

“Combining our Efforts:
Organising for Decent Work in the Informal Economy:
The Way out of Poverty”,
25-27 October 2005, Dakar, Senegal

Chris Bonner, Pat Horn

The workshop, funded mainly by the ILO, was planned as a joint ICC-ILO effort and aimed to bring together those unions/worker organizations organizing informal workers to exchange experiences, identify issues and develop organizing strategies, with a special focus on social protection for informal workers.

Objectives of this regional workshop were:

- To better understand the lack, gaps and needs of social protection for the workers in the informal economy;
- to develop strategies to intensify organization of workers in the informal economy;
- to discuss the role of workers organizations to improve social protection in the informal economy;
- to discuss future co-ordination between organizations of workers in the informal economy, and develop mechanisms for such co-ordination;
- to build links between Anglophone and Francophone countries in order to maximise the sharing of experiences and organising traditions between them in organising the informal economy;
- to identify existing and new partnerships and alliances;
- to collect inputs for the organisers’ manual which is being prepared as an ICC project;
- regional preparation for the next international conference to be convened by the ICC in Ghana .

Participants were mainly from national union federations, with a mix of those affiliated to ICFTU and WCL. The majority were from Francophone West Africa: Senegal, Niger, Mali, Guinea, DRC, Benin, Burkina Faso. English speaking union participants were from Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia.

The ICC (International Co-ordinating Committee on organizing workers in the informal economy) was represented by Pat Horn, Kofi Asemuah (Ghana TUC), Linus Ukamba and Mirai Chatterjee (SEWA). Chris Bonner and Françoise Carre from WIEGO also attended.

The ILO was represented by STEP (Social Protection) and ACTRAV (Workers’ Bureau) representatives from the Dakar regional office as well as the ILO’s Geneva office. There were representatives from OATUU, Afro-ICFTU and ODESTA (WCL) present. The conference was opened by

Senegal's Minister of Public Administration, Labour, Employment and Professional Organisations, Adame Sall; Executive Director of Social Protection of the ILO, Assane Diop; and Director of ILO sub regional office for Sahel in Dakar, Ould Sidi.

Abdoulaye Diallo, consultant to the ILO and formerly with ACTRAV for many years, was overall facilitator.

Programme

ILO Project on organizing in the informal economy. ILO and DANIDA (Danish Development Agency) has conducted a project across four countries - Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Senegal, going on to Phase Two in Niger and Burkina Faso. As a result it was reported that in Niger there are now 5 trade unions of informal workers and a confederation of informal economy workers in which 3 federations are represented; in Senegal 3 federations have people responsible for informal workers; in Burkina Faso there are 70 000 members in 5 unions of informal workers. Training modules have been developed for this project.

Survey of organizing in the informal economy. Prior to the workshop a set of questions was sent out to the participating organizations. 26 organizations responded – 22 federations/unions of which 18 were French speaking. The consolidated report provided an interesting overview of what was happening across the region. For example, 20 unions/federations reported that they had set up bodies /structures for organizing informal workers; the 3 largest informal “sectors” are trade, transport and agriculture.

Social Protection was the focus of Day Two.

Presentations were given by:

- SEWA (Mirai Chatterjee)
- on Thailand (Rakawin Lee)
- ILO-STEP in the region focusing on the mutuals as the main tool (500 systems in Francophone Africa with 1 million beneficiaries) and a new scheme for transport workers (formal./informal) in Senegal – ILO/union partnership project
- PAMECAS network of credit and savings mutuals in Senegal.
- National Council for Rural Dialogue, Senegal, working with agricultural / fisheries workers in Senegal on putting in place social protection for rural population – especially women.

Organizing workers in the informal economy – Day Three.

After an overview presentation by Kofi Asemoah, Ghana TUC, participants divided into discussion groups. The session was engaging,

brought out a lot of information on what was happening, obstacles to organizing, opportunities etc.

Conclusions and final recommendations

- More than 80% of workers are in the informal economy Unions have a duty to organize and a mandate of solidarity
- The needs of workers in the informal economy provide an opportunity for development of trade unions
- Civil society organizations have already begun to organize. Unions can amplify what is being done by others
- Organizing is a must – with or without unions
- Unions have experience in organizing but not in the informal economy. They should use their formal economy experience and adapt for informal economy
- Unions need new methods, strategies and attitudes
- Unions/federations need a special committee, department or desk
- Unions need to define their role in organizing informal workers – collective bargaining, social dialogue, knowledge of labour law, social protection methods
- They should play an active role in advocacy and information with governments, parliaments- national , local and provincial

Programme of action

The following programme of action was proposed by participants:

- Produce a brochure based on the workshop
- Produce a manual on organizing in the informal economy for unions and workers
- Have information available at the ILC 2006
- Hold a side event at the ILC 2006
- Work on advocacy and monitoring. Inform regional trade unions

Interestingly, this programme is very similar to the one developed by participants at the first international ICC meeting in Ahmedabad in December 2003 and the second follow-up meeting in Geneva in June 2004. It seems that organized workers are ultimately on the same track when it comes to being serious about combining efforts to extend the organization of workers in the informal economy.