INCLUDE

Strategic actors

Project findings

Informal workers' political leverage in Ghana and Benin[1]

Mayke Kaag, Tanja Hendriks, Kassim Assouma & Karin Nijenhuis

The research project 'Increasing political leverage for informal and formal workers' organizations for inclusive development' is studying trade unions and informal workers' organizations as strategic actors for inclusive development in Ghana and Benin. The main question is: How to improve the political leverage of informal workers' organizations and trade unions in Ghana and Benin in order to better defend the needs of informal workers? The following are some main findings and policy messages from the project.

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 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 on formalisation), and less so on supporting informal workers' organizations as strategic civil society actors.
- Our project shows however that trade unions and informal workers organizations can indeed be strategic actors for bettering the position of informal workers, IF they function as hubs stimulating and supporting collective action and not so much as membership or representation organizations *per se*.
- The project also reveals challenges for such 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;

---

[1] This project is part of the research agenda of the Knowledge Platform Inclusive Development Policies and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through NWO-WOTRO.

KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM ON INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

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 show interesting differences in organizational dynamics and collective action strategies between stratified sectors (cloth sellers) and those that are more homogeneous (plastic bottle sellers, taxi-motor drivers); between occupations that are fixed in one place (market traders, mechanics) and those that are mobile (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 as a temporary, in-between-job born out of necessity and those who see their work as their profession; 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 organisations. These political linkages bring both opportunities and risks for collective action. Opportunities are in the power of numbers and in the access to resources that are importantly distributed through political networks. The risks are in the cleavages that partisan politics induce, both within and between organisations, and in becoming too dependent on agendas of politicians.
- 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 their blaming trade unions for not well-representing informal workers' issues in official social dialogue platforms, but at the same time also compete 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 lead to different organisational strategies and challenges in Ghana and Benin. Workers' organisations in Ghana are mainly focused on negotiations, making them less visible to (potential) members. In Benin, by contrast, the focus often is on visible protest and action, but later in the process, political neutralisation and encapsulation often occurs, hampering real results for workers' livelihoods. The effect appears to be similar in both countries, though: i.e. undermining the credibility and legitimacy of workers' organisations 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?
- **Building trust** is very important, among informal workers; trade unions and informal workers' organisations; local and central government and informal workers. Collective action, starting small and over time expanding, is an important building stone for this. Therefore, unity in action rather than unity in organisation appears to be the way forward. In addition, follow-up in order to reach real effects in terms of improvement of informal workers' situations is essential.

Recommendations for informal workers:

- *Accept that you have different (and sometimes opposed) interests, you can still collaborate on issues of shared concern;*
- *Make your needs heard, unity in action makes you strong;*
- *Reach out to people/organisations that are responsive to your needs;*
- *Promises of these people/organisations do not count, only real action!*

Recommendations for workers' organisations:

- *Identify needs on the ground and support/organize collective action concerning those needs;*
- *Do not so much focus on increasing membership but on successful action;*
- *Less bureaucratic and more dynamic, agile organisations tend to be more effective in reacting to opportunities and needs for action;*
- *As an unintended consequence, membership may increase because of visible effective action*

Recommendations for local government:

- *Invest in trust relations by being a reliable partner, as this will also help your own agenda;*
- *For this, broad coalitions going beyond partisan politics are needed;*
- *This may create unrest in the beginning, but will in the end help social peace;*
- *Formalization is not a matter of only sticks but requirescarrots, as well (informal workers should see a profit in it)*
- *Do what you promise to do;*
- *Trust and peaceful dialogue will make your mandate into a success*

Recommendations for central government:

Similar to local government, but in addition:

- *Involve representatives of the informal economy in official social dialogue platforms*
- *Coherence of policies between different Ministries (also collaboration is needed there to be effective)*
- *Formalization is not a matter of merely sticks but more so of carrots (informal workers should see a profit in it)*
- *Formalization is a process built on increasing trust of workers in the state/government, trust is built by being responsive to informal workers' needs, and this in the long term;*

3

Recommendations for international partners:
- *Stimulate unity in action and collaborative platforms rather than unity in organisations;*
- *Be also critical about the competitions you are engaged in and try not to have this influence your actions in partner countries;*
- *Instead of offering technical training, rather facilitate analysis and mutual learning (for instance concerning (un)successful collective actions*

Selected knowledge products:

- Vlaminck, Z. & M. Kaag (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. & M. Kaag (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' in *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., T. de Bruyn and H. Huyse (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

Consortium members:

African Studies Centre, CNV International, Confédération des Organisations Syndicales Indépendantes (COSI), Faculté des Sciences Economiques et de Gestion (FASEG), FNV Mondiaal, Ghana Federation of Labour, International Institute for Advanced Studies (IIAS-Ghana), Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (LASDEL-Bénin), Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA), StreetNet International, Trade Union Congress (TUC).