9. "Essential and disposable? Or just disposable?" Informal workers during COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 crisis, the phrase "essential but disposable" became a rallying critique in global North countries against an economic system that demanded worker sacrifice without commensurate safety protections, wages, or access to health care. The slogan underlines that those workers considered "essential" are often employed under the lowest paid, riskiest, and most precarious forms of wage work (Rose 2020). But rather than granting enhanced privileges to such workers, it has been argued that the label "essential" acts as a "controlling mechanism used by employers to maximize labor" (Pandey et al. 2021: 3), among workers whose economic position makes it difficult for them to refuse this work (Lakeoff 2020).

"Essential but disposable" also underscores a feature of transnational racial capitalism, whereby in countries like the United States, immigrant workers, Black, Latina, and women workers are overrepresented in essential work and thus more exposed to COVID-19 infection and death (New York City Office of the Comptroller 2020, Rogers et al. 2020, Tirupathi et al. 2020). While these critiques refer most commonly to the experiences of workers in formal wage employment,[2] some worker organizations and researchers have spotlighted the dangerous intersection of immigration status and informality for groups like farm workers (for example, COVID-19 Farmworker Study 2021), domestic workers (Pandey et al. 2021), and other undocumented workers.

Less has been written about essential work and "essential" workers among the majority of the world's workforce who are informal and in the global South, and less still about informal, *self-employed* workers in both the global South and North. That informal workers provide essential urban services in areas like food provision, care, sanitation, and transportation is well established, though severely underrecognized and undervalued (Tucker

and Anantharaman 2020). Since 2020, a large body of evidence confirms that the COVID-19 crisis resulted in catastrophic impacts on informal workers' livelihoods, earnings, and asset bases (ILO 2020, Chen et al. 2021). Yet few studies evaluate whether and on what terms informal workers were labeled as essential during the pandemic, how they provided essential functions, and how this affected their experience of the pandemic.

This chapter explores whether and how the policy label of "essential" had any meaning for informal workers during the COVID-19 crisis, based on the first round of a mixed-methods longitudinal study of informal workers from 11 cities across five regions. It evaluates whether the slogan "essential but disposable" describes the experiences of this worker group compared to their more visible counterparts in (more) formal wage employment. It concludes by considering whether discussions around essentialness are relevant, helpful, or unhelpful in establishing a more supportive social contract between the state and informal workers.

BACKGROUND: FROM ADVERSE INCORPORATION TO ESSENTIAL STATUS

Previous analyses show the ways in which informal workers are adversely incorporated into global, national, and local economies (Hickey and du Toit 2007, Meagher 2015, Alfers 2019). This characterization emphasizes the ways in which capital or other systems of power benefit from the exploitative terms under which workforces engage in markets or labor markets. As Phillips (2011: 386) says in relation to global value chains, "the imperative is the construction and maintenance of a labour force that is stratified in such a way to enhance the 'disposability' of workers." Like firms within global value chains, households and cities benefit from the cheap and flexible labor of domestic workers, street vendors, and informal transport, sanitation, and delivery workers, among others. Adverse incorporation (and the "disposability" associated with it) has a mutually reinforcing relationship with social exclusion (Hickey and du Toit 2007), linked to gender; religious, racial, ethnic, or caste status; or migration status held by informal workers (Chen 2012, Steiler 2020).

In cities, a further important feature of adverse incorporation is determined by the impermanence, malleability, and unpredictability of state rules and norms that govern informal workers' livelihood activities. A diverse range of state and non-state actors create, enforce, or suspend formal rules allowing – or not allowing – workers like street vendors and waste pickers to operate at certain times and certain places, usually in ways that are sub-optimal or that extract benefits from them. Equally, these actors can exert discipline, dispossession, or violence when they deem these workforces undesirable, threaten-

ing, or otherwise inconvenient for the state or capital (Roy 2005, Devlin 2011, Roever 2016, Xue and Huang 2015).

Whether enacted under formal laws or by more informal means – or, most often, in the gray zone between these – punitive state actions against informal workers frequently have outcomes that contradict national development goals. Moussié and Alfers (2019) discuss this issue in relation to cash transfers, which are usually instituted by national agencies responsible for social welfare, poverty reduction, and/or gender equality goals. The benefits from transfers are undermined by the absence or substandard provision of locally administered services like sanitation, transportation, health care, and child care that are necessary for securing informal livelihoods. The everyday harassment of workers by authorities (Roever 2015) similarly conflicts with national social assistance measures, by limiting workers' earnings or extracting earnings from them. Evictions from or demolition of worksites are the starkest examples of the contradictions between social development aims and local policies. Nevertheless, such punitive actions are extremely common, since at various times many cities espouse the explicit objective of eliminating informal settlements and removing informal workers from public space (Roever and Skinner 2016, Skinner and Watson 2020). Moments of crisis frequently exacerbate the state's destructive position towards informal workers or other subaltern or working-class groups, as capital seeks to consolidate its control of space or other resources via "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2004, 2008).

As a result, even under normal conditions, the constellation of laws, rules, and commercial relationships provides little or no economic or social protection to the well-being of informal workers or their households, and may likely put them at mutually reinforcing physical and economic risk – rendering them disposable (Lee 2018). The malleable rules of urban governments with regard to informal workers mean that during the best of times, these workers barely have the right to work and thereby survive, much less to thrive economically.

The classifications of certain workers as essential during the COVID-19 crisis had little consistency across countries, in terms of both how governments made such designations and who they included. Some national policy frameworks designated specific worker groups as "essential," while others categorized by sector of work: transportation, utilities, and so on (Stevano et al. 2020, WIEGO 2020). Stevano et al. (2020)'s review of seven countries in the global South and North reveals how the concept of essential work is "much more ambiguous, politicized and fungible" than implied from its normative framing (p. 179). They highlight the tendency to exclude from essential categorization – and therefore, perpetuate the devalorization of – both productive and reproductive work that is performed within the informal economy.

Several studies by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing's (WIEGO's) Law Programme provide insight into how countries

categorized the work of informal workers, specifically street vendors, market traders, and domestic workers, during the COVID-19 crisis. An analysis of COVID-19 laws in 51 African, Asian, and Latin American countries confirms widespread omissions in essential designation of domestic workers or the services they provide (WIEGO 2020). In contrast, policy frameworks from most African countries (explicitly or implicitly) allow informal market traders and/or street vendors to continue working (Bamu and Marchiori 2021).[3] In Latin America, rules commonly referred to food distribution systems at large rather than to informal food workers specifically, leaving significant room for interpretation by local governments and/or explicitly favoring trading in built markets over street vending (Marchiori and Prandini Assi 2021). Regardless of designation, Bamu and Marchiori (2021) noted that factors like barriers to accessing permits, reduced foot traffic, curfews, and transport restrictions could prevent essential workers from working or earning.

Focusing on several cities from the WIEGO-led COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study,[4] this chapter shows how even during the pandemic, the punitive arm of the state acted in ways that undermined its more protective functions: facilitating essential services and providing cash and food assistance. It begins by exploring how "essential" designations reflect existing biases and prejudices against informal workers in general as well as different segments of informal workers. It shows that the process of designating "essential workers" or granting other forms of work permission involved contestation and claim-making by informal worker organizations, in some cases successfully.

Yet in most of the cities where such designations were granted, these had little practical value in their main purported objective: allowing essential workers to continue working. This reflects the weakness of the mandates or designations compared to the larger policy context of intense restrictions, and/or policy latitude of local governments, which are frequently hostile to informal workers. It also reflects major disruptions in supply chains and business costs that render business activities of self-employed workers unviable.

Relief measures from national, provincial, and local governments helped to mitigate the harm to informal workers who received them, though they were limited in scope and reach, especially with regard to recognizing self-employed workers' need for support to both meet basic needs and maintain businesses. As with the roll-out of essential worker designations, the relative strength of local political actors and grassroots organizations influenced the reach of relief measures. The actions of local authorities to undermine all informal workers' livelihoods leading up to and during the crisis – and into the future – through demolitions of or evictions from informal workplaces undermine the scarce relief support received by informal workers.

With limited ability to work, active undermining of their livelihoods by local authorities, and patchy and inadequate relief, the phrase "essential but disposable" has arguably even more resonance for informal workers, particularly the self-employed, than for formal wage workers, to whom it is more commonly used to refer. As the conclusion highlights, the experiences of informal workers during COVID-19 highlight the negative and unpredictable position of informal workers within existing social contracts and strongly reinforce the importance of (re)constituting social contracts that actively include and protect informal workers and their livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this chapter is based on the first round of a mixed-method longitudinal study of informal workers from 11 cities[5] across five regions. The quantitative component consisted of a mobile phone survey of 2,292 workers from 10 different sectors of informal work.[6] The survey was conducted in mid-2020 by phone, and was designed to collect information on earnings, working hours, and sector-specific constraints to livelihoods at three points in time. Respondents were asked to report retrospectively on their earnings and time spent working in February 2020 as a reference point for pre-COVID working conditions, and in April 2020 when all of the study cities were under some form of government lockdown or restriction in response to the pandemic. Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about their current working conditions and earnings in the middle of 2020 (June–July). As a complement to the survey data, the study also included in-depth interviews with informal workers, their leaders and organizers, and other key stakeholders.

Among the cities where workers were surveyed, the severity and duration of restrictions varied considerably. In Durban, Lima, and the three Indian cities of Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Tiruppur, the government imposed lockdowns with heavy restrictions on basic mobility. In Accra, Bangkok, Dakar, Mexico City, New York City, and Pleven, the government imposed various forms of partial lockdowns, including stay-at-home advisories, curfews, and restrictions on the type of businesses able to operate, with varying degrees of enforcement.

In each city, the study was conducted by researchers associated with or recommended by organizations representing or supporting informal workers. The survey sample from each city was based on a purposive quota approach and was designed to reflect the key characteristics of the membership of the worker organizations participating in the survey. Based on a non-probability based sample, the data are not intended to be representative of informal workers in each city or even of the membership of each worker organization. For this reason, and because the respondents are members of worker organizations, the

sample is likely to have more years of work experience and higher earnings than other workers in their occupational sectors.

In addition to the COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study data, this chapter draws on various reports and internal documents produced by members of the WIEGO team through the COVID-19 pandemic period.

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF ESSENTIALNESS

Asserting the economic contributions of informal workers has long been a strategy of claims-making for informal worker organizations and their allies. Worker organizations and their allies have argued persuasively before and during the crisis that much of the work performed by informal workers is essential and life sustaining. Pre-crisis research confirms, for instance, the essential nature of informally traded food (Crush and Frayne 2011, Skinner and Haysom 2017), care (Razavi and Staab 2010), informal waste management (Samson 2008, Dias 2012), and informal transport (Cervero and Golub 2007).

COVID-19 significantly raised the stakes for informal workers to gain recognition for these contributions, since this recognition determined their ability to continue working. Yet among the worker groups interviewed in the WIEGO study, COVID-19 did not lead to considerably greater recognition or valorization.

Table 9.1 shows the occupational groups which received some level of official recognition to continue working. The type of recognition granted to these worker groups varies from express designation as "essential" in national decrees, to weaker government advisories, to more tacit forms of inclusion as described further below.

Market traders and/or street vendors selling food goods were the most likely and the earliest informal workers to be recognized, though the designation typically applied to food vendors only (and frequently certain vendors within that category). Other sectors in the study which gained essential status included motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok and newspaper vendors in Lima. Waste pickers groups in two cities received recognition: in Durban in April 2020 (after restrictions were lifted in South Africa), and in Lima in January 2021 (during the country's second COVID wave). No official recognition for domestic workers or home-based workers (the two sectors in the study with the highest concentrations of women) was identified in any of the cities.[7]

In several countries, the recognition of informal food vendors and traders was not automatic, but rather required organizations of informal vendors and traders to make claims on their essential contributions. In South Africa, the South African Informal Traders Alliance pushed the government to include informal vendors and traders under its definition of essential workers,[8] via an existing International Labour Organization (ILO) platform and through the

Table 9.1 Occupational groups included in WIEGO survey recognized as essential

	Domestic worker	Home-based worker	Street vendor/ market trader	Waste picker	Other sectors	% women
Accra			*Food goods only			73
Pleven						68
Dakar						61
Ahmedabad			*Food goods only			100
Delhi			*Food goods only			65
Mexico City						59
New York City			*Food goods only			53
Lima				+	*Newspaper vendors	66
Durban			*Food goods only	+		56
Dar es Salaam						97
Tiruppur						93
Bangkok			*Food goods only		*Motorcycle taxi drivers	70
% women	98	88	64	51	63	

Notes: Tinted boxes indicate items included in the WIEGO survey. * Some or all members of sector formally declared essential by April 2021. + Formally declared essential after April 2021 (waste pickers in South Africa were given permission to work on 29 April 2020; waste pickers in Lima received permission to work in January 2021, during the second wave of the pandemic in Peru).

National Economic Development and Labour Council. Under this pressure and with concerns about a food security crisis, the government revised its Disaster Management Regulations on 2 April 2020 to recognize informal food vendors with written permission from a municipal authority (WIEGO Social Protection Programme 2020).[9] In India, the government's Urban Affairs Ministry on 3 April issued an advisory to allow certain vendors selling groceries, fruits, and vegetables to operate,[10] following pressure on authorities from the National Association of Street Vendors of India (*Hindustan Times* 2020).

For informal food workers, these designations represented a long overdue acknowledgement and valorization of the role of informal sellers in food systems, and thus a victory for workers and activists (Skinner 2021). At the

same time, the rules they imposed reinforced existing stratifications or created new ones within worker groups, even beyond the distinction of food versus merchandise. In Mexico, rules allowed the operation of permanent markets but excluded *tianguis* (weekly markets) and street vendors (Marchiori and Prandini Assis 2021). In South Africa and India, the exclusions extended to vendors selling cooked foods rather than fresh foods. Merchandise vendors selling "non-essential" goods like clothing were omitted entirely.

Importantly, the national designations in South Africa and India also left room for maneuver by local governments, which are generally hostile towards informal vendors and traders, or reinforced local rules which were known to be exclusionary. The advisory from the Indian Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs provided vendors with a particularly weak mandate, stating that food vendors could work "subject to the restrictions imposed by the district authorities," and limited to those vendors with government identifications – despite the fact that the identification distribution process under the national Street Vending Law has yet to be implemented in most Indian cities (Majithia 2020). Arguably this ministerial advisory was particularly weak in contrast to the harsh national lockdown issued from the country's executive a week earlier, which took effect immediately and was being widely enforced. South Africa's mandate was stronger due to its inclusion in the Disaster Management Act Regulations, but nevertheless required informal vendors and traders to receive permission from municipal authorities to work during COVID. These weak, equivocal mandates presaged the challenges vendors and traders would face to actually provide essential goods.

Despite stratification among informal vendors and traders, these two groups enjoyed greater and faster recognition compared to other groups surveyed. The exclusions of domestic workers and home-based workers from the boundaries of "essential" designations reflects the relative invisibility of these groups (despite providing services such as care, cleaning, personal protective equipment (PPE) production,[11] and waste management) and the formal bias underlined by Stevano et al. (2020). As summarized by a waste picker leader in Accra, Ghana:

> I think before the COVID, there was nothing like recognition from the government. The government did not know that some people do work like this. So I think that from lack of recognition, when the COVID came they couldn't remember that there are some people who are left out.

Like street vendors, informal workers in the waste sector also pushed for recognition, in some cases successfully. Waste pickers in South Africa were permitted to work from 29 April 2020, following pressure campaigns from worker organizations and advocates.[12] In Peru, waste pickers received permis-

sion from the Ministry of Environment to continue during new restrictions in January 2021, after meeting with worker leaders and WIEGO representatives. In contrast, the Delhi Roundtable for Solid Waste Management sent letters to the Chief Minister of Delhi, urging the city to recognize waste pickers as essential workers.[13] However, to date, Indian waste pickers have not gained official designation as essential.

2. ESSENTIAL, BUT "ONLY ON PAPER"

While it is symbolically significant that governments recognized essential services provided by informal workers, the practical implications proved limited. In the seven cities where informal workers received some form of recognition – Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi, Durban, Lima and New York City – only 34 per cent of such workers were able to work during the peak lockdowns or restrictions in April 2020, as shown in Figure 9.1. Only in Accra and Bangkok did more than half of those workers continue to provide such services: a slim majority of 58 per cent in Accra (58 per cent) compared to 82 per cent in Bangkok. By mid-year when most restrictions had lifted, 30 per cent of essential workers across the sample were still unable to resume work. Figures 9.1 and 9.2 show that in several cities, workers recognized as essential were equally or less likely to work than their unrecognized counterparts, as discussed further below.

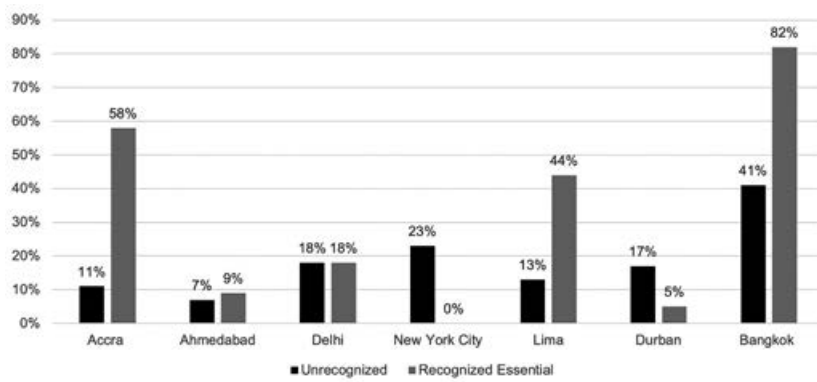

Figure 9.1 *Ability to work in April 2020, by workers recognized as essential v. non-essential, by city: Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Durban, Delhi, Lima, and New York City*[14]

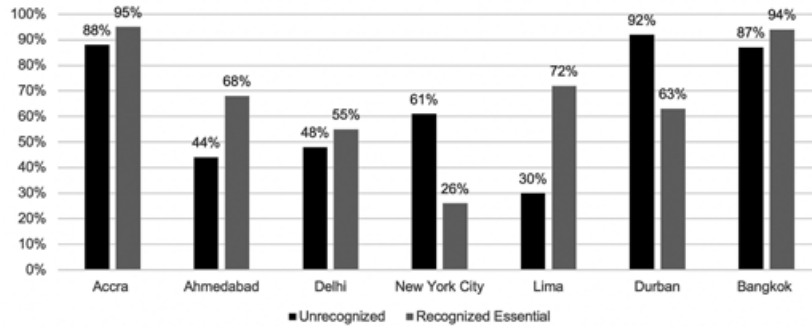

Figure 9.2 *Ability to work by mid-year 2020, by workers recognized as essential v. non-essential, by city: Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Durban, Delhi, Lima, and New York City*

The reasons for this inability of informal essential workers to provide essential services are twofold. First, results reveal a failure by local governments to enforce restrictions in a manner that allowed essential workers to operate, especially during the early days of the crisis. Essential workers most frequently cited government restrictions as the reason for not working in April 2020, in all cities except for Lima (where health concerns were slightly more prevalent among the only recognized group: newspaper vendors). Second, impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on demand and on supply chains also stymied workers, becoming a more important barrier to work by mid-year as government restrictions were eased. The role of market forces in mediating essential work underlines another major difference between formal and informal essential workers: that the latter are much more likely to be self-employed, requiring them to absorb not only the health risks of being "essential," but all the economic risks as well.

The following sections provide deeper analysis into both of these issues.

Local Restrictions Obstruct Essential Work

Survey results and interviews indicate that during peak restrictions in April 2020, the priorities and actions of local governments and law enforcement agencies strongly conflicted with mandates to allow informal workers to operate, and/or took advantage of the weakness of those mandates to implement anti-worker actions. In Durban, South Africa, only 5 per cent of essential food traders continued to work in April 2020. Ninety-one per cent of those who stopped working did so due to stay-at-home orders and/or market closures; a quarter of those specified further that they were unable to obtain municipal

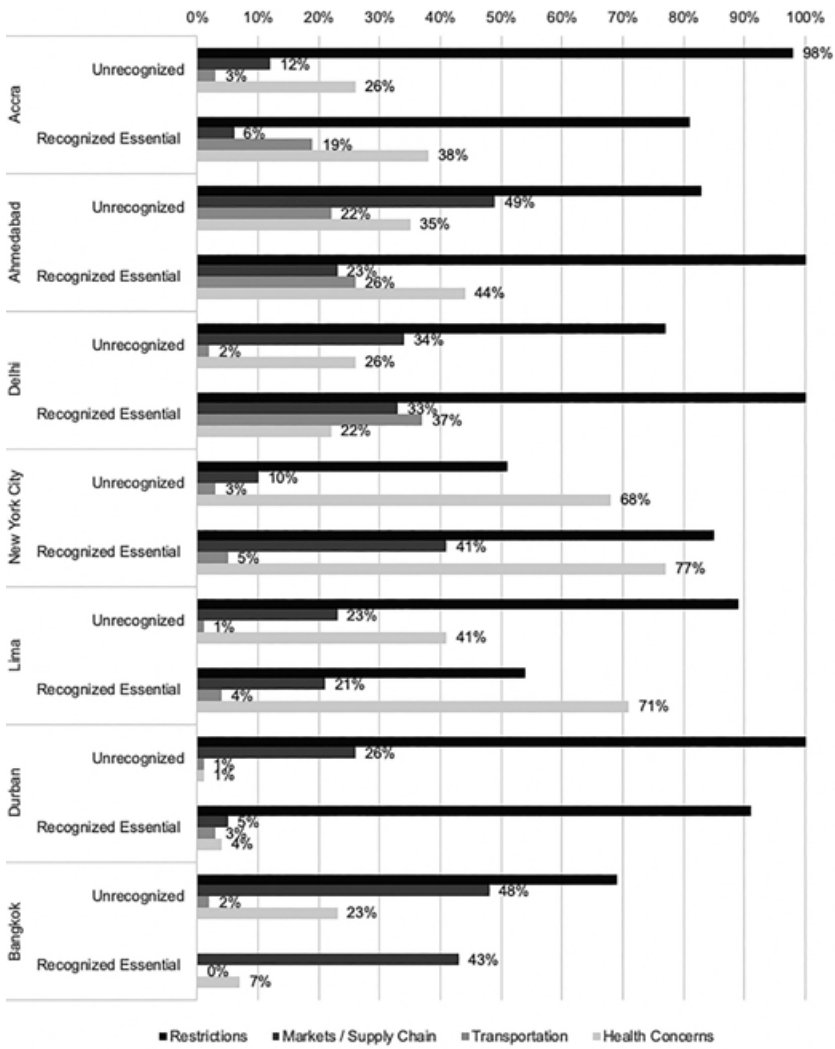

Figure 9.3 *Reasons for not working in April 2020, by workers recognized as essential v. non-essential, by city: Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Durban, Delhi, Lima, and New York City*

work permits necessary for work. As one trader reported, "Although our sector was declared essential, no official was prepared to issue us COVID-19 permits"; another complained of the "incompetence" of municipal officials in

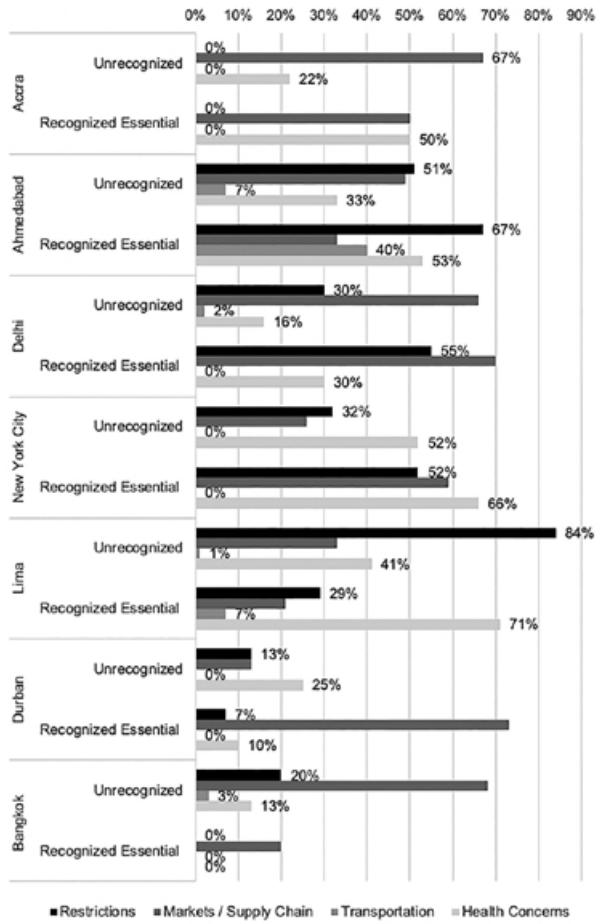

Figure 9.4 *Reasons for not working by mid-year 2020, by workers recognized as essential v. non-essential, by city: Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Durban, Delhi, Lima, and New York City*

issuing permits. The situation of food traders and vendors in Durban was not unique in South Africa, according to Skinner et al. (2021: 17), who describe "municipal offices being closed and declining requests for meetings, and traders reporting harassment of fresh food traders as they lawfully returned to work." In addition to the difficulty in securing permits, the extended closure of the Warwick Junction Market in Durban by the eThekwini Municipality made

it impossible for many to return to work after restrictions were lifted (Heneck 2020: 3).

In the Indian cities of Ahmedabad and Delhi, only 9 per cent and 18 per cent of food vendors, respectively, continued working during the lockdown. As noted above, the provision that only vendors holding IDs could sell considerably narrowed the number in Indian cities with official permission to work, even if they were providing recognized essential services.[15] Almost all food vendors reported that they were unable to work because they were not permitted or because of stay-at-home orders, and approximately 89 per cent of essential workers in Ahmedabad and 62 per cent in Delhi reported market closures as an additional impediment. Worker leaders and key informants recounted how the implementation of strict "containment zones" in areas with high COVID rates prevented workers from reaching those markets, even if they were open. In both cities, vendors described attempting to set up stalls or carts but being turned back by police, and violent forms of enforcement (as detailed further below). This accumulation of deterrents amounted to "a de facto ban on vending," with vendors essential status "on paper only," as described by one key informant.[16]

In Accra, only 58 per cent of street and market vendors designated as essential workers were able to work in April. More than 80 per cent of those not working cited official restrictions as the reason. In interviews, street vendors and market traders described how restrictions on travel between municipalities prevented them from purchasing goods or accessing their trading locations. One leader described:

> The security officials would not allow even those who were designated as essential workers to go beyond to trade. This is due to the planning in our city where not all towns within the city have markets. Some workers stay as far as Ablekuma and could be trading at Makola or Central Market. The security will not allow you to cross to the market in spite of your designation as an essential worker … They will just ask you to stay within your area of residence and sell, in spite of the fact that that may not be your trading zone (Street vendor leader, Accra).

In April, trader organizations and transport unions in Accra negotiated with the Ministry of Local Government to issue special identifications for traders and transport workers. Their demands were eventually successful, although the IDs were issued to a limited number of informal workers, and only shortly before most restrictions were lifted.

Respondents also highlighted ambiguities in local policy and inconsistency in application. A merchandise vendor in Bangkok noted that the enforcement regime varied considerably from location to location within the city: "At present, the municipal officials are quite lenient, but it is not like this everywhere. In some areas, they would take pictures and report to their boss every

day." In some cities, this led to a higher rate of work among groups without essential status or permission to work. In Accra, waste pickers were able to enter the landfill where they normally worked because their association T-shirts and IDs gave them the appearance of being formal sanitation workers. In Ahmedabad, Delhi, Durban, and New York City, waste pickers and/or domestic workers were *more likely* to work in April and by mid-year 2020 than were food vendors recognized as essential in those cities. Among domestic workers, workers who lived with their employers could frequently continue to work, since their job did not demand regular travel (though these conditions resulted in considerably deteriorating working conditions and exploitation; Ismail et al. 2021). These findings suggest that the relative invisibility of domestic workers and waste pickers, as highlighted above, had a flip side: a greater ability to operate below the radar than street vendors and market traders.

Markets, Supply Chains, and Health: Taking on the Risks of Essentialness Without the Reward

Beyond limitations imposed by local authorities, falling demand and broken supply chain linkages prevented many informal workers from providing essential services. These supply and demand factors became the more central barriers to work for informal workers as restrictions increasingly lifted towards mid-2020. By mid-year, the percentage of essential workers reporting market and supply chain issues as factors in their inability to work had risen from 21 per cent in April to more than half (53 per cent).

The demand for goods and services was impacted by the declining purchasing power of individual customers, their restricted mobility and social activities, and by the limited economic activities of the food and beverage industry such as restaurants, hotels, and bars. Ninety-two per cent of essential vendors reported that their sales had decreased by mid-year as compared to pre-COVID (February 2020). Disruptions to supply chains also impacted vendors' ability to purchase supplies, due to restrictions and/or price surges, with three-quarters of essential workers (73 per cent) reporting that it became harder to buy their stock. A street vendor in Durban highlighted how the economic impact of the pandemic on the general public impacted street vendor's earnings: "people don't have money and some have lost their jobs, and that's not good for our businesses."

These issues underline another key difference between formal and informal essential workers: namely, that the latter are predominantly self-employed. This status in employment means that despite being essential, the informal self-employed bore not only the health risks of COVID-19 (similarly to formal wage workers), but also the economic risks and business costs. Thirty-nine

per cent of essential vendors reported an increase in travel costs due to travel restrictions, and 55 per cent reported additional costs to purchase PPE and sanitation materials.[17] Market traders in Durban described fellow workers borrowing money from lenders in order to restock or pay for other basic business expenses like transportation. A third (30 per cent) of vendors designated as essential workers reported losses of perishables. Yet unlike formal *businesses*, most bore risks and costs without government support mechanisms like special loans and grants, as described further in Section 3.

The convergence of all these risks and costs meant that for many, doing business was simply not worthwhile. A trader in Accra noted that "food sellers who sold to workers … were forced to stop work because their patrons had all gone home and [they] would not have anyone to sell to." In Delhi, a vendor said, "I used to sell food on the road for the workers who used to eat my food. In the pandemic they have also gone back to their village. However, if the workers are not there, then how will I do my business?" A vendor in Bangkok described terminating one of his two workers, whom he could no longer afford to pay.

Thus, while few workers experienced the valorization of essentialness in practical terms, almost all felt the sting of disposability. The material outcomes of this are striking, for recognized and unrecognized workers alike. Across 11 study cities, respondents experienced an average drop in earnings of 79 per cent in April and 45 per cent by mid-year, compared to pre-COVID. Essential workers fared only marginally better than those without such recognition: in the seven cities where any workers were declared essential, 68 per cent of "essential" workers suffered an income loss of 90 per cent or more compared to pre-COVID, versus 82 per cent loss of non-essential workers, in April. Based on the analysis above, this appears to reflect the comparably better market for food goods during the crisis, rather than any favorable treatment or support from the state due to their status. Essential workers were slightly *more likely* than non-essential workers to resort to asset-depleting strategies: borrowing money, drawing down savings, and/or selling assets (81 per cent versus 72 per cent). The use of these strategies might indicate economic capacity as well as economic hardship – but regardless, they hinder informal workers and their households from economic recovery.

This section confirms the disconnect between essential work on paper and in practice. It shows how the priorities of local government, combined with market forces against which workers had no buffer, stopped many workers designated as essential from providing essential goods and services. These factors had negative consequences for workers' ability to sustain themselves and their families without resorting to coping strategies that are likely to entrap them in poverty. The next section explores how the state stepped in for infor-

mal workers in other ways that, mirroring essential worker status, were steeped in contradictions between different parts of the state.

3. RELIEF VERSUS REPRESSION: TWO FACES OF THE STATE

This section reviews another facet of the "essential but disposable" schema, by revisiting how the state both supported and actively harmed informal workers during the crisis. The provision of relief is an important component of this story, since it affected workers' ability to survive the crisis.

While the COVID-19 pandemic recession led to some recognition of the essential goods and services provided by informal workers, it led to greater recognition of the need of informal workers for adequate social protection during crises and beyond. The COVID-19 period saw an unprecedented global expansion in systems designed to distribute relief, with the creation of new cash transfer programs, topping up of benefits under existing social protection programs, and expansion of existing programs to cover a greater number of people. Many of these policies included or targeted informal workers specifically (Gentilini et al. 2020). This chapter argues that similarly with the roll-out of essential worker policies, local actors in some cases mediated access to this relief, both negatively and positively. Where they reached workers, relief measures helped to mitigate the harm to informal workers and their households. However, these benefits were not adequate and did not outweigh the negative impacts of the "other face of the state": the negative impacts of confiscations, evictions, and destruction of work sites.

RELIEF FOR INFORMAL WORKERS: IMPORTANT BUT IMPERFECT

For informal workers, receipt of relief indicates a certain, base level of state recognition – an acknowledgement that informal workers exist, that their earnings have been sharply curtailed, and that they have claims on a certain basic level of provision for survival. While this falls short of recognizing them as workers (with rights equal to those of formal employees), or as businesses (with claims equal to those of formal businesses), receiving government support signifies that one is not fully "disposable." It aligns with an analysis of informal work as adversely incorporated, rather than fully excluded, from the political economy.

The roll-out of relief measures for informal workers was evident in some of the study's 10 countries and 11 cities, with a diverse array of interventions. Some, like Peru and Thailand, created new cash assistance programs, some aimed at informal workers. South Africa both expanded existing cash grant

schemes and created a new program for those not covered by those schemes. In India, the government provided a one-time cash grant though an existing financial inclusion scheme (Jan Dhan) aimed at informal workers, and food aid, building on an existing public distribution system. It also created new relief grants for certain groups, such as informal transport workers. In contrast, Bulgaria provided no specific cash grants and limited food aid aimed at informal workers, despite imposing heavy restrictions on movement and business.

As with essential worker designations, the design of relief programs reflects the relative visibility of as well as biases for or against different groups of informal workers. This is expressed succinctly by members of the Delhi Roundtable Network, which represents waste pickers, in their letter to the Chief Minister of Delhi:

> During the lockdown, auto-rickshaw drivers, construction workers, public transport drivers of the informal livelihoods have been provided by the Government, the necessary monetary compensation of Rs. 5000/- due to the loss of work … However, the most important work of maintaining hygiene and cleanliness in the city is being done by informal waste pickers who have not been included. It is to be noted that most waste pickers belong to the low caste and are already on the margins of existence.[18]

In Mexico, domestic workers registered in the social security system could apply for a federal relief grant, and street vendors could apply for loans through a national program, whereas no national programs were available to non-salaried workers.[19] In New York City, a federal relief package included universal cash transfers and a new unemployment scheme aimed specifically at self-employed workers. But both packages explicitly excluded undocumented individuals and their family members, and thus an important and vulnerable segment of the country's informal workforce (including street vendors and canners involved in the crisis study).

While most relief measures originated from the national level, in some cases local or state governments stepped up to fill gaps. Mexico City enacted a small grant program for non-salaried workers in response to demands from these workers, and Tamil Nadu, as well as several other states in India, announced its own small cash grant program. In both cases, however, the cash amounts were very small and offered only once or twice.

Where schemes should have reached eligible informal workers, they frequently failed to do so. Alfers et al.'s (2020) analysis of the WIEGO study data found that fewer than half of respondents had received cash or food aid in cities where such measures were available. For cash grants, this reflected exclusion errors from a variety of sources, as well as the "digital divide" given the dependence on digital application processes. In Lima, for instance, the vast majority of workers (half of the total sample) who did not receive cash relief

transfers believed themselves to be eligible. Only 15 per cent of waste pickers in Durban reported receiving cash grants as compared to more than half of market traders and street vendors, due more to lack of identification and digital access than to non-eligibility.[20]

As with the implementation of essential status, informal modes of urban governance also played a role in mediating receipt of relief, especially for in-kind support such as food aid and utility support. Fifteen per cent of respondents said that political favoritism prevented them from gaining access to food relief. This perception was particularly strong in Lima (32 per cent), Durban (32 per cent), and Dakar (24 per cent). A street vendor in Accra complained that the food packages "were given to those who are political activists; that is, the two main political parties gave out food but to persons they identified as their core members." According to interviews in Accra, it was frequently landlords rather than tenants who profited from water bill waivers and utility relief, by requiring tenants to continue paying them for these services.

For both cash and food relief, grassroots worker organizations provided an important local counterweight to exclusionary hurdles at all levels, by assisting workers to claim and acquire these resources. High rates of access to cash relief in Bangkok and food relief in all three Indian cities reflect assistance from worker organizations for members to complete digital application forms (in the case of Bangkok), and/or channel food relief to workers' homes (in the case of Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Tiruppur) (Alfers et al. 2020).

Even for workers who accessed relief aid, its impact in cushioning the crisis was limited (WIEGO 2021). Cash relief measures were not designed to replace income or account for regular expenses like rent, loans, and school tuition, or special urgent needs such as smartphones for remote learning. A street vendor in Bangkok noted that the 5,000 baht per month cash handout (the largest across all the study cities) was "helpful" but "sufficient just for [a home] rental fee, but insufficient for food expenses." A waste picker in Lima described how even after receiving the 350 peso relief, he and his family were forced to reduce their food intake to survive. Relief systems rarely recognize that many informal workers, especially the self-employed, require cash relief for meeting basic needs, *as well as* working capital to restart their business after a crisis. In Accra, Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi, and Mexico City, vendors were eligible in principle for small loans, but struggled in reality to access them due to bureaucratic hurdles and slow roll-outs.[21] In New York City, the street vendor organization, called the Street Vendor Project, reported that while many of its members received some relief assistance from programs aimed at individual workers, none of the vendors who applied for small business loans with the organizations' help had their applications approved. As a result, some vendors who had received government cash transfers for their households

could no longer afford the operating costs of their businesses, as compared to brick-and-mortar restaurants that had access to low-cost loans.

The Other Face of the State

As with essential worker recognition, the importance of government relief measures for informal workers should not be understated. They set a precedent and provide invaluable lessons to governments on how to better design these systems.

Yet as highlighted by Moussié and Alfers (2019), it is common during normal times for these national-level protective measures to be undermined by punitive policies of other branches of government, particularly at the local level. Actions like confiscations, evictions, and demolitions of working sites, which are not uncommon during normal times, are evidence not just that informal workers are disposable in the eyes of local government. They reflect explicit policy goals to actively dispose of them, as highlighted in the introduction.

The global pandemic was no exception. Accounts show how actions by other state actors reduced workers' resilience prior to the crisis, threatened their ability to survive during the crisis, and put in jeopardy workers' long-term recovery prospects by dispossessing them of space, infrastructure, and/or labor rights. The latter aligns with the historical observations of Harvey (2008), on how capital leverages crises to reshape cities through accumulation by dispossession of the working classes.

Punitive enforcement was nothing new for informal workers. Leading up to the pandemic, sustained government evictions of street vendors in Bangkok had already reduced their sales volumes and earnings. One food vendor noted that his forced relocation several years earlier had cut his sales in half, and that COVID cut them further to one-quarter.

During the early months of the crisis, many law enforcement actions went beyond simply stopping workers from providing essential services as described in Section 3, but actively harmed them at a time of intense economic desperation. Vendors in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Durban, Lima, and Mexico City complained of confiscations and/or destruction of their equipment or merchandise. Almost all waste pickers and street vendors interviewed in Ahmedabad and Delhi described police beatings of workers; one waste picker explained that she and her husband endured daily beatings for selling vegetables as a supplemental source of income. In Durban, waste pickers described arbitrary confiscation of recyclables by police, who claimed waste pickers were stealing or littering. "The greatest fear that recyclers face at the moment is police harassment, and they fear walking on the street to collect waste," described

one. An official in Mexico City boastfully posted a photo of over 100 tricycles confiscated from street vendors in August 2020 (Harvey 2020).

Workers' complaints about police violence during COVID-19 do not reflect a rejection of public health restrictions. In Ahmedabad and Delhi, the same worker leaders who described public beatings expressed appreciation for enforcement of mask-wearing or social distancing. One vendor in Ghana said he wished that police had been stronger in their enforcement, out of concern that some traders and clients were not respecting social distancing protocols. Yet actions like confiscations, destruction of workspace, and beatings had little value for public health.

Larger-scale dispossessions are presenting longer-term threats to informal livelihoods. In April 2020 in Accra, the government suddenly initiated the decommissioning of Accra's Kpone landfill site, where 300 waste pickers earned their living, allegedly as part of the World Bank's Greater Accra Resilient and Integrated Development program.[22] According to Boampong et al. (2020), the state "has taken advantage of the distraction of COVID-19 to advance the landfill's closure, without adhering to their commitments to ensure viable livelihood alternatives or compensation for displaced workers." In this way, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis has become a permanent livelihood crisis for waste pickers at Kpone landfill.

In Delhi, street vendor leaders learned that the Delhi Municipal Corporation was considering implementing a legally mandated vendor census during the pandemic. While vendors have long demanded implementation of the national Street Vendor Protection Act, conducting the census at a time when few vendors were operating on the streets would undercut the law by identifying – and thus registering legally – only those present. One leader worried that "maybe after the survey they'll evict hawkers/vendors from their space." In a similarly ominous act, the municipal government has been removing or destroying important work sites in the processing chain of waste pickers (WIEGO Delhi Focal City 2021). These larger-scale instances of accumulation by dispossession strike a particularly startling contrast with the limited reach and paucity of cash and food relief.

CONCLUSION

> The poor man fulfills all his needs from buying from hawkers, but the government has really not taken care of us (Street vendor, Delhi, India).

This chapter began by interrogating what meaning the policy construct of "essential" work had for informal workers, particularly in the global South. In doing so, it established a comparison with their largely Northern counter-

parts in formal wage employment facing the paradox of being "essential but disposable."

In cities like Accra, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Durban, Lima, and New York City, recognition of workers' essential roles, however weak, was an important symbolic victory celebrated by informal workers' organizations, which in some cases fought during the pandemic for this recognition. The omission of other groups, particularly domestic workers and waste pickers who provide essential care and waste recycling services, reflects existing stratification and degrees of visibility within informal employment. This played out again in the design of COVID-related cash relief measures, which in many contexts implicitly or explicitly excluded all or certain segments of informal workers.

In most cities where essential status was granted, the ways in which local governments implemented COVID-19 restrictions during the restrictive periods meant that the majority of designated essential workers could not in practice provide essential services to the public. Ironically, groups with less visibility than the food traders and vendors who were granted essential worker status were in some cases better able to navigate the ambiguity of rules and enforcement. Major disruptions in markets and supply chains further hampered the ability to work, especially as restrictions were eased or lifted. A parallel can be seen in the gap between relief design and relief targeting, stemming from various types of exclusion errors and digital barriers, as well as mediator roles played by local actors in the distribution of relief.

Shifting rules, ambiguous boundaries, and multiple interests mediated the implementation of both essential worker status and relief measures for informal workers during the pandemic; this was not an exception to informal workers' pre-COVID experience, but an intensification. In response, grassroots organizations of informal workers made claims on essentialness *and* relief for their members, both in the design phase and during on-the-ground implementation.

The ongoing experience of violence and harassment highlights a second paradox for informal workers, like waste pickers and street vendors, whose limited access to relief measures is consistently undermined by state violence against their livelihoods. The undermining of their livelihoods, their relative lack of social protection, and the absence of support for their businesses means that the phrase "essential but disposable" has arguably more resonance for informal workers, particularly the self-employed, than for formal wage workers. The loss of earnings and the coping strategies used by informal workers, both "essential" and "non-essential," illustrate the real, material outcomes of their disposability, outcomes which need to be addressed in a new social compact for informal workers.

As such, this chapter brings to light several points which are relevant to the idea and reality of social contracts. The experience of disposability as

a persistent feature in the work and lives of urban informal workers, as evinced from 11 cities in five continents, is a contravention of the core principles of a fair social contract. A working social contract would not require individual workers to continuously negotiate their value and essentialness, in particular with the state at multiple levels. Rather, these should be guaranteed in regulatory frameworks and in practice by a fair social contract.

Second, the state is supposed to be the guarantor of the social contract. However, the findings presented in the chapter highlighted the diverse ways in which different levels and arms of the state may both promote and undermine informal workers and their livelihoods. The depiction of national and local governments as inconsistent, capricious and hostile to informal workers in their COVID-19 responses in several contexts demands a careful examination of assumptions regarding the role of the state in social contract models.

Finally, the chapter highlights the ways in which the self-employed status of many informal workers left them triply vulnerable, taking on health risks and business risks associated with the pandemic without any of the health protections afforded to formal wage workers and none of the economic or business protections afforded to formal businesses. This underlines the need for a social contract to encompass the multiple relationships with the state and other actors that informal workers have to negotiate on a daily basis.

NOTES

1. Ghida Ismail led the quantitative data analysis for this chapter, and contributed to the overall findings.
2. We qualify here the word "formal," since the critique of "essential but disposable" implicitly highlights the ongoing informalization of wage work in the global North that has been underway for decades under neo-liberal labor, employment, and economic policies (see, for instance, Breman and van der Linden 2014).
3. Bamu and Marchiori (2021) find that regulations provided a "continuum" of permissions to work, from implicit permission by recognizing certain goods or services as essential to express permission to work or designation as essential.
4. Additional research outputs from the WIEGO-led COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study are available here: www.wiego.org/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-study-0.
5. The cities included in the study are as follows: Accra, Ghana; Pleven, Bulgaria; Dakar, Senegal; Ahmedabad, Delhi and Tiruppur, India; Mexico City, Mexico; New York City, United States; Lima, Peru; Durban, South Africa; and Bangkok, Thailand.
6. The four main sector groups across the 11 cities include: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers. Other types of workers were also sampled in some cities, and these include: "non-salaried" workers in Mexico City, newspaper vendors in Lima, *kayayeis* (head porters) in Accra,

market vendors in Durban, and motorcycle taxi drivers and massage therapists in Bangkok.

7. Table 9.1 is not an exhaustive scan of essential designations in all cities, but rather examines only those occupational sectors included in the study. For example, food vendors in Dakar were recognized as essential, but are not listed here since the study did not include them.
8. On 25 March 2020, Joburg Informal Traders Platform and WIEGO released a joint statement arguing for the right to work on the basis of promoting food security and securing their own livelihoods.
9. See Amendment of Annexure B to the Regulations, Section E, www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202004/43199rg11078-gon446.pdf.
10. See Government of India, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (3 April 2020): "Subject: Allowing identified urban street vendors to sell essential items during lockdown period due to COVID-19." Available at http://nasvinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GoI-Direction-Essential-services.png.
11. Home-based workers in Ahmedabad and Delhi received orders to produce masks.
12. See, for instance, https://awethu.amandla.mobi/petitions/demand-the-right-to-work-for-reclaimers-and-their-right-to-survival-during-COVID-19?bucket=&source=twitter-share-button&utm_campaign=&utm_source=twitter&share=31304651-9d93-4201-838a-5d2fa1103375.
13. Available at: www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/file/Letter%20to%20CM_Wastepickers_DRT.pdf.
14. The "essential worker" grouping includes all food vendors/traders and motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok; all food vendors in Accra and New York City; vendors/traders selling fresh food in Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Durban; and newspaper vendors in Lima. For consistency, waste pickers in Durban are excluded although they received permission to work on 29 April.
15. The WIEGO survey did not distinguish between vendors with pre-existing government identification and those without, and thus does not provide insight into whether this documentation made them more likely to continue working. In Delhi, only 1.3 million out of the estimated 3 million vendors currently hold an identification (Majithia and Sinha 2020).
16. One initiative in Ahmedabad shows that there were alternatives to the repressive stance towards informal, essential workers in India. In late April, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation launched a "Vegetable on Wheels" program in collaboration with the trade union Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). The program permitted participating fresh produce vendors to visit wholesale markets in the early morning, and to ride with rickshaw drivers to sell their products to customers at various stops on a specific route. Though small-scale, the initiative provided critical earning opportunities to both vendors and rickshaw drivers, as well as providing access to healthy foods in parts of the city affected by curfew (Chen 2020).
17. Braham and Ogando (2021) provide an analysis of respondents' access to PPE, noting that the vast majority supplied this themselves.
18. See www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/file/Letter%20to%20CM_Wastepickers_DRT.pdf.
19. "Non-salaried worker" is a legal category of workers in Mexico, which covers a diverse range of occupational groups in public space, including shoe shiners and mariachi musicians, among others.

20. Forty-six per cent reported that they lacked documentation, and 26 per cent reported a lack of digital services, versus 28 per cent reporting non-eligibility.
21. See, for instance, Majithia (2021), who describes a vendor who had not yet received his small state loan after applying three months earlier.
22. As noted by Boampong et al. (2020), the World Bank denies financing the decommissioning, though "This may be a strategy to avoid World Bank safeguards for the livelihoods of displaced workers under its Operational Policies and Environmental and Social Standards."

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