Sri Lanka	9	6	3	0	2	4	0	3	0
China	25	11	13	1	0	0	0	21	4

Source: WEIGO Organization and Representation Database (WORD), as available on 04/11/2015

Figure 1 plots the number of informal workers' organizations against percentage of informal employment in total non-agricultural employment in selected countries from the global south. As seen, there is no necessarily positive correspondence between scale of informal employment and extent of organizing among informal workers in terms of number of organizations. This is especially apparent in case of African and Latin American countries, while in Asia there seems to be some correspondence between the two factors – particularly due to unique case of India with the highest level of informal employment as well as largest number of informal organizations. It must be underscored however, that this variation in scale of informal workers' organizing is an interesting subject of inquiry.
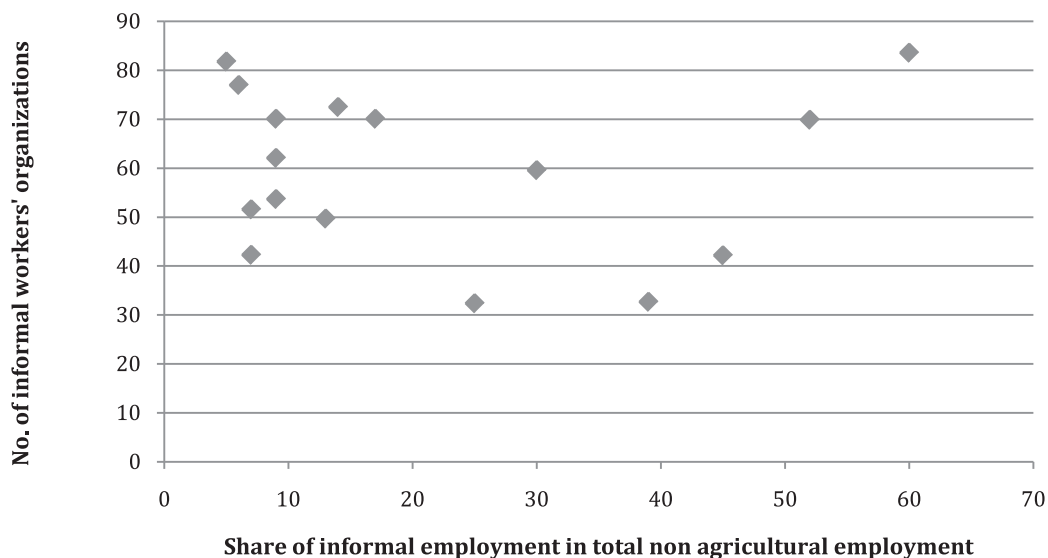

Figure 1: Extent of organizing vis.-a-vis. proportion of informal employment in non agriculture employment across selected countries

Source: Based on data obtained from Informal Economy Country Data – ILO (2011) and WIEGO (2012)

Similarly, it is also interesting to note the wide variation in the nature and forms of organizing among informal workers across countries. Moreover, associations, trade unions, cooperatives – the kinds of organizations built at the base by informal workers can vary greatly. It may be argued that if the orientation of the organization is assertion of labour rights and advocacy, it usually takes the form of trade union and when advancement of socio-economic well being of workers is the objective, cooperatives and self help groups are the preferred forms of organizing (see Bonner and Spooner 2011). Still further, when a common interest of labour amidst global policy process is to be asserted, global alliances and networks of country level associations and organizations are forged. There is an ostensive overlap amongst all these forms. Often within trade unions, cooperatives and/or self help groups are formed to facilitate

economic well being of informal workers. Varying forms of organizing represent innovative models which are being produced, as informal workers organize in unique ways – different for typical model of labour unionism. It is argued here that whatever be the form of organizing, it is an instance of 'solidarity' in practice that always carries a potential for evolution of an enterprise of solidarity economy. In fact, cooperatives are as much the units of solidarity on economic experiments. Further, cooperatives and self help groups have often been developed with concerted initiatives from the Non Government Organizations (NGOs) (see Mather 2013, Kabeer 2013, Folkerth and Warnecke 2011). While these varying forms coexist within a country, a particular form of organizing seems to predominate in a particular country. As observed from table 1, in some countries – for example – Brazil, cooperatives seem to be the predominant form of organizing while in some other, member based organizations (MBOs) and Trade Unions seem to prevail more. As mentioned above, this depends upon whether the members of an informal workers' organization focus primarily on using their collective strength to further the members' economic/livelihood interests, for example through organizing into a cooperative, or whether their primary is on defending and advancing their rights and status as workers through a trade union or workers' association. In India and China relatively greater number of Trade Union forms of organization is observable while in Brazil it is cooperatives that predominate (table 1). However, the listed trade unions in China are not independent entities, rather they are extended sub-entities of the All China Federation of Trade Unions - appendage of the Communist Party[4].

Organizing among informal workers is also variable across occupational sectors. It is evident from table 1 that in most of the listed countries, the largest number of informal workers' organizing is concentrated in the street vending and waste picking sector. Except in China, Pakistan, Philippines and Thailand, in all other countries in the table street vendors and waste pickers have the largest number of organizations. This is interesting given that organizing is particularly challenging for self employed workers (e.g. street vendors), since collective bargaining came to be associated with labour-capital relationship, wherein self - employed workers failed to fit into the criteria (Chen 2013, Bonner and Spooner 2012, Folkerth and Warnecke 2011). Also, self - employed workers are usually scattered across spaces so that they have much less opportunity to interact and their problems may not be common at any one point of time. Despite these challenges, based on table 1 it may be contended that the street vending sector has been the most vibrant in terms of associational activities across the globe. Despite their vulnerability, these informal workers have built perhaps the most powerful informal worker organizations in their countries (Sarah et al 2016). Further, street vending sector has also been the most successful in forging international alliances, getting acceptance and number of vendors' unions have been increasing at a faster pace than other sectors of the informal sector (see Bonner and Spooner 2011).

Moreover, wide variation is observable across regions and countries as far as extent and forms of organizing among informal workers are concerned. This is happening because informal

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[4] See Estlund (2013) for critical insight into trade unions in contemporary China

workers forge unique strategies to organize depending upon their socio-economic and political context. There are sporadic observations that underscore the role of the political context in any particular situation (Rodgers 2013).: for example, the extent to which civil society is free to organize, or the culture and history of organization in the country (Mather 2012). But most of the existing literature focuses on micro level dynamics whereas the broader role of political culture and history, has been somewhat relegated to the back. This paper attempts to focus on this contextual aspect of informal workers' organizing, which is also instrumental to cross country understanding of the subject and tries to identify some common threads in the process. Although, street vending is not the only activity within informal sector to have witnessed associational activities, yet due to its observed predominance and relatively more vibrant character, this paper makes its argument with salient reference to street vending.

Informal street vending and solidarity: building resistance identities

Street vending has a unique cultural and traditional dimension in human civilization and today is perhaps most conspicuous forms of informality within the global south. While there is no nationwide census of street vendors in India or Thailand, their considerable presence in the cities needs no substantiation. As the countries, embraced the neoliberal agenda, street vending has been the easiest cushion against uncertainties associated with it. The incidence of street vending in Thailand is much smaller than in India, as is also the share of informal employment in total non-agricultural employment – at 83.6% and 42.3% respectively (ILO 2011). Yet in both India and Thailand, it has been part of an economic strategy and has witnessed a spur in scale, as and when economic recessions and consequent dwindling of formal employment opportunities, have hit the country (Marjit and Kar 2011, Kusakabe 2006, Nirathron 2006). As such, it is fairly integrated into the market system. In fact, this significance of street vending is a universal phenomenon albeit with variable scale in countries of Asia, Africa as well as Latin America- such as China, South Africa and Brazil among others (see for example - Liu 2013, Willemse 2011, Monte and da Silva 2013).

Interestingly, street vending is also often the most despised within the informal sector. "During economic recession, street food vending is regarded as a "solution" to unemployment and high cost of living. However, during times of economic progress, street food vending is viewed as a "threat" to orderliness (Nirathron 2006: 21). Administrative approach towards street vending reflects certain level of dualism in it – directly or indirectly. Moreover, informal street trade - being the most visible form of largely precarious informal employment and having the largest and simultaneous interface with various users of public space, has been prone to conflicts particularly owing to access to public place – key resource for street vendors. Strict land use regulations and forceful evictions remain central tool of regulation of street vending, everywhere. More often than not, such attempts to regulation have come up as direct threat to street sellers' livelihood and have witnessed massive resistance. This has fostered, what is called here 'resistance identities' of street vendors – an expression of solidarity made to resist the threat to their livelihood.

Building resistant identities

Resistance has usually been the starting point for any act of labour solidarity. Historically, the modern labour union movement arose out of intolerable working and living conditions in England and Europe (Bowden 2009: 529). Several studies show that the basis of labour union organization is essentially negative – i.e. labour form group to protect themselves from the outside world than to associate for greater causes (Bowden 2009). It is contended here that street vendors' organizing has had a similar basis - evolved to protect their livelihood, to resist any attempt to undermine their existence. This of course, may or may not rise up to a new level of solidarity that goes beyond resistance. That is organizing responses among informal street vendors have typically taken to building of resistance identities and this is true for nearly all places where street vending is in practice. This frequent and direct threat to livelihood is in fact, one of the reasons due to which street vending has been ahead in the informal sector, as far as labour activism is concerned. Further, the fact that street vendors are self employed workers they do not have the fear of losing a job after indulging in organizing activities, which is one of responsible factors underlying low unionizing among informal workers. They organize to resist against the administration – a government and not against an employer. However, the nature, extent as well as the duration of such identities various across places.

In India, within the informal sector, street vending is perhaps the one that has witnessed large scale associational activities in India. Administrative forces have not only failed consistently to check the visibility of street trade, the sector in fact has gradually acquired voice and agency through large scale associational activities at national and international levels. For example, more than 300000 street vendors across India are affiliated to the National Alliance of Street Vendors in India (NASVI)[5]. The legislation of the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors 2009, Government of India and legislations in several states of India broadly oriented towards regulation as well as protection of livelihood of street vendor are the corollary of an organized action on the part of street traders and civil society. Even though, ground level implementation of the policy varies across country, informal street trade despite remaining a shelter for the economically poor and the socially insecure, has grown influential in India, on one hand, to not allow the policy process to bypass it and on the other to use informal agency to sustain its day-to-day business. Again resisting forceful evictions has been primary motive instrumental to organizing. However, subsequently it rose to accommodate social security and related concerns, which have also been addressed in the policy legislation.

In Thailand, where the history of policy on regulation of street vending dates back to as early as 1941, vending activities are perceived as dirt and threat to orderliness of the cities (Nirathron 2006, Rupkamdee et al 2005). Policies in Bangkok vis.-a-vis. street vendors have witnessed positive and negative changes over the years and seem to have been more concerned with cleanliness of cities and public health (Kusakabe 2006). Contrary to India however, there is a lack of organizing among street vendors in Thailand where it is a fairly orderly activity (Kayuni

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[5] Source: Annual Report 2009-10, National Alliance of Street Vendors in India, http://nasvinet.org

and Tambulasi 2009, Rupkamdee et al 2005). In fact, informal workers particularly street vendors in Thailand are hardly found to engage in organizing activities, though sometimes temporary groups are formed in wake of eviction drives (Kusakabe 2006). Although there are some reports on organization of vendors near the central market, Pakkhlong Talad and in the late 1990s along the busy thoroughfares such as Silom Road (Yasmeen and Nirathron 2014). Yet, these do not seem to have sustained especially after the military coup.

At the same time, absence of a formidable organization of street vendors does not simply imply that street vendors have been mute spectator of every administrative move. In fact, street vendors in Thailand have indulged in massive protests frequently, in wake of forceful eviction or undesirable relocation by administration. Table 1 shows some of the recent instances of protests by street vendors in Bangkok against relocation or eviction or time based regulation. Under the current military coop, administrative approach to street vendors has been stricter. Yet, any move of the former has been resisted by the latter. Thus, street vendors indulge in collective action, in whatsoever form, only in wake of some threat to their access to public space.

Table 1: Some recent protests by street vendors in Bangkok

Period of protest	Vending areas	Reason of protests
March 2015[6]	Khlong Thom Market, Bangkok	Relocation
December 2014[7]	Khlong Thom Market, Bangkok	Relocation
September 2014[8]	Wat Hua Lamphong, Bangkok	Time zoning
August 2014[9]	Tha Tian, Tha Chang	Relocation
March 2011[10]	Siam Square	Eviction

In Bangkok, street vendors have a cooperative group Moobaan Nakeela that negotiates with the Bangkok Municipal Administration (BMA) during phases of conflict. These cases are examples of marginalized groups that wield resistance identities in response to political [or administrative] decisions, otherwise they sporadically act as groups (see Balassiano and Pandi 2013). Indeed, [situational] resistance has been central to formation of solidarity among street vendors across countries (see for example – Lindell 2009). These vendors' organized resistance recently against their eviction in wake of preparation for Olympic games in Rio de Janerio, Brazil, also reflects that this is a constant battle[11]. However, what makes Thailand

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[6] http://news.thaivisa.com/thailand/unsanctioned-vendors-in-the-khlong-thom-market-protest-eviction/34331/, accessed November 20, 2015

[7] http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/ousted-street-vendors-claim-right-to-trade-in-khlong-thom-market-area/451718, accessed November 20, 2015

[8] http://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/who-will-save-bangkoks-sidewalks, accessed November 20, 2015

[9] http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/tha-tian-vendors-fight-eviction/424358, accessed November 20, 2015

[10] http://www.bulsuk.com/2011/03/editorial-siam-sidewalk.html, accessed November 20, 2015

[11] A rally was organized by United Movement of Street Vendors in Rio de Janerio against systematic state violence against street vendors [see http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=24185]

unique is - i.) eviction is the only motivation for them to come together and ii.) essentially therefore,, once the political move ends or becomes immaterial the identity dissolves or flounders i.e. not only the resistance, the group itself is volatile. This is unlike India and many other countries such as Ghana, Kenya, etc. where vendors' associations have begun to take up growth and well being on their agenda even though they were born with an identity to resist. What conditions this contrast in informal workers and street vendors' organizing responses? The next section attempts to explore the contextual dynamics underlying the varying extent and nature of organizing within informal work.

Contextualizing solidarity: is democracy over-rated?

It is argued that for solidarity and collective action among informal workers, very significant is the political context in any particular situation: for example, the extent to which civil society is free to organize, or the culture and history of organization in the country (Mather 2012). Economic initiatives can carry a social critique and play the role of political actors, who defend causes in the public debate and who call for the development of public policies related to these issues (Lemaitre and Helmsing 2012). As such, in its evolved form, informal workers' organization is expected to invite critical public discourse that may influence political processes and public policies. Although this is a gradual process, it may be argued that its foundation somewhere roots into political freedom that a system like democracy bestows upon its citizens. To the extent democratic beliefs represent enduring ideologies for organizing human collective action (Novak and Harter 2008), it would not be a revelation to argue that a society with a democratic context offers favourable grounds for emergences of solidarity, organizing and associational activities. Partha Chatterjee (2008) explains that the organization of informal sector- which he conceptualizes as the political society directly depends on successful operations of certain political function and this process if facilitated by democracy.

If we revisit the country experiences in this regard, the above argument is somewhat self evident. From table 1, it appears that the countries with relatively larger number of informal workers' organizations also happen to be those with relatively better democratic trajectory or those that witnessed recent democratization or prolonged struggles for it. For example, workers' organizing in general and among informal workers in particular got impetus, after the fall of Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1998 (Folkerth and Warnecke 2011). Similar observation can be made for South Africa as well. At the same time, the level of labour organizing and associational activities in India is connected to its independence struggle as well as its largely successful democratic experiment. Electoral politics set within democratic framework has also unique implications for workers' organizing. For example - informal workers organizing in states that engage in pro-poor competitive elections are most successful in India (Agarwala 2013). On the contrary, independent labour associations are less traceable in non-democratic countries like China and Thailand. What are the mechanisms through which democracy or democratic struggle has facilitated the manifestation of organizing among informal workers in recent decades? How these mechanisms vary across country contexts?

International development order and civil society

Informal workers' organizing has often been facilitated by or is co-terminus with social movements and civil society activism – as the wheels of democracy and democratization process. The new international development order during neoliberalism and after has supported civil society growth – first - to stimulate democratization in non-democracies as a prerequisite to expansion of its free market policies and second to appease subsequent neoliberal discontents reflected in anti-globalization movements across countries. The convergence of democratic struggles and anti neoliberalism movements in Latin American countries like Argentina and Brazil – has been an opportunity for the international development order to retain its hold in the countries – now through partnership with the civil society. These convergences culminated into what has been expressed as 'neoliberal democracy[12]' in Latin American context. For example - in Chile, popular organizations of the urban poor were formed to protest against conditions of political authoritarianism or dictatorial rule and to push for a democratic opening (see Foweraker 2001). In fact, in Latin America, the urban poor as a whole organized themselves against neo-liberalism and lack of statesmanship and formed many cooperatives as an alternative to advance their own well being (Veltmeyer 2009). These urban poor are the informal workers, who in the above discussed contexts have been organizing to innovate alternative economic experiments, being promoted as social economy by the ILO currently. Thus, what is seen in Latin America is not so much the growth of unionism as that of cooperatives and associations of informal workers (see table 1).

In democracies like India, the same development discourse emphasized upon the role of civil society, initially as a vehicle of alternative development to the state and lately as development partner of the state (sees Connolly 2007). The empowerment of the civil society has been conceptualized as the true guardians of democracy and good governance everywhere (UNDP 1997). The emergence of a donor-recipient relationship, has also been a major catalyst for growth and strengthening of civil society organizations, which have been field contact in the South for operationalizing the (development) agenda of the North. This process has been rather empowering for civil society in India, wherein now even the government departments do not hesitate to outsource their activities to various NGOs[13]. Alongside, the democratic freedom and an independent judiciary have positively mediated the process of strengthening of civil society in India, of which organizing of informal workers, has been a central agenda. When social protection does not come from work status, it has to be derived from citizenship status, which concerns rights championed by the civil society (see White 2013). The organizing of informal street vendors under the aegis of NASVI, as indicated above and subsequent formulation of the National Policy is a case in point. Civil society freedom has been eventually upheld by an independent judiciary (see Sundar 2011) – as indicated in Supreme Court's verdict favouring street vendors' right to livelihood in public spaces. Moreover, the civil society

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[12] Palacios (1999) in Veltmeyer (2004)
[13] Of course, there have been strong criticisms also (see White 2013, Chandhoke 2005).
   It is questioned whether this is just a way for the state to absolve its obligations to the citizens –
   commodification of state's functions

relates to the political society (informal workers and marginalized groups) through the logic of the reversal of the of the effects of primitive accumulation – which is necessarily inherent in the capitalistic structure of growth with its hegemony in all domains of power[14].

In Thailand the growth in NGOs in Thailand post liberalization was facilitated by the process of devolution wherein overwhelmed with tasks that were once Central Government's responsibility, municipalities began to turn to NGOs (Balassiano and Pandi 2013). Yet the civil society remained subordinate to the Thai government. The expansion of civil society and the rise of NGOs in Thailand as noted above contributed to democratic development in Thailand by allowing greater public participation in politics (Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014). Unfortunately, a careful analysis of Thai political history illustrates that there have been instances of major civil society organizations supporting non-democratic governments or state agencies wherein key civil society organizations choose to support the notion of deliberative democracy only in instances where they can advance their interests (Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014). Thailand demonstrates a background of conflicting policies and practices: a constitution that specifies freedoms, devolution of authority and public participation that contrasts sharply with regular military crack-downs on political demonstrations by civil society organisations (Balassiano and Pandi 2013). Despite its adoption of free market policies, Thailand like China has not allowed international development relationships to shape its internal agenda. Also, civil societies have been dissuaded from international partnerships and therefore, could not witness a growth as they have in India. Among the literally thousands of organizations that populate civil society in Thailand, labour unions, labour-affiliated NGOs, and other loose networks of worker groups form but a tiny component (Brown 2007). In the civil society in Thailand, informal workers have lacked a platform to facilitate their organizing activities.

Trade unionism and informal workers' organizing

To the extent the effectiveness of informal workers' movements could be a function of the presence of formal workers' movement (Agarwala 2013), countries with a history of strong trade unions offer a favourable context for informal workers to organize. This is expected due to cultural legacy of activism that formal trade union movements offer to informal workers. But this is also happening due to the support formal trade unions have begun to extend to informal workers – primarily to deal with the declining trend in their membership base, as more labours work informally under liberal economic framework. For example, in 1996, the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) adopted six policies – one of which was organising informal workers – to help the organisation confront challenges of declining membership (Chen, 2008). Franklin O. Ansah, of Trade Union Congress of Ghana explains,

'Earlier informal workers were not in the consideration of our unions. But now we are carrying out campaigns to mobilize these workers – as their share in labour force has increased significantly.[15]'

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[14] See Chatterjee,Partha (2004). The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Political Society in Most of the World- for a discussion on civil society versus political society.

[15] In the interview conducted on July 13, 2016, during the first Academy on South-South and Triangular Cooperation, held in Turin

In India, there are organizations like the Trade Union Centre of India (TUCI, Mumbai), Trade Union Coordination Centre (TUCC) (Bengaluru), the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) that organize contract and other forms of non-regular workers (Sundar 2011). The secretary-general of Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), S. Q. Zama in a recent interview to Business Standard, explains that the union is trying to expand its membership among contractual workers[16]. Amidst qualms over the success of the upcoming strike, he indicates union's strategy to involve contractual workers in the strike. Similar trends are observed in Brazil. According to Ana Paula Melli of CUT, Brazil,

'trade unions are strong in Brazil and even though they did not directly engage with informal workers' earlier, they have used their influence to get social security coverage for informal workers as well[17]'.

As such, informal workers' movement have benefitted wherever legacy of trade unions has been strong. This resonates quite a bit in the Indian case also where the formal trade unions have enlarged their protest agenda to cover not only issues relating to organized sector workers, but also those concerning the unorganized workers and livelihood issues (see Folkerth and Warnecke 2011, Sundar, 2011), though in India this has not resulted in as much success as in Brazil or Uruguay. According to Ariel Ferrari of the National Trade Union of Uruguay,

'there is strong partnership between the [left] government and Trade Union, which has resulted into a decline in informal employment from 53% in 2005, to 17% at present. Bargaining is not looked at enterprise level now and the focus is on social security. There is universal social security for all workers including informal labour. The national union is also engaged in organizing street sellers for advancing economic gains[18].'

Lack of a history of labour unions has been one of the weaknesses that discouraged growth of organizing among informal workers in Thailand. Democratic upheavals at the level of government have failed to accommodate labour movement in an independent political space and as an independent social force (Hutchison and Brown 2001). While the Labour Relation Act 1975 grants right to association to private sector enterprises workers, only 3.73% of workers are members of any trade unions (Ayudhya 2010). Since mid 1970s Thailand has been pursuing export oriented growth strategy and the associated capitalistic industrialization has created a labour which is highly heterogeneous and fragmented that hindered the emergence of a strong, independent and organized labour movement (Hewison and Brown 1994). The strategy of labour re-organizing through the political spaces of civil society during the 1990s addressed at

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[16] See Rakshit, Avishek (2016). Contract workers will help Coal India tide over September 2 strike, Business Standard, Kolkata, August 24, 2016

[17] In the interview conducted on July 13, 2016, during the first Academy on South-South and Triangular Cooperation, held in Turin

[18] In the interview conducted on July 14, 2016, during the first Academy on South-South and Triangular cooperation, held in Turin.

least some of the inherent limitations associated with the marginalization of officially sanctioned trade unionism and elite domination of electoral politics. Through their activism within civil society, workers did manage to establish new and important organizational vehicles such as the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee (khana kamakan samanchan raengngan thai) (TLSC) and the Thai Labour Campaign (TLC). Overall however, despite these developments, labour unions' ability in Thailand to organize and embed in political space remained weak. Practically, Thai governments have made numerous attempts to divide up and dissolve unions and workers, to create division among workers and their representative organisations, and to destroy the general organisation of labour in the country (Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014, Ayudhya 2010). It may be argued that this is a strategic intervention to dissolve labour unions – as labour movements everywhere have been key partners of political struggles as well. Consequently, informal workers' organizing in Thailand has had no fertile ground to emerge as a force.

Decent work and informal worker- transnational activism

Among the international responses that harsh labour implications of neoliberalism invited, those emerging from the ILO's international convention on decent work, has been at the forefront. The decent work framework of ILO has been able to get involvement from formal trade unions as well as informal workers' representations. These represents come from workers who do not seek a structural change in labour relation, instead they attempt to carve out their own space within the given framework. As Veltmeyer (2009) aptly explains, radical transformation never became the agenda of those who wanted a change. Given that right to form associations and to bargain is one of the constituents of the decent work criteria, ILO and other such agencies have begun to engage with labour centric organizations and trade unions and encourage them in turn to associate with informal workers. As a part of its decent work agenda, increasingly the ILO[19] is organizing programmes that bring together representations from policy, unions as well as academia. Creation of a Global Labour University as a collaborative project among Brazil, India, Germany, South Africa and United States of America, is a unique initiative to provide a platform for labour unions, which offers a platform for knowledge and experience sharing as well as training of informal and formal unions representatives.

Informal workers' organizing has increasingly been integrated into this international framework and across countries they have entered into various forms of partnerships (with formal trade unions as discussed above) to advance their agenda. Associations of informal workers in the South are increasingly establishing international links and creating international movements (Chen et al 2015, Lindell 2010). Thus, sector-specific international networks have been formed that have local organizations as the affiliates. StreetNet International, Home Net International, Latin American Waste Pickers Network, International Domestic Workers' Network etc. are among these networks and regional alliances that spread

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[19] For example, several Academies on Social and Solidarity Economy have been held by the International Training Centre of the ILO in different parts of the world – which include a discussion on union strategy and informal workers' organizing

awareness and recognition and indulge in advocacy for informal workers. At a local level, access and exposure to such networks has been instrumental in strengthening informal workers' organizations. For example, the Self Employed Women's Union (SEWU) in South Africa was created on the basis of experience sharing from SEWA in India. That is, the more the informal workers' partner with such networks – the better they organize and gain policy acceptance (Chen et al 2015, Feingold 2013). One of the reasons the street vending sector is relatively more vibrant in terms of associational activities, is its ability to enter into global networks and partnerships. Ostensibly, political contexts that allow such partnerships are conducive for workers' organizing. Starting from SEWA, which has taken networking at another level (Folkerth and Warnecke 2011), many informal workers' organization in India are active part of international networks. While government in countries like India encourage such partnership as an obligation to ILO's decent work agenda, Thailand has no such obligation, as the Thai government has not yet ratified the International Labour Organisation Conventions 87 and 98 on the right to association, the right to organise and the right to engage in collective bargaining. Ostensibly, informal workers' organizing including street vendors' – operate within a restricted framework and has no legacy or support to draw upon. The same framework also restricts workers' organizations' ability to indulge in cross border partnership and activism in Thailand.

Contextualizing solidarity: state during neo-liberalism and after

The very basis of informalization of labour is economic – the efficiency gains from flexible labour laws and consequent spur anticipated in private investment and economic growth. Informal labour is not a new phenomenon, but what makes it an issue of concern and debates, is the scale of its existence today ranging from around 84% in India to 42% in Thailand. It is this scale of existence that has also opened the opportunities for them to organize. At the level of informal workers, organizing activity has been a response to unfavourable labour relations – deprived of certainty, security and protection. It is argued that within the national and international framework discussed in previous section - to what extent informal workers indulge in organizing depends upon the extent of neoliberal ramifications as well as state interventions in the form of social protection tec. In Latin America it has emerged[20] as a necessary response to social deprivation (Allard & Matthaei 2008) while in Africa, solidarity and cooperation are reflected in civil society involvement in initiatives of poverty alleviation, social exclusion etc. (Tremblay 2009). In Asia, cooperatives and solidarity types based innovations are attempting to fight economic discrimination and exclusion -for example, in Japan, solidarity initiatives have emerged as a consequence of worsening socioeconomic indicators (Alcorta 2009). Thus, organizing among informal workers can be seen as a strategic intervention on their part to improve their economic conditions – whether through bargaining or through cooperation.

Extreme consequences of neoliberal policies in the form of various economic crises have encouraged workers to form groups, associations and organizations – to promote their economic condition. Such responses have been particularly conspicuous and vibrant in Latin

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[20] Veltmeyer (2011), Kumar (2008)

America. In India, the governments have adopted relatively incremental approach to economic liberalization particularly labour reforms [until recently when the incumbent government expressed its willingness to further labour reform, which is being protested as well[21]]. Consequently, India has also been relatively insulated from global meltdowns and the kind of organizing response observed in Latin America is not found in India. Although, the lack of strong movement in India has been critiqued, for example as - 'Despite such impoverishment and exploitation there is an absence of any powerful movement today in the cities (in India).... It is the power of capital to atomize the collective that impedes the growth of any ideologically structured resistance' (Kumar 2008: 82). It is also argued that they have not been able to articulate an alternative development agenda to protect the mass of informal self employed or wage workers (White and Prakash 2015). Yet, this lack of a demand for structural change does not indicate absence of organizing, what it reflects is a different mode of participation in organizing.

Social protection agenda and informal workers' organizing

So called 'formalization of informal workers' is another issue that the current international development agenda vouches for, with extension of social protection being the mechanism for it. From 'reduced' state, to a state that devises social protection programmes and partners with the civil society to implement and monitor them is the new approach towards informal workers. One of the goals of informal workers' organizing activities in Latin America has been to secure greater social protection coverage and organizing support from the government, which has ended up lending support to cooperative organizing through favourable legislation, partnerships and social protection leading to decline in informalization (Maurizio 2014). These governments have undergone administrative experiments to deal with social protection and people's cooperation[22]. Solidarity and consultative councils in Brazil are such administrative innovations that have promoted informal workers' organizing in terms of cooperation and solidarity units.

In India, informal workers' organizing strategy is oriented more towards bargaining and cooperation than confrontation, wherein workers demand social security and protection from the government[23]. According to a recent survey on informal labour conducted and shared by Thozhilalar Koodam[24] (Workers' Forum) – blog on labour issues in Tamil Nadu, majority of workers sought government support in terms of social security, health care, food security and so on. Some of the workers also expressed qualms insofar as the success of nationwide strike proposed on September 2, 2016 by major Trade Unions of India is concerned and instead argued for a new method to get government support. Although a few of them do see some hope in it.

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[21] The upcoming nationwide strike is being organized on September 2, 2016 against, the Government of India's proposed policies to further disinvestment and strategic sale of nationalized coal sector.
[22] South American Council on Social Development established in 2009, can be seen as a platform for coordinated state supported initiatives
[23] See Agarwala (2013), for exquisite insight into the new strategy of informal workers' organizing in India
[24] Thozhilalar Koodam (2016). What workers think of the upcoming general strike: a general survey, August 24, 2016 (http://tnlabour.in/?p=4014)

The state in India has aligned with the neoliberal economic regime as well as the international development relation's agenda that advocates social inclusion and social protection. Several social protection programmes have been initiated in India that are eventually a support for the informal workers. Among these, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and the National Food Security Act are the largest ones. MNREGA in particular has received widespread appreciation and in fact other countries such as South Africa are attempting to come with a similar programme. These programmes do satisfy a large segment of population including the civil society, activists and academia, which is of the opinion that free market is going to stay and so is informalization and therefore, it is appropriate to have public support mechanisms. This segment represents the lot that speaks of reforms instead of radicalism and their opinion also underlies the kind of organizing among informal workers seen in India – strategic, bargaining-oriented and cooperative.

As far as Thailand is concerned, the country was one of the centres of the economic crisis of 1997, resulting into large scale labour layoffs and informalization. Yet the country is noted to has been relatively quick in reviving from global economic crises of 1997 (Lafferty 2010). According to Poonsap Toolaphan of HomeNet Thailand-

'economic opportunities in the country have been sound enough to keep people especially labour silent rather than confront the government for their rights as labourers.... Because of lucrative economic alternatives, it is difficult in Thailand to find people willing to work for the cause of labour or for civil society in general[25]'.

This is not surprising given that the poverty line at around 740 US Dollars per month in Thailand is much higher than that the set international cut offs. At the same time, workers in the informal economy of Thailand are entitled to social protection schemes which provide basic, social and economic security (Nirathron 2013). A study by Nirathron (2006) revealed that 85% of respondent of the survey expressed satisfaction with their job and autonomy, which is very different from the picture, though very limited, available on India (Bhowmik 2005). The economic condition of informal workers in Thailand is relatively better than their counterparts in other countries from the south and the need for organizing has not been felt intensely. Further, there are many layers of street vending activity in Thailand especially in Bangkok, where an entirely new generation of street vendors who are erstwhile employees of formal sector private enterprises and are successfully deploying their entrepreneurial skill to make decent profit out of street vending (Walsh 2010). Not all street vendors are among the poorest and the class division within the sector makes it difficult to bring them on one platform.

The unanswered questions

Struggle -for democracy and against neoliberal dominance – although is not class based - has together been instrumental to evolution of such an alternative development process that necessarily involves informal workers' organizing – in the form of cooperatives if less preferably as unions (Wolfe 1996). The way neo-liberalism has not only altered the labour

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[25] Interview conducted on November 25, 2015, at HomeNet Thailand Office in Bangkok

relation but also the options before the labour to respond to the alteration in the labour relation, is striking. The tactics labour – largely informal – adopts today to counterbalance the capital hegemony include contextualized permutations of resistance, pressure, bargaining and cooperation. They are not necessarily imbued with the passionate ideology of the Marxian proletariat, but they are not conformist either. Their strategy is different and their ideology is of 'pragmatism'. With this new ideological approach, they do represent a new labour movement - struggling to identify and create its own space.

It is this new form of organizing that this paper has attempted to contextualize. The extent, form and dynamics of organizing vary considerably across country and regional contexts, as seen from table 1 earlier. There is much heterogeneity observed within the informal sector itself and amidst it – it is the street vending sector that appears to be the most vibrant in terms of associational activities. This paper has attempted to inquire into the underlying contextual forces that govern the extent, form as well as the strategy of organizing among informal workers. The is a macro level examination of organizing processes with reference to the global south in general and India and Thailand in particular.

Based on a broad review of informal workers' organizing [or a lack of it] in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the paper identifies contextual realities that condition or deter growth of given form of solidarity among informal workers. Of course, as the paper extricates these realities do not work in isolation – they shape and are shaped by each other. As such, the paper has established the broad link between – national socioeconomic -political framework on one hand and international economic and development relation on the other - as far as they converge to produce the environment for the given dynamics of informal workers' organizing.

Yet, the identification of certain linkages in no way can be conclusive. Rather, it unfolds perhaps more questions than it answers. It questions which ideology is 'the ideology'? Can only Marxism provide an ideological basis to a workers' struggle to be able to be considered as a 'labour movement'? If in a communist context like China – labour is denied space for independent labour activism, do the informal workers have better option than pragmatism?

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