

Project: The Political Leverage of Informal Workers Organizations; the cases of Ghana en Benin

Report External Stakeholders Mid-Term Review Accra - Ghana

Venue: Accra City Hotel

Date: 29 March 2016

No. of participants: 39

The workshop

In Accra, 39 people, representing Ghanaian academics, trade unions, informal workers associations (IWOs), government and NGOs, convened for one day to conduct a self-assessment of the Strategic Actors research project 'The Political Leverage of Informal Workers Organizations; the cases of Ghana and Benin'. The workshop was a country level meeting, a similar workshop will be held in Benin. The set-up of the workshop was informal, people sitting around tables and the Chair of the Day walking around, to encourage discussion among the participants. Participants could speak their own Ghanaian languages, so all participants could easily follow the lively discussion and many of them stood up to express their thoughts and raise issues.

Presentation of preliminary research findings

The workshop started with a brief presentation of preliminary findings from the sample survey and the in-depth study. The focus of these presentations was on the voice, representation and political leverage aspects of informal workers organizations. Survey data show that there are considerable 'decent work deficits' among informal workers in the textile and mechanics sector, in particular in the areas of income security and social protection. Concerns of informal sector workers are also access to credit, property rights and all sorts of harassment in the market place (violent evictions, sexual harassment, corruption, and so on). With regard to voice and representation, the association rate is about 14% among informal sector workers in the textile and mechanics sector. This is relatively low but does somehow reflect national figures which are about 17-18%.

From the in-depth study preliminary findings show that IWOs use a multitude of strategies to increase their political leverage. The landscape has become diffuse since also (foreign) donor sponsored IWOs have entered the arena, either or not financed through local trade unions like TUC and GFL. Their organization is different from locally embedded IWOs in terms of leadership roles, strategies and funding. This creates tensions and power struggles among IWOs that operate within the same sector and this may reduce the effectiveness of collective action and political leverage strategies.

After these presentations the remainder of the day was used to discuss several questions with the participants, among others, whether the presented research findings reflect realities on the ground, whether there are cases to be found of successful political leverage by informal workers associations that could possibly feed into the project, and how the research findings could facilitate and benefit external stakeholders.

Reflection on preliminary research findings

In general, participants recognized the preliminary findings that were presented by the researchers, and some new examples of successful political leverage were mentioned that could feed into the research findings (see below). Competition within the sectors was a major concern for many participants. The representatives from SMIDO from Kumasi indicated that younger workers much easier break away from their masters these days and set up their own garages. This creates tensions within SMIDO. Also the evolution of cars, which implies a transition from mechanics to electronics, affects the sector very much. Advanced equipment is needed to diagnose and repair modern cars and many mechanics lack the finance for this equipment and increasingly lose market shares. Participants active in textile trading mentioned the controversy around the import of cheap (Chinese) cloths. On the one hand this undermines existing market positions of those who are in the top segment of the cloths trade, but it gives opportunities for those active in the lower priced segments. Laws to prohibit the imports have been looked upon critically by both opponents and supporters.

The social protection issue was also very much recognized. For many organizations that were present social protection is on the agenda, but it is difficult to set up schemes. Pensions were taken as an example. There have been new arrangements in national law to allow for pensions schemes for informal workers, but there is a lack of understanding among IWOs on how this works and it is difficult to mobilize informal workers around this issue. The lack of understanding also creates distrust towards the government and other formal institutions who aim to introduce and implement these schemes. Because education among informal workers is low, formal sector policies are not always understood well, which creates a feeling of exclusion. "The problem is mistrust" as one participant stated.

The low rates of association were not related by participants to unwillingness among people to join associations. People are in fact willing to join, but the short-term costs are for many too high to attend meetings and join forms of collective action. Attending meetings would imply no income, which many informal workers cannot afford. Some of the leaders in the room complained about their many tasks. They feel the burden is on them, there is considerable 'free-riding' among association members. This was confirmed from the side of the trade unions. If strikes are organized for the informal sector, these fail in many cases because of lack of commitment. But also here again mistrust between IWOs and trade unions plays a role. It was suggested that for collective action between trade unions and IWOs to be successful new focal points of advocacy should be developed, which bear much more importance for informal sector workers. These include access to credit, property rights, market regulations and by-laws and social protection.

Regarding the multitude of strategies IWOs use, it was pointed out that relations with political parties and politicians (bot local and national) are crucial in attaining political leverage. Political parties on the other hand are quite opportunistic in their behaviour towards IWOs. Depending on whether they are in power or not or whether or not elections take place, they choose associations to support. Associations that support governmental policies and/or the ruling party are more ensured to receive benefits than associations that do not. Much hinges on individual relations though between IWO leaders and politicians and party officials. This could work out negatively for IWOs if politicians do not consider IWO leaders to be the legitimate representatives of their association.

Successes and constraints of political leverage

Successful cases of political leverage were mentioned. One success has been the lifting of the ban on imported cloths. Through a national campaign and press conferences IWOs succeeded in lifting the ban. Public opinion was with the women, because poor consumers cannot afford the more expensive cloths which are produced in Ghana. Previously, there has been constant raids into markets by a special police Task Force to confiscate the imported cloths from traders at the market, and destroy their business. Dialogue with the local and national government and the lifting of the ban has reduced the number of raids and confiscations. The latter only focus now on capturing illegal trade. Still, participants complain that the police should not deprive market traders, but should be active at the point of entry, the ports and national borders, taking action towards importers.

One of the big problems IWOs meet is the lack of understanding among informal workers and also IWO leaders of market regulations and the many by-laws that exist for markets and market places. This gives authorities an advantage, and makes it difficult for IWOs to contest these laws and discuss the legitimacy with authorities. At the same time cases were mentioned whereby IWOs established successful coalitions with lawyers – either or not in collaboration with trade unions – and were able to raise critical questions towards the implementation of by-laws. Participants suggested that the research should pay attention to the legal environment in which informal workers and IWOs operate, because this will lead to a better understanding on why political leverage strategies succeed or fail.

One participant suggested that it may be worth making a distinction between the major metropolitan areas (especially Accra & Kumasi) and smaller District capitals when looking for success stories. The main issue is conflict over the use of public space. The smaller districts tend to have more space relative to population and fewer claimants.

Knowledge sharing and research uptake

The importance of research uptake and knowledge sharing was highly emphasized by the participants. Advocacy can work up to the highest level, and research can play a role in this by providing evidence based recommendations. A labour research network could facilitate this. Putting a document together is however not enough, as one participant remarks. It should go together with finding the right person who is willing to accept and read the document and start a dialogue about it. The entry is in many case someone who belongs to the local authorities. Trade unions may at the same time be more aware than IWOs who to address at the national level and could facilitate dialogue at this level, in collaboration with IWOs.

Such collaboration might also be between IWOs and employers' organizations, which looks at first sight an unlikely coalition, but in Ghana there are examples of employers' organizations that work together with IWOs, for instance with the national hairdressers association. For effective political leverage the employers' organization representative finds it crucial that IWOs are organized well though. They should have democratic leadership, transparency, the capacity, and a critical mass in terms of members to make successful coalitions with for instance trade unions or employers' organizations. The representative held a plea for the 'formalization' of IWOs.

Such plea for formalization of informal workers was also heard from the side of the government representatives. The intervention logic underlying many government policies is to formalize the informal, not to facilitate a smooth operation of the informal sector per se. In contrast, IWOs advocate improvements within the informal sector without informal workers necessarily needing to

become formal workers. This is a point of controversy which may prevent successful political leverage of IWOs. Still, a government representative pointed out that the government is dealing with the informal sector as such. The government has an 'Informal Economy Secretariat', and there is a policy framework in place, but it was acknowledged that this secretariat has limited capacity to do the tasks it is supposed to perform. The government representative raised a critical question why Ghana has big ministries on Health and Education but not on Labour and Employment. International donor preferences may play a role here as well? (question by undersigned).

All participants supported the idea that the direct stakeholders in the project should try their best to prevent that "the info stays in the room". The Labour Research Network which is envisaged in the project could contribute to diffusion of findings among IWOs, trade unions, governmental agencies and departments. But for IWOs this diffusion may also need innovative ideas, given low education levels and little knowledge about what is going on elsewhere. A suggestion was made that research findings could perhaps translate into education and training modules for IWO leaders and members, trade unions could be instrumental in this. Also the idea that a 'labour network' should provide support on legal issues, acting as a sort of 'legal help desk', was brought forward. And the translation of research findings into accessible documents (either or not presented in local languages) which can be used by IWOs for their political leverage purposes was also suggested, as well as the direct involvement of researchers in these processes. As one participant stated: "if questions are raised by researchers, politicians will listen".

Conclusion

The workshop was highly appreciated by the participants. The Chairman emphasized the importance of bringing together researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The appeal by the participants that the information should not stay in the room has been heard by the direct stakeholders in the research project. The suggestions for further research directions in the project will be discussed by the research staff. The Chairman thanks the participants for their attendance and their input, and closes the workshop.

Accra, 30 March 2016

André Leliveld.