

## Organise – **don't resign**

Fighting poverty through the  
implementation of the right to  
organise in the informal economy

Documentation of a project of the  
German Commission for Justice and Peace  
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## Foreword

Informal work will only disappear if you organise the workers!

Renana Jhabvala, SEWA 2005

This insight of an Indian trade unionist operating in the informal economy is the quintessence of a project which the German Commission for Justice and Peace has intensively prepared and implemented in the past four years, together with a large number of partners in Germany and in other European countries.

The informalisation of the labour market is expanding through globalisation. Seen from a worldwide perspective, the situation is dramatic since far more than two-thirds of the working population in many countries work in the so-called informal economy. Even in Germany, employers, trade unions and governments have been increasingly concentrating on this phenomenon in recent years. What at first sight appears to be a liberalisation of the labour market, and hence an expansion of economic opportunity, frequently means for those concerned a profound lack of security for their lives and of opportunities to plan for the future. Neither international nor national employment policy has so far developed coherent concepts to counter these trends effectively and sustainably, so that people can survive and live by their own work and perhaps even gain a certain degree of prosperity and security for themselves and their families.

In this situation of change, Catholic social doctrine warns against insisting that the changes take place in a deterministic manner. On the contrary, the human person must ultimately remain the decisive factor, the "referee" of all change who must also remain the true protagonist of his work.<sup>1</sup>

What latitude is there if people living in extreme material poverty must make their daily living by means of insecure, unregistered, unregulated and inadequately-paid activities, in other words informal work? How can they be a decisive factor and protagonist in view of the lack of opportunities to effectively express their needs and security requirements (such as with regard to social security) in the political arena, and if they are certainly unable to claim these opportunities?

Projects being organised by state and church development cooperation facilities in the fight against poverty strive to provide educational opportunities and training subsidies, to facilitate the provision of initial equipment to launch a business, and to seek to improve access to microfinance. However, the relevance of the right to organise, of political expression of opinion and of joint representation of interests in the informal economy is much too seldom taken into account. This was the preserve of formal workers, who could join trade unions in their multitude of ideological and political leanings worldwide. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognised at an early stage that these rights must be available to all working people, including informal workers.

It is high time to make a strong plea in all sectors of society for fundamental rights at work – particularly also in precarious employment. Social alliances such as those between trade unions and churches can promote the right to decent work, so that the priorities are set correctly in our globalised world and people can once more give shape to the future of the world which is entrusted to them.

The German Commission for Justice and Peace has built bridges to trade unions and development policy players in Germany and in the South through the project which it has been organising over the past three years. It starts this documentation by providing a detailed presentation of the project, and goes on to present selected contributions, setting out their goals and outlining the progress that has been made. The insights obtained and the results of the project unfold, not in chronological order, but with a topical structure.

Thus, the right to decent work in times of informalisation and globalisation is presented first of all. Statements by the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and by the Chairman of the Confederation of German Trade Unions, underline the significance of the International Labour Organisation's decent work concept, each from their own perspective.

The significance of freedom of assembly as a fundamental right of working people is analysed for the situation encountered in the informal economy against the background of these human rights contributions. Personal testimony from Chile and India make this clear and are supplemented by a compilation of the content of the international conferences that have been implemented and experience from an exposure and dialogue programme.

In a further step, employment and development policy challenges are formulated which range from support for international regulatory instruments, via the promotion of social dialogue, through to development cooperation approaches.

The German Commission for Justice and Peace considers its task to lie in observing these topics, developing perspectives and endeavouring to strengthen social alliances, so that even people in insecure employment can stand up for their interests, can become organised, and can ensure a decent structure of work worldwide.

Trier, 25 August 2006

Dr. Reinhard Marx, Bishop of Trier

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, No. 317, Libreria Editrice Vaticana