

## ITF Informal Transport Workers Project



# Informal workers

## AFRICA REGIONAL LEADERSHIP SEMINAR

NIAMEY, NIGER, 25-27 MARCH 2014

# Seminar Report

### Contents

Introduction .....	2
Mapping the informal workplace .....	2
Opening Ceremony .....	4
Organising Experience .....	4
Organising Strategy .....	6
Collective Bargaining.....	8
ITF Action Week .....	8
Conclusions .....	9
Evaluation Report .....	11

## Introduction

This was the first major event of the ITF Informal Transport Workers Project: a seminar bringing together leaders from twenty-four transport unions from Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinée-Conakry, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Uganda, and Zambia – thirteen countries in all. There were 24 men and 4 women participants.

The objective of the seminar was to share and discuss strategies for the successful organisation of informal transport workers, the inclusion of women workers, and the revision and reform of trade union structures and procedures to enable informal workers to play a full and active part.

## Mapping the informal workplace

The formal opening of the seminar was preceded by a group activity for all the participants among informal transport workers in Niamey's goods and bus terminal and taxi station. Each small group, accompanied by an interpreter where needed, was asked to spend an hour interviewing informal workers in and around the terminals to undertake a simple mapping exercise, and then present a report to the plenary group upon return.

Groups were asked to discover:

- What the workers do for a living (occupations)?
- How much do they earn?
- What are the employment relationships in the terminal?
- What are the key issues faced by the workers?
- Who are (or could be) their 'bargaining counterparts', and
- Are they organised? If so, how?

The activity was designed to give the participants a shared practical experience and common reference point which could inform subsequent discussions, as well as provide an introduction to aspects of the underlying organising methodology of the project (see [ITF Organising Manual](#)). For a few of the union leaders present, it provided a first opportunity to meet informal workers face-to-face. It also served as a good immediate ice-breaker for the group as a whole.

The groups met bus drivers, taxi drivers, loaders, mechanics, tyre-repairers, and vendors. It was noted that in such a short visit, it was not possible for the participants to recognise the full range of occupations and forms of employment present.

**Earnings** varied considerably, and were difficult to meaningfully assess in such a short visit – particularly when attempting to gauge net earnings after the costs of fuel, taxes, terminal fees, payments to ancillary workers, loan repayments, and payments based on the number of trips, vehicles loaded and other factors have been taken into account.



Interviewing informal transport workers

Employment relationships also varied considerably, and included waged work for employers, self-employment, payment on assignment by other informal operators, own-account earnings from sales and services directly to the public, and so on.

The **key issues** faced by the workers included:

- Low wages
- Long working hours – no rest time
- Employers not maintaining the vehicles properly (e.g. brakes, tyres), for which the drivers are punished at police checks etc.
- The cost of fuel
- Police harassment and road blocks
- Lack of parking spaces
- Working conditions - no shelter from rain and sand (vendors)
- Insufficient working space (mechanics)
- High taxes
- Accidents and delays
- Lack of access to micro-finance
- Insufficient or non-existent social protection

The group identified **bargaining counterparts** to include:

- Bus terminal and taxi station management
- Police
- Vehicle owners
- Ministry of Transport
- Town Hall
- Mayor's office
- Prime Minister's office
- Licensing authorities



Workers at Niamey terminal

The levels of **organisation** varied. Taxi drivers and drivers at the goods/bus terminal were organised into unions and in some cases with a high percentage of membership – although in a multiplicity of small unions. Others are in unions, but with weak organisation (e.g. mechanics).

Different types and combinations of membership fees were also reported e.g. annual fees plus daily fees per vehicle or load.

There were also examples of informal 'solidarity funds' - self-help social protection schemes to help cover funeral costs, or financial help on a daily basis to those without work or in urgent need. Arrangements varied from workplace to workplace. Participants from Niger noted the need to formalise arrangements, and make the system more transparent. Nevertheless, participants were impressed by the extent of solidarity organisation.

## Opening Ceremony

The seminar was formally opened with a ceremony and press event, with a panel of participants and invited guests including:

Souley Zeinabou	SYNATRA
Abdoulaye Seydou Guindo	ITF National Coordinating Committee, Niger
Salamatou Mariko	Intersyndicale des Travailleurs du Niger ITN
Issaka Guindo	Ministry of Transport, Niger
G�rard Delanne	Goods Transportation Federation (employers association)
Claire Clarke	ITF Inland Transport Sections, London
Bayla Sow	ITF Africa francophone office, Ouagadougou
Dave Spooner	Global Labour Institute, Manchester

The employers’ representative suggested that the unions were better organised than the employers in the transport sector and that the employers themselves needed to develop better internal governance. He stressed that the most urgent problems for the transport industry in Niger were caused by the extraordinary queues at the borders with neighbouring countries, affecting 10,000 vehicles and 14,000 drivers. He argued that the informal economy was the invisible force and strength of Niger – the backbone of the economy.



Seminar Opening Ceremony

The representative of the Ministry of Transport acknowledged the poor state of the transport infrastructure in Niger, but “luckily we have the informal sector – the only deficit is organisation”. He stressed that the Government recognises and encourages the efforts to support organisation, and is willing to enter into collective bargaining with informal economy transport workers.

He referred to the strike in January and February 2014 against high fuel prices, and recognised the difficulties faced by transport workers. He acknowledged that the vehicle fleet in Niger is virtually obsolete, and that very few people could afford to buy new trucks and buses. He also recognised the major problem of road-blocks throughout Niger, and the need to reduce the number, and to stop the payment of bribes and illegal taxes.

## Organising Experience

After the opening ceremony, participants held a round-table discussion on their experience of organising among informal workers - Who are the informal transport workers in our countries? Are we organising them? What has been our experience?

The discussion was led by Zeinabou Habou Barma, SYNATRA Niger and Azizi Kiirya, ATGWU Uganda, the two ‘mentor unions’ for the Africa region.

**SYNATRA** is a union of informal workers, including street vendors, restaurant workers, market traders and mobile phone vendors, as well as the workers in transport terminals. SYNATRA members pay CFA 500 (USD 1.00) membership fee per year. SYNATRA is affiliated to both StreetNet International and the ITF.

Zeinabou explained the large range of occupations and activities in the Niger informal economy, and the rapidly evolving emergence of new sectors.



Importance of membership cards for informal workers

She noted the large increase in the number of motorcycle taxis, and the young age of most of the operators. She recognised that they present competition, and perhaps a threat, to other transport workers, but argued that it was important to organise them, and come to terms with the new situation.

SYNATRA has regular contact with the Mayor's office in Niamey, mostly over the problems faced by vendors and transport operators in the town centre, where over-crowding of the streets causes an endless traffic jam, and subsequent police actions to try and chase the vendors away.

She highlighted the lack of available statistics on employment in the informal economy, due to (for example) seasonal migration of workers returning to rural areas, and the need for soft loans to be made available to the informal workers.

Azizi Kiirya introduced the **Amalgamated Transport & General Workers' Union**, the oldest in Uganda, formed in 1938. The union changed its constitution in 2012, to include informal workers. It currently has over 7,000 fee-paying members.

The ATGWU organising drive among informal transport workers was started with taxi operators at Entebbe airport, where the union was already well-organised. They now have 230 airport taxi members, mostly self-employed. Many of them virtually live at the airport, waiting for flights to come in. The union has achieved a new parking area for the drivers, established a savings cooperative, runs training programmes on drivers' rights when confronted by corrupt police, and gained Interpol certification for access to the airport. The union also runs AIDS/HIV programmes, which proved popular with the drivers.

Azizi suggested that the ATGWU had learned some important lessons; particularly that unions need to ask the informal workers what are the key issues facing them, rather than assume they know; and the importance of working with informal associations – supporting them in collective bargaining with local government, for example – even if they are not necessarily union members. He also highlighted the need for unions to consider the range of services they could provide informal workers, in addition to their collective bargaining role.

He noted that the number of 'Boda-Bodas' bicycle and motorcycle taxis in Uganda is increasing, and that there are now more than 200,000 bicycle taxis, and 80,000 motorcycle taxis in the country.

The SYNATRA and ATGWU presentations were followed by a general round-table discussion by the participants on their organising experience.

It became evident that the growth of motorcycle taxis, and the need to organise the drivers, is to be found in most countries. This is a rapidly growing industry, and provides a lot of employment, particularly for young people. The seminar heard examples of these drivers becoming organised into unions from Kenya, Burundi, Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote D'Ivoire. David Sesay explained that the Sierra Leone Commercial Motor Bike Riders Union now has 247,000 members. It has its own offices, a community bank (used to buy bikes for rental by members), and even has its own police force.

There was also a lot of discussion on the variety of ways in which workers paid union membership fees, and how the money was used. Some paid a form of toll at terminals – a fee per vehicle or driver, others paid by the day or month, an annual fee for a membership card, or a 'negotiated' fee on an ad hoc basis depending on the ability to pay, or a mixture of these. The income was used to cover the administrative costs of the union, funds to assist payment of fines or legal costs of drivers, funds for various forms of informal social protection, membership cards etc.

Overall, it was noticeable that all the participants were already engaged, to some extent or another, in organising informal workers. A major problem however is the multiplicity of unions in many countries. In Burundi, for example, the government has recently registered twenty-eight new unions; in Togo there are seven different unions of motorcycle taxi drivers alone, plus a variety of associations, cooperatives and self-help health insurance groups.

## Organising Strategy

The session was introduced by Dave Spooner (GLI) with a presentation<sup>1</sup> on some of the key questions facing unions organising precarious (including informal) workers, based on the [ITF Organising Manual](#) and the [ITF Organising Precarious Workers](#) booklet, which was distributed to all the participants.

As a group activity, the participants were asked to imagine that a group of workers in a bus station had approached them for advice in establishing a union. Each group was asked to come up with recommendations concerning:

- The union constitution, including a definition of membership – who are the members?
- What would be an appropriate structure for the union?
- How is the leadership elected?
- What education programmes would be needed – for the leadership and for the members?
- What services might the union offer?

Each group then reported back to the plenary, followed by discussion.

The issue that generated most discussion was around the question of membership and, in particular, whether or not micro-employers should be able to join the union. Put simply, if an owner-driver of a vehicle can be a member, what if he/she owns two vehicles? or six? or twenty? At what point do we

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<sup>1</sup> See: *How to we organise Informal Transport Workers? Seven Questions...*

define them as employers, not workers? It was generally agreed that union membership was only open to workers (those not employing anyone), and their purpose was to defend those “at the bottom of the ladder”.

Yet some unions control access/ exit to bus terminals and taxi stations or plays a regulatory role, and effectively operate a ‘closed-shop’, whereby union cards are necessary to operate, and where union income is derived from terminal fees. In those circumstances, how can you exclude micro-employers? Nevertheless, it was also acknowledged that sometimes, unions have to make a distinction and, if necessary, enable employers to create their own organisations – but work together on issues of mutual interest. It was suggested that unions could consider enabling micro-employers to have some form of ‘associate membership’ which would enable them to gain access to terminal facilities, for example, but would not entitle them to voting rights, or enable them to represent the union in any capacity.



Discussion group

Other issues that emerged from group presentations and discussion included:

- The importance of asserting the rights of informal workers within the constitutions and other core documentation of unions; that all workers, regardless of employment relationship, have the same rights and are covered by all the applicable ILO Conventions.
- Whether or not unions should include micro-finance programmes among services offered to members. It was pointed out that there are hundreds of such schemes in most countries, many of which are highly problematic or exploitative.
- The importance of demanding adequate social protection programmes from governments, while – where necessary – supporting self-help programmes (informal cooperatives, SACCOs etc) where state support has no immediate chance of being realised.
- The fundamental importance of financial transparency for the unions themselves.
- The importance of fighting criminality, especially within the union. Unions need to be very vigilant when considering which groups or associations the union should work with or recruit, be able to identify gangsters and criminals, and to ensure ‘due diligence’ in recruiting new members.
- Whether each ‘occupation’ or trade within the transport industry should have its own union, or whether to include everyone within one large union. Should unions have different subscription rates for different occupations? Should unions encourage the development of occupation-based small associations then join them together in a federation? Or, as suggested by one participant, ensure that each occupation (e.g. tyre-menders, vendors, mechanics, drivers etc) has its own leadership, but all within the same union.
- The need to explore ways in which cross-border and migrant workers can be better organised.

## Collective Bargaining

This session was designed to identify the key issues facing informal transport workers, what are the appropriate potential bargaining counterparts at local, national and international levels, and how unions might seek to negotiate successful outcomes.

The group as a whole was asked to identify issues facing the workers, then to prioritise what they believe to be the five most important. The five issues, determined by a show of hands, included:

1. The lack of social protection
2. High fuel prices
3. Harassment by police and authorities
4. High levels of taxation
5. Poor working conditions

Other issues proposed included lack of shelter, lack of adequate parking areas, vehicle registration and taxation, working time and rest time, lack of jobs, lack of collective bargaining agreements, lack of respect for workers' rights, low incomes and inadequate health services.

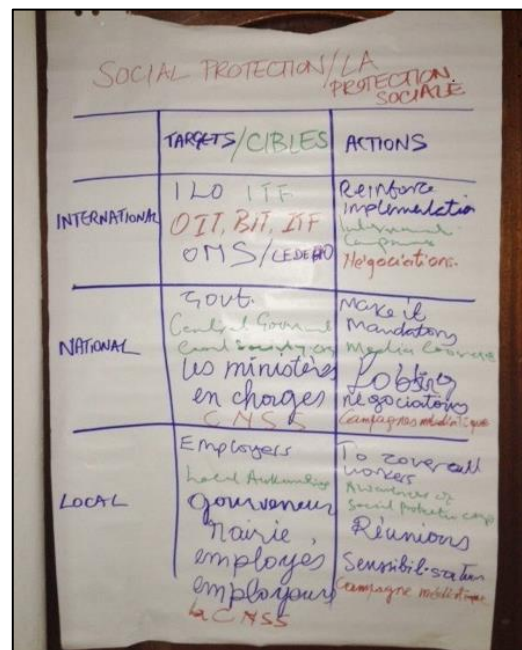
Each of the selected five issues was given a 'station' at points around the seminar room. Wall-charts were placed at each station with a grid to be filled in by participants.

The group was divided into five teams, each of which was allocated to one 'station'. They were then asked to complete the grid, identifying local, national and international target bargaining counterparts relevant to the issue, and potential actions. After ten minutes or so, they were each asked to move to the next station and add to, or comment on, the previous teams' entries.

The exercise demonstrated the wide range of potential local, national and international bargaining counterparts. Most important of these were local authorities and employers, national government agencies, and a range of inter-governmental organisations, including the ILO. Discussion revealed the need to identify more closely some of the international bargaining counterparts and potential sources of leverage on some of the issues – e.g. fuel prices, social protection and police corruption.

## ITF Action Week

The ITF International Action Week for road transport and railway workers' unions is scheduled for **6-12 October 2014**. Claire Clarke introduced a session to explore how the participants' unions could use the Action Week to reach out to informal transport workers. The session also enabled participants to discuss more generally some practical ideas for



	TARGETS/CIBLES	ACTIONS
INTERNATIONAL	ILO ITF OIT, BIT, IIF OMS/LEADER	Reinforce implementation International Negotiations
NATIONAL	Govt. Central Government Local Government Ministers en charges C.N.S.S.	Make it mandatory Mandatory Lobbying negotiations Campaigns
LOCAL	Employers Local Authorities Gouvernement maire employés employeurs C.N.S.S.	To cover all workers Awareness of Social Protection corp Réunions Sensibilisation Campaigns

Example of completed chart



recommendation to their respective unions on their return.

Some of the ideas put forward included:

- Concentration of road safety, raising awareness among informal workers
- HIV-AIDS awareness and education
- Demanding social protection for informal transport workers
- Demanding implementation of collective bargaining agreements
- Organising informal workers in transport
- Demanding greater protection from criminal violent attacks on vehicles on the road
- Demanding repair and refurbishment of roads
- Demanding repair of vehicles
- Demanding action on climate change
- A minute's silence for those killed in road traffic accidents
- Focus on women workers
- Demanding action to combat high accident rates on the roads at night
- Working with vendors to improve hygiene in food production (a major source of illness among drivers)

Overall, it was agreed that throughout the region unions should consider the use of the Action Week to promote road safety and health for informal transport workers, with organising as a focus throughout. It was also suggested that unions use the Action Week as an opportunity to make links with street vendors, market traders and their associations, e.g. affiliates of StreetNet International.

## Conclusions

In the last session, participants considered future activities, including those proposed for the Action Week. It was agreed to recommend:

- Establish clear contact points in each union as key organisers in the informal economy
- Participate in the ITF International Action Week in October 2014
- Consider submission of motions to ITF 2014 Congress in Sofia to strengthen and deepen ITF policy in support of the organisation of informal transport workers. It was noted that the deadline for motions to Congress is **10 April 2014**.
- Maintain close communications with the mentor unions
- Involve informal workers in May 1<sup>st</sup> celebrations
- Review union constitutions and rules to ensure inclusivity for informal economy workers, including inclusion in union leadership positions.
- Send copies of union constitutions to the project coordinator
- Share news and successfully negotiated collective bargaining agreements on the ITF Informal Workers Blog ([www.itfglobal.org/informal\\_workers\\_blog/](http://www.itfglobal.org/informal_workers_blog/)).

The seminar concluded with closing ceremony, addressed by the mentor unions, ITF and GLI facilitators, and guests from the USTN national centre in Niger.

Dave Spooner, GLI

With many thanks to Bayla Sow and Claire Clarke at the ITF and project funders, FNV Mondiaal.

April 2014.

For news, updates, resources, links and other information about the ITF Informal Transport Workers Project, please visit the ITF's Informal Workers Blog at: [www.itfglobal.org/informal\\_workers\\_blog](http://www.itfglobal.org/informal_workers_blog).

If you would like to find out more about the ITF Informal Workers Project, or have any related queries, please email: [dave.spooner@global-labour.net](mailto:dave.spooner@global-labour.net).

## Evaluation Report

All participants were asked to complete questionnaires at the conclusion of the seminar. 28 questionnaires were completed. This is a summary of their comments:

*Say what you have found in this seminar positive in terms of organisation, animation, pedagogic, didactic material:*

- Well organised and very beneficial
- Encouraging and educative
- Perfect presentations from resource persons
- Good programme organisation
- Learned a lot from SYNATRA
- Well organised and well- attended, with full participation
- A complete success in terms of training, awareness raising and communications

*Say what you found from negative about this seminar:*

- The visa issue was a problem, but the organisers managed to get us the visa [some participants faced major problems on arrival at the airport, but SYNATRA was able to ensure government intervention that enabled entry into Niger].
- The time granted for the discussions was insufficient
- Allowing certain participants to talk too much and too often

*What are themes that most attracted your attention:*

- Mapping exercise at the bus station (3)
- Discussion on social protection issues
- 2014 ITF Action Week
- How the informal sector in Niger operates
- We feared that the informal workers might be hostile to us, but we learned that they are not
- Getting together and knowing each other and hearing the views from the region
- Organisation of informal workers
- The politics of organising
- How to organise strong unions
- The presentation by Claire Clarke (ITF Action Week)
- How to regroup and organise activists in the informal economy

*What are the themes that you wish to see in the future animate:*

- How to negotiate collective bargaining agreements in the informal economy (3)
- How to revitalise unions from the ground up (2)
- International action on fuel prices
- How to recruit the informal workers in our country – taxis, motorcycle-taxis
- How we might submit proposals to the ILO for action in support of informal economy workers

- The same themes – so we can develop the analysis further.
- Road safety
- To include other informal sectors that are evolving in parallel with transport
- Fight for better visibility of women in union activities
- The ITF's long term aim to unionise the whole informal sector

*Other (optional) comments:*

- Good and beneficial – keep it up
- Continue with these seminars and widen opportunities for more people to attend them
- More of the same please, focusing on how to start organising from the ground up
- The ITF must ensure that seminars are held in Francophone countries
- Encourage the ITF to help the road transport and informal sector.
- Cover new techniques for organising