

## Final findings: Increasing informal workers' political leverage

The research project 'Increasing political leverage for informal and formal workers' organizations for inclusive development' studied trade unions and informal workers' organizations as strategic actors for inclusive development in Ghana and Benin. It looked at how to improve the political leverage of informal workers' organizations and trade unions in Ghana and Benin in order to better protect the needs of informal workers. The following are some of the main findings and policy messages from the project.

### Final findings

- There is a long history and wide diversity of forms of organizing in the informal economy in Ghana and Benin. Forms of collective action include: trade unions expanding their membership in order to also embrace informal workers; trade unions and informal workers' organizations cooperating on an ad hoc basis on certain issues; informal workers' organizations affiliating with trade unions; and informal workers' organizations operating independently from trade unions.
- The informal economy is increasingly being acknowledged as a driver of development in Africa, but there is a lack of understanding of how informal workers operate and organize. Development projects often focus on business development and entrepreneurship within the informal economy (frequently with an eye to formalization), and less on supporting informal workers' organizations as strategic civil society actors.
- Our project found that trade unions and informal workers organizations can indeed be strategic actors for improving the position of informal workers, if they function as hubs stimulating and supporting collective action and not so much as membership or representative organizations.
- The project also identified the challenges facing collective action: informal workers often lack a shared 'worker' identity; discrepancies exist in the motives for collective action among leaders and members of informal workers' organizations; partisan politics influence the power and legitimacy of various workers' organizations; and international donors have a (conflict-stimulating) impact on power hierarchies among various groups/organizations of informal workers.
- In addition, the case studies revealed interesting differences in organizational dynamics and collective action strategies between stratified sectors (e.g. cloth sellers) and those that are more homogeneous (e.g. plastic bottle sellers, taxi-motor drivers); between occupations that are fixed in one place (e.g. market traders, mechanics) and those that are mobile (e.g. taxi-motor drivers); between occupations that require a form of education and those that can be engaged in without any appreciable (informal) training; between female- and male-dominated occupations; between those who consider their occupation to be a temporary, in-between-job born out of necessity and those who see their work as their profession; and between Ghana and Benin, influenced by different trade union traditions.
- In organizing, informal workers generally try to be as flexible as possible in order to navigate the (changing) political and donor landscape.
- At the same time, linkages to the political realm are key for most organizations. These political linkages bring both opportunities and risks in relation to collective action. Opportunities are created by the power of numbers in political networks and, more importantly, the access to the resources they distribute. The risks are in the cleavages that partisan politics induce, both within and between organizations; there is also a risk of the organization becoming too dependent on political agendas.

- There are different and shifting constellations of collaboration and competition in relation to informal workers' rights: for instance, leaders of informal workers' organizations may unite in blaming trade unions for not representing informal workers' issues well in official social dialogue platforms, while at the same time competing among each other for legitimacy, donor support (which may come through those same trade unions), and visibility.
- It is useful to make a distinction between the political action and political leverage of informal workers' organizations. Informal workers' organizations may engage in political support for payment, not necessarily to further their agenda.
- Different trade union traditions and political histories have led to different organizational strategies and challenges in Ghana and Benin. Workers' organizations in Ghana are mainly focused on negotiations, making them less visible to (potential) members. In Benin, the focus is often on visible protests and action; however, later in the process, political neutralization and encapsulation often occur, preventing real results for workers' livelihoods. However, the effect appears to be similar in both countries: i.e. the credibility and legitimacy of workers' organizations is undermined among (informal) workers.

## Policy messages

- **Understand that informal workers are not a homogenous group:** Policymakers should realize that informal workers are diverse in terms of:
  - the channels and strategies they use to raise their voices (e.g. traditional organizations, newly-formed organizations, which are often related to donor support, and trade unions; official channels such as national dialogue platforms; unofficial/personal links with politicians; and lobbying, striking, voting support, etc.)
  - their livelihood challenges, decent work deficits (e.g. income, health, workplace safety, social protection), and willingness to participate in workers' organizations
- **Recognize that informal workers have certain interests and needs in common:** Informal workers generally share a preoccupation with income-generating opportunities, access to credit, and an enabling and decent working environment. Therefore, a good starting point for policy and action could be informal workers' direct preoccupations.
- **Strive for inclusion:** Donors, in particular, should realize that the inclusion of one group/organization means the exclusion of others and they should analyse the effects of their partnerships in terms of inclusion/exclusion. How can negative effects be mitigated? Are other support forms possible, for instance supporting (ad hoc) collective action platforms?
- **Build trust:** Building trust is very important: among informal workers; between trade unions and informal workers' organizations; and between local and central governments and informal workers. Collective action, starting small and expanding over time, provides an important foundation for trust. Therefore, unity in action, rather than unity in organization, appears to be the way forward. In addition, follow-up is essential in order to achieve real effects in terms of the improvement of informal workers' situations.

## Knowledge products

- Vlaminc, Z & Kaag, M (2015). Report inception workshop. Increasing political leverage of informal and formal workers' organisations for inclusive development: the cases of Ghana and Benin.  
<http://includeplatform.net/downloads/report-workshop-increasing-political-leverage-informal-formal-workers-organisations-inclusive-development-cases-ghana-benin/>

- Leliveld, A (2016). Report external stakeholders mid-term review meeting Accra-Ghana. The political leverage of informal workers organizations: the cases of Ghana and Benin. <http://includeplatform.net/downloads/report-external-stakeholders-mid-term-review-accra-ghana/>
- Assouma, K & Kaag, M (2016). Report external stakeholders mid-term review meeting Cotonou-Benin. The political leverage of informal workers organizations: the cases of Ghana and Benin.
- Verbuyst, R (2016). Welcome to Suame Magazine; the decline of an informal artisan setting. <http://www.includeplatform.net/blog-welcome-suame-magazine-decline-informal-artisan-setting/>
- Verbuyst, R (2017). Restoring the declining 'center of African indigenous creativity'. Informal workers, informal worker organizations and political leverage in Suame Magazine, Kumasi (fieldwork report).
- Hendriks, T (2017). How to make differences work. Increasing political leverage for informal workers: the case of textile traders in Makola's 31st December Market, Accra (fieldwork report).
- Hendriks, T (forthcoming). 'Collaboration and competition: market queens, trade unions and collective action of informal workers in Ghana's Makola Market'. Interface: A journal for and about social movements.
- Assouma, K (2017). Améliorer l'influence politique des organisations des travailleurs et travailleuses de l'économie informelle: une recherche qualitative au marché Dantokpa et parmi les taxi-motos au Bénin (fieldwork report).
- Vlaminck, Z, De Bruyn, T & Huyse, H (2017). Donor support for informal employment, informal workers and their associations. Trends in thinking and practice. KU Leuven: HIVA.

## Contact

Dr Mayke Kaag, research project leader, [kaag@ascleiden.nl](mailto:kaag@ascleiden.nl)

## Weblink

<http://includeplatform.net/research-group/increasing-political-leverage-for-informal-and-formal-workers-organizations-for-inclusive-development/>