Climate Justice and the Informal Economy: A Study on Informal Workers and the Climate Crisis

Urban informal workers face increasingly extreme heat every year—making their work not only harder but also burdening them with rising expenses and fragile health, while their struggles remain overlooked and invisible.

The project **"Climate Justice and the Urban Informal Economy,"** funded by WIEGO, takes on the task of researching and documenting the realities of informal workers across Bangkok. The focus is on **home-based workers** and **street vendors**, creating a space for informal workers to raise their voices to society while also advancing concrete policy recommendations to the state.

1. Focus Group Discussion

In the first half of 2025, **HomeNet** invited informal workers from two occupations—**street vendors** and **home-based workers**—to join small-group discussions on climate change. A total of **32 focus group sessions** were organized in different areas across Bangkok, with **93 participants** (77 women and 16 men).

The conversations covered a wide range of topics: from basic understanding of climate change, to its impacts on the economy, health, daily life, and care responsibilities; workers' adaptation strategies; and finally, their messages to the government.

One recurring recommendation voiced by many workers was the need to make **sunscreen more affordable** by including it in the national essential drug list, allowing vulnerable groups to access it through the universal health coverage scheme. Many informal workers work under the sun every day, yet sunscreen remains too expensive for them to buy. At the same time, workers also emphasized that those who must work outdoors should receive **income compensation** when extreme heat makes it impossible to work.

This activity marked the **first step for informal workers in Bangkok**, and also the **first step for HomeNet Thailand** in taking the climate crisis seriously. Many participants expressed similar sentiments:

- *"I never knew about these issues before."*
- *"No one has ever invited us to talk about this."*
- *"Why are we discussing this so late?"*

- *“So what should we do now?”*
- *“I want to share this with others.”*
- *“I want children to learn about this in school, so they understand how they will live in the future.”*

Workers who joined the discussions were eager to pass on the knowledge they had gained to others. They also proposed **expanding the role of community health volunteers (Aor Sor Sor)** by increasing their numbers, providing better compensation, and adding training modules specifically on heat-related illnesses.

2. Surveying “Hot Issues” Reflecting Workers’ Lives (in collaboration with &Wider)

The 32 focus group discussions provided rich qualitative insights. To complement this, we also conducted a **quantitative survey with 1,039 informal workers across Bangkok (76% women)** before and after the hot season (March and July). Using a set of 20 occupation-specific questions, the survey examined the impacts of extreme heat on livelihoods, daily life, health, and care responsibilities.

Some of the most striking findings include:

- **79%** reported needing to reduce their working hours during the hot season, resulting in lower productivity.
- **9 out of 10 workers** reported higher expenses to cope with extreme heat.
- **Over 60%** reported having to stop working in order to seek medical care for heat-related illnesses.
- **More than 71%** reported needing to borrow money and take on greater care responsibilities during the hot seaso**n.**

Yet, only **43%** of respondents said they had received warnings about upcoming heatwaves, and just **34%** were registered under Social Security Article 40.

These findings suggest that informal workers in urban areas—already among the most vulnerable—will become even more at risk as temperatures rise. At the same time, the mechanisms for support, early warning systems, and state-led measures to help people cope with extreme heat remain **inadequate and underdeveloped**.

All of this quantitative data will be integrated with findings from other research tools to form a strong set of **policy recommendations** moving forward.

3. “Working under Heat: A Practical Guide for Workers in Bangkok” Handbook

Based on the data we collected, both quantitative and qualitative, **WIEGO and HomeNet Thailand** realized that knowledge resources and practical methods for coping with extreme heat remain very new and far removed from the awareness of most workers. We therefore developed this handbook to share with informal workers in Thailand, who must increasingly work under extreme heat but remain overlooked by the Thai state. This has made it the responsibility of civil society to deliver essential knowledge directly to those who need it most.[i] The handbook was launched during the Songkran Festival, which is Thailand’s peak hot season (although this year’s climate disruptions brought early rains as soon as April). It was disseminated through **LINE worker network groups, the foundation’s website, and Facebook page**, as well as in **hard copy** to ensure it reached those who truly need it.

The handbook focuses on **health care and safe working practices under extreme heat**, with practical tips that workers themselves identified as most useful, such as:

- **Use electric fans only when the temperature is below 40˚C.** In temperatures above 40˚C, fans will heat the body.
- **Use sunscreen:** Apply sunscreen with a high SPF and UVA protection. **Re-apply every 2 hours and after sweating.**
- **Limit spicy food intake as this can increase your body temperature during heat waves.**
- **Limit sugary drinks, alcohol and caffeine as these can lead to dehydration.**

Many workers had never known, for example, that sunscreen should be reapplied every two hours, or that fans should not be used once temperatures rise too high. Another useful tip is to **avoid spicy food**—something especially relevant for street vendors, who could consider reducing or skipping spicy dishes during the hot season. This benefits both sellers and buyers, since spicy food tends to sell poorly in extreme heat, while avoiding it also helps protect health.

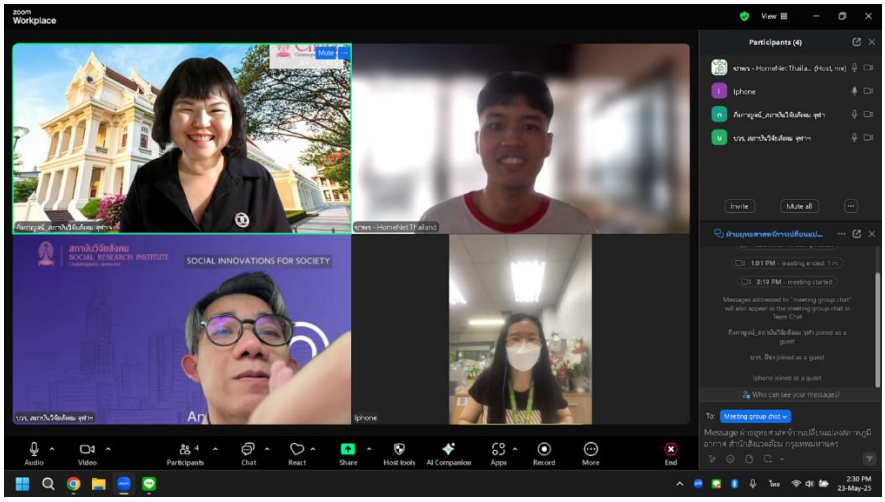
4. In-Depth Interviews to Capture the Voices of Climate-Related Agencies

The project did not only listen to the voices of informal urban workers directly affected by extreme heat, but also engaged with **policy-makers and climate-related agencies**. In collaboration with the **Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University**, HomeNet Thailand conducted **seven in-depth interviews** in May 2025 with the following agencies:

- Department of Climate Change and Environment (formerly the Department of Climate Change Mitigation)
- Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS)
- Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour
- Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)
- Department of Disease Control (DDC)
- Thailand Environment Institute (TEI)
- Climate Watch Thailand (CWT)

The purpose was to gather perspectives, plans, and challenges in addressing the climate vulnerability of informal workers. The insights from these seven interviews have been consolidated into an academic paper:

“Climate Vulnerability of Informal Workers in Thailand: Cross-Sectoral Responses and Operational Challenges.” This paper will be used as a key resource to **advocate for stronger, more inclusive national policies** for all informal workers moving forward.



5. “Hotter World, Harder Lives: The State Must Rethink Urban Poverty Policies”

On **World Environment Day (June 5)**, the **Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion (HomeNet Thailand)**, in collaboration with **Thai PBS**, hosted a public forum under the theme *“Global Warming, People Struggling: The State Must Rethink Policies for the Urban Poor.”* The event was not only a platform for government officials, academics, and worker representatives to exchange views, but also an opportunity for **informal workers themselves**—those who had joined earlier focus group discussions—to voice the daily hardships they face from rising urban heat and the rapid impacts of climate change, which remain largely ignored.

The **real voices of workers left many participants deeply moved.** One worker shared: ***“It’s so hot I have to stop selling, but no one compensates my lost income.”*** The atmosphere was filled with raw exchanges and sharp questions aimed directly at those in power. This was more than a conversation—it was a **demand for rights and a call for change.**

As one street vendor described:

“Some of us face shortness of breath under the heat… For those with high blood pressure, we hardly dare to face the sun. We have to wait until it goes down before we can continue selling.”

The **“threefold impact” of climate change on informal workers** comes from three overlapping pressures: deteriorating health, falling income, and

state policies that remain incomplete. Workers consistently shared the view that, while many government policies may look good on paper (such as electric trains, “15-minute parks,” or carbon credits), they fail to address the **real-life struggles of marginalized urban workers** who lack welfare protections or the capacity to adapt. A prominent demand raised was for the state to establish a **“reserve fund”** to support those most directly affected—such as outdoor workers and street vendors—whose daily living costs keep rising while their access to rights and welfare remains limited.

The conclusion from the forum was that, although workers’ voices are growing louder in declaring that climate change is not a distant issue, there is still a **gap in translating these concerns into practical, inclusive policies**. Examples include expanding social security coverage to informal workers, ensuring rest areas/shade/water access for outdoor workers, and building early-warning systems for heatwaves. A full summary of the forum, in Thai, is available on the [Locals ThaiPBS] website.