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Social Media and New Organisations of Migrant Workers in Barcelona

Policy Report

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This report aims to contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular focus towards:

- SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Summary

In line with the proposed approach of the ‘Migration and Cities’ project (UNU-GCM), this report aims to broaden knowledge of good practices and policies that can contribute to good governance of human mobility at a local level in the face of the challenges posed by the links between urban expansion and migration. It therefore analyses new forms of organisation of informal migrant workers and the use of social networks as mechanisms to access rights by using the case of the *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes de Barcelona* (Popular Union of Street Vendors of Barcelona). Since 2008, the year in which the economic crisis began socially in Spain, perception of the number of informal activities has been on the rise, primarily due to a higher unemployment rate and worsening of general working conditions. Informal work in Barcelona today is currently associated with migrant populations without access to the labour market, as in the case of migrants from West Africa connected to street vending. Lacking access to the rights associated with the world of work, and in many cases also lacking access to those rights associated with citizenship, many of them have created access to rights through worker organisations and the use of social networks. The management of street vending in the city of Barcelona, as well as the knowledge and practices surrounding the use of social networks and the consolidation of work-based social movements by the *Sindicato*, is a good example of access to migrant worker rights, as well as an experience that can be extended to similar urban contexts. At the same time, it can also be a useful tool for the joint efforts of various agencies of the United Nations (UN) in line with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 8.8. Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments of all workers, **including migrant workers**, particularly women migrants, and **those in precarious employment**; 10.7. Facilitate orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies; and 11. Make cities and human settlements **inclusive**, safe, **resilient** and sustainable.

Introduction

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), almost two billion women and men work in the informal sector around the world (ILO, 2018), primarily in urban areas (Chen, 2016). This phenomenon presents a challenge for most of the world’s cities to promote inclusive measures, create decent working conditions, and defend the rights of workers excluded from the labour market. Informality in Barcelona is linked to specific migrant groups, reinforcing the relationship between certain activities and population groups that could be dubbed ‘ethnic enclaves’ (Portes & Wilson, 1980). The case of street vendors in Barcelona is a good example that demonstrates the challenges facing major European cities in the face of the economic crisis, such as worsening working conditions, unemployment, and the exclusion of migrant workers from the formal labour market.

Although several studies claim that the percentage of the informal economy has been in continuous decline in Spain since 2002 (Schneider, 2018), one of the characteristics of the economic crisis of 2008 has been a greater visibility of informal jobs and worker groups. This phenomenon is evident in the increased presence of these types of jobs in the media, as well as in the emergence of platforms denouncing precarious work, demanding recognition of care work or increasing the processes of regulating street work.¹

Nonetheless, new informal worker organisations cannot be understood today without the role played by information and communication technologies (ICT), and the use that these organisations make of social networks. The use of technology by migrants is an aspect of migration today that has been well studied (Egeland Harouny, 2018), in which the role of technology in modern transnational migration has been highlighted. However, there is a need for further progress in the political use of these very technologies among different migrant groups. In other words, the uses and practices revolving around technology in consolidating political demands, establishing trade union networks, and connecting with various social movements.

The methodology of this study is based on qualitative research and analysis of social networks concerning the *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes de Barcelona*.² Its results revolve around two core elements: the political learning obtained by the *Sindicato* in managing informal work in Barcelona, and the various forms of complementarity between virtual social networks and grassroots organisation networks, both necessary to create ‘safe’ spaces in which to reinforce access to rights.

Migration and Informal Work

The concept of informality was historically based on the contributions of Keith Hart with regards to Ghana’s labour market (1973) and ILO missions on employment in Kenya (1974). It arose from a need to explain the characteristics of a labour structure that did not coincide with the traditional patterns studied by economists at the time. By means of this dichotomous description of labour, parallels have been established related to these forms of work as modern/traditional or developed/non-developed. Although the many authors who have studied informal activities have tried not to link them to negative characteristics, informality is a concept

¹ Some examples of European networks against precarious work: *La oficina precaria* in Madrid, *Precarious Workers Brigade* in London, *Coordination des intermittents et précaires d’Île-de-France* in France, or *Generazione 1.000 euro* in Italy. As well as worker groups such as *Alencop*, which gathers together grassroots scrap metal waste pickers in Barcelona, hotel chambermaid platforms like *Las Kellys* or caregiver groups like *Sindihogar*.

² Methodological design: **Qualitative research** (participatory observation: events, meetings and talks by the *Sindicato*, July 2017 - July 2018; virtual ethnography: observation and analysis of the Facebook public profile of the *Sindicato*, July 2017 - July 2018; analysis of interviews with spokespersons of the *Sindicato*). **Analysis of networks** (analysis of public profile network of the *Sindicato* profile, July 2018; diagram of social movements, media, designers, artists and institutions collaborating with the *Sindicato*, July 2018).

that has generally been linked to the poverty/work binomial (Chen, 2012). This is one reason why the ILO has been shifting its objectives towards the search for forms of decent work since 2002, promoting a more complex interpretation of the phenomenon, while at the same time admitting that it is a structural characteristic (ILO, 2002).

There is no direct data on the informal economy or work when it comes to the Spanish case. Using indirect methods (Multiple Indicators and Multiple Causes), Schneider estimates that approximately 18.5% of the Spanish economy is informal (2018). In other words, not registered as an economic or labour activity and, consequently, beyond the scope of institutional action. Alongside being aggregated at a national level and not allowing for analysis by city or by economic activity, these measures are focused exclusively on the legal characteristics of the phenomenon – leaving aside the characteristics that are of interest for analysing the case of street vendors, such as which people work in these activities, in which specific activities, and details of their working conditions.

Social organisation around unregulated street vendors is not a new, or exclusively local, phenomenon. There are many organisations of street vendors at a local, regional and global level. These can be viewed in two ways, as organisational forms within formalisation processes – such as the cases reported by NGOs like Wiego or international organisations like ILO, Inter-American Development Bank or World Bank – or they can be viewed as self-organisation – such as the cases of popular economies at a Latin American level (Coraggio, 1998), or collective action mobilisations (Sariato, Tilly, de la Garza Toledo, & Gayosso Ramírez, 2016).

Formalisation processes have played a central role in interpreting and designing public policies from the outset, with the aim of adapting the organisational forms surrounding work to the criteria of the ‘formal’. These processes occur on at least three levels: academic, political and cyclical. Academic discussion has focused on the relationships of distance and disconnection between the formal and the informal, and ultimately on what and who is informal (Shapland & Heyes, 2017). With regards to politics, informality has been a source of public policy as one of the elements to regulate labour markets that lacked an adequate format or were unstructured (de la Garza Toledo, 2011) and it has had global repercussions today as a result of the crisis (Hilbrandt & Richter, 2015; Williams, 2013). The cyclical function of the concept ultimately leads one to think of its utility in times of economic expansion and contraction (Siqueira, 2016). The relevance of this discussion today arises from this aspect; in large cities of the global North, concern for a growing non-articulated population becoming part of migrant groups organised around citizenship rights, work and institutional recognition has become a central theme of the political landscape (Espinosa, 2017; Pradel-Miquel, 2016; Sariato, Tilly, de la Garza Toledo, & Gayosso Ramírez, 2016).

Growing concern about this issue today can be seen in the rise of case studies on informal work that are far removed from classical literature on work that is informal, undeclared, rural or associated with ‘underdevelopment’ (Pfau-Effinger, 2017), as well as far removed from criminology studies (Edelbache, Kratcoski, & Dobovsek, 2016; Ponsaers, Shapland, & Williams,

2008). There is a growing body of research on informal work in cities in ‘developed’ countries. For example, on street vendors at a global scale (Bromley, 2000), or in cities such as New York, Los Angeles or Brussels (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Estrada, 2011; Basinski, 2014; Voiculescu, 2014), or research on scrap metal waste pickers in Canada and Europe (Wittmer & Parizeau, 2018; Scheinberg, et al., 2016; Porrás Bulla & Climent Sanjuan, 2018).

Work and Social Movements: *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes de Barcelona*

The activity carried out by hundreds of street vendors in Barcelona is complex, organised, methodical, efficient, supportive and adaptable, and it is based on selecting, purchasing, transporting, displaying and selling goods. Alongside this is an easily mutable organisation to circumvent police operations, coexistence with other vendors and coordination with the flow of pedestrians, bicycles and skaters, among many others. It is an activity that involves a very brief set-up time and a form of instantaneous collection, and this has led to the development and design of mechanisms that form part of the temporary architecture of the city. Their *mantas* (the name given to specially designed fabrics) are working tools to create a point of display and exchange of goods in a few minutes, adapted to each type of good.

The basic characteristics of the populations carrying it out are unknown. No institutional or descriptive academic studies exist, and so it is difficult to determine number, nationality, permanence or working days. That said, several characteristics of the activity can be inferred. It is mostly carried out by sub-Saharan Africans, and it is primarily a male activity. According to informal conversations and observations, the merchandise they sell depends on the season and amount of money they invest, from sunglasses to sneakers to leather handbags. It is a commercial activity involving the buying and selling of goods associated with mass tourism or consumption: football shirts, souvenirs, sneakers, watches and sunglasses, among other items. Their number fluctuates, as do the other activities associated with tourism in the city, between the summer and winter seasons.

However, unlike other activities associated with tourism, street vending in Barcelona goes against the economic objectives of the tourist industry. Gentrification processes – in the case of Barcelona, for purposes of tourism – obey some of the core dynamics of financial capitalism. City areas are used as a means of providing greater value to strategic buildings (Sassen, 2015). This process includes activities that are carried out in the street and involves two elements – land use and the hegemonic model of work – as instruments that manage to generate a ‘model’ of the city through law and police action.

The *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes* emerged in 2016 as a response to police pressure at the time.³ It was structured as a mechanism for political pressure and for reporting opaque police practices that failed to guarantee due process or the possibility of filing complaints. Alongside the organisation of some of the city's street vendors, existing social movements created mechanisms to monitor police raids, provide information on legal operations and support in-court proceedings as well as on the filing of complaints and to challenge fines. Mechanisms were created almost simultaneously to monitor and accompany street vendors, as well as protests and disobedience actions (rebel flea markets or anti-racist performances) (Espinosa, 2017). Similarly, a political agenda linked to various social and collective migrant movements was developed based on cross-cutting issues, such as changes in the law on foreigners, anti-racist actions, decolonial movements and criticism of the regulation of public space usage.

A novel element in the new organisations of informal migrant workers is the use of ICTs and social mobilisation through social networks. Previous reports have highlighted the importance of technology in the forms of migration today (Egeland Harouny, 2018), as well as at the heart of current transnational migration theories (Martiniello, 2006). Existing reports and research highlight the role of technology in establishing support networks and forms of labour claims associated with reproductive and care work carried out by migrants (Amrith, 2015; Pescinski, 2016). However, the use of technologies to construct migratory political subjects associated with work is at least one element that is new or little developed in this type of activity. More complexity is required to understand the use of technology, not only in aspects such as how migrants interact with their places of origin, but also how they interact with the urban and political context in which they live.

Uses and Practices in Social Networks

The operations of the *Sindicato* are based on articulating two structures of intersecting social bonds. One is based on the grassroots relationships that the *Sindicato* has created with social organisations and institutions – represented in **figure 1** – and the other is the virtual network – represented in **figure 2** – showing the direct and indirect relationships of the *Sindicato* with the media, social movements, political parties and local artists. These two networks are backed by expressions of support and the ability to have an impact, exemplified in the case of **figure 1** by marches, events and conferences; while in the case of **figure 2**, it is demonstrated by more than 15 thousand followers of this social network and the impact generated by some of its posts.⁴

³ However, this is not exclusively a current claim, because in the Second Republic, prior to the Spanish Civil War, organisations of street vendors comprising migrants from inland Spain fought to improve their living conditions (Ealham, 2008).

⁴ When analysing the comments (1,955), 'likes' (35,729) and 'shared' posts (25,385) of the 585 posts in the Facebook profile of the *Sindicato*, it can be seen that there is a virtual 'community' of content followers and disseminators of

Based on the participatory observation and virtual ethnography of this report, it can be observed that one of the determining elements for these two organisational structures to have stable points of intersection are physical meeting points in the city. In the case of social movements, it is interesting to note how the spaces occupied have been a defining element in which events created from virtual platforms such as Facebook are carried out. This has made it easier for various collectives to come together in both physical and virtual places. The same thing occurs at rallies, marches, protests and performances that take place in public spaces, and most of the time without the necessary city permit. This is how in these spaces it is possible to concretise experiences lived within social networks.

In a similar vein, this is also true of the media. Most press articles reflect either a spatial dispute in the city or a specific event in which one of the activities of the *Sindicato* takes place. Moreover, agencies and advertisers that have collaborated with the *Sindicato* have used physical spaces for brand and new product launches, in addition to their expertise in creating visual content.



Figure 1: Social organisations, institutions and movements revolving around the *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes de Barcelona*. Created by the author.

its political ‘discourse’ or ‘stories’ in which it is evident that posts on police harassment, trials against ‘*manteros*’ and racist situations are those obtaining best results, demonstrating the construction of a shared conventional wisdom in this virtual community.

This confluence between virtual networks and organisations around the *Sindicato* in specific physical spaces reveals another determining element: informal worker organisations do not comply with institutionally established formats. The ways of convening, doing and managing do not coincide with classic associative, cooperative or entrepreneurial organisational structures, given that they are based on flexibility as a core element. They are organisational structures in which their members do not have elements of internal negotiation, or in which the legal or administrative situations of their participants leave no room for institutional formalisation. Adaptability is the element that helps them to adjust to work times, opportunity or convenience. All this is increased by the immediacy facilitated by social networks, in which, for example, an event, a march or a complaint can be made in real time and can rapidly lead to a specific effect.



Figure 2: Analysis of public profile networks on the Facebook page of the *Sindicato Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes de Barcelona*. Source: Facebook. Created by the author.

An individual organisational format and strong links between social movements and social networks is one of the determining elements in the new forms of worker organisation. Not only because disconnected groups are a priori intersecting in the city in physical spaces, but also because this process simultaneously generates the visibility of collectives in these very same spaces, thereby promoting one of the elements necessary for decent work, which is social recognition through work. This can be seen in the case of various groups, such as in the case of *Deliveroo*, taxi drivers or *Las Kellys*.

The regularisation programmes of the Barcelona City Council have so far focused on trying to accommodate informal worker groups within an institutional model, creating some of these

responses: dismantling worker groups, concealing previous organisational processes, inability to manage conflicts autonomously or institutional dependency in order to make decisions (Porrás Bulla & Climent Sanjuan, 2018). Local authorities promoting meeting spaces prevents worker groups from being doubly punished for meeting or using meeting places where they can be harassed by the police. Strengthening migrant worker groups is one of the first steps towards making cities inclusive spaces. Likewise, recognising the needs of the groups themselves is essential for creating decent working conditions, comparable to those of the workers in the rest of society.

Conclusions and Recommendations

New technologies provide migrant groups and social movements with spaces to claim rights to which public administrations and states must adapt, learning to work with them and to strengthen these avenues of political empowerment. This is a fundamental step towards the social inclusion of migrants, both at a national and a local level. This would make it possible to create efficient mechanisms to carry out the efforts proposed in the SDGs for inclusive cities, for the protection of labour rights of people in precarious employment and for facilitating migration. Along these lines, the promoters and facilitators of public policy in cities should focus their efforts and concerns on the challenges that the uses and practices of social networks and social movements establish on at least three aspects: adapting institutional formats in the regularisation processes of informal work, recognising the importance of public and private spaces within cities in consolidating migrant worker organisations, and promoting avenues of representation and social recognition for these groups. In line with the above, the following public policy recommendations are proposed:

- To recognise and not persecute or stigmatise informal migrant worker jobs and groups. Under these objectives, the *Sindicato* has managed to reduce the levels of police harassment and helped re-signify its activity. It is therefore necessary for local authorities to promote these very same objectives within their own political sphere of action, not only in the case of street vendors, but also in the case of most informal work that is carried out in cities.
- Faced with an increase in informal worker organisations using social networks as a tool for political action, local authorities should facilitate access to physical spaces and media to access virtual platforms, in line with new forms of organisation and the needs of collectives.
- Policies focused on adapting social organisations to rigid institutional frameworks have proven to be ineffective. Institutional formats need to be reformulated at a national and urban level so that they can be adapted to collectives and their technological realities.
- The need exists to invest, promote and facilitate research on the role of technology in the political and labour expression of migrant groups and collectives.

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