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| **Building Bridges** |
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| http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content_images/infeconconf_banner.gif**Panel Discussion: Building BridgesDiscussing innovative partnerships and types of organizations that bridge the gap between “formal” and “informal” sectors to secure decent work for all workers****Facilitator: Brian Finnegan, Solidarity Center, Brazil*** Phillip Sanzvenga: Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations; an independent association of informal workers created by and linked to Zimbabwe’s national trade union center, ZCTU (Zimbabwe)
* Bhairavi Desai: New York Taxi Workers Alliance; adapting worker representation to new models of employment, a union of “independent contractors” with an AFL-CIO organizing charter (United States)
* Karuppiah Velayudam: NTUF; Sri Lanka’s national union center has created a new structure, the Migrant Workers Front (Sri Lanka)
* Ari Aloraldo: CUT-ADS Agency for Sustainable Development; a department within Brazil´s largest national trade union center, supports diverse informal and self-employed workers through new models of outreach and representation

**New York Taxi Drivers Unite**Founded in 1998, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA, <http://www.nytwa.org/>) is a union of taxi drivers, who are essentially “independent contractors, recruited individually,” said Bhairavi Desai, director of the organization. “Most of them are new to the United States, unaware of their rights, and reluctant to speak up for themselves to improve working conditions.”At the same time, cab drivers engage in incredibly dangerous work for little pay and few benefits. Indeed, said Desai, the pay can often average to less than half the minimum wage. “Driving a taxi is among the most dangerous jobs in the country,” said Desai. “A taxi driver is 60 times more likely than other U.S. workers to be killed on the job. Taxi drivers face a level of on-the-job assaults second only to those directed at police and private security guards.”The process of bringing together a dispersed workforce—one of the largest in North America—began before the establishment of the NYTWA. It evolved from an organization called the Lease Drivers’ Coalition, formed to help support independent drivers who were at the mercy of medallion brokers (medallions are required for cabs and are leased to drivers), a financially untenable commission system, harassment by authorities, and on-the-job threats.Today the NYTWA has some 15,000 members from some 100 countries, with about 60 percent from South Asia, 15 percent from West Africa, and the remainder from Haiti, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. It is the 57th and most recent affiliate of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).Still, cab drivers face a variety of other challenges; among them, drivers lack:* Guaranteed income and contracts
* Job security
* Ability to bargain collectively
* Grievance procedures
* Health coverage

While there is still much to do, the NYTWA has helped win some important victories. To draw attention to unsafe working conditions and unfair regulations, some 40,000 drivers staged a one-day work stoppage. In 2004, the organization won a historic victory when New York City established the first living wage standard for taxi drivers, who receive 60 percent to 75 percent of the additional revenue generated by a fare increase, the first in eight years.After September 11, 2001, taxi drivers were among many groups facing economic hardship. The NYTWA sought to help, holding four disaster assistance clinics at taxicab holding lots at LaGuardia and JFK airports, as well as conducting meetings at restaurants and gas stations frequented by drivers. The organization helped more than 2,000 drivers apply for a post-9/11 Federal Emergency Management Agency Mortgage and Rental Assistance program.In addition, the NYTWA worked with Columbia University in 2002 to document drivers’ health needs and experiences with the health care system. The survey was conducted at airport taxi holding areas, where drivers sometimes wait hours for a fare. The organization held its first health care fair for drivers at airport holding lots, which enabled more than 600 drivers to receive health screenings from 14 institutions. The survey results proved to be an important tool in NYTWA’s 2004 negotiations with the New York City mayor’s office and led to higher fares for drivers.**Unions and Informal Workers Ally to Fight Poverty**Meanwhile, deepening poverty and the sheer number of people working in the informal economy—and excluded from legal protections and denied their rights—led the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) in 2004 to build an alliance between informal sector workers and trade unions, forming the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA).Phillip Sanzvenga, ZCIEA director, said, “Men and women are being driven to work in the informal economy to survive. Salaried workers, even public-sector employees, do not earn enough and have to take a second job to make ends meet, for example, selling shoes or raising chickens.”Informal workers, he said, have to cope with red tape and harassment from the police and authorities. The workers often are driven out of their workplaces and, said Sanzvenga, “pushed to the sidelines of the system without rights.”ZCIEA today has about 2 million members nationwide, some 60 percent of them women. The organization has 125 affiliates from a variety of jobs; members include vendors, cross-border traders, sculptors, carpenters, welders, manufacturers, farmers, and agricultural dealers. ZCIEA’s constitution was written by informal sector workers, with technical assistance from the ZCTU.ZCIEA’s objectives, among others, are to:* Empower marginalized, informal workers by educating and helping them develop entrepreneurial skills.
* Undertake research and collect information to disseminate.
* Facilitate access to social and economic resources for its members, including micro-credit, in an effort to extend social services to marginalized workers.
* Promote decent work.
* Train grassroots leaders in negotiating skills, leadership orientation and development, and paralegal training.

To date, ZCIEA has gained recognition from local and national government authorities and is able to voice the concerns of and represent informal workers. The organization is working to strengthen links to other informal economy associations and groups and to integrate them into the trade union movement. It has established legal desks and trained paralegal officers in different territories around Zimbabwe. At the local level, it has formed housing cooperatives for low-income workers, approaching the councils of different cities around the country in an effort to acquire land for both residential and business use. In addition, ZCIEA has developed a rights awareness and paralegal manual for informal workers, supported by the Norwegian People’s Aid, StreetNet, and the International Labor Organization.[**Supporting Migrant Workers**](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/infecon_sri_lanka_migrant_workers_front_ntuf.pptm)Despite a difficult post-conflict climate and increasing intolerance to unions in Sri Lanka, the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) has succeeded in establishing two groups that represent the interests of informal workers.In Sri Lanka, widespread poverty, a lack of employment opportunities, and the growing demands, needs, and aspirations of families (to educate their children, find decent housing, and survive under a higher cost of living) have pushed underprivileged, unskilled, and less-educated workers to migrate from rural to urban areas within the country or overseas, according to Karupiah Velayudam, president of the NTUF. The result: increased unemployment, underemployment, casualization, and contractual employment.Informal workers within the country have little protection or benefit under the law, he said. “They are generally not covered by Sri Lanka labor law (or the Trade Union Ordinance Act) and have no social security, no job security, no minimum wage, and no benefits.” Under Sri Lanka’s Industrial Disputes Act, domestic workers may seek redress in the labor tribunal on termination issues, but the labor tribunal does not have any powers to order reinstatement other than compensation. Migrant workers—usually female domestic workers—often are subjected to human rights abuses and are highly vulnerable. In some cases, they are treated as slaves.NTUF membership includes all sectors—public, private, and agricultural—and today includes two informal worker groups, the National Organization of Self-Employed (NOSE) and the recently established Migrant Workers Front (MWF).The Migrant Workers Front, formed in 2011, can point to several achievements that serve to support people, usually women, who travel overseas to work. The group has set up help desks to assist migrants and family members, and it has trained trade union activists to organize and enroll migrant workers and family members for protection and representation. The MWF also is working to organize migrant workers by communicating with family members left in Sri Lanka, linking them to networks and services (e.g., banks for wire transfers and savings accounts). And it coordinates with the Foreign Employment Bureau to eliminate unlawful practices.Meanwhile, the union is educating and sensitizing its leaders, members, and local authorities on migrant worker issues and the role of trade unions in protecting the rights of migrants and other informal workers. And the NTUF has established a network of ITUC affiliates, civil society, migrant workers, and domestic workers to promote International Labor Organization Convention 189 on domestic work.[**Brazil: Partnership Protects Excluded Workers, Promotes Economic Development**](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/infecon_brazil_agency_for_sustainable_development_cut.pptm)In Brazil in the 1990s, unions began losing members as factories closed, through privatization or as companies chased low wages in other parts of the country or abroad. Workers who had stable jobs were thrust into the informal economy. In an effort to find a way to support working people who fell outside the traditional union structure, the Unified Workers Central (CUT), Interuniversity Labor Study and Research Network (UNITRABALHO), the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), and the Federation of Organizations for Social and Educational Assistance (FASE) formed the Agency for Sustainable Development (ADS in Portuguese) in 1999, said Ari Alorado with ADS.ADS was designed to  address unemployment, social exclusion, and a crisis in the trade union movement due to a regression of worker rights and the lack of representation of people pushed into the informal sector. Its goal was to organize informal and excluded workers, help influence Brazil’s development, and guarantee rights for all.ADS is a department within the CUT, the largest national trade union center in Brazil. It has been working to support workers in cooperatives, helping them gain access to credit, attain business skills, bring their products to market, create sustainable enterprises, build economic networks, better understand public policy, and self-manage. ADS provides technical, legal, and political assistance to solidarity organizations and promotes consistent principles of development.Among its very visible successes, ADS has helped small businesses link to larger supply chains, including supporting the efforts of women in the garment sector to reach the runways and establish brands at major fashion events in Brazil. |
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