African Trade Unions and the Future of Work

Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

Edited by
Mohammed Mwamadzingo
Hilma Mote
Dung Pam Sha
Stefano Bellucci
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<td>AATUF</td>
<td>All-African Trade Union Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACFTU</td>
<td>All-China Federation of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACHPR</td>
<td>African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACILS</td>
<td>American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACTRAV</td>
<td>ILO’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>AfCFTA</td>
<td>African Continental Free Trade Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFL-CIO</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATUC</td>
<td>African Trade Union Confederation</td>
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<td>ATUC</td>
<td>Arab Trade Union Confederation</td>
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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBTU</td>
<td>Coalition of Black Trade Unionists</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCOO</td>
<td>Confederación sindical de comisiones obreras, Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEPPWAWU</td>
<td>Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CETU</td>
<td>Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFDT</td>
<td>Confédération française démocratique du travail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGIL</td>
<td>Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGT</td>
<td>Confédération générale du travail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CISL</td>
<td>Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLC</td>
<td>Canadian Labour Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNTG</td>
<td>Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Guinée</td>
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<td>CNTS</td>
<td>Confédération nationale des travailleurs du Sénégal</td>
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<td>CNTT</td>
<td>Confédération nationale des travailleurs du Togo</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMESA</td>
<td>Common Market of East and Southern Africa</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONATUL</td>
<td>Congress of National Trade Unions of Liberia</td>
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<td>COSATU</td>
<td>Congress of South African Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>COTU-K</td>
<td>Central Organisation of Trade Unions of Kenya</td>
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<td>CSA</td>
<td>Confédération des syndicats autonomes</td>
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<td>CSC</td>
<td>Confédération des syndicats chrétiens, Belgium</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOAWTU</td>
<td>Democratic Organisation of African Workers Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTDA</td>
<td>Danish Trade Union Development Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAC</td>
<td>East African Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>EATUC</td>
<td>East African Trade Union Confederation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOSOCC</td>
<td>Economic, Social and Cultural Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>Euskal Langileen Alkartasuna – Basque Workers Solidarity, Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETUF</td>
<td>Egyptian Trade Union Federation</td>
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<td>FES</td>
<td>Friedrich Ebert Stiftung</td>
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<td>FGTB</td>
<td>Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique</td>
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<td>FNV</td>
<td>Federation of Dutch Trade Unions</td>
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<td>FTQ</td>
<td>Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAWI</td>
<td>Global African Workers Initiative</td>
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<td>GUFs</td>
<td>Global Union Federations</td>
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<tr>
<td>HACTU</td>
<td>Horn of Africa Confederation of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICATU</td>
<td>Confederation of Arab Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICFTU-AFRO</td>
<td>African Regional Organisation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFIs</td>
<td>international financial institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGAD</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Authority on Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO-ACTRAV</td>
<td>ILO’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITUC-Africa</td>
<td>African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JILAF</td>
<td>Japan International Labour Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LFLU</td>
<td>Liberia Federation of Labour Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLC</td>
<td>Liberia Labour Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO-Norway</td>
<td>Norwegian Trade Union Confederation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO-TCO</td>
<td>Secretariat of International Trade Union Development Co-operation founded by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen) and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (Tjänstemännens centralorganisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCEW</td>
<td>National Confederation of Eritrean Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEHAWU</td>
<td>National Education Health and Allied Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEPAD</td>
<td>New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLC</td>
<td>Nigeria Labour Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUM</td>
<td>National Union of Mineworkers</td>
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<tr>
<td>OATUUU</td>
<td>Organisation of African Trade Union Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organisation of African Unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSTAC</td>
<td>Organization of Trade Unions of Central Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>OTUWA</td>
<td>Organisation of Trade Unions of West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPCRU</td>
<td>Police Prisons Civil Rights Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACCAWU</td>
<td>South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASK</td>
<td>Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland</td>
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<tr>
<td>SATUCC</td>
<td>Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFL</td>
<td>Swaziland Federation of Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFTU</td>
<td>Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLLC</td>
<td>Sierra Leone Labour Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNAT</td>
<td>Swaziland National Association of Teachers</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>STC- SDLE</td>
<td>Specialized Technical Committee on Social Development, Labour and Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWTUF</td>
<td>Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUC</td>
<td>Trades Union Congress of Ghana</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUC (UK)</td>
<td>Trades Union Congress, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUCOSWA</td>
<td>Trade Union Congress of Swaziland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUDCN</td>
<td>Trade Union Development Cooperation Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGTA</td>
<td>Union générale des travailleurs algériens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGTCI</td>
<td>Union générale des travailleurs de Côte d’Ivoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGTM</td>
<td>Union générale des travailleurs du Maroc</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGTT</td>
<td>Union générale tunisienne du travail</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMT</td>
<td>Union marocaine du travail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNEP</td>
<td>United Nations Environment Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNTM</td>
<td>Union nationale des travailleurs du Mali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USO</td>
<td>Unión sindical obrera, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCL</td>
<td>World Confederation of Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>WFTU</td>
<td>World Federation of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZCTU (Zambia)</td>
<td>Zambian Congress of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZCTU (Zimbabwe)</td>
<td>Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions</td>
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Trade unions in Africa emerged from the economic transformations produced by the development of the capitalist mode of production and the rise of wage labour. The history of trade unionism in Africa started with organizing workers mainly in public services, as well as in mining, transport and other sectors. A crucial moment of the history of trade unions in Africa is shaped by the period of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) as championed by the international financial institutions in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. The SAPs, coupled with Africa’s primary commodity dependence, contributed to exacerbating the divergence between formal and informal economies and consequently between stable (and relatively well remunerated) and precarious labour. This led to increased instability, and inequality increased within the world of work. It also had the effect of protecting foreign direct investment and multinational corporations, especially through the repatriation of profits. The SAPs disregarded the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which were predominantly African owned.

The economic policy programmes contributed to the emergence of a labour force divided into at least three segments. The first segment comprises a small category of workers in the “formal economy” with relatively stable and well-remunerated jobs and contracts. These workers are mainly in the public sector and in the most advanced sections of the private sector (capital-intensive and technologically driven) with stable and well-remunerated wages, relative job security, enjoying workers’ rights, as well as social security and trade union protection.

The second segment comprises informal or precarious workers who labour under grim circumstances. These workers hardly enjoy basic labour rights, have no social protection, and are excluded from social dialogue and trade union protection in law and practice. Paradoxically, this group of workers is not exempted from paying indirect and income taxes, despite their paltry incomes.

The third segment is the openly inactive, unemployed, discouraged and despondent group. This is the group who, despite their age, educational
attainment, physical abilities, availability and willingness to work, are not able to secure any form of employment whether in the formal or informal economy. Some opt for and succeed in becoming small-scale informal economy operators, including being involved in cross-border trading. Many others, especially young women, remain largely outside the labour market and trapped into the household economy as domestic or subsistence rural workers.

This book reminds us that African trade unions and their members are aware of these developments in the world of work. The continued negative effects of colonialism, capitalism and post-colonialism has meant that African trade unions must broaden the scope of their collective bargaining agenda. Trade unions must move beyond the basic bread-and-butter issues and engage in broader social and political economy policy discourse to change the state of affairs of African labour. The book urges workers and their organizations to remain resolute despite the array of incessant threats to traditional forms of employment.

Owing to the observable decline in the proportion of unionized members, this book underscores that trade unions in Africa should think about new and innovative ways of reaching out to workers in the informal economy. It also highlights the benefits of diversifying and democratizing the leadership echelons of trade unions by bringing in more young people and women. It calls for more human and financial resource investment in diversified forms of education and training to prepare trade unions and their members to better confront the new world of work and seize the opportunities brought about by digitalization.

To all intents and purposes, this book is based on the conversations that have been conducted by Union Leadership Schools called the New Year School (NYS) hosted by the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) since 2011. The Schools benefited from the support of ILO-ACTRAV, which provided a platform for senior trade union leaders, activists and technical persons to reflect on contemporary social, economic and political matters affecting Africa. Among the thematic areas covered are African economic liberalization, regional integration, sustainable development, trade union renewal and unity, youth and women’s participation in trade unions, organizing, climate change, social protection and the future of work in Africa.
This book is being published when the world is at a crossroads due to two main global challenges. First, the effects of the COVID-19 global health, economic and social crisis. A crisis that has exposed the many structural faults in the global economic order; one that has worsened the fundamental challenges that trade unions in Africa have been grappling with for decades related to structural unemployment, low diversification of economies and high dependence on imports even for the most basic food items – with the consequent poverty, inequalities, inadequate capacities of labour administrative institutions, low trade union density and visibility.

Secondly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine poses significant risks to African economies and workers due to fuel shortages, and the impact on commodity exchanges and on the price of basic needs including food items. As in the words of the late Martin Luther King, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

Trade unions must continue to promote a world political, social and economic order based on the principles of social justice, peace and equality as declared in the ILO constitution, as well as in the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization.

We are grateful to all the authors for their invaluable role in the successful completion of this book. We express sincere appreciation to Mohammed Mwamadzingo and Hilma Mote for diligently designing the conceptual framework behind this work and coordinating its implementation. We also thank Dung Pam Sha and Stefano Bellucci for their great work in the coordination as well as the editing and reviewing of all the chapters.

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Director, ILO-ACTRAV

Joel Odigie
General Secretary, ITUC-Africa
Introduction

*Dung Pam Sha (University of Jos, Nigeria)*
*Hilma Mote (ILO-ACTRAV, Geneva)*

**Scope and aims**

Since 2011, the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) has annually held the New Year School (NYS) as a platform for senior trade union leaders, activists and technical persons to reflect on contemporary social, economic and political matters affecting Africa. The robust debates and new perspectives on the world of work and the future of trade unions in Africa at these meetings gave impetus to this documentation. The NYS is ordinarily convened at the ITUC-Africa headquarters in Lomé, Togo, with the exception of the 2012 edition, which was held at the Tom Mboya College in Kisumu, Kenya. Initially, the idea was to hold the School on a rotational hosting basis in various countries, but it had to be reviewed out of practical considerations. The ITUC-Africa headquarters in Togo eventually became the regular venue.

The main aim of the School is to offer a forum for exchange and education for trade union leaders, activists, labour academics and researchers on issues of interest and concern to trade unions in Africa. The overall coordination of the School is vested in the General Secretary of ITUC-Africa and the Executive Director of the Research and Education Institute (ALREI).

Since its inception, the funding and technical support to the School has primarily come from the International Labour Organization’s Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ILO-ACTRAV) and the ILO Regional Office for Africa (ROAF). The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), especially the FES Trade Union Competency Centre, ordinarily offers support for the participation of women and youth.
Each edition of the School is driven by an overarching theme that has direct implication on the world of work in Africa. The themes are selected to respond to the needs of workers and their organizations at the national, regional, continental and global levels. For example, the schools in 2011, 2012 and 2013 centred on Africa's emancipation, while the 2014, 2015 and 2017 editions focused on Africa's development including structural transformation and industrial development. While the changing nature of work, the future of work and sustainable development also featured in some deliberations, these themes were given special attention during the 2018 and 2020 editions. The 2021 theme was designed to directly respond to the impact of COVID-19 on trade unions and their responses towards ensuring a human-centred recovery.

The School’s themes varied throughout the various editions. However, themes were all somehow concerned with the structural changes required in African economies for creating decent jobs. This book is organized in chapters that correspond to the major issues discussed in over a decade of the School. The cross-cutting issues during all schools included trade union unity, social dialogue, organizing, decent work, informal economy, women and youth, equality, research, education and networking. A sense of frustration concerning societal changes clearly emerged, for acceptable levels of social justice and human development are still to be achieved. From this reality it appears evident that trade unions’ agency is ever more crucial in Africa.

For the above reasons, the authors try to answer various crucial questions. What is the relationship of African trade unions with governments? How can trade union unity be achieved? How can education be a viable tool to enhance workers’ consciousness? How can trade unions be organized and reorganized to improve internal governance? How can trade unions contribute to inclusivity? How is it possible for trade unions to deal with informal labour and at the same time fight precarity? What can be done to improve the representation of women and youth? What are the strategies to be used to make work more decent in Africa? How to deal with exogenous factors that affect the world of work, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects both on the world of work and on climate change?

During all editions of the School and through the formulation of focus areas, ITUC-Africa urged its affiliates to pay attention to the long-term impact of the issues encapsulated in the themes. Affiliated organizations were also urged to organize their struggles beyond the immediate bread-and-butter
issues. This meant that trade unions should understand that their struggle is connected to many issues. For example, the struggle for workers’ rights is related to the struggle for a better environment, or the struggle for their rights is related to the demand for the end to global inequalities and neocolonialism. It also means that trade unions should have broad horizons of issues to be able to seek a better society.

This book serves the purpose of unveiling the causes and effects of violations of workers’ and trade unions’ rights, and larger implications in the world of work. It brings together perspectives of African trade unionists, researchers and academics who have collaborated with the NYS. Accordingly, the book offers an insight into the issues that matter the most to African trade unions today, particularly those affiliated to ITUC-Africa.

Readers of this book are expected to pay attention not only to the state of the unions, but also and especially to how African trade unions have addressed fundamental social and international issues. They are to study the challenges confronting trade unions in the various areas discussed and evaluate the attempts made by the trade unions in resolving the problems. This will help to craft alternative ways of addressing union issues.

Workers’ and unions’ leaders should pay attention to the recommendations that authors have proffered and consider using them as a guide to action. These recommendations will be helpful to the unions in their planning and programming. Indeed, this book represents a struggle to translate into tangible actions, the ideas, the strategies and the shared visions emanating from African trade unions, beyond the attendance at the ITUC-Africa NYS. It remains to be seen how trade unions themselves will make use of such knowledge. As we move forward, the authors collectively call for periodic evaluation of the NYS by trade unions to ensure that it delivers on consciousness raising, development of skills and promotion of levels of policy influence on the continent.
Book structure

The authors of the various chapters used information collected from ILO documents, journals and publications from trade unions in Africa. They equally used their institutional memories to objectively buttress the various points made in the chapters. Interviews were conducted and open-ended questionnaires and interviews were used to generate data for the chapters. The book also attempts to strike a balance between the theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings from trade union data and views of workers in the region.

The book begins with a chapter by Dung Pam Sha that portrays the complex relationship of trade unions, political parties, State institutions and regional and continental organizations in Africa and how these relationships have impacted the working class. It also explores how trade unions can project the future of work in national discourses and into the policy arena.

The chapter suggests that trade unions should creatively utilize extant policies and the policy environments in their countries and proffer alternative policy positions to protect their members from the vagaries of capital and the State. They should be innovative in navigating the complex political terrains controlled by political parties, parliaments, State officials, regional and continental bodies with the aim of ensuring that workers’ rights and the future of work are placed on the policymaking and implementation agenda. The unions should also embed into their programming ways of dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises.

Kwasi Adu-Amankwah (Chapter 2) addresses the thorny issue of a rapprochement between ITUC-Africa and the other major continental trade union organization, the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU); while Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Michael Watt, Dickson Wandeda and George Owidhi analyse the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to trade unionism in Africa (Chapter 3).

Apart from a crisis response, African trade unions ought to develop a conscience that only education or knowledge can bring. Chapter 4, by Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa, is concerned with workers’ education and its place in the deliberations at the various ITUC-Africa New Year Schools. Historically, African trade unions invested heavily in the education of their
members, but more recently a weakening of trade union education in Africa has been registered, from funding to political will. Yet, African trade unions remain a principal and viable actor for the ILO and the tripartite structure. How is it possible to participate in such a structure without being aware of and well informed on important developments in the world of work, such as those of the ILO and other programmes?

Stefano Bellucci and Samuel Andreas Admasie’s Chapter 5 on the Decent Work Agenda depicts a situation whereby the promotion of the Agenda has positive results when trade unions are involved effectively in the promotion of such programmes.

The remaining chapters deal with specific issues that are central to ITUC-Africa activity and that were widely debated at the various editions of the NYS, such as the issues of women, youth, informality and climate change. While the first three issues are directly related to the world of work, the last one, climate change, is indirectly linked to it. This, however, does not make it less important for trade unions and ITUC-Africa.

Chapter 6, by Naome Chakanya, analyses the problems of African women workers. Using the COVID-19 crisis, the author highlights gender injustices in Africa.

Chapter 7, by Grayson Koyi, uses examples of success stories and practices from Kenya and South Africa to discuss how trade union organization can be directed at increasing membership and youth participation in trade unions as a possible route to union renewal. The chapter argues that increasing youth participation in trade unions can function as a catalyst for union renewal. The author recommends that successful union organization for youth participation will need to rest on transformations in union organizational culture and strategy, support of union leaders and members and resource allocation patterns. Grayson suggests that youth participation in unions should be embedded in the programming of unions, creation of youth structures in unions, targeted recruitment of youth, youth-friendly approaches and communication, involvement of youth structures in decision-making, and networking and coalition building among youth.

Akua O. Britwum and Angela D. Akorsu analyse the state of the informal economy, trade union involvement and lessons learnt by employing examples from Ghana and Uganda (Chapter 8).
In Chapter 9, Rhoda Boateng discusses the global challenge of climate change and its effects on the world of work. The health crisis provides concrete lessons that can be applied to accelerate the implementation of climate goals towards achieving a just transition.

The appendices of the book are useful for understanding how the ITUC-Africa New Year School was organized, its content and its history. Hilma Mote provides insight into the various editions of the School and their themes. This way unionists and researchers alike can inform their ideas about what is relevant and important for African trade unions and the workers they represent. Another appendix consists of the list of unions affiliated both to ITUC-Africa and the Organisations of African Trade Unions Unity (OATUU), the other major African trade unions’ umbrella organization. The table helps to visualize and make sense of trade unionism at a continental level.

Acknowledgements

The editors, Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Hilma Mote, Dung Pam Sha and Stefano Bellucci, are grateful to ILO-ACTRAV, ILO-ROAF and ITUC-Africa for their support and for facilitating the work that resulted in this book. They would like also to express their gratitude to the authors of the chapters who also peer-reviewed each other’s work. Finally, our gratitude goes to African trade unions that provided access to their data and documents. This book is dedicated to all trade unionists who perished and who risk their lives in their struggle to make the world of work a better one.
Trade union involvement in partisan politics has taken different forms in many countries in Africa. There are debates within and outside the labour movement on whether trade unions should participate in party politics and seek to take over the running of the machinery of the State. Other frequently asked questions are: why should political parties seek to maintain a relationship with trade unions? How should the unions relate to the State, regional and continental organizations and how should these relate to the unions? How should the relationships be constructed for the benefit of the labour movement? How can trade unions use these forms of relationships to ensure that political parties, the State and regional and continental organizations start to address the future of work and consistently advocate for workers’ interest?

This chapter examines the historical relationship between trade unions, political parties, State institutions and regional and continental organizations and how these relationships have been beneficial to the worker over time. It also explores ways in which trade unions can project the future of work in the national discourse and the policy arena. It is hoped that this chapter will help trade unions to creatively utilize extant policies and the policy environments in their countries and proffer alternative policy
positions to protect their members from the vagaries of capital and the State. It will equally help them to navigate the complex political terrains controlled by political parties, parliaments, State officials and regional and continental bodies with the aim of ensuring that workers’ rights and the future of work are placed on the policymaking and implementation agenda. Trade unions will also be able to embed into their programming ways of dealing with the potential impact of COVID-19.

The chapter draws examples of trade union action in Africa. Attention is focused on labour centres and their involvement in politics, their interactions with the political parties and the State. Attempts have been made to cluster the experiences of trade unions in African countries into “types/forms of practices” to facilitate easy understanding of the political behaviour of trade unions.

The chapter compares experiences of the interaction between trade unions, political parties and the State in Africa. Experiences from countries/regions are clustered into ‘types/forms of practices’ with the aim of developing typologies of trade union influence over State policy and State influence over trade unions. Desk study has been employed and interviews were conducted in order to help clarify issues in contention and tell the story of trade union relationship to politics and the State.

**Theorizing trade unions, politics and the State**

This chapter refers to politics to imply influence over policies at State, regional and continental levels; participation in party politics and competition to win elections and control State power. The chapter also considers the State as the institutions of government that are involved in policymaking, implementation and in the development of mechanisms that control trade and the labour movement.

There are four main theoretical explanations for trade union participation in politics and why they relate with the State: the rational choice perspective; the liberal democracy perspective; the State-class perspective and the gender/feminist perspective.
The *rational choice perspective*¹ suggests that people make choices primarily to achieve their personal goals based on rational calculations that could fetch them more benefits than costs. This implies that workers and trade unions have often made choices about participation in politics and in wanting to have control of the State based on their individual and group goals. The choice to participate in politics and the mode of relating with the State are based on the assessment of the costs and benefits.

The *liberal democracy perspective*² argues that participation of citizens and the organizations representing them in governance is an essential ingredient of democracy. Therefore, trade unions being part of civil society or non-State actors are to take part in politics as part of exercising their democratic rights as well as try to run the State. In many African countries however, workers in the public sector are expected to vote during elections, remain politically neutral while their organizations abstain from partisan politics.

The *State-class perspective*³ explains that the competition for State power only revolves around members of the ruling class. This ruling class then controls the State and uses it to allocate resources to enhance their accumulation of wealth. It therefore implements public policy and programmes that exclude the working class, regulate workers’ organizations and controls working class participation in politics. The proponents of this perspective insist that trade unions should participate in politics and form their parties in order to displace the ruling class or acquire greater influence over the allocation of resources to its members and other citizens.

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The gender/feminist perspective argues for the opening of the political space for both genders, and women, to participate in national politics. This is necessary to deal with the conditions that adversely affect workers as a whole and women workers in particular. Women in trade unions should be given more access to and be empowered to play more influential roles in trade union structures.

While all the above perspectives offer some explanations of trade unions political behaviour, the State-class and feminist perspectives offer more plausible explanations of the reasons for trade union political behaviour especially in the areas of improving working conditions, levels of wages, inclusion and their relationship with political parties and the State.

The discourse regarding the relationship between trade unions and political parties has focused attention on the fight for autonomy of trade unions after independence; the State repression of trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s, and especially during the era of Structural Adjustment Programmes. Meanwhile some argue for trade union abstention from politics because involvement does not favour workers and their organizations. Other authors have demonstrated that trade unions that supported political parties that fought for decolonization were expected to be part of the independent governments in their countries.

At independence, some of the unions lost autonomy, others remained in an unholy alliance with political parties while others abstained from partisan politics. Some other scholars argue that trade unions need to forge partnerships with other credible actors such as NGOs for sustainability which will meet the needs of the working class.

The discussions on the influence of trade unions over public policy argue that African trade unions have contributed to shaping policy and resisted

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6 Public Service Association (PSA), Trade Unions and Party Politics, 2014.

neoliberal programmes of the State. The success is derived from their relative autonomy from the State.\(^8\)

There are five critical gaps in the discussions on trade union participation in politics and their relationship with the State in Africa:

a. Because some authors treat Africa as a homogenous society, the conclusions reached on trade union political behaviour do not reflect their unique experiences in politics and their relationship with the State;

b. Some labour centres take rigid positions on specific models of the relationship with the State and participation in politics which they will want to adopt without giving room for innovations and flexibility;

c. The case studies of trade unions on a country basis reveal unique country experiences of trade unions and such experiences are used to proffer recommendations for all other African trade unions despite the different ideological, political and economic contexts that these unions operate in;

d. Some policy actors that trigger trade union intervention in the policy arena at national and international levels such as the international financial institutions are seldom discussed in the trade union political behaviour;

e. The discussions have focused predominantly on the relationship between trade unions and politics at the national level, while few attempts have been made to discuss the level of trade union influence at regional and continental levels.

f. Trade unions and party politics

Trade unions in Africa have a long history of interacting with political actors at the national and continental levels. The question is, are they able to strike a balance between autonomy and influence? Trade union autonomy can be defined as the trade unions’ ability to avoid being swallowed or captured by State, capital or by powerful non-State actors. It is also able to assert its views on national and international issues without fear of being gagged by local or international forces.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Hubert René Schillinger, *Trade Unions in Africa: Weak but Feared*, (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2005).

\(^9\) Influence is defined as the ability to stimulate an enactment of a policy or a change in a policy course or resist the implementation of a policy because of its potential harm to workers or the trade unions.
The discussion below sketches the known schools of thought with respect to the practices of trade unions’ engagement in the political arena across Africa indicating the extent to which it protects its autonomy and exerts its influence with respect to party politics.

**Trade unions as part of political parties**

Some trade unions in post-colonial Africa had very close and strong ties with political parties and liberation movements that struggled for independence and established governments in the post-independence periods. Trade unions participated in these struggles in order to confront colonialism and the system that dehumanized the worker. The parties needed trusted allies to boost their ranks and sustain the struggles. At independence, the distinction between trade unions and the ruling parties and government became thin.

This school of thought was justified because the trade unions were part and parcel of the liberation struggles and therefore their leaders would not have been side-tracked when the post-independent governments were constituted. For instance, the socialist trade union, the General Federation of Somalia was part of the Siad Barre Government. In South Africa, COSATU joined the ANC in the formation of a national Government at gaining majority rule. In Namibia, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNM) formalized its relationship through a pact with the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO). Similarly, in Angola, the National Union of Angolan Workers (UNTA) joined the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), just as the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) were with the ZANU-PF in constituting post-independence Governments in their respective countries.


The merit of this school of thought lies in the fact that it promotes inclusion of all those that participated in the liberation struggle. The demerit of this model, drawing from the South African case, is first the weakening of the trade union in making legitimate demands on the Government since it is considered as a partner of the ruling party. Second, it is argued that trade unionists who ascended to senior government positions such as Ministers have not continued to publicly advocate for the interest of workers and or trade unions. This has contributed to the splintering of the trade unions because of ideological and operational reasons. It has led to loss of trust between leadership and membership as the members do not believe the leadership is able to advance their interests in earnest irrespective of their political affiliation or orientation. For instance, in Namibia the NUNW has always openly supported SWAPO during election campaigns, contributing to the alienation of members who belong to other political parties and perhaps even contributing to the exit of some sectoral unions from NUNW.

**Trade union sponsorship of candidates for parliament**

This school of thought is derived from the old trade union practice where parliamentary candidates sympathetic to the trade unions are identified and supported during elections. This is the only way in which trade unions could have their interest represented inside the parliament and possibly in government. The challenge with this model is that unless some formal understanding is reached, there will be difficulty in extracting accountability from such candidates while in parliament or government.

**Trade union alliance with progressive members of parliament**

This is a common practice where trade unions scout for politicians in parliament who they can relate with and serve as their voice in the legislative and policy arena. Trade unions lobby politicians with “progressive” credentials that have shown sympathy to the working class. The model has its origins in situations where trade unions are either only recently established or are limited by State regulations to stay out of competitive
politics. The trade unions then take the option of relating to politicians in government or parliament or reduce support for non-progressive candidates and their parties.

In Botswana, during the 2009 general elections, the Manual Workers Union (MWU) took a stance in engaging in active party politics by producing what they called a “hit list” of senior Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) cabinet members who they claimed were “enemies of democracy” and who could not be voted for.

Similarly, during and after the 2011 public sector strike, trade union leaders mainly from the Botswana Land Board and Local Government Workers Union (BLLAWU) endorsed a resolution on “regime change” issued by its governing council. Another example is the case where the Botswana Federation of Public Sector Unions (BOFEPUSU) pledged support for a united opposition in by-elections during the 2014 general elections. The merits and demerits of this model are the same as those of the sponsorship model. However, the trade unions could be divided on the nature of support given to candidates and parties and fractionalization can be an outcome.

Trade unions elect members to parliament

This model is derived from the tradition where trade unions are mandated by country constitutions to have representation in parliament. In this case, trade unions fill in their required parliamentary seats through internal elections. The Ugandan Constitution of 1995 enshrines this practice.

Though the model appears to strengthen inclusion, it is actually an attempt by the State to fulfil its corporatist project of keeping the unions under control.

The merit of this model is that it allows representation of workers in the policymaking environment and thus strengthens participatory democracy. Its demerit is exemplified by the case of the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) which operates under an authoritarian State, thus suffering suppression and marginalization.

The union leadership has been incorporated by the Museveni regime through a patron-client relationship. The Government supports the elections of trade unionists who are members only of the ruling party. The union representatives in parliament then compromise and side with the Government. Generally, independent pro-worker action by unions is hardly witnessed.¹⁴

**Trade unionists join competitive politics**

This model has seen trade unionists participating in competitive politics and contesting political positions under existing political parties. They run for elections not as trade unionists but as members of political parties.¹⁵

This model has its origins in a time when trade unionists felt frustrated with the failure of the State to provide welfare and institute reform processes. Trade unions believed that their presence in politics and in the policy arena would make a difference in societal transformation. Some trade unionists have succeeded in winning elections but many have difficulties scaling through the initial inner party politics, largely due to non-democratic party organization. Some of the candidates that got elected were caught up in bourgeois politics and hardly remember the plight of the working class. And some of the unionists-turned-politicians actually engage in anti-labour stances on some issues.

**Trade unions form political parties**

In order to ensure that the State responds to the needs of the working class, it is crucial to capture political power and use the State to achieve these goals. Political parties are vehicles used in capturing this power. The model has evolved because trade unions consider existing political parties as bad allies who have not protected working class interests in legislation, policies and programmes. The parties do not have programmes that are transformative and use the State apparatus to accumulate wealth. Trade unions


unions therefore think that forming working class parties will be the sure way to deliver welfare to the people and transform economies.

Trade unions have ventured into party formation for the purpose of competing for political power. The Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) assisted in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the main opposition to former President Robert Mugabe. The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU), Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) had experience in party formation. The NLC formed the Labour Party of Nigeria (LP).

The merit of these trade-union-inspired parties is that they serve as platforms for labour to project their voices on issues of national and international concerns.

The demerit is that workers or even leaders who form them do not join them, as in the case of Nigeria. They are used by bourgeois politicians to compete for political offices.\(^\text{16}\)

**Trade unions abstained from party politics**

This model ensures that the trade unions and the labour centres officially stay clear of party affiliations and competitive party politics. It is argued that this political separation of the unions from political parties will dignify the unions and endow them with the needed autonomy to work in the interest of all their members. The Ghanaian Trade Union Congress (TUC) is often cited as a good example of this model.\(^\text{17}\)

The rationale for the evolution of this model is based on the experience of the trade union and its relationship with the political parties and the State. One commentator argued that the relationship with the ruling political parties had taught the TUC that formal political alliances could have short-term benefits such as strengthening its organizational capacity and its infrastructure. But such an alliance was harmful in the long run because the TUC lost both its organizational independence and its political autonomy as

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\(^\text{16}\) Sha, “The Street and Boardroom Politics”.

its leadership was effectively co-opted to facilitate support for government policies that its members were opposed to.\(^{18}\)

The merit of this model is that trade unions are able to retain their autonomy and work for their cohesion and fight for their members. And the trade unions are not exposed to danger when there is regime change.

The demerit is the loss of connection with points of influence of public policy as its external relations with State and non-State policy actors is limited. It is therefore unable to influence macroeconomic policy choices in the country.\(^{19}\) It further reduces the unions to mere bureaucracies that manage the affairs of their members without being a voice of other citizens in the country.

**Social movement trade unionism**

This model ensures that trade unions go into sustained mutual alliance with social movements and civil society groups in the country. Sometimes these alliances are loose coalitions, whereas others are definite coalitions with civil society. The model is designed to increase trade union influence over State policy and to contest political and economic issues that affect the wider population of the country.

Zimbabwe is an example of a country where unions have provided a core opposition to the ruling party in alliance with civil society.\(^{20}\) The trade unions have also aligned with civil society to demand for regime change, as in the case of Zambia with the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and post-Kaunda transition.\(^{21}\)

This model boosts the numerical and psychological strength of the trade union movements when demanding their rights and other concessions that will benefit the general population. The demerit of the model is the lack of understanding between the labour unions and civil society, which negates the gains the trade unions would have derived from the alliance.

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\(^{18}\) Akwetey and Dorkenno, “Disengagement from party politics”, 42–43.

\(^{19}\) Akwetey and Dorkenno, ”Disengagement from party politics”, 54.


A critical lesson of the different schools of thought is that the variations in trade union engagement with the political parties and the State show the complex political environment in which trade unions operate.

Each national trade union centre should be able to learn lessons from these experiences and develop credible ways of securing union autonomy and exert maximum influence in the interest of its members and the general population.

**Trade unions and the State**

Trade unions have played a variety of roles in protecting their members at country level. For this to be effective, they maintain a relationship with the State. Their relationship with the State is dependent on their level of autonomy.

The major issues that preoccupy the trade union movement in Africa include:

a. Demanding improved working conditions through demands for workable collective bargaining systems, social dialogue and reforms of labour laws, etc.;

b. Resisting economic reforms that impoverish and casualize workers and citizens; privatize and commercialize public services; increase tax burdens on the poor and reduce the visibility of the State in the economy and society. The trade unions have demanded inclusive growth reform programmes, employment generation programmes and improved welfare programmes from the State;[22]

c. Demanding rapid democratization of society and politics that is inclusive, less conflictual, less violent, more equitable and transparent and that

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works towards generating transformative leadership and a democratic and developmental State;\textsuperscript{23}

d. Ensuring that climate change issues are projected on the agenda of national, regional and continental bodies. They have demanded that States proactively take steps to address these issues in the interest of the working poor;

e. Demanding legislation, policies and programmes for the rapid integration of migrant labour in the national and regional labour market systems;

f. Struggling to find ways against gender and workplace violence;

g. Ensuring a world of work that recognizes the dignity of labour and advancement of humanity. In difficult situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, trade unions have made attempts to protect their members as well as influence government policies that favour workers’ welfare.

h. The strategies that trade unions have used to achieve their goals include lobbying State and non-State actors at various levels, promoting social dialogue and tripartism; carrying out campaigns on issues to arouse the interest and awareness of workers and other citizens; organizing street protests to compel governments and owners of capital to address the issues or force them to change their course of action.

The capacities of trade unions in Africa to influence politics and the State have not been the same. Their level of influence has been dependent on their autonomy and cohesion. Autonomy represents trade unions’ ability to avoid being swallowed or captured by the State, by capital or by powerful non-State actors; its ability to assert an opinion on national and international issues without being gagged by local or international forces. On the other hand, influence is the ability to stimulate an enactment of a policy or a change in a policy course or resist the implementation of a policy because of its potential harm to workers or the trade unions.

We can explain four levels of autonomy and influence, the reasons for their prevalence and the likely political systems where these scenarios may exist:

1. \textit{Trade unions with low autonomy and low influence}. These unions may be described as \textit{captured} by the State and or their patrons using corporatist mechanisms or through repression. The loss of autonomy leads to

\textsuperscript{23} Yunusa Zakari Yau, “Progressives and the Pro-democracy Movement(s) in Nigeria: Assessing Five Decades of Struggle” in \textit{Organising for Democracy}.
the loss of capacity to influence policy.\textsuperscript{24} In most cases, this scenario appears in countries with authoritarian regimes.

2. \textit{Trade unions with low autonomy but high influence}. In this case, the trade unions may be described as \textit{semi-captured} by the party they are affiliated to or the State. The loss of autonomy does not necessarily lead to the loss of influence. Despite their weak autonomy, the unions still try to raise critical policy issues or attempt to resist reforms.\textsuperscript{25} This practice can be found in liberal democratic systems with the State adopting corporatist models of governance.

3. \textit{Trade unions with high autonomy but low influence}. The trade unions in this situation are undergoing liberation either by dissociating themselves from parties and State institutions or they have resisted State control.\textsuperscript{26} In this situation, trade union autonomy affects the level of influence the unions have in the policy environment. This scenario may be found in countries that are democratizing or in democracies that place limits on some types of participation.

4. \textit{Trade unions with high autonomy and high influence}. These are unions that can be seen as semi-liberated. The unions have either refused to align with bourgeois parties or they have formed their parties or have refused incorporation by the State.\textsuperscript{27} Their decision to remain autonomous in addition to being cohesive has influenced their level of influence in the public policy arena. This scenario can exist in democratizing political environments where the regimes are compelled to observe groups' and trade unions' rights.


\textsuperscript{25} Schillinger, “Trade Unions in Africa”;

\textsuperscript{26} PSA, “Trade unions and party politics”;

The level of influence of regional and continental labour centres on regional and continental organizations. For instance, what influence has the Organisation of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA), the East Africa Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) and the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) on Member States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East Africa Community and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)? What has also been the influence of OATUU and the ITUC-Africa on the African Union (AU)? OTUWA is undergoing internal rejuvenation and its level of influence will better be assessed after this process. EATUC and SATUCC have links with regional organizations over time and therefore their levels of influence over working class and policy reforms is high.

It is argued that OATUU over time was influential in the AU and campaigned vigorously against the economic reform programmes across the continent. It is not clear whether this level of influence is still high.

Some observers argue that ITUC-Africa’s visibility and increasing membership has been used to penetrate trade union centres and exert a high degree of influence and there are opportunities for it to perform better in dealing with wide-ranging global transition issues, the challenges confronting trade unions on the continent and its presence in the policy arena.\(^{28}\) There is a need to devote more research to understanding the levels of influence which these trade union institutions exert on the continent.

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### The political influence of the State over trade unions

The social, political and economic ideologies adopted by countries largely influenced the attitude of States towards trade unions in Africa. For instance, the old Marxist States in post-colonial Africa (e.g. Angola under Augustus Neto, Mozambique under Samora Machel and Tanzania under Julius Nyerere) have historically sought to promote economic development from

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\(^{28}\) Online interviews in December 2019 with labour leaders in Africa: Owei Lakemfa (formerly at OATUU); John Odah (OTUWA); Kwasi Adu-Amankwah (ITUC-Africa).
a working-class perspective. The different forms of socialist ideologies that the regimes adopted were basically designed to function in the interest of the working class and other citizens. They implemented employment policies and programmes, anti-poverty programmes and general developmental programmes. Trade unions were influential members of the regimes and were therefore required to facilitate the successful implementation of the development models by collaborating with the ruling party and the regimes.\textsuperscript{29} For instance, many unions collaborated with governments on many policies and programmes. It can therefore be argued that the level of State influence over trade unions in those Marxist regimes was high.

Authoritarian States under military dictatorships adopted economic reforms that introduced and promoted the flourishing of neoliberal policies (commonly called “structural adjustments programmes”). Those programmes included privatization, commercialization and general deregulation of the economy, which negatively affected the productive sectors of the economy. The policies included wage freezes, increased taxation and increases in the payment for social services, and retrenchments.

Such regimes prevented and resisted opposition, including trade union activism, to the economic reforms. In Nigeria, for instance, the central labour union, the Nigeria Labour Congress was banned. As a result of pressure, the military regime reconstituted the labour movement to suit its programme of economic adjustment although this did not go the way the regime anticipated. When this did not work, they started reviewing labour laws to ensure complete control, and this did not work either.

The State prevented labour unions and their members from participating in politics. Since such regimes are interested in growth policies, they have little or no interest in social welfare programmes including addressing the future of work in the interest of workers.\textsuperscript{30} The conclusion that can be reached here is that the level of State control over the existence, operations and influence of trade unions was very high.

In countries that are liberal developmental, the State’s focus is on increasing rates of economic growth and growth policies and programmes are anti-worker and worker organizations. The ideology emphasizes economic

\textsuperscript{29} Roger Southhall and Edward Webster “Unions and parties in South Africa: COSATU and the ANC in the wake of Polokwane”, in \textit{Trade Unions and Party Politics}, 131–166.

\textsuperscript{30} Sha, “The Street and Boardroom Politics”.
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growth, while the welfare of workers and citizens takes the backstage. In such countries, there are restrictions and controls over trade unionism such as in Rwanda and Botswana.\textsuperscript{31}

Where trade unions exist, the State ensures maximum control. For instance, in Somalia, the State was instrumental in the formation of the Public Workers Union and ensured that it was led by officials from the Ministry of Labour.\textsuperscript{32}

At the same time, these countries have ratified ILO conventions, but, in reality there is no domestication of the international labour standards and there is no interest in addressing workers’ rights.

The rentier variant of the liberal developmental regimes (i.e. those that depend on 50% of their earnings from the rents on natural resources) are concerned about the accumulation of oil wealth and economic growth strategies and less of welfare\textsuperscript{33}. Rentier States by their very nature do not want distraction of the capital accumulation processes and therefore will adopt measures to protect the process. These may include measures ranging from bribing of trade unions with State resources to the introduction of division into trade unions to weaken their resistance to reform programmes that harm workers. The State may also establish maximum control of trade union activities. Examples of these regimes are found in Nigeria and some French-speaking countries. The State may allow labour unions to form political parties like it did in Nigeria just to gain legitimacy as a democratizing country.

\section*{Trade unions, politics and the State during COVID-19}

The pandemic had several consequences on the African worker. Many governments introduced lockdown and work-from-home as strategies to control the spread of the virus, with implications on employers, individuals and families. These measures also led to job losses.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31} See Kalusopa and Molefhe “A study”.
\textsuperscript{32} Anon. Paper presented at ILO-ACTRAV meeting in Kigali (for security reasons).
\textsuperscript{33} Banerji and Ghanem, “Political regimes”.
\end{flushleft}
The levels of trade union influence during the pandemic varied. Some trade unions and their labour centres had marginal influence over State policy and were unable to engage in collective bargaining because the States used the period to unilaterally take decisions that affected workers.

Other trade unions had significant influence over State policy and actions during the pandemic. Some used tripartism to achieve their goals. For example, the Nigerian Labour Congress had a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government and Nigerian Employers Consultative Association to defend jobs.\(^{34}\)

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**Conclusions**

In this chapter, we examined the historical relationship between trade unions, political parties, State institutions, and regional and continental organizations and how these relationships have been beneficial to the worker over time. We also explored ways in which trade unions can project the future of work in national discourses and into the policy arena.

Trade unions can creatively utilize policies and the policy environments in their countries and proffer alternative policy positions to protect their members from the vagaries of capital and the State. They are able to navigate the complex political terrains controlled by political parties, parliaments, State officials, regional and continental bodies with the aim of ensuring that workers’ rights and the future of work are placed on the policymaking and implementation agenda. They are also able to embed into their programming ways of dealing with the potential impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

However, future studies may want to examine these conclusions on a country basis or on a continental level. This will certainly enrich our understanding of the political behaviours of trade unions in Africa and the way in which they relate with political parties, the State, regional and continental organizations. Furthermore, we believe that the following set of suggestions should be studied and discussed by trade unions.

\(^{34}\) Telephone interview with Bello (Abuja Nigeria) in May 2021.
Trade union relationship with political parties and the State at national levels

No model of trade union relationship with parties and the States should be imposed on any country because the unions have different histories, ideological orientations and capacities. They are dynamic and capable of adopting any model of political relationship with parties and participation in politics. It is strongly suggested that trade unions should understand the political terrains in their countries and be able to work within these in order to achieve the best for their members. If such terrains harm the interest of workers, they must directly seek reforms.

Relationship with political parties

Trade unions should (a) open and sustain principled communication channels with critical stakeholders in the ruling and opposition political parties in the interest of the labour movement and (b) initiate discussion on the future of work so that it is projected onto the agendas of the political parties and those of their candidates.

Relationship with the State

Trade unions should (a) establish and sustain a relationship with the parliament at all levels. In the next few years trade unions should engage their country parliaments on issues that affect the world of work such as climate change, de-industrialization, unemployment, restructuring the way capital operates etc, (b) through legal and political channels, work with the parliament to review labour laws that harm the working class and (c) be creative in relating with the executive arm of government to improve the conditions of their members. In addition, they must ensure that the discussion of the world of work, and particularly its future, must be on the agenda of the regime as well as an accountability item on which the regime will be judged.
Relationship with regional and continental organizations

Trade unions must understand the workings of inter-State organizations in their regions such as ECOWAS, SADC and EAC to collaborate with them to initiate reforms that will promote their interests or pressure the regional organizations for pro-worker reforms. At the level of the African Union, trade unions should continually relate with committees that handle issues that affect the world of work. This may include committees on climate change, trade and industrialization.

The future of the relationship between the trade unions, the State and politics

Trade unions that have capacity to get members into government or form parties to capture State power should be supported. They should use their relationships with the ruling and opposition political parties and the State in their countries and organizations at the national, regional and continental levels to address the future of work.

Trade unions should continue to study and understand the changes that have been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic to exert their influence over employers and governments in order to protect workers and their jobs. They must continue to ensure that the practices of tripartism and collective bargaining are upheld.
Introduction

The power of workers is in their organized and united strength. The number of victories workers score is usually directly linked to their organized strength and ability to effectively challenge the power of the ruling classes. Not as atomized individuals, but by the power of numbers, as a strong, united and highly organized force.

Since the advent of capitalism, unity and solidarity have been critical to working class power and its ability to make a difference. As capital has extended its reach and control over virtually all nations of the world, it has not done so simply with untrammeled power. Various social forces including workers in their trade unions have been instrumental in shaping institutions and developing a social order that recognizes rights and guarantees benefits to citizens. In the case of workers, trade unions and their actions have been essential for securing rights, protection and benefits in the world of work and society.
African trade unions have played critical roles in securing rights and direct benefits for their members and in advancing the interests of their countries. Trade unions played a key part in the struggle for independence in many African countries. They collaborated closely with national liberation movements in the campaign for independence from colonial rule. In doing this, they expected that independence would bring enhanced freedom and promote development and better working and living conditions for workers and the citizens as a whole. However, when independence was won, political elites started distancing themselves from the working classes or pursued active policies of co-opting them into State structures as a “conveyor belt” for carrying out party/government policies.  

In the “third wave” of democratization that came to bear on African States in the late 1980s and 1990s, when one party rule and military dictatorships were being swept out of power in countries of the continent, trade unions, as a strategic and dominant segment of civil society, played critical roles in the process.  

In the current context of poor governance and political instability, high unemployment (particularly among youth), precarious jobs, poor safety and health at work, low level of social protection, widening inequality and increasing poverty, high vulnerability to infectious diseases, lack of respect for international labour standards and labour laws, deregulation, growth of informality, trade unions in Africa face new responsibilities to fight for a system of decent work and greater social justice. Hence there is an urgency to overcome fragmentation and begin a process of bringing together the various trade union centres into one strong federation representing the broad interests and aspirations of all working people on the continent. Further, the relatively weak position of African countries in global affairs presents challenges on the labour front, which can only be addressed through concerted efforts.


The international trade union terrain offers possibilities for advancing the cause of African workers. In the current weak and fragmented state of African trade unions; however, that terrain, which rests on consolidation and unity, has not proven wholly favourable. The African trade union movement does not measure up to its potential size and importance as a player on the global trade union scene. In many ways, trade unions in Africa have mimicked the weakness of African States in the institutions of global governance.

The existence of two main continental centres, the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) is problematic and costly for African workers. The two organizations almost share the same membership. This leads to duplication of activities and roles and creates a fertile ground for unnecessary competition, fragmentation and lack of focus. The failure to unite has a real cost for African workers. The inability to consistently defend and promote workers' interests at national, regional and global levels reflects the overall fragmentation and weakness of the African trade union movement.

At the national level, unity remains a major challenge because trade union proliferation and fragmentation persist and appear to be getting worse. In some countries, there are half a dozen or more trade union confederations that compete for the same space and membership base. This weakens workers' unity and organized power to the benefit of class opponents. The fragmentation reflects the ever-shifting political landscape in our various countries and the continent. Democratization has created new spaces and new organizational dynamics for workers and their organizations.

But trade union fragmentation on the continent also results from the lack of internal democracy, accountability and transparency in the management of the trade unions. In other cases, there exist patronizing relations between trade unions and political parties that tend to create “satellite” trade unions that are mere transmission belts for political parties, to the detriment of working class interests. A similar problem is the historical relations and influences of international organizations that jealously seek to keep

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39 See, for example, Beckman, Buhlungu and Sachikonye (eds) *Trade Unions*. 
unions in their fold, while setting their agenda. Finally, there are selfish and personal ambitions leading to sectarianism, duplications and bureaucratic superstructures that are contrary to workers’ interests.⁴⁰

Against this backdrop of fragmentation, there have also been efforts to achieve greater unity. In 2007, the African Regional Organization of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU-AFRO) and the Democratic Organization of African Workers Trade Unions (DOAWTU) of the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) merged to form ITUC-Africa. This was an immense step forward in the effort to achieve trade union unity at the African continental level.

ITUC-Africa started off with a resolve to pursue further trade union unity at both continental and national levels. An ILO-ACTRAV supported workshop in 2009 for union leaders from six French-speaking countries resulted in the “Appel de Lomé” that called on multiple trade union centres to work towards unification.⁴¹ In 2011, the 2nd Congress of ITUC-Africa passed a resolution for trade union unity at both continental and national levels. However, in 2012 OATUU declined to endorse the call for unity but rather resolved to cooperate between the two organizations at its 10th Ordinary Congress.

While the efforts at unity at continental level have thus not borne fruit, efforts at unification at national level resulted in a merger of national centres in some countries. In 2012 separate federations in Eswatini merged to become the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland (TUCOSWA). In Liberia, the Liberia Federation of Labour Unions (LFLU) and the Congress of National Trade Unions of Liberia (CONATUL) merged to become the Liberia Labour Congress (LLC) in 2008.

In a number of French-speaking countries where the proliferation of trade unions centres is more intense, follow-up to the “Appel de Lomé” reinforced trade union cooperation frameworks known as “inter-centrals”. Modest progress towards trade union unity has since been made. However, the continuing disunity and divisions within the movement at continental and


national levels hamper the consistent and diligent pursuit of the interests of workers. This requires urgent attention.

In this chapter we will consider the factors and actors that impede the achievement of African trade union unity at national and continental levels and suggest steps towards advancing on the road to unity.

### History and drivers of disunity and unity in the trade unions

In the period immediately after the Second World War and its succeeding decades, divisions based on ideology and politics were an essential feature of the international trade union movement. From the 1950s through the 1960s and 1970s the main protagonists were the ICFTU and the WFTU, with the WCL also assuming some prominence in the 1980s and 1990s and impacting on regional organization.

In May 1961 the All Africa Trade Union Federation (AATUF) was launched in Casablanca, Morocco, as a pan-African trade union confederation that sought to keep African trade unions from affiliating with the rival international trade union confederations, ICFTU and WFTU. Union leaders from Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Egypt, Morocco and the Algerian Liberation Front were key constituents of AATUF. They were backed by President Kwame Nkrumah.

In 1962, the African Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) was founded as a rival organization to AATUF. Among other things, the ATUC sought to encourage African trade unions to affiliate with international organizations. In 1973, under the aegis of the OAU, OATUU was formed out of a merger of AATUF, ATUC, and the Pan African Trade Union Organization. OATUU emerged as an umbrella organization, providing a home for all trade union tendencies. As a unified continental trade union centre, it had a provision in its statute, which prevented its national trade union affiliates from affiliating to any international trade union confederation.42

Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the wave of democratization across Africa and the end of the Cold War and thawing of East-West relations had an impact on African trade union organizations and their relations with the international trade union movement. In a number of countries, particularly in West and Central Africa, single national trade union centres that had been linked to one-party States gave way to a multiplication of centres. At the same time, the international trade union movement was reviewing ways to integrate African workers and trade unions into the global labour movement.

ICFTU-AFRO, which was originally formed in 1957, went through various struggles and challenges as an independent and democratic organization of African workers directly linked with the international trade union movement. During the Cold War when there was intense contestation as to what international affiliation African States and trade unions should keep, the affiliates of ICFTU-AFRO fell from 20 in 1960 to 8 in 1977. It was re-launched again in 1993 with a secretariat established in Nairobi. Notwithstanding a provision in the constitution of OATUU which barred its affiliates from affiliating with international trade union confederations, the majority of OATUU affiliates joined the new ICFTU-AFRO, led by Andrew Kailembo.43

Throughout the 1990s, there was considerable rivalry between the two main organizations AFRO and OATUU, under the respective leadership of Andrew Kailembo and Hassan Sunmonu, as to which organization truly represented African workers. It is to the credit of these two leaders, however, that over time the rivalry waned and they sought avenues for cooperation. The ILO and the AU Labour and Social Affairs Commission (LSAC) were the arenas in which they best cooperated.

The two organizations drew their strength from a number of different affiliates, the majority of which belonged to both continental organizations. As the rivalry between the two main organizations persisted, OATUU had the tendency to align more with the WFTU at international level than with the ICFTU. The WFTU also remained active on the continent with a limited number of affiliates in countries such as South Africa, Benin, Senegal, but contributed to the disunity within the ranks of the trade union movement in Africa as a whole.

DOAWTU was formed in 1993 as a regional organization of the WCL and became the third significant organization on the continent. AFRO and

43 See Gona, Kailembo, 143–144.
DOAWTU provided platforms of support to new trade union centres that broke away from national organizations that were affiliates of OATUU. Meanwhile, OATUU had a policy of only accepting one affiliated national centre per country.

At the turn of the century, the consolidation of neoliberalism sharpened the contradictions between capital and labour in the industrialized countries and the global economy as a whole and worsened the crises of the non-industrialized countries on the periphery of world capitalism. Overall, the trends in the global political economy contributed to dissolving some of the differences within the international trade union movement, leading to greater cooperation within it. Under the leadership of Guy Ryder of the ICFTU and Willie Thys of the WCL, this trend culminated in the unification of the two organizations into the ITUC in 2006, bringing together 176 million workers from 312 affiliates in 155 countries and territories, throughout the globe. The WFTU remained relatively smaller, with its affiliates concentrated in parts of Europe, the Middle East, Africa and South America, and claiming a membership of about 80 million. The ITUC has since grown to 200 million members with 332 affiliates in 163 countries and territories around the world. The regional organizations of the ICFTU and WCL-AFRO and DOAWTU respectively merged into ITUC-Africa in 2007, following the merger of their parent organizations in the preceding year.

The merger process of AFRO and DOAWTU into ITUC-Africa, however, did not take full account of the history of unionism on the continent that produced OATUU and the strong attachment that a number of established unions have to it. Beyond narrowly negotiating the fusion of AFRO and DOAWTU, the unification process did not address the existence of OATUU, and some formation of the WFTU, and how that would impact on the broader unity of African workers. Thus, OATUU claimed that it could not join the process of unification because it ought to have been consulted earlier when the whole question of global trade union unity was being considered. While there may be merit in the claim, that cannot outrank the importance of unity and the contribution it can make to the struggles and fortunes of African workers.


The state of the African trade union movement: the regional level

As a result of the process discussed in the previous section, the most significant feature of the contemporary African regional trade union landscape is the existence of two separate large regional organizations: ITUC-Africa and OATUU. In addition to the two organizations, there is a regional secretariat of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) to which a string of unions in Senegal, Benin, South Africa and few other countries are related. These are complemented by the existence of subregional trade union organizations and regional formations of the Global Union Federations (GUFs).

OATUU was established in 1973 under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to provide an independent voice for African workers. Prior to this, in the 1960s, the African trade union movement had gone through several motions of defining its identity. Initially torn between two groups whose differences mirrored the differences between newly independent African States, they were grouped into the “radicals” and “conservatives”. The radicals opposed affiliation of African trade unions to international trade union organizations as a variant of the policy of non-alignment by a number of African States. They went on to form the All Africa Trade Union Federation (AATUF). The conservatives, on the other hand, supported association with international trade union organizations and went on to form the ATUC.

The Cold War differences in the international trade union movement in the 1960s and 1970s that were reflected in the African region undermined the unity of the emergent African trade union movement. OATUU was founded to provide a framework for unity for all African workers regardless of ideology or political inclination and affiliation. It had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s when the Cold War raged fiercely. At the time, OATUU maintained a provision in its statute that barred its member organizations from joining other international trade union organization. Today, it has 61 national affiliated organizations in all 54 African countries and claims
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a membership of 25 million. Sponsored originally by the OAU, OATUU gained early recognition in OAU and African Union (AU) structures, where it represents African workers in the Specialized Technical Committee on Employment, Labour and Social Affairs and other forums including, more recently, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). OATUU has also enjoyed recognition at the ILO since the early 1990s as representative of African workers.

ITUC-Africa is the product of the unification of ICFTU-AFRO, DOAWTU – the regional organizations of the ICFTU and WCL respectively – and three independent national trade union centres within the African region, which were already affiliated to ITUC. ITUC-Africa was founded by 86 national trade union centres with a total paid-up membership of 8,891,928 workers drawn from the affiliates of the erstwhile ICFTU-AFRO and DOAWTU. ITUC-Africa’s composition has risen to 104 affiliates in 52 countries with a claimed membership of 17 million.

ITUC-Africa’s stated mission is to strengthen the trade unions in Africa and provide a common voice for all African workers to realize a healthy and safe working environment and a decent life for all, by fighting all forms of exploitation and discrimination. ITUC-Africa leads African representation within international trade union delegations to the multilateral agencies, G20, and also to UN high-level consultations and meetings including to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It also represents African workers within the workers’ group of the ILO as well as at the AU Specialized Technical Committee on Employment, Labour and Social Affairs.

There is a great overlap in affiliates between the two organizations (see appendix 2). They share 51 affiliates from 45 countries. At the same time, ITUC-Africa has 54 additional affiliates who are not members of OATUU while OATUU has 9 affiliates who are not members of ITUC-Africa. As a regional organization, ITUC-Africa, like its counterparts in the Americas and Asia-Pacific, relies on the regional allocation from the ITUC for the core funding for the operation of its secretariat. Limited subscriptions from


members (which represents about 10% of its total income) and grants/donations are its other sources of funding. OATUU relies on subventions from some African governments, limited subscriptions from affiliates, generous support from a limited number of affiliates as well as grants from solidarity support organizations and others for its core funding. Both organizations share support from a range bilateral and multilateral source of funding.

The WFTU has two regional offices in Africa, one in Gabon for French-speaking countries and the other in South Africa hosted by four unions affiliated to COSATU. It is difficult to measure its true membership since its affiliates consists of confederations as well as federations and sector unions which frequently overlap.

Given the stated preoccupations and programmes of OATUU and ITUC-Africa and the overlap in membership, it is reasonable to question why the two organizations should not actively explore the possibility of merging. Particularly since this could make a critical contribution to developing focus, enhancing coordination, optimizing resources and mobilizing the united power of African workers. On the other hand, an insistence on retaining two separate organizations should raise the question of separate membership, so as to give full meaning to plurality if that is what is being canvassed.

Again, since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the sharp ideological divide between camps and the survival strategy of non-alignment adopted by countries of the Global South has lost much of its relevance. Within the current regime of global affairs that has the tendency of deepening inequality within and among States, the prevalence of a united regional trade union front is more imperative than ever before.

Autonomous trade union centres also exist at sub regional level in Africa. The most active among them being the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) and the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC). To a somewhat lesser extent, they also include the Organization of Trade Unions of West Africa (OTUWA), the Central African Workers Trade Union Organization (OSTAC), the Horn of Africa Confederation of Trade Unions (HACTU) and the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC).48

48 ATUC groups together workers from a number of countries in North Africa and the Mediterranean.
Regional formations of the GUFs also exist and provide a platform and support to sector unions in various countries. The GUFs operate autonomously even though they try to find common voice among themselves and with ITUC-Africa and OATUU.

Other African trade unions and platforms like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) also exist. The result of this dispersal of regional/continental and diasporan organization is that the voice and representation of global African workers remain fragmented and weakened in their engagements with regional and global institutions including the AU, ILO, UN, WTO and international financial institutions.

**National trade union centres in Africa**

At national level, centres or federations are marked by stark differences in size, strength, ideological and political orientation. There are also differences in internal democratic structures and practices, independence, representativeness and effectiveness. There are relatively big national centres with paid up membership numbering well over one and half million. These include the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Union générale des travailleurs algériens (UGTA) and the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). Others with several hundreds of thousands of members include the Central Organization of Trade Unions of Kenya (COTU-K), the Union générale des travailleurs tunisiens (UGTT), the Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation (SWTUF), the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU), the Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUC), the Union marocaine du travail (UMT) and the

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49 The GUFs in Africa include Public Services International (PSI), Federation of African Journalists, linked to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Union Network International (UNI), Education International (EI), IndustriALL, Building and Workers’ International (BWI), International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF) and International Domestic Workers’ Alliance (IDWA).
Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). There are many smaller unions numbering membership in their thousands and tens of thousands.

The multiplication of national trade union centres and, typically, small unions is a reality in many African countries. Notably, it is most prevalent in West and Central Africa. Striking examples are found in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mauritius, Mauritania, Senegal and Togo. The causes of breakaways from national union centres leading to multiple trade union centres and the formation of new centres have been well documented. They include issues of weak trade union internal democracy and poor management, trade unions’ election disputes, leadership perpetuating themselves in office, leaders serving their selfish interests as against those of their membership, political interference, and external interference by donor organizations. Disunity among unions allows for the exploitation of their differences to undermine the collective demands and interests of workers.

Disunity also prevails at shopfloor and sectoral level leading to multiple unions for the same constituency. Thus, for example, among teachers in a number of countries, especially in West Africa, many unions exist. Several organize primary school teachers, while others organize teachers at secondary/high school and tertiary levels. A number of small unions have continued to exist on the basis of dependence on donor support and/or government subvention. Also, in many relatively small countries with fewer than five to ten million inhabitants, multiple national trade union centres exist that lay claim to represent the national interests of workers.

Most big and medium-sized unions employ technical and professional staff to support union action and service delivery in respect of industrial relations, occupational health and safety, legal aid, education and training, organizing, research and policy, social security and pensions. Most small unions, on the other hand, are unable to internally mobilize resources to engage in such crucial activities.

In terms of capability for autonomous action in pursuit of workers’ interests, a number of trade unions give a fair account of themselves. Over the last few decades, a number of unions have achieved independence and can take

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action against employers and governments in pursuit of workers’ interests. Examples of notable union actions have been recorded in South Africa, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Eswatini, Somalia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Benin, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso. Where union action has not been significant and effective, it has largely suffered from the effects of a disunited front of workers expressed in multiple union centres. That is the case in Togo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mauritania, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Madagascar, the Congo and Mauritius. Some national centres in contexts of multiple centres distinguish themselves but are unable to exert the needed impact because such divisions undermine cohesion.

**Impact of divisions and disunity**

At regional/continental level, division accounts for the inability to secure common and concerted representation within AU structures as well as engagement with global institutions and organs. The result is the absence of a united voice and weakness at international level in dealing with international financial institutions and other multilateral agencies. Both ITUC-Africa and OATUU are engaged in relatively weak and disparate representation in AU structures and in canvassing the interests of African workers where it matters most. Their work is uncoordinated and the African regional trade union level is marked by the absence of a strong centre to champion campaigns and advocate strongly for African workers. They operate with some cooperation within the ILO and the AU without the ability to achieve the synergies and leverage that would be attained by a united organization acting for African workers.

Both regional organizations are to different degrees financially weak, reflecting the financial weakness of the majority of their affiliates. This, in turn, derives from their relatively low levels of union membership. Poor finances limit the possibilities for independent planning and execution by both organizations. The two organizations tug at common resources which could be harnessed for the benefit of African workers. Both depend primarily on external resources to remain viable. On the other hand, projects that are predominantly funded from external sources do not offer
great hopes for sustainability. The division at continental level furthermore provides a bad example of disunity for national affiliates.

At national level, multiple centres and unions create a challenge for securing representativity. Already, union density in most African countries is as low as 10% or below\(^{51}\) and having multiple national trade union centres aggravates the problem. A major consequence of the multiplicity of national centres and unions is that organizations become relatively numerically small and command or receive less in membership subscription and therefore have weak financial bases. Multiplicity that undermines union strength at industrial or sectoral level also undermines union strength and ability at national level. Once unions are not financially autonomous there is even less likelihood of financial autonomy of national centres to which many are affiliated and have to pay affiliation fees.

The absence of financial autonomy exposes unions to the undue influence and manipulation of employers, governments or foreign donors who may desire to secure local spheres of influence. Unions that are compromised in their relations with employers, governments and/or foreign donors or are the objects of their manipulation are unlikely to serve the interests of their members properly.

Moreover, in the absence of financial autonomy the union is unable to recruit a critical mass of qualified technical personnel to serve the union. This affects the union’s ability to deliver on a range of important services to affiliates or members, including education, research, negotiations, social security and pensions, women and youth empowerment, communication, information and campaigns, and legal support. Many organizations have small membership numbers that render them financially unsustainable and dependent on donors or governments to reproduce themselves as organizations. In the few cases where national centres are big enough to sustain their own administration, limited means and a syndrome of dependency that has developed over time still leads to some level of reliance on external financing support.

\(^{51}\) See, for example, Rüya Gökhan Koçer and Susan Hayter, “Comparative Study of Labour Relations in African Countries” (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, AIAS, 2011), 27.
Strengthening the African labour movement

The history of the African labour movement attests to the critical role of the trade unions in Africa’s struggle for progress and emancipation. Africa has a glorious history of trade union role in the protection, defence and promotion of workers’ rights and in contributing to progressive transformation. Reference has already been made to the African trade union contribution to the anti-colonial struggle and to democratization in Africa.

With the failed model of neoliberal globalization and the global trade union call for a New Social Contract, the African trade union role should be harnessed in a pointed way to raise African workers’ issues and advance their cause through concerted actions. Workers’ leaders and activists who commit to unity must pursue it diligently as a step forward from cognition and lamentation to practical action to address the concrete challenge.

Disunity and fragmentation, with the existence of two main regional trade union organizations, is one of the critical causes of the weakness of the African trade union movement. While accepting that the existence of OATUU and ITUC-Africa is rooted in the history of the movement in Africa, it is time to move on and not be trapped by that history. The challenges we face should lead us to consciously address the issue of unity of the movement in Africa. While the two organizations have agreed to cooperate, their continued existence as separate organizations, with similar representative structures, both laying claim to representing African workers, virtually epitomizes the absurdity of “one body with two heads and also in this case, two stomachs”. African workers’ leadership and representation is thereby weakened.

From the state of the African trade union movement and the nature of disunity and fragmentation that exists, the quest for unity must focus on action at a number of levels – global, continental/regional, and national – to include ITUC-Africa, OATUU, WFTU, subregional organizations and GUFs. The global issue also has to do with the relations to be developed with

52 Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, “Prospects and Challenges of Ghana TUC, COSATU and NLC Trilateral Cooperation”.

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workers and their formations in the African diaspora – in the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.53

Focusing on the main elements of the conditions in Africa, their impact on workers is commonly shared and provides credible bases for developing a concerted and coordinated programme of organization and action in the interests of African workers and people. The issues of African emancipation and structural transformation stimulated by the disadvantaged position/situation of Africa in the global political economy calls for common effort and action that can readily be identified if trade unionists and leaders of the labour movement are open, honest and ready to advance the interests of Africa's masses. The daily struggles for workers’ rights, for decent work and life, against growing inequality and poverty, require concerted and committed trade union action. The achievement of unity is critical to African trade unions’ abilities to protect and advance the strategic goals of emancipation and structural transformation. Unity is essential for confirming the character of trade unions as mass membership organizations that derive their strength from their numbers and ability to act together in defence or pursuit of common interests.

When Africans act together within the framework of the AU or during international forums, the common positions they take are progressive and are largely in the interests of the majority of Africans. This is in spite of the weaknesses of nascent African institutions. Strengthening African workers’ participation in African institutions can contribute to reshaping them into genuine organs for the development of African unity, progress and emancipation. The African institution most accessible to African trade unions is the Specialized Technical Committee on Social Development, Labour and Employment (STC-SDLE). There is also the relatively newly established Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) as well as the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR).

The potential for full trade union intervention in these structures has neither been pursued properly nor achieved. This is either due to the absence of the appropriate procedures and the opportunities for intervention or the lack of trade union capacity for making the requisite input into

53 The Global African Workers’ Institute (GAWi) has been launched as an initiative to provide a framework of cooperation and exchange for global African workers, i.e. for African workers in Africa and for all workers of African descent around the world.
decision-making. The absence of a united African regional trade union organization contributes in large measure to the weakness in engaging with these structures for that purpose. With a united front and purpose by the African trade union movement, these African institutions can be reformed to provide the requisite space for input into decision-making by organized workers and other civil society. African workers and people stand to benefit if the trade union movement operates as a united organization and optimizes its synergies and potential.

Conclusions: taking action on unity

At national level, multiple national centres must focus on moving towards unity, starting with full cooperation. Workers face common challenges with employment, decent work deficits, rights violations, low wages, weak social protection, widening inequality, climate change impacts and migration governance. In the context of what has become the new normal, there are challenges, for example, with digitalization and technology, working from home, occupational safety and health, vaccinations and mounting public debt. While these challenges directly pertain to the organization of workers at sectoral level, there are also the issues of informal economy organization, of promoting the social economy as well as the development of cooperatives.

In responding to the current pandemic of COVID-19 and its devastating impact and the need for robust recovery, African trade unions must be proactive in working in concert and cohesion to allow regular engagement and social dialogue with AU institutions, global institutions and national institutions in pushing for change in the way things are done.

In practical terms, there is a need to identify the key drivers of unity in terms of identifiable confederations and federations at global, regional, subregional and national levels and set them to work. For continental unity, consideration must be given to the establishment of an ad hoc working group drawing membership from OATUU, ITUC-Africa, WFTU, subregional organizations and the GUFs tasked with developing a road map and timeline to achieve unity at continental level. Such a working group must be bold to address whatever questions are raised about unity with the foremost
interests of African workers in view. The working group should also pay attention to the Global African Workers’ Institute and how the solidarity of global African workers as a whole can be consolidated.

At national level, centres that are affiliated to ITUC-Africa and OATUU should be tasked to begin simultaneous processes of engagement towards unity with monitoring from a regional level. Sectoral processes can also be encouraged with assistance from the GUFs. African trade union contribution to Africa’s fortunes is critical and has to be consciously increased. But to do so requires a united force that can be harnessed and secured only through conscious and determined organization, effort and struggle that are the stuff of freedom and emancipation.

Bibliography


Introduction

This chapter examines the state of African trade unions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated existing inequalities in the world of work. While the ILO deliberations on the Future of Work preceded the outbreak of the virus, the conclusions culminating in the Centenary Declaration on the immediate issues of conditions of work, social protection, economic recovery or labour rights are today more relevant than ever. As such, trade unions have posited that a better approach to dealing with the challenge is to move beyond the coronavirus crisis and build back better. This is the orientation of this chapter.
The examination of the state of trade unions in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic is informed by the call of the trade union leadership in Africa for a rapid response to confront the challenges of the future of work. Particular attention has been given to the role of social dialogue having been recognized as a building block for productive and decent workplace outcomes in times of crisis.

The chapter presents the findings of a global survey so as to understand the impact of the pandemic on trade unions in Africa as well as the ways in which trade unions responded to the crisis. The discussion also assesses the trade union COVID-19 recovery strategies while examining the mechanisms put in place by the trade unions to build back better to combat future crises in the world of work.

Trade unions and the future of work discourse in Africa

The discussions on the future of work in Africa took centre stage following the launch of the Future of Work initiative by the ILO Director-General at the International Labour Conference of 2015. The initiative produced major debates at global, regional and national levels. These reflections and their outcomes provided additional analysis undertaken by the high-level Global Commission on the Future of Work. The process culminated at the Centenary Conference of 2019 when delegates adopted the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work as a policy guidance for the organization’s second centenary.

The Future of Work initiative was launched in Africa in January 2016, and in many countries national tripartite dialogues took place. For trade unions in Africa, these dialogues, coupled with their participation at various regional and international forums, provided opportunities to reflect on contemporary, central issues pertaining the realm of labour. In all these occasions, a point of departure has been the ILO Centenary Declaration and its call for social justice, equity and rights.

Within the initiative, the ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ILO-ACTRAV) organized regional and subregional conferences that culminated in a global symposium on the slogan “The Future of Work We Want”. The principal highlights from the discussion in Africa were that the future of work must be based on a new inclusive and sustainable development society based on social justice and equality, while at the same time encouraging the strengthening of regional and subregional integration processes. Trade unions in Africa recalled that the fast pace of economic, demographic and technological changes had to be incorporated into sustainable development models that are all-inclusive.57

For these changes to generate opportunities for development rather than hindrances, the models should focus on the transition from an informal to a formal economy, to a lesser extent the formalization of non-standard forms of employment, employment creation addressing the fast population growth, combined with the implementation of inclusive active labour market policies, the implementation of universal access to social protection schemes, strengthening the role of women and other vulnerable workers in the labour market, access to quality education and skills development in the context of a life-long learning strategy to address the current skills mismatches.

It seems necessary to think about the Future of Work from a perspective that acknowledges the large sectoral and country-specific disparities. For example, the huge impact of climate change on the agricultural sector is a matter of serious concern, directly linked to the growth in workers’ internal or external mobility. Migration across borders could be facilitated by a tripartite social dialogue to define the issue of recognition of skills across borders, together with the portability of rights and benefits. There is also a stronger role for collective bargaining at different levels: sectorial, national, regional and international. This is important for, but not restricted to, the agricultural sector, where the need to increase labour productivity – crucial to improve the quality of work, to increase wages and to create jobs – is an issue that has to be seriously addressed by the social parties.

It was also agreed that social needs have to be put back at the centre of political processes. To that end, African trade unions need to try to shape macroeconomic policies.\textsuperscript{58}

In the face of the current and future challenges, trade unions need to establish new strategies that expand workers’ collective action to new forms of work (both in terms of representation and union membership) with a gender perspective. Given this, it is important to rethink trade union structures focusing on the shift to an increasing number of informal, precarious and non-standard workers, and especially the youth.

The discussions on the Future of Work are part of the continuous discussions on social justice and the provision of decent work for all. It is generally agreed that the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work has taken on heightened importance in the context of the pandemic.\textsuperscript{59} While the simultaneous health and economic shock might have asked more and pressing questions of trade unions and exacerbated existing inequalities, the deliberations of the past years on the Future of Work remain now as relevant as ever. It means that the ILO must now focus its attention on the task of promoting a human-centred recovery from the unprecedented crisis that has engulfed the world of work using the Centenary Declaration as its road map.

\textsuperscript{58} ILO, “Highlights”.

African trade unions in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

Having observed the unprecedented negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trade unions, the ILO found it prudent to assess the State of trade union amidst the pandemic through a survey. The survey sought to assess the prevailing State of trade unions amidst the pandemic for the achievement of decent work and sustainable development. In particular, an assessment was made of the impact of the pandemic on trade unions, including ways in which trade unions have responded to it. We also assessed trade union COVID-19 recovery strategies while also examining strategies put in place by trade unions to build back better to combat future crises.

The survey methodology was online. The survey was available in six languages: Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. It was conducted over a period of one month from 23 April to 24 May 2021, covering all the worker constituents of the ILO.

The survey targeted 136 trade union centres from 54 countries in Africa. From the global survey, 42 per cent of the responses were received from trade unions in Africa, making Africa a region of interest for further analysis. We therefore settled on these data with a view to deepening our understanding of the state of trade unions in Africa amidst the pandemic. The chapter will present some of its main findings in the following subsections.

**Impact on the overall activities of trade unions.** The findings showed that the pandemic curtailed the smooth operations of trade unions. Based on the information provided by the African trade unions as shown in Figure 1, the pandemic to a large extent (56.1 per cent) impacted negatively on the overall activities of the trade union in the region. Negatively affected activities included the recruitment of new members into trade unions, services to existing and potential members, provision of education and training, collection of membership fees and collective bargaining.

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Impact on trade union services to members. The pandemic disrupted many services rendered by African trade unions to their members. Some of the services included representation in tripartite negotiations, negotiations of collective bargaining agreements, representation in employment restructuring, education and training services, membership support on disciplinary and other complaints at workplaces, advisory on work-related issues and organizing and recruitment of new members.

Figure 2 shows that 43 per cent of trade unions could not effectively represent their members in restructuring of employment as firms cut down on employment, leading to several workers being made redundant. Similarly, 41 per cent of trade unions in the continent could not effectively offer advisory services to their members during the pandemic mainly due to the lockdowns imposed by governments and the weak financial base of the unions.
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Figure 2: Extent to which COVID-19 has impacted the trade unions’ services to members

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic

*Capacity-building activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Evidence from the survey shows that 83.7 per cent of African trade unions were able to offer capacity-building functions to their members despite the ongoing pandemic. In this regard, the activities were carefully chosen and were related to the COVID-19 awareness at workplaces. Some of these activities included education and training on occupational safety and health measures at workplaces, how workers could respond to the containment measures put in place by various governments, the ILO policy framework in response to COVID-19, as well as training on financial management.

This finding points to capacity-building as a strong intervention mechanism adopted by trade unions to enable the workers traverse the harsh socioeconomic effects of the pandemic including loss of jobs, salary cuts
as well as forced unpaid leave, among other decent work deficits workers faced during the pandemic. In effect, trade unions in Africa prioritized capacity-building in order to reduce the magnitude of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their members.

Figure 3 shows that 71 per cent of trade unions in Africa prioritized the creation of awareness on COVID-19 at the workplace to avert the spread of the virus among their members. The Figure also shows that 63 per cent of the trade unions prioritized capacity-building on occupational safety and health. About half of respondent African trade unions reported that they educated and trained their members on how to respond to government measures directed at addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 3: Type of capacity-building conducted by trade unions during COVID-19**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Capacity-Building</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ILO Policy Framework in response to COVID-19</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to government measures to address COVID-19</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational safety and health measures</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial management during COVID-19</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness on COVID-19 at workplace</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic

*Changes in trade union membership during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Figure 4 illustrates that 63 per cent of trade unions reported a decline in membership. This is an unprecedented decrease in membership which can have wide-ranging negative impact, weakening the voice of the trade union movement.
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Figure 4: The nature of change in trade union membership due to COVID-19

- No change observed: 10%
- Increase in membership: 12.5%
- Decrease in membership: 62.5%

Source: ILO/ACTRAV global survey on state of trade unions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

Government responses to curb the spread of the disease also adversely affected different sectors in the continent. The most affected sectors were hospitality and transport, as they were heavily influenced by restrictions. The resultant membership change in various economic sectors are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Membership change in various economic sectors

- Agriculture: 45.95% decrease, 43.24% no change, 11% increase
- Education: 40% decrease, 50% no change, 10% increase
- Transport and communications: 41.18% decrease, 41.18% no change, 10% increase
- Manufacturing: 21.43% decrease, 59.52% no change, 20.1% increase
- Health and social services: 28.21% decrease, 51.28% no change, 19.5% increase
- Wholesale and retail trade: 30.77% decrease, 61.54% no change, 7.7% increase
- Building and construction: 20.51% decrease, 66.67% no change, 12.86% increase
- Hotels and entertainment: 4.88% decrease, 85.37% no change, 19.75% increase
- Civil service (public sector): 16.22% decrease, 72.97% no change, 10.81% increase

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic
Data obtained from the survey showed that unions in the hotel and entertainment sector were the most adversely affected sectors with 85 per cent reporting a change in membership. The survey also indicates that the building and construction sector was the second worst affected. Other sectors affected included the wholesale and retail trade as well as the manufacturing sector. Notably, trade union membership in the civil service sector in Africa was the least affected (16 per cent). Public servants continued to play a role in halting the spread and recovering from the pandemic.

**Effects on membership fee contributions.** The emergence of COVID-19 drastically affected membership fee contributions because of retrenchments, which mostly occurred in the private sector. In some countries, public sector workers were not paid salaries during the peak of the pandemic, thus affecting the incomes of the public sector unions. Reduced membership fee contributions resulted in the straining of operational activities of the trade unions, as shown in Figure 6. The findings from the survey indicated that 64 per cent of African trade unions reported a decline in income due to the pandemic.

![Figure 6: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trade unions’ sources of income](image_url)

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic
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Challenges when offering services to their members. Trade unions in Africa experienced a myriad of challenges when offering services to their members during the pandemic. Limited mobility due to travel restrictions was cited by 75 per cent of trade unions as the major challenge affecting services to their members (see Figure 7). The survey also showed that 73 per cent of the trade unions were unable to hold meetings and prepare for negotiations and collective bargaining on behalf of their members. Some 54 per cent of trade unions could not offer services to their members due to inadequate funds. Other challenges that limited trade union ability to offer services to members included inability to engage in organizing efforts, inability to cope up with lockdown measures and restrictions, as well as limited access to internet services.

Figure 7: Challenges faced by African trade unions when offering services during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic

Responses to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Trade unions adopted various internal measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. Most of the measures were implemented to ensure the safety of members and staff of the trade unions. The main operational management measure was the reduction in working hours of trade union staff. Another important measure taken
by African trade unions was the postponement of constitutional meetings amidst the pandemic.

**Table 1: Measures adopted by African trade unions to contain the COVID-10 pandemic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures adopted by trade unions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic</th>
<th>Rank (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in working hours</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postponement of constitutional meetings (congress, committee meetings, etc.)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay cuts for staff members</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed salary payments</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid compulsory leave</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of benefits and allowances</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of benefits and allowances</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay-offs</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic

Trade unions also adopted various strategies to ensure the smooth running of their organizations amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies included the adoption of virtual meetings conducted via online platforms. In addition, trade unions attended meetings with governments to address labour market challenges facing workers due to the pandemic. Only a few African trade unions opted to reduce membership fee contributions as a way of coping with the crisis (see Figure 8).
Trade unions in Africa also adopted various technological solutions as a strategy to retain and increase their membership. Membership registration was promoted virtually through social media platforms and funds were allocated for digital membership recruitment (see Figure 9).

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic
**Effects of the pandemic in addressing the future of work challenges.** The extent to which African trade union organization were affected by the pandemic while addressing the future of work challenges is presented in Figure 10. Trade union ability to organize and recruit workers in precarious employment, migrant workers and young workers to address the future of work challenges was very much affected by the crisis. The pandemic affected trade union capacity to advocate for climate change mitigation, extension of social protection coverage and portability of social security benefits. It was also observed that attempts at modernizing trade union structures and approaches aimed at instituting virtual operations were impacted by the pandemic. COVID-19 also affected trade unions’ plans to undertake advocacy for transnational trade union membership and alliances.

**Figure 10: The extent to which trade unions have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing the future of work challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affected Level</th>
<th>Advocacy for climate change to reduce environmental crises including environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and pollution</th>
<th>Advocacy for extension of social protection coverage and portability of social security benefits</th>
<th>Modernizing trade union structures and regulations to accommodate virtual operations</th>
<th>Advocacy for transnational trade union membership and alliances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely affected</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very much affected</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately affected</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly affected</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all affected</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILO-ACTRAV global survey on the state of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic
Trade unions, COVID-19 and the future of work

Africa is faced with vast economic, demographic and technological changes which influence the future of work. To ensure that these changes yield opportunities for development and to achieve a human-centred recovery from the pandemic, trade unions are pushing for a model that focuses on employment creation combined with the implementation of inclusive active labour market policies and concrete programmes targeting young people, the implementation of universal access to social protection schemes, strengthening the role of women in the labour market, and ensuring access to quality education and skills development.

It is also necessary to think about the future of work in ways that acknowledge the large sectoral and country specific disparities. These sentiment are addressed in the Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, adopted at the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference, in June 2021.61

This call to action advocates for a just transition and prioritizes the creation of decent jobs for all and addresses the inequalities caused by the crisis. It outlines a comprehensive agenda and commits countries to ensuring that their economic and social recovery from the crisis is “fully inclusive, sustainable and resilient.”

For trade unions in Africa, the call is instrumental in pushing the achievement of a job-rich recovery that substantially strengthens workers and social protections and supports livelihoods. By implication, the huge impact of climate change on the agricultural sector is also crucial, and it is directly linked to the increase in workers mobility, be it internal or external. There is also a stronger role for collective bargaining at the sector level in coordination with negotiations at the regional and international level. Again, this is important, but not restricted to, the agricultural sector, where the need to increase labour productivity growth, which is relevant for job

quality, wages and job creation, is an issue that has to be addressed by the social partners.

Just as the future of work is important, the additional burden associated with the pandemic has further revealed the chronic underinvestment in public services as well as the lack of clear national occupational health and safety frameworks. This is because millions of workers, including the self-employed, have been losing their jobs and often their only source of income without proper social protection coverage. Furthermore, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and other human rights have been broadly and unilaterally restricted, while tensions among countries have been growing.

The impact of COVID-19 has also exposed the serious deficits in decent work affecting the most vulnerable groups of workers – women, youth, older workers, migrant workers, self-employed and workers in precarious employment. Moreover, adequate social protection for all, including active labour market policies, has not been developed in most African countries.

In order to tackle the global health and economic crisis, trade unions have promoted the idea that the decent work agenda should be at the centre of immediate and decisive measures to prioritize employment retention and income support with extended social protection. A lack of openness and transparency, key processes of democracy and declining multilateralism have made situations significantly worse, with mistrust in governments growing, as well as tension among countries, combined with rising xenophobia and discrimination.

In addition, COVID-19 could alter the pattern of daily life, including consumption and production. This would make the world more fragile and vulnerable with increasing precarious jobs and income inequality. We must cure the world of these deficiencies and deficits to make the post COVID-19 world truly inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. This can only be done by building trust in governance systems and institutions and increasing confidence in the future with a new social contract on the basis of international commitments, including the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Conference of the Parties Agreement.
Trade unions have also been calling for a new social contract to address major inequalities and challenges in the world. The ILO’s Centenary Declaration should be the foundation for such a new social contract, requiring tripartite concerted action to provide for decent work, shared prosperity and environmental sustainability.

Despite the drastic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, trade union organizations in Africa have managed to remain proactive, enlisting the support of their membership and other social and development partners. They have adopted various measures to remain relevant in addressing future challenges, including advocating for the extension of social protection coverage and portability of social security benefits. They have also been advocating for transnational trade union membership and alliances, for climate change to reduce zoonotic diseases, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and pollution. At the same time, a majority of trade unions are organizing and recruiting gig economy workers, migrant workers, young workers, workers with disabilities as well as informal economy workers through online platforms.

In order to build forward better from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, African trade unions have opted to hold periodic awareness-raising campaigns on trade unionization through social media as a way to retain and increase trade union membership. The establishment of a fully functional digital membership recruitment and organizing department to digitize recruitment of members, is another priority. Legislative amendments to labour laws to combat discriminations of workers in the event of future crises are also considered by the African trade unions.

Within the framework of the ILO’s Future of Work initiative, national, regional and subregional dialogues on the Future of Work involving governments, employers and workers organizations have provided a framework for the attainment of decent jobs for all, the organization of work and production, and the governance of work. It is hoped that this will deliver the future of work workers want.
To remain relevant in the future world of work despite situations of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic as well as any future ones, trade unions should endeavour to invest in capacity-building and training of their members about the COVID-19 pandemic at workplaces, including mitigating measures during and beyond the pandemic, enhance investment in social dialogue including through virtual meetings to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic, and enhance investment in digitization of trade union membership organizing and recruitment strategies including through developing and launching digital awareness campaigns on trade unionization in order to retain and increase their membership.

Trade unions should also enhance investment in virtual education and training of workers through relevant online media tools, including developing, launching and disseminating digital education and training materials and modules for workers, and modernizing trade union structures and regulations in order to accommodate virtual operations.

Unions should step up advocacy for the extension of social protection coverage and portability of social security benefits across countries; and continue to engage all stakeholders in the mobilization of resources to ensure continuous operationalization of trade unions during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.
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Bibliography


Introduction

Working-class education is a critical tool for building worker consciousness. It is necessary for achieving worker emancipation and collective growth of workers’ organizations. Effective worker education should be grounded on the experiences of the workers, and it must be provided directly by trade union organizations and to the furthest extent possible through the support of their allies.

The boundary between trade union education, worker education and labour education is sometimes blurred. An ILO-ACTRAV international workers’ symposium referred to labour education as education that involves workers, divided into three distinct but interrelated categories. The first category is union education, which is an educational activity conducted by unions to achieve specific purposes. It covers (a) functional education, which refers to training members in the operations of their unions and (b) subject education, which takes general subjects such as economics and applies them to union issues such as fair globalization or enterprise analysis.62

The second category is workers’ education, which refers to programmes aimed at the educational attainment of working people. It involves

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programmes related to literacy, numeracy, learning a second language and other general education activities.

The third category is labour studies, which involves the open, impartial and critical study of labour in society, as practised by universities. It can refer to union education and to labour studies when practised by union or university-based educators on behalf of unions. Labour education is a branch of adult education and could benefit from innovations in the field of union education and labour studies.\textsuperscript{63}

The focus of trade union education is therefore on developing the organizational capacity of its office bearers, representatives and officials, and to enable them to represent the organization and its members when engaging with management and government. Such education is provided to ensure the effective operation of the organization. It adopts a technical approach, so it ensures that unions function within the parameters of legislation, which defines its role and functions. Worker education or labour education, on the other hand, includes trade union education but places workers at the core of the organization to ensure that their democratic participation in the organizational agenda and operations is vital.

Trade union education is also about working class. This is when education has its focus on the broader societal realities and sees society made up of contending class formations and forces with the ruling class being in power politically, business being the capitalist class, and workers and broader communities as the working class. In this case, education sees the role of unions as part of a class movement that needs to advance the interests of its own class against that of other contending classes.\textsuperscript{64}

Trade unions can be involved in all the levels of worker education, playing various roles as organizers of education programmes, as participants in programmes offered by other institutions and or as sponsors financially and otherwise of their members to undertake union education elsewhere. Many trade union organizations play these triple roles. Therefore, in defining or determining the nature of education, it is important to identify the purpose

\textsuperscript{63} ILO-ACTRAV, \textit{The role of trade unions}.

\textsuperscript{64} Interview with Kessie Moodley, Labour Education Facilitator, Durban, South Africa, held on 1 September 2021.
of such an education as it does not exist in a vacuum but rather always has a particular context within which it is developed and delivered.\textsuperscript{65}

Education at national centres, trade union federations, confederations and sectoral affiliates is shaped by the orientation of the organization and how it sees itself and its role in the environment. In the main, trade unions are creations of legislation which defines the parameters within which it must operate its rights and obligations, and its role within the economic, social and political spheres. How organizations interpret such a role determines the nature of their orientation.

This chapter is concerned about formal worker education, referring to recognition by a formal institution. However, the chapter also recognizes informal education as equally important. Informal education is gained from life experiences, knowledge, information, insights that are shared, and knowledge and skills that are developed through practice as these are as important and often have a greater impact on the trade union individual and collective.

\textbf{Workers’ education in Africa}

The contemporary phase of worker education in Africa began during the 1990s, an era that in essence also marked the end of colonialism in Africa, particularly with the ending of apartheid racial minority rule in Namibia and South Africa. The 1990s were characterized by intensified democratization process, debate on good governance and internal trade union democracy, economic reforms, globalization and emergence of new technologies, proliferation of the internet as well as challenges such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It was also when African trade unions began to break away from the relations with the one-party regimes. Trade unions also saw the benefits of developing linkages with international trade union organizations and chart their independent operational paths.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{65} Interview with Kessie Moodley.

This period also saw the content of education programmes expand to include gender mainstreaming, neoliberalism (especially structural adjustment programmes), human and trade union rights and child labour as major priorities for the trade unions. The changing nature of work, especially the negative impacts of neoliberal economic policies on African economies, massive job losses and growing informality, the failure of governance and absence of developmental States warranted that trade unions started to show more interest in political and economic issues.67

In the broader contextual and external arena, globalization has constantly transformed the labour market and the relevance of employment structures and methods. Labour markets have gradually become flexible while permanent employment conditions are fast eroding. This situation has not only polarized the voice of labour and fragmented trade union unity, but also negatively affected the organizational power of trade unions.

The increasing complexity of employment relations propelled by the full ascendancy of neoliberalism as the driving philosophy for national and global economic activities necessitates the need for more attention to be focused on worker education. In addition, the level of consciousness of workers on major issues that affect their lives both as workers and citizens makes the need for worker education most compelling in trade unions.68

Trade unions in Africa are currently faced with huge challenges. These include unacceptably high levels of unemployment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which then reflect on the levels of poverty on the one hand, and failure of the economic systems to ensure sustainable employment in the economy, on the other.

As a result, droves of formal workers are seeking informal mechanisms and solutions to resolve their plight. There has been a drastic drop in trade union membership both because of the high rates of formal unemployment69 and the increasing lack of confidence in the ability of unions to represent workers and to increase their membership through organizing and mobilization of members in the informal economy, a large majority of whom are women and youth.

67 ———. “Trade Union Education”.
69 ILOSTAT.
Workers’ education in Africa

With this background, Moodley suggests four key contextual issues that must inform worker education: the realities that confront workers, the working class, which includes the formal and informal economy divide, the unemployed and the marginalized; the extent to which workers’ material conditions both at work and at home continue to enslave them and reduce them to poverty in their own countries; the approach and agenda of trade unions themselves (there are many forms of trade unions, which can be broadly categorized into unions that deal with bread-and-butter issues, unions that want to influence not only the collective bargaining agenda but also that of political, social and economic policy).

Whichever type or form we classify a trade union organization, all of them must be agents of change – their capacity and commitment to bring about the change that they seek on behalf of their members, and finally, the realization that such change must be brought about by a collective effort locally, nationally, with continental and international solidarity.70

Trade union education programmes in Africa are diverse in form and reflect a multiplicity of context-specific differences pertaining to national history, politics, economy and governance. At the national level, there are various role players, though the prevalent practice is where the trade union federation (or confederation) provides the education directly.71 In some countries, it is also common for some affiliated unions to provide education specifically targeting their members on issues that concern a particular sector. Similarly, there could be a structural problem at the workplace or an issue that is confronting workers due to changes in national law or practice.72

Apart from the education that is offered and or coordinated by national centres and sectoral unions, there are other various role players at national level. These include labour support organizations specifically established to back trade union efforts such as the Workers College in Durban, the DITSELA, Labour Research Services in Cape Town, Khanya College, LaRRI, the Labour Resource and Research Institute in Namibia, LEDRIZ, the Labour Education and Research Institute of Zimbabwe and the Tom Mboya Labour

71 For example, the Nigeria Labour Congress’s Rain and Harmattan Schools.
72 For example, education offered by the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MANWU) in Namibia to workers in the construction and metal industries.
College in Kenya. These institutions provide short- and medium-term training programmes to union members. The duration varies depending on the program design and issues at hand, ranging from a few hours to 2–5 days and 6–12 months.

Initially, the Workers College in Durban only offered a labour studies diploma that was accredited through Ruskin College, Oxford. The programme was offered on a part-time basis before the entire education scope was reformed to include short courses. Short course programmes were introduced in 1994 at the request of unions. The courses offered as popular education ranged from basic to intermediate and advanced level to shop stewards, organizers and worker leaders. They were also designed to meet specific needs of trade unionists for specialized training to either develop organizational skills and interaction with leadership. Usually, short courses were held in camp form over a duration of 3 to 5 days. The courses covered subjects that included the Labour Relations Act, arbitration, worker participation, facing management, trade union administration, collective bargaining, computer literacy, trade union finances, training of trainers and gender.

In its early days, LaRRI offered 2–5 days educational workshops, targeting members of trade unions, who register with a support letter from their trade unions. LaRRI's external moderation was done through the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa. Later on LaRRI sought formal accreditation through the Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA) and by the end of 2012, it had established formal links with the University of Namibia’s Faculty of Humanities, offering a joint diploma in labour and employment studies. This diploma programme is accessible to all, irrespective of their employment and or trade union status and is offered over a 2-year period and deemed very useful in exposing labour ideologies to the broader Namibian society.

In Ghana, the Department of Labour Human Resource Studies (DoLaHRS) at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) offers innovative university training programmes catering for trade union activists and other scholars. The Department offers qualifications that range from a certificate in labour studies, an executive postgraduate certificate in labour policy studies and a diploma in labour studies to an MA in labour studies and human resources to an MPhil and PhD in labour studies. The UCC project offers the diploma and certificates programmes to contribute to development by building the capacity of trade union personnel, as well as others operating in labour movements in Ghana and other parts of Africa.
For many participants, the worker education programme was their first exposure to formal education beyond primary and or secondary education. Many graduates have gone on to serve in various capacities within the trade unions, as well as across a spectrum of economic and political spheres in their countries and sometimes across the region.

Overall, evidence showed that in essence, what type or duration of worker education trade union organizations are able to offer in part depends on the resources they have available, with obvious economies of scale including their ability to draw on the support from their social capital networks being available to larger organizations.

At the regional level, the ITUC-Africa annual New Year School began in 2011 with the aim of offering “a regular forum of exchange and education for trade union leaders, activists, labour academics and researchers on issues of interest and concern to trade unions in Africa. It helps prepare union leaders and activists for some of the issues they are likely to deal with during the year”. It has since taken place every year. All editions are held at the ITUC-Africa Headquarters in Lomé, Togo, save for the 2012 edition, which took place at the Tom Mboya College in Kisumu, Kenya. Initially, the idea was to hold the school on a rotational hosting basis in various countries, and this idea was abandoned because of the complex logistical practical arrangements involved.73

At the East African subregional level, the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) organizes a bi-annual youth academy camp to build the capacities of young people in trade unions, mentorship coaching, depending on what’s trending. The 2019 theme was on the role of youth in revitalizing the SDGs, geared toward the increasing capacities of youth to appreciate SDGs and how that affects their work. Otherwise and overall, the themes are normally drawn from the prevailing ILO and the ITUC agenda. The one-week programme is held on a rotational basis in the member countries.74

Although the Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC) does not have a specific education programme, it coordinates various short-term workshops (largely funded by the ILO-ACTRRAV) on issues

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73 Interview with Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, General Secretary, ITUC-Africa, 12 August 2021.

74 Interview with Caroline Mugalla, Executive Secretary, East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC), 1 September 2021.
affecting workers in the subregion. SATUCC is planning to establish a training, education and research coordination centre to assist the affiliates in strengthening these aspects. Some of SATUCC’s affiliates also offer systematic education programmes: COSATU and the Federation of Union South Africa (FEDUSA) in South Africa, Angola’s União Nacional de Trabalhadores Angolanos (UNTA-CS) and BFTU Botswana.

Emerging issues on trade union education in Africa

This chapter establishes that trade unions in Africa deem the provision of education as a core service to their membership. While much of the education is currently pitched at the basic level, there is increasing recognition of the importance of providing education at advanced levels too.

Trade unions in Africa are aware that trade union education must primarily enable workers to challenge the unequal power relations within the workplace. It must also help expose workers to the ever-changing dynamics within national labour markets, the prevailing socio-economic and political environment, global development shifts, making the intrinsic link between worker struggles and other factors that affect or impinge on trade union operations. In essence, trade union education must enable workers to become active and respectable actors in society and informed partners in development.

Overall, while the content of the programmes is still very country specific, with participants mostly drawn from the country where the education is being offered, a positive practice of international learning exchanges, regional and continental short-duration exchanges taking place from time to time is growing.

75 Interview with Mavis Koogotsitse, Executive Secretary, Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC), 1 September 2021.
Collaboration between trade union labour support institutions and universities has also begun a tradition that exposes trade union ideals to the broader society. This collaboration between academia and trade union organizations exposes trade union activists to theoretical underpinnings related to labour law and practice and in turn exposes academics to the everyday struggles of the various classes of workers.

In research for the European Trade Union Committee for Education, Stevenson, Milner and Winchip concluded that the education provided by the trade union organizations directly is considered more autonomous, less driven by the agenda of external parties such as employers, government and or funders. The context in which it is offered is considered safe to discuss and raise issues that would not have been possible in an environment that is not owned and controlled by trade unions.76

Given the complex and rapidly changing operating environments due to globalization and its effects on the world of work, workers’ education in Africa has expanded in scope beyond the usual topics such as negotiations, organizing, collective bargaining and gender equality. Most worker education programmes now include topics on economic literacy, economic development and transformation, analysis of national income and budget expenditures, regional integration, taxation, trade and investments, sustainable development (SDGs), and climate change.77

Through workers’ education, trade union activists are now not only learning about issues that are internal to their organizations, internal to their own countries and workplaces, but also about broader global politics and economics. More recently, the programmes have been including topics on COVID-19 and its implications on the world of work. This education has enabled trade unions to be accepted as partners in development who bring a more informed and alternative view to policy formulation.78

In terms of delivery methods, many trade unions are experimenting with different ways of providing education and training, particularly using online

76 Howard Stevenson, Alison Milner and Emily Winchip, Education Trade Unions for the Teaching Profession: Strengthening the Capacity of Education Trade Unions (European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2018).

77 Interview with Dr. Godfrey Kanyenze, Director of the Labour Education and Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ) on 13 September 2021.

78 Interview with Dr. Godfrey Kanyenze, Director of the Labour Education and Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ) on 13 September 2021.
methods. While such flexibility clearly has advantages, the growth of online learning, if not well handled, could lead to further exclusion of already marginalized workers. The need for workers’ education to maintain face-to-face provision and to combat the individualism and isolation that e-based learning encourages is important.\(^7^9\)

It is the norm for the service providers to offer a certificate of attendance. However, most of the institutions reviewed such as the Workers’ College and the LaRRI also offer formal accredited training programmes. Almost all the programmes reviewed except for those offered directly by the trade unions are certified and formally accredited, especially those whose duration is six months and more. The accreditation is done by the national institutions such as the National Qualifications Authority of Namibia, with periodical reviews, which include a thorough assessment of the capacity of the institution to continue the programme, including assessment of the safety of the premises.\(^8^0\)

While the overarching impacts of the pandemic on trade union education provision in Africa has not yet been fully documented, the rapid change from face-to-face interactions, enhanced through social distancing measures, has massively affected worker education. However, many trade union activists have continued to partake in training programmes offered especially by the ILO training centre in Turin, ensuring that learning continues even during the pandemic.

On the negative side, it seems to be that basic trade union education has declined in quantity and quality over time. Besides the general acknowledgment that worker education is important, what is happening in practice does not suggest so. Provision is not consistent, the quality varies, fluctuates and the quantity depends on the country as well as on the union-specific context. Most of these education programmes are dependent on the political support of the trade union leadership directly or indirectly. In some cases, the type of leadership determines the success and or continuation of the programme.

Another challenge is the exclusionary nature of current worker education programmes, particularly based on gender, physical and language abilities and sector of operation. The language used is often at a level too high

\(^7^9\) Howard Stevenson, Alison Milner and Emily Winchip, *Education Trade Unions*.

\(^8^0\) Interview with Patrick Kafuka, Education Coordinator at the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) on 1 September 2021.
for workers from vulnerable sectors such as domestic or farm workers to access or understand the content offered.

Many participants are serial or repetitive beneficiaries, with women, young persons and workers in the informal economy largely not well represented, as either participants, facilitators, or trainers. There is a feeling that education is becoming more elitist in nature, with a dangerous lineage to certification and accreditation at the expense of grassroots-level education.

In addition, there are few, if any, credible, relevant and consistent education programmes for leadership at the national and regional levels. Many leadership programmes are established and coordinated by a variety of regional and international organizations that either overlap or duplicate each other, or that do not build on each other, thus offering no sustainable results.81

Most often, the need for the programme is assumed, rather than clearly informed by evidence. There is therefore not always clear systematic documentation of the needs identification processes or baseline evidence of the gap analysis.

Many of the programmes depend on erratic human and financial resources, with almost all the organizations having no internally sourced and dedicated budgets for education programmes.82 These programmes are more often than not funded by international trade union organizations ranging from the GUFs, to Northern-based country federations and national centres, as well as the ILO.83

Thus, donor dependency is a huge challenge, which in turn affects either their institutional focus, or the selection of countries and participants that become part of the initiative, or the lifespan of a programme. There is also an underlying competition for such funding, which country or national


82 Interview with Mavis Koogotsitse, Executive Secretary, Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC), 1 September, 2021

83 Almost all the respondents confirmed this.
centre is in favour of the funder, and which funder is given priority or preference by the national centre itself.  

Regular budget and staffing of programmes is also an issue. Even though some trade unions have a small number of staff dedicated to training and education, many are not utilized for that purpose most of the time. Often, such trainers/educators spent more time doing other non-education related activities such as drafting speeches for the leadership.

The training and re-training of educators is almost absent. Apart from the short-term workshops that trade union educators attend, often organized by other institutions, and usually on subject matters unrelated to the programmes they train, we found no reliable evidence on how the skills of the educators are supported and developed to offer quality training. A significant number have never received adult education training and or are not educators by training. Consequently, there is no clear correlation between the quality of the education provided and the quality of the service providers, trainers and or educators.

While there are examples of good practice, the majority of the programmes do not have a long-term sustainability plan. Overall, quite often the challenges with sustainability across all the organizations is that there was no long-term view or planning of the programme. In more cases than not, the duration was often closely tied to the duration of the funding contract.

Future prospects

There are broad strategic issues that workers’ education institutions in Africa must consider adopting to meet the desired educational outcomes of their members. These strategies are by no means mutually exclusive – many workers’ education organizations work with several or even all these approaches simultaneously, with any single strategy often reinforcing the others. The strategies must be within the context of the individual union and the social, economic and political environment in which an organization

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84 Kaisval Moodley, “Towards an African Workers’ Education Programme”.

finds itself. Thus, this is not a blueprint or a panacea for addressing all the challenges reflected. Rather, these are possible options, and it is up to the individual organization to determine what fits with their own priorities and what might be possible within each specific context.

1. **Prioritizing workers’ education through organizational strategic plans.** Workers’ education must become an integral part of the strategic planning of trade unions, with every aspect of trade unionism having an element of education. A comprehensive evaluation of workers’ education in Africa ought to be carried out at the sectoral national, subregional and regional levels. Such an evaluation must ask some critical questions like: Does workers’ education feature as part of the trade union organization's strategic planning and vision? and Do trade unions see workers’ education as an essential, integral part of their agenda?

2. **Linking worker education to organizing and mobilization of members.** Workers’ education must be directly linked to mobilization of trade union recruitment, consciousness and the trade union agenda, addressing the everyday realities confronted by members.

3. **Providing education for workers, and not workers for education.** Strive as much as possible to move education away from the predominantly workshop models to where workers are. Supplement current models with more creative, radical forms of delivery such as “guerrilla theatre”, lunchtime 10-minute sessions, sessions on public transportation (taxis, buses and trains) and wherever workers congregate including eating places, markets and public transportation terminals. Also strategically include drama, traditional songs, and use of radio and print media.\(^{85}\) Given the COVID-19 pandemic realities, it is important to consider a combination of face-to-face and virtual educational programming.

4. **Offering something relevant for all the members, rank and file.** A strategic delivery plan and mode that engages with the different levels of trade union education – membership, representatives, leadership, organizational – should be considered with a strong component of bringing all the workers together for a collective sharing of experiences, synergizing and strategy development.

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\(^{85}\) Mwamwadzingo and Dia, “Trade Union Education”.

5. **Considering adopting community and civil society-based education models.** This must start with unions identifying themselves as part of broader communities and running workshops for workers and community members. After all, workers have multiple identities. Therefore, the education should reckon with their multiple identities as workers, as union members, as citizens, as parents and guardians, as actors in the real economy, as political actors, tax and ratepayers, or as ethnic minorities. The education must be clear on how the issues that workers are confronted with at the workplace can likewise be won through community mobilization and vice versa. Worker education must connect the dots between workers and communities.

6. **Strategically collaborating with NGOs, community-based organizations, broader civil society, and academia on education programmes.** Essentially, trade union work and the broad fields of industrial relations, labour studies and development economics which address concerns of workers, and their organizations are inter- and multi-disciplinary. As such, conducting education, lobbying and advocacy in these areas would benefit from collaboration. There are groups outside the trade union movement within larger social formations who are disadvantaged and share similar fates with workers, and it is always rewarding to work with such groups. For several reasons, such as lack of adequate capacity, funding, and pressure of normal work, the trade unions cannot do it alone. Collaboration must be based on a joint commitment to share resources, collaborate on projects and programmes and build capacity. Joint and collaborative actions, which can take varying and diverse forms, can be undertaken. In particular, collaboration with academic institutions and NGOs must be informed by the trade union agenda and outcomes. In other words, academia and or the NGOs must not lead the agenda but rather reinforce the trade union agenda.

7. **Carrying out skills audits including organizational skills assessments.** Get to know what type of education and experience for worker education your organization holds through an assessment of trade union officials, office bearers, representatives and members. This will help determine the capacities an organization has and areas to focus on given the available capacities and for what areas external resource capacities will be required. Replenish the internal capacities when necessary by investing in training skills of younger trade union activists.
8. **Investing in e-based, digital learning infrastructure is required.** Despite the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic presents trade unions with a renewed opportunity to offer an alternative form of education – one that is non-discriminatory, inclusive and more resource efficient than ever before in the history of trade union education. The post-COVID context will require workers to successfully conclude negotiations via virtual platforms and sign collective bargaining agreements digitally. The collective bargaining agenda will also have to change to include new aspects such as support for remote working and life-work balance. The advocacy agenda towards governments must also consider the investments in sustainable IT infrastructure across countries and regions.

9. **Adequately resourcing worker education.** Resourcing does not only mean money, but also includes the support from, or acquisition of, resources. Resources include human resources like facilitators and support staff and organizations, education and reading materials and books, including teaching aids, equipment and venues. What requires financing differ from one context to another and from one programme to another. Generally, resources can be divided into two or more levels.

10. The first is the construction of the education programme itself. This will include the gathering and development, updating of the materials, compensation if any for the trainers and other processes such as evaluation. The second level relates to logistical arrangements. This can include coordination and administration, printing, data base development and maintenance, communication, transportation, venues, accommodation and meals.

11. Trade union organizations must thus become creative regarding the use of initial funding by using it to acquire resources that would sustain the programmes. First, internally assess the available resources for contribution to the programmes. A contributory model by the targeted beneficiaries must be considered, no matter how minimal, in view of the overall human resources required to develop, coordinate and successfully implement the programme. Even if the initial costs could be high, as the programme unfolds its overall costs must minimize, and its impact maximize. There must be a strategic move away from use of expensive venues such as high star hotels towards the use of our own venues where they exist and are fit for education.
12. Ensuring sustainability of worker education. Worker education providing institutions must overcome the challenges of sustainability. Coblentz\textsuperscript{86} noted that sustainability means continuation. For an organization, it means that it has the elements necessary to carry on and constantly enhance its activities in pursuit of a defined mission. It has both a defined mission and some combination of goals and objectives, the attainment of which ensures the successful pursuit of the mission—through, for instance, short-, medium-, and long-term planning, competent and sufficient management and staff, visionary leadership and staff commitment to the organization’s mission.\textsuperscript{87}

In relation to a worker education programme, by sustainability, we mean a plan and actions that shows how the programme shall continue to exist but also to grow and show measurable impacts. In such a programme, the factors determining sustainability include: relevance and effectiveness of the programme itself; the appeal to and credibility for those who are its target audience, the beneficiaries; the expressed commitment of those developing and running the programme; the political support it receives; the backing and confidence in the programmes from the support network, including any funders; regular evaluation, improvement and renewal of the programme and the clear intersections between the programme and other programmes or activities of the organization.

For a worker education programme to be sustained, it must be structured as a long-term, continuous programme. It must be assessed, and if possible “accredited”. An educational programme must strike a fair balance between the educational needs of informal and formal economy workers and as far as possible a civil society link. It must have elements of participants ploughing back such as through projects assignments in their own organizations— in other words, there must be a clear political agenda and measurable outcome.

For organizations with regional outreach such as ITUC-Africa, there must be a subregional presence of the programme, such as participants coming together in the subregions including through virtual forums. Facilitators and coordinators of the programme must declare their long-term

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commitment to the programme and must be selected on the basis of trade union experience, and the desire to work with trade unions if they are not trade unionists themselves. A workplace, sectoral, national, subregional or regional network must be established that supports and contributes to the programme and develops a solidarity culture, “each one, teach one”.

There must be constant evaluation of the programme, which involves participants, the outcomes of which must lead to visible improvement of the programme. An alumni structure must be created which involves itself in engaging in structural transformation of worker education at various levels – to develop educators and constantly improve their capacities.

At the core of all these, “there is a need for trade union organization including their labour support arms to embrace sound leadership approaches to ensure the overall organizational sustainability”.88 Worker education succeeds in organizations and countries with the right, committed and vibrant leadership. “Leadership crisis at the many levels of trade unions is what has caused us to be in these difficulties”.89

### Conclusions

There is a general recognition that education is an important factor in the trade union movement. Most unions try to either develop education internally or send their officials and members onto external programmes. Several trade union education institutions, as well as research institutions which support education, have been established on the continent, and have been in existence for many years and have wonderful examples of good trade union education practices. Most trade unionists have been on some education programme during their time representing the union.

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89 Interview with Justina Jonas, General Secretary, Metal and Allied Workers Union (MANWU), Namibia, 3 September 2021.
There is also ample evidence that worker education helps to broaden and upgrade workers’ knowledge and skills, equipping them with competencies that needed to be successful in the defence of their basic human and labour rights. It strengthens their overall resilience to exogenous shocks. In addition, worker education usually has a positive impact on labour relations, making it a worthwhile investment for both workers, employers, and governments.  

It seems that for several reasons, while worker education has existed for many years in Africa and despite the huge resources ploughed in, the material conditions of workers and the institutional capacities of trade union organizations have not changed much for the better. Their social, economic and political realities are not improving, and, in most cases, are even getting worse. The democratic participation of workers and their unions in the societies where they live has not effectively placed them on an equal footing with business and government.

A number of reasons were advanced for this decline, including the changing nature of the national and global economies, characterized by informalization of work and work arrangements, inadequate funding for worker education and overall loss of institutional capacities to deliver worker education in a consistent manner. Another important issue cited is the absence of visionary, strong and independent trade union leadership in some organizations and across the continent. The political commitment and understanding of the necessity of sustained education programmes is often absent or tied to the term of office.

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90 H. Stevenson, Milner and Winchip, *Education Trade Unions*. 


The 2019 “ILO Debate” and the concept of decent work

Tripartism is the *modus operandi* and the principal essence of the ILO. Tripartism implies a structure based on consensus and dialogue between national governments, employers and workers. The representatives of the employers and workers are their private associations, unions and business associations. In recent decades many scholars have claimed that trade

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unions have been losing grounds globally, and some even predict a future without trade unions in industrial relations.93

What it is more likely is that the role of unions is transforming. Unions are generally aware of the decline of their position within industries, politics and society, especially in industrialized economies.94 The decline of unions is very much welcomed by radical right-wing free marketers, who oppose the organization of workers into trade unions and disagree with the tripartite praxis. But tripartism, the way we know it and as enshrined in the ILO and its structure, is impossible without worker representation, which trade unions guarantee.

On the occasion of the ILO Centenary, a debate arose not just over the organization’s history and legacy but also over its future. Within that debate, Marcel van der Linden called for a deep transformation of the ILO, from an institution of dialogue and corporatist tripartism, to a specialized regulatory agency like others that exist within the UN system; an agency dealing with work – such as, for example, for food, health and aviation.95 The position was criticized by Gerry Rodgers, a former director of the International Institute of Labour Studies in Geneva.96 He rejected the view that the ILO, in its current shape, can do very little to change workers’ conditions, and pointed to its track record in advancing workers’ conditions throughout the world.

From the adoption of the ILO World Employment Programme in the 1970s to the debate on a social clause in international trade agreements in the 1980s and 1990s, a generalized increased “respect for core labour standards” (freedom of association, and freedom from discrimination, forced labour


94 This was generally debated at various editions of the ITUC Africa’s New Year School that takes place yearly in Lomé, Togo.


and child labour) has been introduced and guaranteed at a global level.\textsuperscript{97} This is provided, Rodgers claimed, by the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998.

In 1999, the Decent Work Agenda (DWA) came out of such process as a sort of integrated approach to further pursue and improve labour standards globally. Its was pioneered by the then ILO Director-General, Juan Somavía.\textsuperscript{98} The idea was to build “an agenda that connected rights at work, employment, social protection and social dialogue in a mutually reinforcing way. It was about coherence within the ILO, but also coherence between economic and social action at the international level in the face of the adverse effects of globalization.”\textsuperscript{99}

Since its proclamation, the DWA has been embraced by a host of civil society coalitions, national States and multinational organizations, and has the pride of place as one of the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. In 2008, decent work was included in the Millennium Development Goals, and later as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the accompanying Sustainable Development Goals, where it is specifically included in SDG 8: “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.\textsuperscript{100}

The G20, G7, EU and the African Union have endorsed decent work. Today, various aid donors and international development agencies include decent work in their cooperation programmes with Africa. Decent work as a narrative appears to be an international success. Does this success correspond to the betterment of conditions of workers on the continent?

Notably, the DWA has four pillars: employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. As such, since a few years after its

\textsuperscript{97} G. Rodgers, “The ILO at 100”, 67–68.


\textsuperscript{99} G. Rodgers, “The ILO at 100”, 98.

articulation, “decent work levels” have been measured across countries,\textsuperscript{101} and it is quoted in policy, development interventions, conferences and publications. According to the ILO, decent work is “work which is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace, social protection, good prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom to express one’s concerns, freedom to organize and participate in decisions that affect one’s life, as well as equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men”.\textsuperscript{102}

As noted by Dharam Ghai, a former director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development who also worked for the ILO,\textsuperscript{103} decent work embraces various and different aspects of labour. The “decency” of work here is intended in both quantitative and qualitative forms. More recently, Andrea Casavecchia pointed out that decent work is an abstract notion that implies a series of rules and regulations defining not only under what conditions human beings ought to work but also what work means and is in society. Deregulation of the labour market presupposes the deficits in the decency of work, hence underemployment and decreased remuneration.\textsuperscript{104}

Decent work therefore is a means of dignifying labour and an important objective of union action. After all, workers’ struggle is also about normative discourse and counter-discourse and the construction of an hegemonic thinking whereby labour attains a high status not only in the economy (with higher wages and shorter labour times) but also in the social discourse (with the protection of rights).

In Africa, labour conditions and labour rights are frequently not well-protected. Partly due to colonial heritages of exploitation of both resources and the labour force, and, because of neoliberal impositions within structural adjustment programmes, African workers today often find themselves entrenched in a degraded situation. African unions are,

\textsuperscript{101} See, for example, the ILO Decent Work Results dashboard: \url{https://www.ilo.org/IRDashboard/}.


\textsuperscript{104} A. Casavecchia, “Lavoro Dignitoso (Decent Work)”, Bene Comune, 11 April 2014, \url{https://www.benecomune.net/rivista/rubriche/parole/lavoro-dignitoso-decent-work/}. 
among other things, instruments in the hands of workers in confronting and altering the situation. As explained below, African trade unions and unionists have a long history of successful social action in order to attain dignity of labour. With the coming of the DWA, African unions saw it as a useful lever. However, whereas African unions have embraced and promoted the DWA, they have also became objects of the agenda.

Trade unions and the Decent Work Agenda in Africa

With the DWA, the ILO’s primary goal became to secure decent work for women and men everywhere. Decent work, Somavía proclaimed, “means productive work in which rights are protected, which generates an adequate income, with adequate social protection”. As such, it took the place of the converging focus of the four strategic objectives of the ILO: the promotion of rights at work; job creation; social protection and social dialogue.

The DWA implied a broadening of the scope of the ILO’s activities, so as to encompass all workers everywhere. Whereas the organization had tended to focus on the standard employment relationship – meaning stable waged full-time work for one employer in the formal sector – it recognized that such employment opportunities had failed to materialize on the scale required, and that a substantial part of the working people of the world were not covered by the social protections that came with it. Hence, the ILO would need to expand its focus to cover women, men and youth working in irregular and precarious forms of employment, in the informal economy, domestic activities and unemployed.

The DWA rests on corporatist assumptions. It assumes the plausibility of a positive-sum-game between business, States and workers – and that genuine “consensus and agreement between the participating individuals and groups” can be expected to exist.105 According to this assumption, better working conditions and wages are thought to make industrial peace more

viable, improve productivity and aggregate demand, and thus increase profits, whereas increased productivity and industrial peace in turn equally enable better working conditions and wages – a virtuous cycle, of sorts. The tripartite social partners, in other words, have tangible reasons to want to cooperate to establish a social contract based on achieving the DWA.

Whereas the DWA is based on the notion of inalienable rights, these rights are not considered to be reflected in any absolute standards. “Everybody – regardless of where they live – needs a minimum level of social protection and income security”, Somavía declared, only to add that this minimum level is “defined according to their society’s capacity and level of development”.

By embracing the DWA, “the ILO is by no means demanding the harmonization of minimum wages world-wide … but rather a base for the remuneration of work that is appropriate for national conditions”. In other words, the DWA did not establish universal standardized rights to, for example, remuneration. No minimum wage was set, and the DWA has therefore been criticized for being relativist.

In the 1990s, the neoliberal offensive implied a decline of corporatism. This entailed a potential marginalization of the role and relevance of the ILO. Despite being outpaced by international organizations that advanced the neoliberal agenda, such as the World Bank and the IMF, the ILO had to offer some form of counter-strategy. As mentioned above, the DWA was its response.

Within international trade and World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations in the mid-1990s, the idea of introducing social clauses to global trade agreements was advocated by many, including trade unions. Social clauses would bring the sanctioning systems of international trade regimes to bear on States that violated international labour standards. This idea, however, was vociferously opposed by States in the Global South, who believed it would likely be used by industrial economies as a tool for protectionism.

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107 W. Sengenberger, “Decent Work”, 47.
109 L. van der Walt, Beyond Decent Work: Fighting for Unions and Equality in Africa (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019).
110 L. Vosko, “Decent Work”.
Moreover, the constituent role of the employers in the ILO meant that not only the interests between participating States had to be balanced, but so had the interests of organizations representing workers with the conflicting interests of opposing social classes. When the WTO discussions stalled, the ILO sought a way out of the impasse by means of an independent declaration.  

The document that emerged out of the discussions was the ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights of Work. The Declaration was adopted at the 1998 International Labour Conference, one year before the DWA was issued. The Declaration included four categories of fundamental freedoms: the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of forced or compulsory labour; the abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Since the rights conferred are considered fundamental, they are held to be legally binding on all ILO Member States. In this way they differ from rights conferred by ILO Conventions, which generally apply only to State signatories that have ratified them. But like other ILO Conventions, they nevertheless come without an enforcement mechanism based on the possibility of sanctions being applied to States that are in breach of the rights conferred.

African unions have used DWA concepts such as the fundamental freedoms both to secure their place within social dialogue structures and to press for the implementation of international labour standards.

There are many cases in which African unions have been using the DWA concepts, rights and standards to campaign for betterment in the conditions of workers. One such example is the Central Organisation of Trade Unions campaign against precarious working conditions in Kenya, in which it has sought to identify legal loopholes and find ways of addressing them through social dialogue.  

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111 L. Vosko, “Decent Work”.

112 Union to Union, A changing world of work – what does it mean for international development cooperation?, 2020.
Efforts to ensure social protection for formal and informal economy workers in a range of African countries is another example. In addition to this, trade unions also play important roles in designing and jointly implementing Decent Work Country Programmes, they benefit from the implementation of development cooperation projects and participate in monitoring and reporting on the implementing of DWA standards.

If implemented, moreover, international labour standards could assist African trade unions in increasing their leverage further. An example of this is the 2011 Domestic Workers Convention which includes the stipulation that each Member State shall take measures to “respect, promote and realize... [the] freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining” of domestic workers. Given the size of this category of workers in Africa, respect for their freedom of association could boost trade union ranks considerably. However, what possibilities unions have to impose those standards tend to originate in the specific balance of forces between employers, the State and workers in each context, rather than any measures that the ILO could take.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example that has demonstrated how trade unions in Africa, using DWA categories, can seek to protect the interest of workers. African trade unions, such as the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU), have rallied to prevent retrenchment of workers and “precarization” of working conditions in the wake of the pandemic. They have also engaged in social dialogue to make sure that workplaces have protective measures in place, and a crucial role in reporting outbreaks at an early stage. Where retrenchments nevertheless have taken place, the importance that the DWA places on social protection has been a helpful instrument in protecting the livelihoods of workers. This has also been evident in the discussions within the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference through 2021.

115 See ILO, Domestic Workers Convention, C189.
The Director-General's report to the conference stated that in the wake of the pandemic “the ILO had documented no less than 1,622 newly introduced measures for social protection benefiting hundreds of millions of people [which have] involved extending or adjusting existing programmes or introducing new ones, including direct cash transfers and emergency relief”. Moreover, the report stressed the importance of social dialogue “to identify and implement the most appropriate responses to the social and economic impact of COVID-19”. The conference also adopted a Global Call to Action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in which the creation of decent work occupied a central place.

African unions have welcomed the DWA and have sought to acquire gains from it. The brief sketch so far has shown that their view of the DWA has been more nuanced than celebratory declarations alone would indicate and entanglements are far more diverse. The next section addresses how African trade unions have contributed to the DWA both in action and in debate.

The position of African unions on the Decent Work Agenda

There is not much academic literature on the role of African trade unions in the debate on the DWA and its implementation. In many respects, until recently the ILO treated African trade unions as objects of its decent works programmes rather than as subjects – i.e. a partnership role in the improvement of working conditions in Africa. This, however, is changing, partly due to the agency of African trade unions themselves.

Some critics of the DWA have pointed to its top-down character and its focus on soft interventions. This is because those who are called to implement the DWA are governments, corporations and workers’ organizations, which are

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118 ILO, Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, 2021.
actors that are not guided by the same interests and beliefs. In this section, we will briefly discuss the position of trade unions vis-à-vis the DWA and associated ILO programmes, and how trade unions shaped the agenda in Africa. Two aspects will be looked at: the debate and the implementation.

African trade unions did not fully engage or position themselves in the debate on the DWA at its gestation. Looking at African trade unions’ contribution to the debate on DWA, it can merely be noted that they embraced the DWA fully and unconditionally after its formulation. This could indicate two things: either that they are servile organizations with a tendency to follow whatever is proposed by the ILO; or that they actually found that the main tenants of the agenda converged with the interest they represented – popular and corporate. It seems that the second proposition is most likely representing the real situation.

Although they did not contribute in any meaningful way to the formulation of the DWA, African unions did find that the agenda norms and principles coincided with their interests. In large parts of Africa, real wages had stagnated and overall growth had failed to translate into a comparable growth in decent, stable employment opportunities. Meanwhile, African unions had lost some of the traction that came with their close association with liberation movements, and risked a relative decline of leverage. The DWA presented an opportunity and a lever to address these problems.

Hence, the DWA was embraced by African unions as an objective and as an instrument of advocacy vis-à-vis both employers and governments. The respect of the provisions contained in the DWA is the legal ground upon which African unions petition and denounce detrimental actions by employers and governments, especially when their claim of treating work decently is not matched by their practice. Already in 2002, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) addressed President Olusegun Obasanjo and the National Assembly with a communiqué protesting in terms of “defend[ing] the decent work agenda, especially the rights to fair terms of employment, decent compensation package and unionisation”. The NLC also urged the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) programme to directly address the DWA in order to tackle the problem of the working poor by

not only guaranteeing jobs but also by making work “meaningful”\textsuperscript{120}. In South Africa, COSATU accused the ANC Government of failing to advance a radical economic shift and to continue to favour big business, against the backdrop of progressive policies such as its Industrial Policy Action Plan and the National Growth Path which had pledged “the creation of decent work for all”. COSATU saw the category of decent work as a tool of redistribution, and combating economic inequality and poverty, and held the Government to the standards established by the narrative of the DWA. Decent work is not synonymous with the DWA, but slowly and steadily COSATU has started to refer to the DWA in terms of principles and standards to be promoted, albeit critically. The criticism of the narrative consists of an understanding that labour is not a mere commodity, or at least not a commodity like any other. COSATU’s critique of the DWA is consistently based on this aspect. In the manner understood by COSATU, promoting labour rights, as the DWA does, means promoting human dignity and quality of life in the struggle against opposing interest. It is instructive to read the way in which COSATU discussed the DWA during the 10th National Congress in 2018:

\begin{quote}
Class war continues all the time unabated – sometimes you see it in the streets and sometimes you don’t see it ... This we know because daily we are involved in bitter battles to defend and to advance our gains. The battle is about which class interests will be imposed as the national interest by the State. Is it going to be the Decent Work Agenda or unfettered private accumulation?\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{121} COSATU 10th Congress. See: http://mediadon.co.za/10th-national-congress/ In the same website, it is possible to read more on the COSATU’s position on the DWA and the meaning of “decent work” for COSATU.
The DWA includes the right of workers to unionize and bargain. During countless conflicts between African workers and employers to assert the rights to unionize and bargain, there are accounts of how African unionists have been prevented from doing so, even at the threat of violence. The freedom of association – the right to unionize – has thus been put under serious strain – and a continuous attack on unions has been perhaps a leitmotif of contemporary African labour history. The right to unionize affects working conditions. Unionization remains one of the few antidotes against dehumanizing working conditions that companies subject their workers to. Female workers tend to be affected disproportionately in this respect. Responding to prevailing and gendered conditions of work in the Nigerian service sector as an example\(^{122}\), the NLC has referred to the Nigerian Government’s rhetorical support to the DWA as a way forward: to not only give workers the right to unionize but also to enhance the role of unions in the collective determination of working conditions and human dignity.

In the first years after the formulation of the DWA, unions embraced the Agenda provisions and utilized them to promote and legitimize their struggles for dignity of labour. In November 2006, in Nairobi, an important step forward in this respect occurred. African labour officials such as Andrew Kailembo of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Africa (ICFTU-Afro), Andrien Akoute of the Democratic Organisation of African Workers and Trade Unions (DOAWTU) and Hassan Sunmonu of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) took the initiative of convening discussions among Africa workers on the DWA.\(^{123}\) A follow-up meeting occurred in the same city in January 2007, in the context of the World Social Forum. During this occasion, Solidar, ITUC, ETUC, World Solidarity and the Global Progressive Forum launched the “Decent Work, Decent Life” campaign, aiming to promote the DWA and place it at the centre of global development discourse.\(^{124}\) The creation of the African

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Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) followed in November of the same year. These institutional developments are not disconnected from the development of the DWA. Since its inception, ITUC-Africa has strenuously promoted the DWA. This contributed to the adoption of the DWA as a key element of development in Africa at the European Union-Africa summit in February 2009.

The DWA, as promoted by global and regional African unionism, has gone beyond workplace issues. The Agenda has been used to support African trade unions’ campaigns in different sectors and social domains. The 11th ILO African Regional Meeting, held in Addis Ababa in April 2007, enshrined the connections between African unions and the DWA. The report of the Director-General at the meeting, entitled The Decent Work Agenda in Africa: 2007–2015, was by no means a revolutionary manifesto, and contains many provisions that converge with neoliberalism.

However, the role of unions as positive actors in society was reiterated. The report recognized that decent work deficits prevailed: workers in Africa, it said, have still a long way to go before attaining dignified conditions, because of “violations of trade union rights ... intensification in the violent repression of workers ... failure of most governments to respect the rights of their own employees, the right to organize, to strike or bargain collectively”. Presenting these factual deficits as being in need of concrete action is an example of why the DWA was seen by many African unions as a way of reinforcing their leverage, but also their status in politics and society. A series of Decent Work Country Programmes followed in Africa, implemented by the ILO. Generally, national confederations embraced and were involved in such programmes, adding to their clout. National governments, too, have embraced the agenda. At the 14th regional meeting of the ILO in Abidjan, moreover, it was noted that “the majority of African

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125 The founding congress of ITUC Africa occurred in Accra and followed the dissolution congresses of AFRO and the DOAWTU, the regional organizations of the former ICFTU and WCL respectively.


countries had prioritized youth employment in their national development policies and plans, and designed special programmes to promote decent work for young women and men”\textsuperscript{129}

Despite this, the discussion contained in the final report makes clear that decent work deficits and irregular compliance with core conventions remain problematic across the continent. The report from the meeting and the resultant Abidjan resolution that was adopted testified to the great popularity of the DWA within the mainstream of African developmental discourse, and among national and regional trade union organizations in the continent. Moreover, the implementation plan undertakes to develop the capacity of regional and subregional workers’ organizations including ITUC-Africa and OATUU, and gives them a mandated role in the implementation of the Abidjan Declaration.\textsuperscript{130}

Like other global and regional trade unions organizations, ITUC-Africa is part of the Trade Union Development Cooperation Network (TUDCN), a global union initiative. Within this framework, in 2017, it was declared that the promotion of the DWA has become “the main objective of trade unions’ contribution to the development policy debate”.\textsuperscript{131} Apart from ITUC-Africa, OATUU, the other major pan-African union organization, has also lined up behind the agenda and sought to make use of it in promoting working people’s overall conditions across the continent. In its 2017–20 Strategic Plan it identified support for the DWA as a “priority area”.

However, despite the manner in which African unions have come to rally behind the DWA, it has not been adopted unproblematically and without dissent. In the next section, we turn our attention to the critiques and alternatives that have been articulated within the discussion.\textsuperscript{132}


Which (African) alternatives?

One form of doubt that surrounds the DWA relates to the likelihood of its implementation. One source of such doubt is whether the ILO possesses the resources and instruments required. The ILO establishes labour standards through conventions, which are typically voluntary and need to be ratified by Member States. As Sengenberger has described it, “when a member country ratifies an ILO Convention, it commits itself to the legally binding, international obligation of observing and implementing this standard”,133 and subjects itself to submitting regular reports on the implementation. However, these conventions generally have a poor rate of ratification by Member States, with the average African Member State having ratified only 36 out of 196 ILO conventions and protocols. But even when ratification has occurred, implementation suffers from problems.

As van der Linden has pointed out, “the ILO has no independent labour inspectorate” to monitor that standards and conventions are implemented, and “must therefore rely on trade unions, international and local NGOs, and the national labour inspectorates – if these exist – pertaining to the official mechanisms controlled by the national governments”.134 This is troubling in African contexts, where the capacities of such inspectorates typically remain weak. However, the ILO has put in place some mechanisms of sanctioning Member States that are in breach of conventions. The ILO Constitution has established various supervisory mechanisms to its international labour standards, including the International Labour Conference’s Committee for Application of Standards (CAS), the Governing Body’s Committee of Freedom of Association (CFA), and the Committee of Experts on the Application of Recommendations and Conventions (CEARC). In addition, the ILO can recommend that other actors impose sanctions, something which van der Linden considers “realistic only if a country commits very serious violations and moreover wields little economic or political power”, as in the case of Myanmar.135 Studies are needed to concretely assess the results of these initiatives.

Enforcement or supervisory mechanisms of the ILO are required also in connection with the realization of the DWA. This was an issue raised in the above-mentioned “ILO debate” of 2019. However, for the ILO to be granted hard enforcement mechanisms appears to be highly unrealistic in a world economy defined by great asymmetries. Indeed, Rodgers has conceded that “there has not been much progress toward decent work in the twenty years since the idea was introduced”. But it is crucial to note that “the reality of today’s world, where we see the unilateral imposition of sanctions by powerful States for political aims, does not give any hope that they will cede any of that power to international organizations”. Moreover, should that change it remains highly likely that the granting of such powers to international organizations would be strongly opposed by African States, who are always the most likely subjects to be at the receiving end of such sanctions – if only for reasons of power asymmetry.

Another source of doubt concerns the traction of the tripartite within a global neoliberal order. Lucien van der Walt has claimed that DWA programmes, in Africa, “fail to seriously appreciate how the neoliberal capitalist globalisation and the changing balance of forces have eroded the basis for sustained reform” and it is thus profoundly unrealistic.

But the DWA has also been critiqued in terms of its content, independent of its viability. By abandoning ILO’s traditional insistence on promoting a standard employment relationship, it has expanded its quantitative scope to embrace workers in hitherto neglected sectors of work, but it has meanwhile entailed a qualitative retreat. Vosko has noted, that “the protections surrounding ‘decent work’ are significantly inferior to those typically associated with a standard employment relationship”, One can question whether, in a world of growing inequalities, this lowering of the qualitative horizons – however pragmatic the reasons may be – can be justified on grounds of social justice. Moreover, as van der Walt has pointed out, abandoning this goal on grounds that it is no longer feasible suffers from an erroneous understanding of the direction of causality: the standard employment relationship has never been

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136 G. Rodgers, “The ILO at 100”, 68.
137 G. Rodgers, “The ILO at 100”, 69.
138 L. van der Walt, Beyond Decent Work, 2.
a default standard, but rather “wherever it has existed, it has been mainly imposed – by unions”.\(^{140}\)

In other words, the standard employment relationship ought not merely be protected in situations where it exists, but improved upon and advanced to new context and sectors of workers. The determination of “decency” of work is relative. For example, the DWA poses the problematic question of the viability of measuring diverging appropriate levels of remuneration. How can such levels be calculated? With reference to productivity, Samir Amin has pointed out this is likely to become a ruse given the way international trade is structured and productivity is calculated, and a tautology since the price of labour is decisive for the price of a commodity in the first place: “we cannot deduct comparative productivities from the comparison of incomes (salaries plus profits) … We must do the reverse, that is, begin with a comparative analysis of working conditions which define the comparative productivities and the rates of extraction of surplus labour”.\(^{141}\)

Another question pertains to the corporativist assumptions the DWA – and in fact the ILO in general – has been premised on. It is highly questionable that class relations can be conceived of as a positive-sum-game in the first place, since one class exists on the labour of another. But this is even more so in a context of increasingly harsh exploitation and a race to the bottom of wages. It is also questionable how a labour market marked by extreme asymmetry of powers between employers, States and employees can be considered to be “based on consensus and agreement between the participating individuals and groups”.\(^{142}\) It is difficult to establish, in such a context, in what manner individual workers can withhold consent – and if there is no way of demonstrating lack of consent, it is equally impossible to establish that consensus prevails.

Rather, it has been claimed, the likelihood of positive change has historically been – in Africa and beyond – pressure from below that alters the class balance of forces. But such pressure has taken place outside of the structures of the State. As an alternative, van der Walt has suggested that instead of adopting the DWA wholesale, African unions “should learn from past successes and failings and promote change from below, [because

\(^{140}\) L. van der Walt, *Beyond Decent Work*, 16.


\(^{142}\) W. Sengenberger, “Decent Work”, 41.
while the DWA] has some positive elements that unions could perhaps appropriate, it also has serious problems”.\textsuperscript{143} Instead of placing their faith in States and international organizations, African trade unions should thus be cognizant that “the single most important factor in achieving major reforms has been massive struggle from below”.\textsuperscript{144} Moreover, it has been suggested that, because there is historical evidence of how entanglement with the State has compromised the integrity and capacity of African unions in the past, such struggles ought to take place at some distance from the State, and outside of corporativist bodies which tend to generate the conditions for co-optation.\textsuperscript{145}

There are certainly points from the DWA that would constitute major improvements in the working conditions of millions of African workers, and which are rightly to be supported by trade unions. However, for the likelihood that the aspects of the DWA that are most advantageous to African workers are implemented, the class balance of forces must be taken into consideration. Only active pressure from trade unions can guarantee ratification, implementation, monitoring and adherence over time.

\section*{Conclusions}

Although the DWA is and has been considered useful in the efforts of African unions to increase the leverage, clout and conditions of African labour, there are reservations about how far-going the agenda is. If the DWA constitutes a floor of working conditions worldwide, it is a sliding floor that stops short of the type of universalism that has animated the international workers’ movement since its inception. The relativism of the DWA constitutes a significant problem in Africa, where it can be used to legitimize working conditions that would be considered decisively indecent.

\textsuperscript{143} L. van der Walt, \textit{Beyond Decent Work}, 2.

\textsuperscript{144} L. van der Walt, \textit{Beyond Decent Work}, 6.

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elsewhere. Perhaps this is why it needs to be envisaged as a floor, rather than an ultimate goal. In order for workers to acquire rights to universalized decent conditions, further struggles are required. Similarly, social dialogue and tripartism constitutes a platform, out of many, on which to build leverage on for further advancement towards making work more decent, and in so doing reducing injustice and inequalities.

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African Trade Unions and the Future of Work
Responses, Challenges and Opportunities


Union to Union. 2020. A changing world of work – what does it mean for international development cooperation?


Women workers, COVID-19 recovery and the future of work in Africa

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Introduction

The labour market has gone through profound and transformational changes over the past decades, giving rise to various complexities and uncertainties for the future of work and with differential impact on the future of decent work for women and men in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed women workers’ precarious status in both the formal and informal economy. It also reversed some of the progress and gains on gender equality in the world of work that had been attained over the past decade in various African countries. Similarly, the pandemic also reversed gains that trade unions had achieved on women rights and gender equality at the workplace and in collective bargaining.

Some trade unions in Africa have challenged the status quo of gender roles in the workplace and trade unions, and have championed women’s progress in leadership positions even during the challenging pandemic period. However, with the pandemic and its adverse effects on the world of work, many of these gains have been threatened, with some governments
focusing much on health care responses at the expense of labour market interventions such as strengthening labour inspections, adequately financing job protection and retention schemes, and incentives for the informal economy. This means that the struggle for gender equality at national level and more so at trade union level in Africa should remain a priority in the fight for decent work for women workers today and in the future of work.

▶ Situating women workers in Africa

The ILO highlighted that more men are occupying waged and salaried employment than women (35.8 per cent for men versus 19.2 per cent for women). Women are less likely to be employers than men, while a greater majority of women are contributing family workers, a status characterized by acute decent work deficits. In terms of occupation, female employment in Africa is largely in the agriculture sector and is as high as 94 per cent in Burundi; 82 per cent in Malawi; 84 per cent in Somalia; 80 per cent in Mozambique; 77 per cent in Uganda and 69 per cent in Zimbabwe. Strikingly, the agriculture sector workers are among the lowest paid workers across Africa with serious decent work deficits.

In addition, a significant number of female workers in Africa are employed in the service sector, the percentage numbering as high as 84.2 in South Africa. The sector consists of health and social care sectors, education, banking, domestic work, tourism and hospitality, among others. These were the very same sectors that were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially health and social care workers in the frontline which were predominantly women. Vulnerable employment was higher for females, above 60 per cent in many African countries, thus, raising concerns of high decent work deficits for women workers.

While feminization of non-standard forms of employment is growing, it remains understated with much celebratory focus on the gains of increasing

147 ILO, *A quantum leap*. 
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women’s participation in the labour market (quantity of jobs) rather than the quality of jobs created for these women.

The informal economy in Africa is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather the space where the majority of working men and women sustain themselves.\textsuperscript{148} The ILO has reported that the informal economy accounts for 92 per cent of women’s total employment while it is 86 per cent of men’s total employment\textsuperscript{149}, and serious decent work deficits related to this makes women more vulnerable to poverty. Women represent up to 70 per cent of cross-border traders in Africa trading a variety of commodities.\textsuperscript{150} The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated a focus on women workers’ vulnerabilities in the informal economy in Africa.

What is worrisome is that the world of work and trade union operations continue to function largely without much due consideration of the implications of the burden of the unpaid care work and domestic work (UCDW) and the reproductive roles that women workers carry. In Africa, significantly more women are in full-time unpaid care work (15.7 per cent) compared to men (1.1 per cent).\textsuperscript{151} Women in Africa spend three and a half times more time in unpaid care work (4.23 hours per day) than men (1.18 hours per day). Ultimately, women spend more hours per day in both paid and unpaid work. Undoubtedly, this disproportionate share of women undertaking UCDW has adverse effects of women’s participation in the future world of work, in COVID-19 recovery plans and in the trade unions.

Overall, four striking features of the world of work in Africa worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic which have a bearing on the future of work for women in the COVID-19 recovery path include “feminization of vulnerable employment”, “feminization of non-standard of employment”, the “feminization of informal economy” and “feminization of decent work deficits”. Trade unions will have a major role to play in fighting for decent work in the future of work and COVID-19 recovery phase. As advised by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{150} ILO, \textit{The impact of the COVID-19}.
\item \textsuperscript{151} ILO, \textit{A quantum leap}.
\end{itemize}
Britwum and Ledwith,\textsuperscript{152} women workers should not be systematically excluded and marginalized from trade union operations and leadership.

\textit{Situating women in trade unions.} Over the years, there has been a rise in female membership and women in trade union leadership positions in some African countries,\textsuperscript{153} although more can be done. Some trade unions have championed gender equality in unions and put in place various mechanisms to that effect. However, some studies have shown that perceptions about women’s capacities and attitudes as well as male hostility to female union leaders constitute a strong barrier inhibiting women’s representation and participation in trade unions.\textsuperscript{154}

Although statistics of female membership in unions could not be obtained during the research, ITUC-Africa applauds the achievements made by some of the trade unions in Africa through their support for the gender equality agenda. Gender audits, policies and champions have been established in some trade union federations with the support of ITUC-Africa and by Global Union Federations (GUFs). The number of women in trade union leadership positions rose from one female Secretary General in 2011 to nine by 2021.

Women are in key leadership positions in the following national centres: Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU); Union démocratique des travailleurs du Sénégal (UDTS); Union des syndicats autonomes du Madagascar (USAM); Confédération des syndicats des travailleurs Malagasy révolutionnaires (FISEMARE); União Nacional dos Trabalhadores de Cabo Verde - Central Sindical (UNTC-CS); Union des syndicats libres du Cameroun (USLC); Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Centrafrique (CNTC); Union des travailleurs de Mauritanie (UTM); and, Federation of unions of South Africa (FEDUSA). At the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) women are regularly elected to titular positions. The participation of African women at the International Labour Conference (ILC) has been on the rise in recent years.

\textsuperscript{152} Akua O. Britwum and Sue Ledwith, \textit{Visibility and Voice for Union Women: Country case studies from Global Labour University researchers} (München: Rainer Hampp Verlag, 2014).

\textsuperscript{153} ALRN, \textit{The status of women in trade unions in Africa}, 2011.

However, while these achievements are notable, the number of women in decision-making positions at union sectoral level has not risen remarkably. There have been undocumented cases of women being blocked from assuming trade union leadership positions, mainly because of the patriarchal nature of most trade unions. This reflects a glass ceiling to gender equality in trade unions and the world of work, a situation which has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.\footnote{ILO, “Break the Glass Ceiling of Gender Equality at Work,” www.ilo.org, 26 April 2021, https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/pr/WCMS_783224/lang--en/index.htm.} Even in sectors dominated by women workers, the proportion of women in union leadership pales in comparison to men. Nonetheless, the momentum to increase the number of women in trade union decision-making and leadership positions must not be lost in the COVID-19 recovery phase.

**COVID-19 impact and emerging challenges for women workers in Africa**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted female employment. At the global level, between 2019 and 2020, women’s employment declined by 4.2 per cent, representing a drop of 54 million jobs, while men’s employment declined by 3 per cent, or 60 million jobs.\footnote{UNDP, Informality and Social Protection.} Table 1 shows the extent of the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment.
As shown in the table, between 2019 and 2020, female employment in Africa declined more than male employment, -1.9 per cent for females compared with -0.1 per cent for males. And, a significant number of women workers in the informal economy lost their employment or their hours of work were reduced. This has resulted in many women depleting their savings, selling assets, and taking on significant and perhaps unsurmountable debt, with some having no hope of resuscitating their businesses in the COVID-19 recovery phase. It is most likely that women’s business and wage recovery may be slower than for their male counterparts, due to systemic and structural barriers women face in the economy, the world of work and society in general.

Interestingly, between 2020 and 2021, female employment recovered better than male employment (4.7 per cent for females as against 3.9 per cent for males). However, the major concern is that while female employment recovers in the COVID-19 recovery period, the majority of the jobs are more likely to be precarious (e.g. casual, contract, subcontracted or fixed term), thus, raising major concerns of deeper decent work deficits.

**Impact on decent work for women workers.** The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with a rise in gender-based violence, particularly sexual
harassment of women workers.\textsuperscript{158} Sexual harassment is at odds with decent work as it prevents workers (especially female workers who are largely the victims) from enjoying a safe and decent workplace. While sexual harassment in the world of work constituted a serious problem before the pandemic, undocumented reports from women workers in Africa indicated that sexual harassment worsened during COVID-19 lockdowns especially due to workplace restructuring and after relaxation of the regulations as male managers or supervisors held the power to select who comes back to work.

\textbf{Often harassed in the workplace, “women have been asked for sexual favours in exchange of disinfectant gel”}\textsuperscript{159}

There are instances where due to fear of job loss, poverty and possible retaliation disguised as layoffs, some women succumbed to sexual harassment at the workplace.

From personal observations and conversations with colleagues in the African trade union movement, the shutdown of both public and private transportation during COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in mobility challenges for women workers, especially those in essential services. Yet the same women were expected to fully undertake their gendered responsibility at home. In addition, some African governments focused much of the COVID-19 responses on health care investments at the expense of labour market interventions such as strengthening labour inspections. Most women front-line workers lacked adequate COVID-19 related personal protective clothing. This led to strikes, protests and demonstrations by


predominantly female nurses in some countries, such as Zimbabwe, to which the Government responded with heavy-handedness, banning strikes and demonstrations. Most African governments’ COVID-19 responses were gender blind and lacked finance for job protection and retention schemes. They also lacked incentives for sectors dominated by women, such as the informal economy, tourism and hospitality, where precariousness prevailed and social protection was weak.

**Impact on female membership in trade unions.** The decline in female employment (table 1), also resulted in loss of female trade union membership. While the actual figures of female membership in trade unions across Africa could not be ascertained at the time of research, the loss in female employment has a domino effect on: (a) trade unions sustainability, especially those unions that organize in female dominated sectors and (b) the voice and visibility of women workers in trade unions. Moreover, informal economy associations were adversely affected as the majority of their membership were women who faced the brunt of the pandemic and lockdown impacts, thus threatening their visibility and sustainability. The rise of female union membership was critical in setting the foundation for increased women leadership in trade unions, their increased role in social dialogue, particularly collective bargaining, and women’s empowerment in trade unions.

**Women workers, COVID-19 recovery and future of work: opportunities and challenges**

Recovery from COVID-19 and the future of work presents unique opportunities for positive transformation that can make the world of work better for women workers. From my personal reflections, some opportunities that can be leveraged by workers and trade unions in Africa are discussed below.

*Better and improved recruitment and organizing of women workers through technology.* Mobile digital technologies are making it easier to recruit and collect union dues in sectors which were once difficult to recruit and
organize workers in sectors dominated by women such as the informal economy, domestic work and agriculture. Technology also assists where women workers were afraid to expose their trade union affiliation to the employer in fear of retaliation in the form of loss of jobs or non-renewal of contracts. Undoubtedly, the use of trade union social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly improved engagement of women workers in the workplace. This has scope to enhance debates and solidarity among women workers as well as facilitating women-related trade union online activities, and, awareness raising and organizing around on women workers’ rights and ILO C190 Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019. Also, women workers can use social media platforms as an effective tool to mobilize themselves, undertake campaigns on women’s demands at the national, the African subregional, the continental and intercontinental levels.

Online recruitment, organizing and mobilization is also a sure way for increasing the voice, visibility and representation of women workers and to engage in collective action to challenge patriarchal systems in the unions. However, this needs to be complemented by availability of women who are ready to take leading roles despite the push back from the male counterparts.

Development of mobile and digital applications specifically for women workers. Development of such applications is an opportunity to mobilize women workers. They can go a long way in reporting, outreach, advocacy and building alliances in fighting violence at the workplace and other gender inequalities. For example, trade unions can facilitate the development of a mobile application for their membership to report on sexual harassment in an anonymous way especially given the possibilities of precarious work for women. Such platforms will not substitute real workplace action but support workplace action. However, garnering the full potential in these areas needs to be complemented by access and ownership of digital assets and technologies and the acquisition of digital skills by women workers themselves.

Scope for women employment in service sectors. While automation is likely to adversely affect some jobs and occupations, in some contexts women workers may be less vulnerable to automation, as they are overrepresented in sectors needing workers with strong empathic and social skills such as health and social care / work (child and elder care), teaching, hospitality and...
tourism. These sectors also require interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence; which automation may not provide. More so, these sectors are relatively labour-intensive, and are more likely to hire women in the COVID-19 recovery. However, this advantage needs to be complemented by improvement in decent working conditions given that the availability of more jobs for women does not automatically guarantee good quality jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare and exposed the existing decent work deficit for health care sectors in the front line.

Improved access to online capacity development programmes. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been a growth in the number of online education and skills development programmes spearheaded by (a) the International Training Centre (ITC)-ILO-ACTRAV; (b) ITUC-Africa; (c) GUFs; and (d) national federation and sector unions. The increasing number of massive open online courses on various topics including women and leadership; women’s rights; and gender-based violence provides further learning opportunities for women workers. Education remains a key tool in raising women’s awareness as well as facilitating the exchange of good practices. However, as the major limiting factor could be internet costs to participate in online education programmes, trade unions should find innovative ways to support online programmes for women workers.

Overall, online programmes will help women workers to: (a) exchange and learn good practices in advancing women rights at the workplace and in trade unions; (b) break the traditional barriers that were inhibiting their full participation such as multiple gendered roles, UCDW, and balancing family responsibilities with work or trade union programmes; and (c) narrow their vulnerability to violence and harassment associated with physical training set-ups. Other advantages include (a) inspiring them to invest in digital skills, innovative skills and job occupation skills for them to fully leverage these various advantages and (b) overcoming challenges related with disabilities. Online programmes provides scope for women workers with disabilities, who before the pandemic could not participate due to mobility challenges and lack of disability-friendly infrastructure at training venues.

Green jobs and green skills opportunities for women. Climate change is one of the drivers of the future of work. Governments globally are encouraged to implement green COVID-19 recovery policies and strategies. While the

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pace is still slow in African countries, compared with other continents, there is scope for accelerated renewable energy deployment (e.g. solar, bio-energy, biomass energy or waste-to-energy). This provides employment opportunities for women workers, opportunities for acquiring green skills, and the opportunity to venture in the energy sector, which is male dominated. Some of the renewable energy investments like bio-fuels are in the agriculture sector, are labour intensive and have the scope to employ more women. This means that new sectors may emerge through renewable energy deployment, giving trade unions more scope to recruit and organize women workers. However, the governments should set investment funds that focus on low-carbon green jobs and training and transitioning women into the historically male-dominated energy sector.

**Potential for new jobs for females in digital labour platforms.** Digital labour platforms (DLPs) are now a vital part of the labour market and have created new ways to organize work and business and, are key drivers of future employment. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated a rise in the use of DLPs and e-commerce, which have opened opportunities for women to be employed, albeit in precarious conditions. These platforms have grown exponentially in the past decade, increasing from at least 142 in 2010 to over 777 in 2020.\textsuperscript{161} Examples in Africa include Uber, Pickmeup, Vaya, Ubiz Cabs and Careem. Food delivery platforms in Africa include Foodlocker and SoupDirect and Jumia Food (Nigeria), Glovo (Kenya, Morocco and Côte d’Ivoire), Tupuca (Angola), Food Court (Rwanda), Uber Eats (South Africa and Kenya). In addition, given the dominance of the informal economy in African countries, DLPs can provide scope for women employment in the various activities of the informal economy including domestic services (homecare and cleaning services) where women are overrepresented.\textsuperscript{162}

Although competition is rising among DLPs in Africa, there is limited research done by trade unions in Africa on implications on employment creation, workers’ rights, working conditions and trade union organizing. However, DLPs have created unprecedented opportunities for workers, with scope for female employment, albeit in precarious conditions and little or no adherence to women-specific rights such as maternity, protection from violence and harassment, and family responsibilities. The following can serve as examples of the opportunities prevalent in the DLPs:

\textsuperscript{161} ILO, *Building Forward Fairer*.

\textsuperscript{162} ILO, *Building Forward Fairer*.
Ubiz Cabs is an on-demand ride-hailing service and women-first platform in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is headed by a woman and, its drivers are mostly young female graduates. The platform provides a safe working environment for female drivers as it has an emergency button and GPS tracking.  

A cab-hailing company called Little Cab in Kenya has an all-female fleet of drivers that only accept female customers during late-night rides. The company was expected to expand to Ethiopia.

Bolt, a cab-hailing company launched a service in South Africa that allows female riders to select female drivers (though there were far more male e-hailing drivers across Africa). Bolt has witnessed a significant increase in the number of women applying to join the platform as drivers. Uber also launched an option for female drivers in South Africa to indicate they prefer female passengers.

In Uganda, women market sellers are using the Market Garden app to sell and safely deliver fruits and vegetables to customers.

However, more research on the gendered nature of DLPs is required beyond the facts that they have brought more job opportunities for women and better family-work balance. While various opportunities exist, meanwhile there are also possible challenges that may arise in the COVID-19 recovery phase, as discussed below.

**Digitalization, technological advancements and job threats in female dominated sectors** Policy debate on the future of work and COVID-19 recovery in Africa has centred mostly on how technological advancements enhance productivity and competitiveness with less attention on how technological advancements have the potential to cause job and employment tenure disruptions. As a substantial number of jobs may demand reorganization and reskilling, with the many facets of digital revolution and technological advancement under way in COVID-19 recovery, women workers are at risk of losing jobs in female-dominated sectors and occupations that

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164 Lawal, “By Women, for Women”.

165 Lawal, “By Women, for Women”.
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are susceptible to automation and robotization. These include banking, security, revenue collection, agriculture sectors and the labour-intensive manufacturing sector. Worrisome, as indicated earlier in section two, women in Africa are highly concentrated in clerical support, routine, service work and modifiable tasks which are feminized occupations, and at high risk of automation, thus risking job losses.

Furthermore, given a future of work driven by technology, there are also likely prospects of a drive towards technology-driven (mechanized) agriculture, bringing into question the possibility of job losses for some women agriculture workers who may find themselves not technologically and skills-ready to take up the new and transformed jobs with a domino effect of trade union membership in such sectors, as it adversely affect trade unions organizing in such sectors.

Similarly, if the once labour-intensive industries with a heavy presence of women workers such as garment, textiles and apparel manufacturing in African countries becomes automated, female employment will be greatly threatened. For instance, Swaziland, Ethiopia and Kenya are already on a pathway to invest more in these industries and tap into the global value chains in the context of the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). It is therefore critical for women workers and trade unions to prepare for such transitions.

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the world of work enabled by digital technology. The risk of increased GBV against women workers, especially young women workers in COVID-19 recovery and the future of work is likely to be driven by two main factors: (a) feminization of informal and vulnerable employment; especially in female dominated sectors; and (b) cyber-based GBV. A study on the status of women in trade unions in Africa by the African Labour Research Network (ALRN) in 2011 observed sexual harassment as a “silent challenge” to achieving gender equity in the trade unions. The same report highlighted that sexual harassment can translate into hatred

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167 ALRN, Status of women in trade unions.
and intimidation at workplaces that can also affect active participation of females in trade union activities. Various researchers have found that victims of GBV, especially sexual harassment at the workplace, are more likely to change jobs, and therefore suffer financial stress, rather than report incidents to escape an abusive situation. Sexual harassment also leads to reluctance by women to move into leadership roles and thus reinforces stereotypes about women's abilities and aspirations.

It is very worrisome to note that most workplaces lack any meaningful obligation on employers to implement proactive, practical and effective measures to address violence and harassment at the workplace. Owing to fear of job loss, poverty and retaliation disguised as layoffs, some women are more likely to succumb to sexual harassment at the workplace. Especially if the cases go unreported, without redress. Thus, given the possibilities of a rise in non-standard forms of employment and outsourcing and its feminization, it is likely that more women workers will become vulnerable to GBV if bold measures are not put in place at workplaces to redress this challenge. Additionally, technological advancement in COVID-19 recovery is likely to increase the vulnerability of women workers to cyber-related GBV such as cyber-(sexual) harassment, cyber-bullying, cyber-intimidation and cyberstalking.

*Rise in occupational safety and health (OSH) risks.* the rise in feminization of non-standard forms of employment in COVID-19 recovery especially in female dominated sectors is associated with high risk of workplace injuries, neglect of safety systems, inadequate education and training and induction OSH, and fear of retaliation from employers and supervisors for freedom of expression over safety and health concerns. For women workers, safety and health issues including maternity protection, require great attention at the workplace given women's biological and reproductive roles. While some African governments have integrated maternity protection in their national policies, labour laws and national constitutions, in practice, most working women do not enjoy this benefit due to the precarious nature of their jobs. In fact, out of the 39 countries that ratified the ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), only nine are from Africa (namely Benin, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe and Senegal), clearly indicating a ratification gap.

As of September 2021.
Similarly, as economies begin to pick up and the informal economy starts resuscitating, high levels of OSH deficits, social security deficits and voice representation deficits are expected, meaning more women will be susceptible to decent work deficits unless governments make frantic efforts to extend labour inspection services to the informal economy.

**Increasing entrance of men in the once female dominated informal economy.** With the COVID-19 adverse impact on jobs in the formal economy, some men who lost jobs in the formal economy may never be re-absorbed. Therefore, it is likely to follow that most women holding jobs in the informal economy will slowly be displaced or elbowed out of lucrative deals and more rewarding informal economy sectors by men who enter the informal economy with better productive and economic resources, business and professional networks and, digital and technological skills than women, thus perpetuating the gender imbalances on the informal economy.

Furthermore, working in the informal economy, a survivalist economy to a large extent, means that the majority of women workers especially those on the lower echelons of the informal economy, cannot leverage fully on similar advantages found in the formal economy, such as teleworking, leaving them vulnerable and at high risk of coronavirus infection.

**Slow pace of women access, ownership and use of digital services and assets.** Technology and digital advancements will define COVID-19 recovery and the future of work. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a dramatic shift to digitalization of services and e-commerce in general, teleworking, online education, and the rise in digital labour platforms. This drove women workers with less access and ownership to digital technologies further behind. The following figures are striking:

In 2022, 34 per cent of Africa’s female population had online access, compared with 45 per cent of men.169

- In 2020, the mobile ownership rate for women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was 75 per cent while the proportion of women using mobile internet was only 39 per cent. Gender gap in mobile internet use170 in SSA was high at

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170 The gender gap refers to how less likely a woman is to own a mobile than a man. Mobile ownership is defined as having sole or main use of a SIM card (or a mobile phone that does not require a SIM), and using it at least once a month.
37 per cent as compared with 17 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa and 2 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{171}

If the pace of women’s access to and ownership in digital and internet services, skills and assets and digital literacy is slow, women workers may not be able to compete with their male counterparts in the competitive labour market. Plus, women workers will also be left behind in trade union digitalized programmes such as e-learning, e-organizing, e-recruitment, e-campaigns. Overall, the future of work and COVID-19 recovery requires more women workers to be digitally well informed and skilled and active online.

\textit{Increasing gender wage/pay gap.} Despite the widespread recognition and support for the principle of equal pay, if fewer women workers are able to leverage benefits from technological advancements in Africa, they risk remaining in low-skilled and low-wage sectors thus widening the gender wage gap. Also, gender wage/pay gaps are more likely to be entrenched by emerging digital labour platforms in Africa, whose systems and operations are mostly gender-blind, with little or no respect and protection of women workers’ rights.

\textit{Low and slow pace in female students’ enrolment in science, technology, engineering and mathematic (STEM) subjects.} There is an intrinsic link between human capital, the future of work, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). Low and slow uptake of girls and women in STEM risks further preventing women workers from fully tapping into the digitalized economy, accompanying jobs and occupations. This has been underscored by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development:

“Women have been left out of much more than innovation, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers, yet these are the sectors that imagine, design, build and code our future. Unless we get more women working on technology and innovation, men will define how we communicate, work, produce food, provide health care and educate. It’s high-time that we change the narrative on women in STEM careers”.\textsuperscript{172}


\textsuperscript{172} Shamika N. Sirimanne, “What If Our Future Were Designed Equally by Women?,” UNCTAD, February 11, 2019, \url{https://unctad.org/news/what-if-our-future-were-designed-equally-women}. 
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The risk of celebrating quantity rather than quality jobs. While not much research has been undertaken in Africa pertaining to the gig economy and women workers, women workers’ safety and security in the gig economy has come under the spotlight. Many of these jobs do not provide an equal footing for men and women as some gendered roles and responsibilities for women inhibit them from working the highest-rate hours in gig rates, thus perpetuating the gender pay gap. For instance, for the Uber industry, safety concerns have also led to pay disparities as male drivers can work late-night or early-morning hours and sometimes earn more, while women may not feel comfortable driving at those times\(^{173}\).

Alongside this, maternity protection is a challenge in gig economy jobs, as pregnant women are more likely to be discriminated against in hiring and firing as well as being denied the right to return to work once their maternity leave ends. Rather than celebrating the number of jobs created for women alone, the role of the trade unions in Africa is to continue fighting for decent work, application of national labour laws and advocating for labour law reforms that integrate these new forms of work arrangements in order to ensure a better and decent future of work for women.

Voice representation gap. The more women are employed in non-standard forms of employment, the greater the gendered “representation gap” as fewer workers, in particular women, are likely to become unionized. Cyber-based GBV – especially sexual harassment – may also reduce women’s voice and presence online, as they self-censor to avoid becoming targets.

Gender-blind digital labour platforms. While the growth of digital labour platforms is applauded for having scope for employment creation, serious concerns remain over the adherence to women’s workers’ rights in these platforms. Emerging concerns include the prevalence of sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women in some types of platform work, such as ride-sharing and home rental. For example, ride-share platforms, such as Uber, often exert considerable control over their workers to ensure the immediate availability of their services to customers or longer availability of drivers on the platform even during the evening. Owing to the gendered roles in the African context, these conditions may not favour women who have to double the platform economy work and caring responsibilities. As a result, they lose job allocations/ rides, thus perpetuating gender pay gaps.

In addition, existing structural barriers such as women’s access and control to digital technologies, internet infrastructure, costs of internet services and low internet penetration rates for females and patriarchal tendencies in African societies may hinder leveraging these opportunities. Moreover, use of digital labour platforms may exclude some groups of women in the informal economy given the heterogeneity of women in the economy, with some living in rural communities with limited access to useful technologies and to the internet.

**Conclusions**

The urgency to restore decent work for women workers and build a better future of work in a safe, healthy, equitable and respectful environment must be of high priority to trade unions and governments and employers. Without targeted and meaningful action to rebuild women’s jobs, safety and healthy at workplaces, skills and incomes, the COVID-19 recovery and the future of work will leave the majority of women workers behind. In this concluding section, the role of trade unions is divided in two: trade union level and national level.

Trade unions should undertake the following to ensure that the future of work is achieved (which includes creating more work for women, ensuring women are engaged in decent work and guaranteeing gender equity):

*Design and effectively implement actions to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work.* Eliminating violence and harassment, especially sexual harassment against women workers, is a precondition for gender equality, decent work and dignity at the workplace. Going forward, it is critical to:

- strengthen capacities of women workers and women trade union structures to report violence and harassment at the workplace.
- empower all workers to disseminate information and change harmful practices against women in the world of work.
- continue undertaking of education, trainings and awareness programmes aimed at changing stereotypes and social norms that perpetuate GBV against women in the workplace and in trade unions.
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- continue to involve men trade unionists to be part of the discourse on eliminating such violence and harassment.

- facilitate and develop sexual harassment policies and sustained follow-up actions in line with ILO C190 and its Recommendation, at trade union and sectoral and workplace levels.

- **Build alliances and networking with like-minded organizations.** Women workers’ challenges and struggles in the COVID-19 recovery and future of work do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of the broader women’s struggles for social and gender justice. In the context of possible further decline in membership, trade unions must reinforce collaboration, harness synergies, energies and expertise among and with women-based and gender-based organizations who have in the past been instrumental in supporting women workers’ struggles and enhancing solidarity towards improving the status of women in the labour market and society in general. This will boost voice and visibility of workers and trade unions especially in light of possible decline in membership.

**Expedite women’s meaningful and safe participation in trade unions.** The future of work needs women workers and their collective voice. Addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities presented in the COVID-19 recovery and future of work are best attained through increasing women’s safe participation in trade union work including in collective bargaining negotiating teams and leadership roles. Having women in collective bargaining teams allows for Bargaining Agenda for Gender (BAG), where women workers’ can push their demands such as for day-care and breastfeeding facilities. This also allows diverse and democratic decision-making processes at sectoral and trade union level. Importantly, both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that, where women do have higher levels of leadership, institutions are more likely to respond better to crises in ways that support gender equality and pursuance of women’s interests in the world of work. One recent case of a woman in trade union leadership is that of COSATU which elected the first female President in 2018.

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174 Britwum and Ledwith, *Visibility and Voice.*

175 ALRN, *Status of women in trade unions*; Britwum and Ledwith, *Visibility and Voice.*
Enhance political will of trade union leadership to support women structures, women-led programmes and initiatives. The challenges presented in the COVID-19 recovery and future of work for women workers requires upscaling the momentum for gender equality at both the workplace and in trade unions. Innovative, cutting-edge strategies and capacity development of women themselves, mentorship and women leadership programmes, and reorganizing women structures to have political strength beyond just being discussion and information sharing platforms will be critical in the future.

Regularly supporting gender audits and developing gender audit toolkits and redressing emerging challenges from the audits is critical in order to monitor and evaluate progress towards political will for gender equality in unions. Thus, trade union leadership needs to go a step further beyond just ceremonial and rhetorical statements to proportionate and meaningful allocation of resources and funding activities, projects and programmes that reflect and pursue the gender equality agenda in the trade union fraternity and at workplace level, especially starting at shop steward level. Gender-responsive budgeting should become a permanent feature of the trade unions’ annual budget processes in future.

Change the traditional trade union patriarchal culture. Although slowly changing, some trade unions still exhibit a male-dominated organizational culture, particularly in sectors where the majority of workers are men. Even in sectors dominated by female employment such as health, domestic and education, women remain under-represented in decision-making positions in trade unions. This means that greater work needs to be done beyond numbers, such as changing the patriarchal culture in the trade unions, the institutionalized gendered sociocultural norms and attitudes, the informal rules and male privileges that still exist in the African context as well as in some trade unions. Going forward, there is need for inclusive trade unions that systematically and consistently ensure the inclusion of women in decision-making processes, thus raising their voice and visibility. This cultural change also needs to be accompanied by an intersectional perspective (e.g. disability, ethnicity) into trade union work, which should no longer be a matter of choice, but rather necessity.

Facilitate capacity development in digital skills for female membership. The COVID-19 recovery is digital. Trade unions, either national or sectoral should consider designing digital skills courses (online or physical) to female membership or collaborating or partnering with academic institutions and
the private sector as part of trade unions’ contribution towards bridging the gender digital divide and thus contributing significantly to the gender equality agenda. This can also be used as a recruitment and organizing strategy to attract women into trade unions.

**Leverage on online-based trade union strategies for women workers.** Development and undertaking of more e-based gender awareness and gender equality campaigns, e-training, e-advocacy, e-recruitment, e-organizing and mobile applications on women workers’ rights and gender equality is critical. This will also strengthen solidarity among women workers and membership. For example, women workers can reinvigorate the principle “an injury to one is an injury to all”, through online initiatives and programmes.

**Review collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) and trade union constitutions.** Given that some sectors and trade unions were historically and traditionally dominated by men, some of the CBAs and trade union constitutions remain generally gender neutral in wording and in practice. It is therefore important that trade unions facilitate the processes of reviewing these to ensure that they are gender inclusive and are in sync with international and national gender equality instruments. Furthermore, in the post-COVID-19 recovery, trade unions must also continually revise and widely disseminate the CBAs at sectoral and workplace level, as well as their own constitutions and internal policies to ensure that they incorporate clauses that support women workers who have caring responsibilities. Coupled with this, trade union leadership must demystify union policies and procedures and provide targeted information about union decision-making structures to women workers and women structures.

**Regularly undertake evidence-based and policy-oriented research focused on women workers and membership.** Research plays a key role in policy development at trade union level as it feeds into policy formulation, education and training, mobilization and organizing, and vice versa. With the rapid and changing world of work, trade unions must invest in capacitating and strengthening their research departments and gender department/desks to undertake timely research. Areas for further research can include: ways in which emerging technology-enabled work and DLPs are either changing or reproducing the pre-existing gender segregation and inequalities by occupation and industry; how to organize women workers in DLPs; usage of social media platforms by women membership; and the
impact of DLPs on female employment, working conditions, women’s rights alternatives ways of redressing challenges arising for women workers.

**Strengthen collaboration and alliance with informal economy associations.** As indicated above it is likely that the scope and coverage of the informal economy will increase especially for women. It is critical for trade unions to work closely with informal economy associations especially in the context of existing and increasing decent work deficits among women and the formalization agenda, which some African countries are striving or seemingly striving to achieve in the spirit of providing a future of work that is decent work for women and for all workers.

**Strengthen bipartite dialogue with employers in female dominated sectors.** Trade unions must engage employers to support and facilitate retraining and re-skilling of female workers who may otherwise be affected by automation and digitalization of jobs and work.

**Continue championing the various ILO instruments on gender equality in the world of work and COVID-19 recovery efforts.** These include the ILO conventions and recommendations on gender equality; the ILO declarations integrating gender equality; the ILO Decent Work Agenda (DWA) and its four pillars (employment creation, workers’ rights, social protection and social dialogue), and the seven ILO Centenary Declaration Initiatives, particularly the Future of Work (FoW) Initiative and the Women at Work (W@W) Initiative.

Meanwhile, the following should be the trade unions demands to the governments to foster women-friendly and gender-equal COVID-19 recovery and future of work:

- Implementation of policies and interventions that reduce UCDW for women to allow them to fully leverage on the opportunities presented in COVID-19 recovery, digital labour platforms, and professional and digital skills training.

- Ratification, domestication and enforcement of ILO Conventions that champion gender equality in the world of work, especially C190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. By June 2021, only six countries had ratified the Convention. Of the six, only two are from Africa: Namibia, which ratified on 9 December 2020 and Somalia which ratified on 8 March 2021.
Championing of SDG 5 on gender equality and women empowerment and SDG 8 on economic recovery and decent work in national policies and budgets with clear gender-inclusive targets and indicators for monitoring progress, as well as enhancing implementation, transparency, accountability, communication for a better future of work for women workers and women in general (Wesely and Midgley, 2019).

Sustained investment in information and communication technologies and internet infrastructure and costs. The COVID-19 pandemic and future of work proved that the internet is no longer a luxury but a necessity for everyone.

Expedite the transition to formality as provided for by ILO Recommendation No. 204 focus on supporting the informal economy, particularly women, through establishing a regulatory environment that promotes the business, workers’ rights, the majority of whom are women, strengthening social security and the employability of informal women workers through skills training and job matching. All processes must be inclusive, done with the full involvement of trade unions and informal economy associations.

Expedite strengthening Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS) and making them gender inclusive so that they are ready to inform the future work and skills requirements and they adapt to the changing world of work needs and inform future skills requirements.

Facilitate getting more girls and women into STEM subjects and fields to enhancing education and skills preparedness for women. Governments should enhance programmes to meaningfully support girls (starting from kindergarten) and women’s enrolment in ICT and STEM subjects and fields including green skills for women;

Redressing national structural barriers to lack of access and ownership to assets and resources, which act as a barrier to women’s full participation in the world of work, hindering women workers from tapping into the benefits of the future of work in any sector of the economy.
Bibliography


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Organizing, membership and youth participation in trade unions in Africa

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Introduction

Trade unions are important actors on the labour market and on the economic and political arena in many countries. The existence of trade unions and their political and economic influence crucially depends on their ability to organize, attract and retain members and to successfully advance collective interests. However, many trade unions around the world are facing challenges in organizing and attracting new members, particularly young workers under precarious work conditions.

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In Africa, the need for trade unions to rethink and devise innovative activities and programmes that attract young workers into joining the trade union assumes even greater urgency given the growing proportion of the workforce that is young and unorganized. Demographically, Africa is a young continent with an average age of 19. The population aged between 15 and 24 is expected to be more than three times the current size by 2055. In this sense, young people hold great promise for union renewal and the future of African trade unions.

The annual educational forum of labour centres in Africa, the New Year School of the International Trade Union Confederation of Africa (ITUC-Africa), recognizes the importance of youth as the future of the unions. Its 2019 report states that youth organizing is necessary for union membership and renewal. Beyond acknowledging the necessity of youth organizing for membership growth, however, trade unions will need to ask very heart-searching questions and undertake a candid internal examination in order to set about various way of restoring the lost momentum. What, for instance, has contributed to trade union membership decline and crisis of representation in Africa? How has the growing informal economy and changing composition of workers challenged the legitimacy of trade unions? How can youth participation in trade unions in Africa be enhanced? What strategy should African trade unions adopt to draw more young workers into the union ranks?

With these questions in mind, the chapter examines the case of Kenya and South Africa in contributing to the existing knowledge on union organizing for increased membership and youth participation in trade unions, as a route to union renewal. The chapter also examines the regional level experience of ITUC-Africa in providing a justification that increasing youth participation in trade unions can function as a catalyst for union revitalization. The two countries provide good examples of African countries with extensive histories of labour and trade unionism. Trade unions in both countries have remained relatively strong in the post-independence era despite neoliberal onslaughts on component aspects of traditional industrial relations.

Union organizing, youth and youth participation: definitions and conceptual framing

The term “union organizing” is used to describe an approach to trade unionism that emphasizes membership activism around relevant workplace issues. In the last few decades, the literature on industrial relations has increasingly focused on how unions can restore the lost momentum by actively organizing the unorganized. Broadly, the literature distinguishes between two simplified models: the servicing model and the organizing model. Figure 11 illustrates the key characteristics of these models.

Figure 11: Union organizing models: “organizing” versus “servicing” model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Organizing model</th>
<th>Servicing (business)model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards employer</td>
<td>Defending members is most important</td>
<td>Good relationship with management is most important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards members</td>
<td>Inclusive. Tries to reflect workforce in composition of union leadership</td>
<td>Exclusive. Little turnover in leadership. Suspicious of newcomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance handling</td>
<td>Tries to involve all members in the department</td>
<td>Tries to settle without involvement of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settling grievances</td>
<td>Make immediate supervisor settle by showing solidarity of workers</td>
<td>Settle at highest level with company or through arbitration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of stewards</td>
<td>Election by co-workers</td>
<td>Appointment by union leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargaining</td>
<td>Large bargaining committee, constant flow of information to members</td>
<td>Small committee, negotiations often kept secret until a settlement is reached</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characteristic | Organizing model | Servicing (business)model
---|---|---
**Strategy and tactics** | Encourage initiative and creativity of members | Reluctant to involve members in bringing pressure on employer

**Organizing the unorganized** | Union represents all workers - organized and unorganized. In a constant State of organizing | Unwilling and unable to organize. Feels threatened by newly organized

**Members’ view of the union** | Take personal responsibility for success or failure of the union | An insurance policy or a “third party” to call on when they have a problem


The organizing model is essentially transformational while the servicing model is transactional. Under the servicing model, members pay union fees in exchange for services in much the same way as they buy an insurance policy. In essence, members are not actively involved in the business of the union but only turn to it when they have a problem. In addition, the servicing model does not encourage members to see themselves as the union. Instead, they rely on “the union” (or someone else) to fix things.

In contrast, the organizing model is about workers taking control of their workplace to achieve improvements rather than relying on “the union” to always fix things. It is about members having the skills to maintain highly organized workplaces themselves, including taking responsibility for keeping members informed and recruiting and coordinating industrial action when required. To gain these skills, members receive training, which gives them the skills, confidence and knowledge needed to tackle daily industrial relations problems on their own at the shop floor. The model encourages the growth of active unionized workplaces. In this regard, active members create the union, rather than the union creating membership.

The organizing model demands that members control their own destiny by being involved and active. Active efforts include recruiting new members, encouraging their participation in the union, and fostering their empowerment.\(^{182}\) The service model involves a “passive” form of union membership, since members are primarily dependent on support and

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services provided by the union. Frege (2000) argues, however, that these models are neither theoretically grounded nor empirically falsifiable.\textsuperscript{183} Heery and Adler (2004) further posits that, in reality, unions select different organizing targets, use a plethora of organizing methods and allocate the resources for organizing activities in various ways.\textsuperscript{184}

Broadly, divergence in terms of model has developed over time and between (local) unions and companies, economic sectors and, obviously, countries. Alongside employer and State strategies and industrial relations institutions, union structures, cultures and traditions are considered the main explanatory variables in accounting for the variation in organizing.\textsuperscript{185}

In an early review of United States literature and practice, Craft and Extejt (1983:19) identify what they call a “classical approach” to union organizing.\textsuperscript{186} They noted that: “traditionally”, most unions conduct highly decentralized organizing programmes with the effort directed at individual work units (e.g. offices, plants). The organizer, a person who is generally self-trained in union organizing activity and comes from the rank-and-file membership, is the key individual who has substantial control over the design and implementation of the organizing campaign. In organizing efforts, the organizer is the embodiment of the union to the prospective union members. In the classical approach, the emphasis in organizing activity appears to be heavily directed towards face-to-face contact with union recruits. The organizer visits offices, plants or worksites of employees to discuss the union, develops social contacts and relationships with workers, organizes small informal meetings of prospective members, and occasionally obtains employment in the target company to have direct access to and integration with the employees.\textsuperscript{187}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
The classical approach and the organizing model variant approximate the common practice of union organizing in Africa. Most African unions conduct highly decentralized organizing programmes with the effort directed at individual workers or work units (e.g. offices, plants or worksites). The union organizer, a person who is generally self-trained or a beneficiary of union training comes from the rank-and-file membership, and spearheads the design and implementation of organizing campaigns. The field-based organizer then coordinates activities with the national centre or union secretariat where there is typically a full time elected official or department in charge of union organizing.

In organizing efforts, the organizer is the embodiment of the union to the prospective union members. The emphasis in organizing activity has generally been directed heavily towards face-to-face contact with potential union recruits. The organizer visits offices, plants or worksites of employees to discuss the union, develops social contacts and relationships with workers, organizes small informal meetings of prospective members, and is usually in employment in the target company, sector or industry to have direct access to and integration with the employees.

Through contacts and effort, the union organizer seeks ways to transform individual dissatisfaction into group interests and channel them into collective action through the union. In this regard, the organizer sells the idea of group action – that through the instrumentality of the union, the employees’ concerns and dissatisfactions could be addressed effectively. The organizer generally attempts to tailor the organizing approach to the concerns and problems of the prospective members (such as the special needs of women, youths, skilled workers or casual workers). Thus, union organizing in Africa encourages the growth of active unionized workplaces and active members, recruiting new members, encouraging their participation in the union, and fostering their empowerment.

In this chapter, therefore, the understanding of the concept of union organizing draws on both the organizing model and the classical approach to refer to an approach to trade unionism that emphasizes membership activism around relevant workplace issues.

The definition of who counts as “youth” in Africa is far from being consistent. In some instances, youths are defined in relation to biosocial

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stages of a universal life course; infancy, childhood, adolescent, youth and adulthood\textsuperscript{189}. However, other instances do not link “youth” in particular to biosocial stages – girls may become youth well before the onset of puberty or much later in their 20s, and young males may continue to be youth long into their 30s or 40s. Schlegel and Barry (1991) distinguish childhood as a period of dependency, subordination and asexual social identity. Adolescence, tied in variable ways to physiological hormonal processes, is a period of developing sexual identity, increased independence, and learning adult social roles, though often in limited contexts. Schlegel and Barry then note that “youth”, a period in their schema following adolescence, is always present and is characteristically a stage of early adulthood, in which people have many of the characteristics of adults but are still not accorded all of the rights and responsibilities. Youth in this approach, stands out from the preceding period in that it is entirely a sociocultural construct.

Other approaches have thought of youth less as a special age group or cohort but as a social “shifter”- a term borrowed from linguistics. A shifter is a special kind of indexical term, a term that works not through absolute reference to a fixed context, but one that relates the speaker to a relational, or indexical, context (“here” or “us” are such terms). In this regard, as people bring the concept of youth to bear on situations, they situate themselves in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationships – indexing both themselves and the typology of that social landscape. This seems to be particularly the case with the mobilization of the idea of “youth” in social life. In recognizing, experiencing, or disputing youth in everyday life, people draw attention to the ways relations are situated in the fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood. Thus, in writing about youth and social imagination in Africa, Durham (2000) draws attention to how youth in Africa is constructed as a problematic category and how it acts as a “social shifter” engaging the social imagination, to how youth contributes to generational debates and constructions, and to how consideration of youth challenges current thinking about agency.

Admittedly, youth definitions are contextual, depending on the sociocultural, political or economic context. In some sociocultural instances, youth is understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence. In other socio-political contexts, it is understood as a social shifter, a term that works not through absolute

\textsuperscript{189} D. Durham (2000). Youth and the social imagination in Africa: Introduction to parts 1 and 2. Anthropological quarterly, 73(3), 113–120
reference to a fixed context but one that relates to the social landscape of power, rights, expectations and relationships that exist in a particular situation. In some socio-economic instances, youth is restricted to fixed age groups, particularly in relation to education and employment. The United Nations, for instance, defines “youth” as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. The World Bank considers the youth as those in the age range from 12 to 24 years, observing that this is the time when important foundations are laid for learning and skills development.

African countries make allowance for a broader definition of “youth” that allows for various dimensions of youth conceptualization and power contestations. The African Union (AU) defines youth as persons aged 15–34 while the African Youth Charter (AYC) defines the youth as every person aged 15–35. This broader definition of the youth recognizes that policies directed at the youth need to influence the outcomes for the youth who are in employment, those in school and those who are not in education, employment or training. This chapter adopts a definition of youth that is broad and consistent with the conceptualization of the African Youth Charter, covering the age range of 15–35 that embody various sociocultural, political and economic constructs of youth in Africa. Trade unions must focus on this category who are also largely in the legal age to be employed.

Related to the concept of youth is youth participation. Youth participation, as used here, refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people in trade unions, not to their passive presence or token roles in the organization. Defined this way, youth participation is about mobilizing and harnessing the power of young people as a group in the industrial political process and empowering them with opportunities to advance the cause of labour through their active engagement, decision-making and delivery of services to the world of work and society. With youth participation in trade unions, therefore, young people should be able to see that their actions have impact and that they can acquire knowledge and skills to support and advance the cause of labour and the development of society.

190 B. Checkoway (2011). What is youth participation?. Children and youth services review, 33(2), 340–345.)
Union membership decline and crisis of representation in Africa

Union membership and density has fallen considerably in Africa since the early 1990s. The trade union membership decline can be attributed to two direct causes. First, unions’ failure to gain a significant organizing presence in the growing informal economy. Second, declining union membership in workplaces where unions were recognized prior to economic restructuring of the 1990s. The underlying causes of union membership change (and therefore of decline) are conventionally held to be: (a) macroeconomic influences conditioned by neoliberal policies in Africa; (b) the composition of the contemporary workforce; (c) the legal and institutional framework conditioned by neoliberal policies; (d) industrial relations policies pursued by management and (e) the recruitment activity of unions themselves. In other words, aggregate union membership is dependent upon both the external environment that unions face and the union’s organizational response to that external environment. Empirical evidence from Zambia found that unions did not respond adequately to the tough environment of the 1990s. This evidence suggests that the organizational configuration and strategies and tactics adopted by trade unions are important influences on aggregate union membership.

Unions’ failure to gain a significant presence in the growing informal economy needs to be placed in a historical context, however. The interest of the African labour movement in the informal economy is a rather recent development. In the past, the informal economy was regarded as a marginal or temporary phenomenon that was bound to wither away and die with modern industrial growth, as illegal activity with which the labour

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union movement should have no contact or as a conspiracy of employers to undermine the rights and conditions of organized workers. However, this has changed after recognizing that the economic restructuring of the 1990s has meant that the majority of the labour force now works in the informal economy and therefore needs a combination of protective legislation and unionization in order to improve their terms of employment and working conditions.

Given the ambiguous viewpoint of the unions towards the informal economy, it is not surprising that organizing the informal economy has been dealt with with some difficulty within the labour movement in Africa. Unions and other workers’ organizations undoubtedly face many real challenges in organizing the informal workforce, irrespective of sector or country. Challenges are political, conceptual and practical, external and internal, with many trade unions lacking the experience, openness, skills, resources or political will to seriously take on the challenge of organizing informal workers. Particular challenges result from the age and gender composition and segmentation of the informal workforce, where women and youths form the bulk of those employed in sectors with the least income, security and status. There has also been resistance from informal economy associations that are emerging and organizing to advance collective interests of informal workers outside of trade unions representation.

Nevertheless, the African labour movement is getting actively involved in organizing the informal economy, although a strategic focus on youths remains elusive. Through the different organizational models and creative strategies, unions and national centres are tackling some of the challenges identified.

The Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUC), for example, has adopted a multifaceted approach. It encouraged its affiliates in many sectors to change their constitutions so that existing informal economy associations

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could affiliate, thus making recruitment and dues collection simpler. It also encouraged the principle of “the stronger helping the weaker” through formal workers cross-subsidizing informal workers. In negotiations on the new Labour Act 2003, the TUC successfully proposed that the Act should cover all workers rather than “employees” and offer protection to casual and temporary workers, thus opening the way for extension to informal workers and in 2003 they were successful in negotiating a health insurance scheme that provided for both formal and informal workers.

Before the onset of neoliberal economic measures, organizing and youth participation was not a major concern for unions, largely because many, or even most, young workers ended up in formal organizations and occupations that had union representation, facilitated by the nature of the existing industrial legal regime. This has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Neoliberal economic measures implemented within the context of structural adjustment programmes have cut a jagged line through the pattern of industrial relations, and employment and wage determination dealt a heavy blow to union organizing. Industries and sectors characterized by high levels of union membership and heavy industrial relations machinery have seen the loss of thousands of jobs.

Consequently, the proportion of workers in trade unions has fallen after these thousands of jobs disappeared from the formal sector. The resulting fall in membership in workplaces where unions were recognized prior to economic restructuring has served to challenge further the legitimacy of trade unions. In consequence, the unions membership base in Africa is increasingly concentrated in those sectors where stable jobs still dominate, which further challenges union vitality and survival.

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Contrasting the membership to labour market trends further indicates the incapacities of unions to organize contract, casual and flexitime workers that have filled up spaces previously occupied by workers on permanent and pensionable employment contracts. Incidentally, initial trade union responses to the effects of the “casualization” of labour, retrenchments and restructuring were defensive and did not result in many wins for supporting those workers worst hit. These changes to working class composition wrought through decades of capital restructuring, offshoring and downsizing, without generative rethinking by unions have altered the political terrain in ways that many argue make old union structures obsolete.

Overall, unions’ failure to gain a significant presence in the growing informal economy, declining membership in workplaces where unions were recognized prior to economic restructuring and the unions’ own failure to effectively respond to the changing composition of workers in a globalized world have combined together, leading to a crisis of trade union representation in Africa. Are there good practices of union organizing that offer a basis for hope and for opportunity, particularly in relation to youth organizing and participation in trade unions in Africa?

**Good practices of union organizing for enhanced youth participation**

**Case of COTU-Kenya**

The Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU-K) in Kenya stands out as one example of a national labour centre in Africa that has proactively been organizing for enhanced youth participation. With 45 affiliated unions, COTU-K is estimated to hold about 97 per cent of the 2.5 million workers covered by trade unions in Kenya. The proportion of young workers in COTU-K’s membership, however, was estimated at only 10 per cent in 2018.
Available data also show a low level of representation and participation of young workers in decision-making by trade unions, constituting less than 3 per cent of the 32 COTU-K Executive Board members in 2018. In order to respond adequately to the challenge of low youth participation in trade unions, COTU-K developed a youth policy (2019–23), which was adopted in 2019. The policy is anchored on four strategic blocks:

a. membership organization, recruitment and retention;

b. institutional capacity-building;

c. publicity, lobbying and advocacy;

d. policy implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

e. The objective of the first strategic policy block, on membership organization, recruitment and retention, is to increase membership and strengthen representation of young workers in trade unions affiliated to COTU-K. This stems from a realization that increasing youth participation in trade unions would require more innovative and targeted organizing and recruitment campaigns. A useful starting point for COTU-K was therefore to first establish youth structures in all affiliate unions.

Available evidence suggests that a number of COTU-K affiliates have made progress in establishing youth departments. The level of engagement varies from union to union and the strength of these structures varies. “Some of the affiliates have well budgeted youth programmes and include young trade unionist mentorship programmes. Others have youth engagement merit-based processes that allow the youth to be part of the trade union leadership programmes through the youth committee where the Chairperson is a full member of the Union Executive”.

The first strategic policy block also includes the establishment of data management systems in COTU-K and affiliates. Here, the emphasis has been on establishing information management systems and ensuring that the capture of membership data is disaggregated by age, gender, labour market sector, and employment conditions. This provides not only a clear

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205 Interview with COTU-K Youth Chairperson, held on 9 September 2021.

206 Interview with COTU-K Youth Chairperson, held on 9 September 2021.
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profile of the young people who are members of the trade union but also trends on the youth labour market – which would prove to be essential in tailoring campaigns and training targeted at young people. Furthermore, with this information, trade unions would be better placed to identify potential leadership material among the young members.

Progress on this strategic block has been limited by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one union that has reported impressive progress in this regard is the Kenya National Private Security Workers Union (KNPSWU) which has implemented an online system whereby potential members can log in and provide details that are used by the unions to do follow-up and target organizing and recruitment drives. 207

Another dimension of the first strategic block has been the development of union products and services that are appropriate and attractive to young workers. Critical to this thrust are young workers’ needs assessments for guiding the packaging of appropriate youth membership services and benefits, and for ensuring the design and implementation of youth responsive programmes. A stand-out programme in this regard has been the youth empowerment programme undertaken in collaboration with ITUC-Africa that specifically targets young female workers to take up leadership positions in affiliate unions and in COTU-K. 208 The surveys undertaken have also helped COTU-K to carry out targeted youth organizing campaigns and capacity assessment for membership organizations, recruitment and retention among young workers. This has also been linked to the need to nurture and develop a pool of young union organizers (i.e. peer-to-peer organizers) in each of the COTU-K affiliates.

The second strategic youth policy block, on institutional capacity-building, aims to build the capacities of COTU-K youth committees to deliver quality services to young workers. The conviction has been that in the same way that trade union women’s structures can support union revitalization, youth representative bodies can offer the ability to influence union leadership to organize young workers and address their interests. This has also involved working with affiliates to entrench clauses in collective bargaining agreements to address casualization, outsourcing, subcontracting, internships and labour brokerage and working with affiliates to negotiate with employers to provide opportunities for quality internships for

207 Interview with COTU-K Youth Chairperson, held on 9 September 2021.
208 Interview with COTU-K Youth Chairperson, held on 9 September 2021.
addressing the need for practical skills among the youths. COTU-K has also designed health and wellness programmes that appeal to the taste of young workers. These programmes have been built on the need to ensure a vision of relevance for youth participation within COTU-K and develop union products and services that are attractive to young workers.

The third strategic policy block, on publicity, lobbying and advocacy, aims to develop and implement young worker-targeted communication, publicity, lobbying and advocacy strategies for disseminating knowledge about the relevance and importance of trade unionism among young people. COTU-K has been working on leveraging the power of new information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve communication, publicity and visibility in trade unions. It has developed an engagement strategy for addressing issues affecting young workers and spreading knowledge and the vision of relevance for youth participation through ICT. This has broadly been in response to the realization that young workers spend more time on smart phones, related gadgets and social media in general and that this constitutes a useful avenue for youth organizing and participation.

The fourth strategic block, on policy implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, is based on the conviction that to achieve the outcomes set out in the youth policy, it is important to have an effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation framework that would facilitate assessment of progress while at the same time allowing for reporting and learning from any implementation or strategic pitfalls. The framework would also allow for tracking the activities outlined in the policy, assessing the impact of key programmes and, in both processes, reporting the results to the core clients and stakeholders.
Case of SACCAWU, South Africa

The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) provides some further learning points for actively engaging youths in trade unions. Based on an interview conducted by the country's Labour Research Service with a SACCAWU shop steward in 2019, we draw some lessons on how to ensure youth participation in trade unions.\(^{209}\)

According to a SACCAWU youth organizer, organizing for the future and ensuring the participation of youths in unions must start with the rejection of the stereotyping of young people as an individualistic lot that do not care much about workplace issues. Rather, a useful starting point must be to recognize that the composition of the contemporary workforce is changing – it is tending to be young, female and educated. In his words, “many young workers in South Africa understand labour issues and are not particularly negative about unionism; rather they just don’t know very much about trade unions and so generally mistrust them”\(^{210}\).

In this sense, the union must reach out to youths in a way that they can win back the trust. As observed by the youth organizer from SACCAWU, many young people are not familiar with the work of trade unions. Therefore, trade unions need to invest more time and effort to reach out to them, spreading the knowledge about trade unions and the relevance of a collective approach to workplace issues.

Fundamentally, the trade union must relate to the reality confronting African youth in order to be appealing and attractive. Many young people are facing difficulties entering the labour market. They are unemployed or they are working under non-standard forms of employment in either the formal or informal economies. All of them are potential members that the union must not wait to reach out to.

For instance, Statistics South Africa reports that there is a constant increase in the discouraged numbers of job seekers, with unemployment reaching 29.30 per cent in early January 2020 to February 2020 (Statistics South

\(^{209}\) [https://www.lrs.org.za/2019/05/28/organising-young-workers-how-are-unions-faring-in-south-africa/]

\(^{210}\) [https://www.lrs.org.za/2019/05/28/organising-young-workers-how-are-unions-faring-in-south-africa/]
Africa, 2020). It is in this vein that different sectors have to employ most of the unemployed youths that were expected to be 53 per cent by the end of the first quarter of 2020 and the bulk of the challenges to be dealt with in the South African economy. Trade union relevance to South African youth must therefore start with reaching out to them even before they enter the labour markets.

SACCAWU is one of the unions already acting on this possibility, having taken an approach that helps young people deal with such issues. It has been using a peer-to-peer organizing approach to create awareness about the benefits of joining a union. The key message has been “united we stand a better chance of achieving fair wages and better conditions of employment”. Through this approach, it has managed to organize young workers in new establishments.

To address the challenges of access to skills training among youths, SACCAWU has been using collective bargaining to negotiate for study loans and bursaries for young workers in the companies that they organize. This has been in an effort to ensure the union responds to the learning and skills development needs of youths. In addition, the union has established a mentoring and good education programme that ensures that new officials get training. As the youth organizer put it, “my mentor said good negotiators must be avid readers, researchers, be analytical and learn to listen well”.

**Case of ITUC-Africa**

Beyond country-level initiatives, good practices exist at regional level. ITUC-Africa is a case in point. The regional trade union body has developed a youth policy and drawn up a strategic action plan for youth participation. It has also provided space for inclusion of youth leaders in its supreme decision-making body and has been running various capacity-building programmes to enhance youth participation in trade unions. Box 1 highlights some salient features of its policy framework and organizational practices for enhanced youth participation in trade unions in Africa.

Box 1: Salient features of the ITUC-Africa approach to organizing for youth participation

- Developing a youth policy in 2020 to ensure effective youth participation in trade unions.
- Developing a youth strategic plan for 2020–23, focusing on organizing and empowering young workers.
- Amending its constitution to ensure that the chairperson of the youth committee automatically becomes a member of its General Council (decision-making body).
- Working to assist affiliates to develop and implement policies for youth organizing.
- Moving towards a 30 per cent youth participation quota in all its meetings and activities.
- Running capacity-building programmes focusing on youth organizing in Africa.
- Using social media platforms to mobilize and organize youths – applying the digital organizing concept.
- Running online e-learning platforms dedicated to training young workers.
- Establishing inter-trade-union youth committees (e.g. in Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Togo)

Organizing for effective youth participation: a synthesis of the key messages

How, therefore, can trade unions in Africa act on present possibilities to enhance youth participation? The recurrent theme from the three good-practice examples from Kenya, South Africa and ITUC-Africa is that enhanced youth participation in trade unions cannot succeed without a
clear visioning process. Such a visioning process must find expression in a clear youth policy and strategic plan of action.

At the heart of the visioning and policy thrust would be appropriate amendments to the union constitution to open up space for youths across all the union. This would ensure a basis for visioning and administrative effectiveness for youth participation in trade unions. Once a policy and structures are in place, building capacities of youths in these structures through various foams of education, training and empowerment programmes would be crucial. This would ensure appropriate knowledge acquisition about the union and organizing skills necessary for peer-to-peer organizing. It would also be a stage of ideological grounding and outreach to youths in college and university.

A useful starting point for building connections with youths not at work is by building connections with like-minded organizations, student movements and related social justice movements operating in spaces where youths are actively engaged. This way, youths participating in these structures will associate trade unions with social justice activism and this will increase their political interest for joining trade unions when job opportunities arise. Early exposure is important because many of the benefits that unions provide operate as an insurance and reveal themselves later, long after joining.212 In this sense, unions are akin to what is known in consumer theory as an “experience good”.213 This makes contact with colleagues, friends and parents who are themselves union members very important. Approaching youth organizing this way ensures a more inclusive and pragmatic way for communicating a vision of trade union relevance for young workers who may not yet be in employment.

Another imperative relates to youth leadership development and inclusion in trade unions. This underscores the importance of ensuring that the youths are not only given the necessary capacity to lead at various levels of trade union structures but also mentored and involved in decision-making. It would also sustain the quality of trade union leadership over time and ensure that young workers’ socio-economic challenges were not marginalized in general union campaigns. As seen from the examples


of Kenya and ITUC-Africa, affiliate unions established youth committees whereby the chairpersons of the youth committees became members of the executive board of the union or federation. This would also enhance internal governance within African unions.

A further imperative is the need for trade unions to harness the power of information communication technologies, particularly social media, to enhance the active engagement of youths in unions. Young people in Africa are increasingly using social media and technological tools to express themselves and advance policy advocacy positions. These platforms are essential for spreading knowledge and information sharing. The organizational strength and influence of these platforms during the youth-led “Fees Must Fall” protests in South Africa, as well the recent “Black Lives Matter” movement, attest to the enormous power of social media platforms. Thus, the labour movement needs to dedicate resources towards developing technologies that support social media strategies and carry out organizing through technological platforms. Youth social justice advocacy is dynamic and constantly changing, especially in an era shaped by the transition towards a digital economy.

Also critical to attracting youths is the membership service packages. The case of SACCAWU was illustrative in this case. The union attracts youths, for instance, through internal trade union bursary and skills development funds. This appeals to the needs and interests of youths and constitutes good practice. A recurrent theme from the examples of good practice presented here was that there was considerable demand for what unions could offer. This is not surprising in view of the type of conditions and problems associated with youths in school-to-workplace transition, as well as in employment. Finding what would attract the youths in a given situation and context could therefore be the centre of an innovative strategy for youth workers.


215 Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a decentralized political and social movement protesting against incidents of police brutality and all racially motivated violence against black people. The movement began in July 2013, with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin 17 months earlier in February 2012.
Critical to the success of any youth organizing strategy for increasing trade union membership in Africa would be a proactive agenda towards organizing young workers in the informal economy. Across most African countries, trade unions tend either to be non-existent in the workplaces of young people (small workplaces and in the informal economy); not to have developed youth-targeted policies and offers for the particular employment situations of young people; or simply not to consider them as an organizing target due to their often “atypical” employment status (e.g. temporary, part-time, activity in the informal economy).

This has to change. However, to achieve such change is certainly no easy task, as it implies opening up towards new employment realities that trade unions have found it difficult (and sometimes refused) to address in the past. The youth question is therefore not merely a demographic problem (how to get new members to survive as an organization). Since young people represent much more than the current union membership in today’s and tomorrow’s structure of the labour market, the “youth problem” poses more fundamentally the question of whether unions are prepared for transformative change and the future of work.

**Conclusions**

Successful union organizing for youth participation will need to rest on transformations in union organizational culture and strategy, support of union leaders and members and resource allocation patterns. There is no guarantee that the “lost momentum” in union membership may be restored without any substantial organizational and political changes. Taking the youth question seriously, therefore, has important implications for any union organization as a whole in terms of its approaches, structures and identity. Indeed, increasing youth participation might function as a catalyst for a necessary more general restructuring of union priorities and modus operandi in Africa.
Specific recommendations for trade union action

1. **Design and implement a clear vision of youth participation is key.** A useful starting point is to develop, with appropriate involvement of youths, a youth policy and strategic plan of action that would spell out the approach to union organizing for enhanced youth participation. Salient features of this policy could include how to reach out to innovatively recruit youths in the informal economy, how to harness the power of social media and capacity-building and training in a digitalized economy and how to communicate a vision of relevance through attractive membership services and benefits.

2. **Establish a strong youth structure.** Setting up and having a youth structure within a trade union ensures a number of positive outcomes – not only for youth but also for the trade unions – such as meaningful participation of young people in the trade union, systematic work on youth topics and capacity-building of youth. Trade unions in Africa must therefore undertake to establish youth structures across the whole union. Beyond establishing these structures, unions must invest financial, human and material resources to ensure that the youth structures can function. Unless the union leadership and members can commit more resources to such structures, youth participation in trade unions will remain marginal.

3. **Target recruitment and outreach campaigns.** Actively addressing potential members is key to gaining membership and involving youths. Many youths are not familiar with the work of trade unions. Therefore, trade unions need to put extra effort into reaching out to them. A more inclusive approach that actively engages youths in the informal economy, those in pre-work arrangements and amidst school-to-work transitions would be of the essence. Either youths are facing difficulties entering the labour market, are unemployed, or are working in non-standard forms of employment. All of them are potential members and the union must act to reach them spreading the knowledge of what the union can do for them.
4. **Employ a youth-friendly approach and communication.** For existing and potential youth members, it is crucial they are informed about the work of a trade union in a language that is understandable to young people. Trade unions already have different tools and ways of communicating with their members, but in most cases these are not designed specifically for youths. Youths have well-honed digital skills and abilities, but some trade union organizations do not currently relate with these communication tools. Trade unions will need to act on existing possibilities to reach out to the youths through ICT platforms.

5. **Involve youth structures in decision-making.** The involvement of youths in trade unions should not be aimed only at increasing the passive membership, but also at ensuring meaningful participation of young people within the trade union decision-making structures. This will both strengthen the youth structure and help the trade union invest in human resources.

6. **Engage in networking and coalition building.** Making alliances with different organizations can strengthen the role of a trade unions’ youth structures, their visibility and outreach, as well as increase their expertise. A useful starting point for building connections with youths not at work is by building connections with like-minded organizations, student movements and related social justice movements operating in spaces where youths are actively engaged.
The implications of economic restructuring and the accompanying work informalization on trade union organizing have attracted several studies. Some predicted that trade unions have outlived their relevance and were on their way to extinction (Andrae and Beckman 1998), others concluded that trade union survival depended on their willingness and ability to organize informal economy workers. For others, however, the expansion of informal work underscores the need for unions to be unrelenting in their attempts to reverse membership decline. Union coverage of informal economy workers has been recognized as one of the available options.

Considered unorganizable, union attitude to informal economy workers has ranged from ambivalence to outright hostility in some instances. The studies on trade unions organizing informal economy workers note that some initial approaches were cautious, often interlaced with cooperation.

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216 Frege, Heery and Turner 2006; Turner 2006
217 Akorsu and Britum 2018
218 Turner 2006, A. O. Britum 2011
and arms-length relations as situations dictated. Such attitudes on the part of unions did not occur in isolation but were informed by State-directed liberal modernization policies, which framed the informal economy and its workers as remnants of an old economy that was bound to disappear under import substitution industrialization. The informal economy has persisted, nevertheless, expanding into the formal.

The annual educational forum of labour centres in Africa, the New Year School of the International Trade Union Confederation of Africa (ITUC-Africa), recognizes the importance of informal economy workers as members of trade unions. Its 2016, 2019 and 2020 reports state that organizing informal economy workers enhances union power. Unions that have successfully organized informal economy workers, however, have faced new issues around interest representation, raising concerns about how much voice they are given within union structures. A situation that calls for the need to further explore the effectiveness of trade union responses to informalization and the workforce emerging from the process. Again, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds it remains to be seen how organizing initiatives will be affected.

This chapter is a contribution to the discussions on trade union organizing of informal economy workers in Africa. It draws on cases from two countries: Ghana and Uganda.

Defining the informal economy

Several institutionally based definitions of the informal economy were triggered by the seminal works of Keith Hart in Ghana and the Singer-Jolly team in Kenya in the early 1970s. Original renderings of the “discovered” informal sector focused on a series of economic activities viewed then as an
aberration from the mainstream. Identified by how much it deviated from the formal, these definitions included checklist-like characteristics of enterprise type, production technologies and labour force features and conditions.\textsuperscript{223}

All the features listed in such definitions used the formal as the reference point. The origins of such definitions have their base in dualistic orientations that separate the formal from the informal in the misleading position that these are two disconnected parts of national economies.\textsuperscript{224} Even when the structural adjustment policies pushed the World Bank and IMF to position the informal as the active centre of failing economies of Africa worth supporting, the dualistic conceptualization persisted.

As informality started taking root within formal labour markets, definitions appeared contesting dualism. Their promoters argued that national economies consisted of a range of economic activities occurring on a scale of decreasing formality or increasing informality. The evolving renderings marked a shift from enterprise-based classifications to ones based on employment relations. This was accompanied by the admission that informality within the formal was a global phenomenon irrespective of national levels of industrialization,\textsuperscript{225} a position that highlighted the need to question mainstream discourse on African economies and a recommendation to situate the definitional base of informality in production relations.\textsuperscript{226}

The definitional shift is based on observations that the origin of informality is capitalism and the emerging informalized trend is yet another phase of capitalist exploitation.\textsuperscript{227} Gallin\textsuperscript{228} points out that the celebrated secure features of formality were not automatic outcomes of waged work, but that workers gained such rights from bitter struggles with capital. As noted earlier, the main driver of informality is the constant shedding of direct and indirect labour costs to lower production cost. This according to Spooner\textsuperscript{229} is achieved through employment processes that shift the traditional risks

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{223} Hussmanns 2004
\item \textsuperscript{224} Hussmanns 2004, Chen 2012
\item \textsuperscript{225} Sindzingre 2008, Haug 2014
\item \textsuperscript{226} Bhattacharya 2017a, Gillespie 2016, Inverardi-Ferri 2017, Overton 2000
\item \textsuperscript{227} Fraser 2017
\item \textsuperscript{228} Gallin 2011
\item \textsuperscript{229} Spooner 2013
\end{itemize}
and responsibilities by replacing permanent workers with time-limited contracted, fixed or short term, seasonal, causal or piece workers.

Other strategies focus on altering enterprise structure to disguise employees as self-employed contractors through subcontracting, franchising and labour brokerage. Thus, there exist major companies who earn considerable wealth while they officially have no employees. The neoliberal onslaught expanding work in the informal is only a return to the original attitude of capitalism to workers’ welfare.

For the purposes of this chapter, we identify informal economy workers as both a waged and a non-waged labour force whose work conditions do not readily submit to mainstream national labour legislation. Missing the legislative cover forms an avenue for capital to avoid covering the full costs of socially reproducing such a labour force. Social reproductive cost of labour include all investments include training, health, pension, aged and childcare. Thus one of the major concerns abt informal workers is the absence of social security. Through this definition, we are able to come to some agreement about delineating the informal economy and the workers engaged in the traditional informal sector as well as formal sector-based workers whose employment conditions to all intents and purposes are informal. We take up the caution of Inverardi-Ferri about the extreme heterogeneity of its specific manifestation because of the wide variety of activities and employment forms.

The concern for informality is the conditions working in a situation where the structures for defending working rights are constantly eroding. The low wages associated with informality, reports of various ITUC-Africa New Year Schools admit, impact national economies and worsen the depressed living conditions on the continent. The ITUC-Africa reports also draw attention to a relationship between low national gross domestic product and high informality. This observation is shared in other studies which show that the intensification of informality in recent times arising out of formal workplace restructuring is due, in part, to accompanying de-unionization

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230 Spooner, 2013
231 Gallin 2011
233 Inverardi-Ferri 2017
234 See ITUC-Africa 2015, ITUC-Africa 2016) and ITUC-Africa 2019
that sets in motion a vicious process of further “precarization” of waged workers removing more workers from union coverage.

### Trade unions and the informal economy

The traditional terrain where trade unions recruit members has been waged work in standard employment relations. The formal labour market, however, has never been the norm for most African countries, particularly in western and eastern Africa. The origins of informality can be traced to deliberate colonial policy on whose back capitalist commodity production was introduced into the various African economies. 

Post-independence policies did not address the systems generating informality. Whatever little of this standard employment type that existed in most African countries came under attack during the 1980s and 1990s structural adjustment era. Almost all African countries adopted the IMF and World Bank policies that demanded the transfer of public enterprises into private hands and the commodification of public service provisioning, thus intensifying what Von Holdt and Webster couch as informalization from above and below – a reference to the twin processes that amplify survivalist activities either as the main income-earning strategies for new entrants or waged workers expelled from secure permanent employment or a supplement to falling wages from precarious work.

Informality is far from being an African phenomenon and it stays the hallmark of the global labour market. The report of the ninth New Year School of ITUC-Africa, held in 2019, noted the high levels of informal employment involving almost 2 billion workers – about 61 per cent of the global workforce. New trends altering work and workplaces of the future, technological, digital innovations are also heightening informality.

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235 Scully and Britwum 2019, Young 2019, Roberts 1982
236 Young 2019
237 Von Holdt and Webster 2005
238 Report of the ITUC-Africa’s 9th New Year School held in Lomé, Togo, February, 2019 under the theme: ‘African Trade Unions: Time for Change.'
everywhere and triggering a new wave of union decline.\textsuperscript{239} In all these are forms of strategies that allow capital to reduce its responsibility towards workers, whose labour generates its wealth. The trends include both low- and high-end workers seemingly self-employed, engaged in flexible work, with no fixed-term contracts or places of work, irrespective of their levels of expertise. In fact, the highly skilled workforce is just as likely to work with neither job security nor social protection and in employment relations that have no permanency.\textsuperscript{240}

Organizing informal economy workers has engaged the attention of the member unions of ITUC-Africa over the years. Some New Year School reports present participants demands for trade unions to organize workers in the informal sector with guidelines. Their recommendations include the need to first identify workers who can be organized, mapping out the environment in which they operate, determining the resources to be deployed in organizing and working out the suitable organizing mode.\textsuperscript{241} The reports note the need to understand the causes and nature of its expansion, the array of operations, as well as union activities that can be directed at informal economy workers.

The 2016 report, for example, captured as responsible for the expansion of the informal economy financial investments and trade policies that have undermined the manufacturing sector, triggering a process of deindustrialization to erode the capacity of African countries to create jobs. According to the report, in the face of public-sector wage and employment freezes, income-earning in the informal economy remains the only viable avenue for young job seekers and low-income earners in Africa.

Urban-based wage employment is not the only casualty of restructuring. The ITUC-Africa report also notes the collapse of rural economies and increased demands for cash to meet needs emerging from the introduction of market-led principles into the administration of public-funded social services such as health care, education and agriculture. These concerns are also supported by a report of the Roosevelt Institute,\textsuperscript{242} blaming job losses at the lowest side of the wage ladder and middle class on the new drivers

\textsuperscript{239} Roosevelt Institute 2015, Balliester and Elsheikhi 2018
\textsuperscript{240} Balliester and Elsheikhi 2018
\textsuperscript{241} ITUC-Africa 2015
\textsuperscript{242} Roosevelt Institute 2015
of the future of work, which expel workers from union coverage and curtail union bargaining power.

The discussions at the fifth New Year School of ITUC-Africa offered some suggestions for overcoming the barriers to effective organizing of informal economy workers.\textsuperscript{243} They include undertaking joint activities around the implementation of the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204), and education programmes, social dialogue and solidarity. Their suggestions also demand informal-economy-focused labour market interventions, as well as social protection schemes or cooperatives. Others require unions to address their internal structural inadequacies for covering informal economy workers and deal effectively with work-related problems of non-standard employment. Some contest the ILO formalization process, acknowledging informality in the formal, by pointing to its current capitalist driver as globalization, they propose alternative economic systems for Africa.\textsuperscript{244}

Beyond making suggestions, other sessions highlighted the benefits of union organizing in the informal economy. Immediate benefits outlined were a reduction in poverty, improvement in employment security and the promotion of decent work outcomes. Other benefits were more political, such as advances in representation and enhancement of workers’ voice. Such observations led to a call for greater trade union investments to cover workers in the informal economy and determine most suitable structures for their representation. These suggestions resonate with existing views such as those of Balliester and Elsheikhi who advise trade unions to “...address rising precariousness”\textsuperscript{245} by developing alternative organizational modes that can adequately cover all workers regardless of their working relations.

There is a recognition that informalizing trends inherent in capital represent a renewed offensive on unions, who need to overcome the existing organizational and representational divide between them and informal economy workers. Even though conscious of the importance of organizing informal economy workers, the progress of African trade unions remains patchy.

\textsuperscript{243} See ITUC-Africa 2015
\textsuperscript{244} ITUC-Africa 2015
\textsuperscript{245} Balliester and Elsheikhi 2018, 39
Studies exploring union organizing efforts in the informal economy have adopted approaches that either focus on informal economy workers or unions. Those focusing on informal economy workers attempt to distil their agentic potential and how they deploy this capability to promote their interests. They have shown the ingenuity of informal economy workers and their ability to navigate legislative and political barriers to protect their interests. Studies focusing on trade union informal economy organizing efforts have revealed two modes: (a) the direct recruitment of individual members into unions and (b) granting affiliation status to already existing informal economy workers’ groups.

In terms of the organizing modes deployed by informal economy workers, Akorsu and Odoi identified three informal organizational agency models: (a) welfare-focused membership-based associations; (b) NGO-supported groups focusing on nominal rights and (c) affiliation with traditional unions to expand representation. Beyond mode of recruitment and organizational form, others point to several organizing actors. The situation underscores the earlier suggestion by Munck on movement unionism where unions broaden their constituencies by forming alliances with other actors. The case of informal economy workers makes the need for such expansion of union terrain and actors more obvious.

Our overview of existing studies so far points to the need to understand not only the organizational forms that are effective for organizing informal economy workers but also the contribution they bring to union bargaining strength. Webster argues that workers deploy the specific power of the informal economy in the pursuit of their interests that any analytical framing of investigations on unions organizing informal economy workers should address. Studies responding to this observation have employed

247 Britwum and Akorsu 2017, Akorsu and Odoi 2017, Britwum 2011
248 Akorsu and Odoi 2017
249 Webster 2005, Gadgil and Samson 2017
250 Munck 2002
251 Webster 2005
the power resources approach (PRA) to understand how the relationship between unions and informal economy workers as organizational partners have fared. There is also the argument that informal economy workers have the potential for operating as a force to counter the excesses of global capital as it alters work and places of work.\textsuperscript{252}

The PRA analytical framework explains the impact of union workplace action on work relations. It also expands to cover other collective action such as social movements in their struggles against global capital in various spaces.\textsuperscript{253} The power dimensions outlined in the PRA include structural power tied to the location of workers within national economies and their ability to disrupt economic activities. Labour market restructuring has diminished union structural power and despite the sheer size of informal economy workers they are yet to assume any significant space in this power dimension. Institutional power has its source in State regulations, relying on instruments and institutions that cater to workers’ interests. A dimension that is usually difficult to apply to informal economy workers, forcing them and their representatives to employ a range of national legislation to protect their interests.

Associational power is derived from the strength of workers’ organizations, their ability to mobilize and maintain their movements by balancing internal dissent that accompanies divergence of membership interests. Associational power comes under intense pressure when informal economy workers join unions. Exploring this power dimension, the PRA allows scholars to explain how unions manage the inevitable internal frictions that result from divergences in worker interests. Associational power is also contingent on union resources and organizational infrastructure to reach and mobilize members around a common cause.

Societal power is closely related to associational power, being based on the support that unions gain from their communities or social movements. Societal power can be discursive when the framing of union demands gains legitimacy within the broader society. Social power can also extend through the national into the international sphere.

The application of PRA to union organizing shows how informal economy workers expand the power dimensions of the labour movement. Studies

\textsuperscript{252} Britwum 2018b, Webster, Britwum and Bhowmik 2017, Webster and Ludwig 2017

\textsuperscript{253} Kellermann 2005, Korpi 1985
employing the PRA reveal the strategies informal economy workers have used to expand their deficient power resources. Through organizing with trade unions or community-based movements, informal economy workers have leveraged their social and associational power to maintain their movements and influence national and local policy to their benefit.254

The cases in our study outline the power dimensions each group brings to the organizational space, detailing which ones get enhanced and which new areas are developing. Ghana and Uganda have some historical trajectories that have profoundly altered their labour markets, causing a rapid expansion of informal economy that is common to most African countries. These include, for both, colonial rule that laid the foundation for formal work, military rule, the institution of structural adjustment policies and youthful population.255 Both countries were largely touted as successes in the adoption of structural adjustment programme policies. A situation Boafo-Arthur256 attributes to the strong-handed policies of the two military regimes of the countries.

Specific to Uganda is the race dimension to its labour force and civil wars that a good number of African countries face. As unions in the two countries declined substantially and needed to rethink their survival, emerging informal economy work was faced with challenges forcing organizational relationships to counter their threats. The experiences captured in these cases show how successful organizing can revive unions and enhance the clout of informal groups that had hitherto lacked credibility. We relied on existing studies on the subject drawn from several secondary sources.

254 Britwum 2018b
255 Young 2019
256 Boafo-Arthur 1999
The Ghana case

Out of an estimated 12 million-member workforce in 2014, about 10 million – or 88 per cent – was projected to be located in the informal economy.\textsuperscript{257} Official records of Ghana Statistical Service report a drop in employment in the country’s informal economy to 71 per cent in 2017.\textsuperscript{258} This figure unlike in 2013 covers non-waged employment only. While 14 per cent of the female working force had waged employment, the male wage-earning workforce was 33 per cent.\textsuperscript{259} A little over 85 per cent of the female labour force were in non-wage employment as against 67 per cent of the male. They were mainly self-employed or unpaid family workers, with females dominating in the unpaid category. The legal instrument governing employment relations in Ghana, the Labour Act, Act 651 of 2003, defines a worker as someone who has an employer, thereby compromising its effectiveness for informal economy workers, especially the self-employed.

This chapter focuses on the work of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana and its affiliate General Agricultural Workers’ Union (GAWU).\textsuperscript{260} The TUC is the dominant labour centre in Ghana. With 18 of the 75 officially registered unions, the TUC Ghana holds about 50 per cent of the one million workers.

The TUC had relations with informal economy workers long before the focus on union organizing of informal economy workers took centre stage. In 1967, the self-employed and owner-drivers of Ghana’s private commercial road transport operators under the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU) decided that their organization would have greater security and clout if they joined TUC Ghana and did so in 1967. In 2016, the GPRTU had an estimated membership of 100,000.

In 2014, the Union of Informal Workers’ Associations (UNIWA) was admitted as an affiliate of the Ghana TUC, having operated as an associate member under the Council for Informal Workers’ Association, the umbrella body

\textsuperscript{257} GSS 2014
\textsuperscript{258} GSS 2018
\textsuperscript{259} GSS 2018
\textsuperscript{260} The reflections here are drawn from a number of existing publications like Britwum (2011), Britwum (2018a), Akorsu and Odoi (2017) and Britwum (2018b).
that brought together all informal economy members. This national union embodies greater heterogeneity, covering groups of informal economy workers drawn from diverse industrial sectors in Ghana.261

In addition to unions directly affiliated to the TUC, its formal economy-based member unions also organize informal economy workers, spurred by liberalization policies of the 1990s that saw large numbers of retrenched formal sector workers forced into the informal sector. The inroads national unions have made in organizing informal economy workers into their fold depends more on their attitude to the needs of informal economy workers within their jurisdiction and sense of responsibility towards such workers and, finally, their notion of what extending benefits coverage might bring to their union situation.

The most active national union organizing informal economy workers has been GAWU since 1979, beginning as a response to an ILO request spurred by the Rural Workers’ Organisations Convention, 1975 (No. 141).262 The main community entry approach was mobilizing around a felt social need like off-farm income-earning activities, equipment, credit schemes, child labour and domestic violence. The groups are later given trade union education to help their engagement with local authorities and other State agencies, like financial institutions, ministries of local government and agriculture and related units like district assemblies and the irrigation authority. The rural self-employed, who include peasant and tenant farmers organized in communities or socio-economic groups, form about 60 per cent of GAWU’s membership.


262 Britwum 2018b
Covering informal economy workers has called for union restructuring and expanding the legislative instruments that can be used to defend workers. Beginning with constitutional revisions GAWU set out to grant equal representation to all members by waving union subscriptions as the basis for qualifying for membership.\(^{263}\) All members, irrespective of the amount and frequency that dues are paid, are eligible for elected positions, can vote and serve on all union governance structures. GAWU relies on international labour standards such as the ILO Conventions C87, C141 and C184\(^{264}\) to overcome the limitations of the existing Labour Act (2003) Act 651 to promote the full rights of agricultural self-employed workers.

Restructuring and expanding the legislative terrain have enlarged the institutional, structural and associational power resources of GAWU. Its membership has increased, even though the formal sector workers it covers have been dwindling. Covering the rural self-employed also gave a new meaning to what can serve as legislation for promoting workers’ rights. For example, GAWU resorted to local legislation as well as World Trade Organization provisions to make a case for rice and poultry farmers to be granted a share of the domestic market through tariffs.

In addition, GAWU’s associational and societal power expanded as a result of its coverage of the rural self-employed. GAWU’s work with the rural self-employed has demanded collaboration with civil society groups, both national and international.\(^{265}\) Its community-based rural self-employed pushed GAWU to engage societal matters outside the traditional concerns of unions, such as child labour and domestic violence, as well as infrastructure provisioning. Because GAWU must fall on a wider range of national instruments and policies to promote the interests of workers, its position in the national policymaking space has expanded, increasing its structural power.

For the rural self-employed, their visibility and enhanced policy engagement skills improved their structural power within their communities. These successes, notwithstanding GAWU’s ability to financially sustain the logistical and organizational infrastructure of its coverage of the rural

\(^{263}\) Britwum 2018b, Britwum 2011

\(^{264}\) The Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, the Rural Workers’ Organisations Convention and the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, respectively.

\(^{265}\) See Britwum 2018a
self-employed members, is a challenge that can threaten its ability to provide effective representation of its informal economy members.

The Uganda case

Just like Ghana, Uganda has a labour force that is predominantly rural and informal. High levels of informalization of the labour market have been the result of similar events, as well as of the protracted civil war. The labour market survey report states that about 85 per cent of the total workforce is in the informal economy, with female proportions (85.6%) slightly higher than males (84.5%) (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2018). Rural informal labour stands at nearly 90 per cent, and 81 per cent in urban areas.

The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU), an affiliate of the Ugandan National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) was formed in 1938 to cover workers in large public corporations. Like most unions it was almost at the point of collapse in 2006 with only 2,000 members due to the various privatization schemes of the neoliberal era. According to Spooner and Mwanika, all leaders of ATGWU had prioritized organizing as a strategy for expanding the union, few considered informal economy workers as an option to stall dwindling membership mainly due to the negative view of leadership towards the sector. The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) dispelled ATGWU leadership’s notion of the sector by involving them in a project, co-funded by the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), which sought to build the capacity of the
union to organize informal economy transport workers and give visibility to women in the sector.\textsuperscript{270}

The ITF selection of ATGWU as one of the mentor unions was not the first time it was leading the union to informal economy workers in the transport sector. In fact, ATGWU had been engaging with long-distance drivers as part of an International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF)-sponsored HIV/AIDS programme in 1999. The ITF project, which included education and training, gave union leadership an enhanced understanding of the shape and character of the informal economy and of accepting the need to extend organization to informal transport workers. A section of the union leadership undertook the necessary constitutional amendments to accommodate informal economy workers, but did not deploy the needed funds for organizing. Once this hurdle was overcome, ATGWU proceeded to organize the transport operators. Events in ATGWU underscore the fact that individual leadership commitment also plays a part in driving action in informal economy workers’ organizing.

An examination of ATGWU’s work with informal economy workers in the transport industry reveals that they utilized the approach that involves granting affiliation to existing informal economy workers’ groups. The transport workers were already organized into “credit and savings cooperatives, informal self-help groups, community-based organizations and most importantly, associations”.\textsuperscript{271} As explained by Spooner and Mwanika, some of the groups had larger membership and commanded bigger resources than the mentor union, ATGWU. The groups covered were the Airport Taxi Operators Association in 2008 and later in 2014 Long Distance Heavy Truck Drivers Association, the Uganda National Lorry and Transporters’ Association joined the union. Other transport operators in the informal economy to seek affiliation following success stories of the benefit airport taxi drivers had derived from union affiliation in 2014 included Entebbe Cargo Carriers Association, Entebbe Casual Labourers Association, Nagojje Cycle and Bicycle Transporters Association and Entebbe Stages and Conductors Association.\textsuperscript{272}

Even though women dominated the informal economy in Uganda, the associations initially covered by the ATGWU were mainly male-dominated.

\textsuperscript{270} Spooner and Mwanika 2017
\textsuperscript{271} Spooner and Mwanika 2017, 5
\textsuperscript{272} Spooner and Mwanika 2017
It was only when the female-dominated craft workers, the Tukolere Wamu Crafts and Development Association, joined that women membership increased. Members of that association were not directly involved in operating vehicles; what qualified them as members of the transport union was that they sold their wares in a market near a main transport intersection.

The benefits to ATGWU and associations of workers in the informal economy was mutual. For a union whose membership had dwindled to 2,000, the organization of the informal economy workers’ groups, which expanded membership to 78,473, was an astronomical increase. In fact, the membership in 2021 was reported to be 105,000.\textsuperscript{273} This dramatic growth in membership should boost most if not all of the various union power dimensions. Beginning from the structural dimension, having such a wide array of private-public transport operators meant that the ATGWU held enough space to disrupt economic activities – a power that was wielded in the defence of taxi drivers against police harassment.\textsuperscript{274} By being members of ATGWU informal taxi drivers could evoke institutional power that grant unions the permission to meet.\textsuperscript{275} For both union and informal economy workers, associational and societal power was enhanced as media engagement gave visibility to the challenges of informal economy workers. The national discourse framing their work-related challenges turned positive, giving them further structural power.

The associational power dimension was derived from the fact that the union was in collaboration with several actors both national and international and this bolstered their structural power, especially their ability to mobilize to defend their interests. According to Spooner and Mwanika this expanded associational power dimension had a multiplicative effect on ATGWU’s structural power. An additional contribution to the union power dimension was the logistical power, where the associations pay direct membership fees, which entitles its members to full union rights.\textsuperscript{276}

A challenge ATGWU is still battling with is the legal basis for organizing transport operators in the informal economy. Legal restrictions emerge first from the legal basis for designating informal economy workers as

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{273} Kagoye 2021
\textsuperscript{274} Spooner and Mwanika 2017
\textsuperscript{275} Kagoye 2021
\textsuperscript{276} Kagoye 2021
\end{flushleft}
workers, their right to organize and collectively bargain as well as derive support from their mother union during strike action. To counter this situation, ATGWU has sought the support of lawyers to understand the legal terrain and outline possible legal instruments like the constitution and international commitments.\textsuperscript{277} Thus while the power dimension that needs to be bolstered for GAWU is associational, for ATGWU it remains institutional.

\subsection*{COVID-19 pandemic and informal economy workers}

The COVID-19 pandemic was slow in breaking out in Africa, but the time was not used to good effect, leading to a panic reaction on the part of governments when the virus finally landed on the continent. The preventive measures were just as stiff as those employed by developed countries to manage a worse situation. Containment began with travel bans, mandatory quarantine for travellers from Asian and European countries ravaged by the SARS 2 virus. Later, other measures were put in place, such as border closures, restrictions on movement and public gatherings, school closures and lockdown of selected cities and communities, with security forces deployed to enforce lockdowns.

With some western European and American countries experiencing death rates at near apocalyptic levels, many predicted doom for Africa. Even though countries on the continent have had their share of the pandemic, the expectations of massive loss of life and collapsed health infrastructure are yet to pass. The economic fallout hangs over the continent nonetheless.\textsuperscript{278} Both Ghana and Uganda instituted various levels of containment measures, with Uganda announcing the most stringent in East Africa.\textsuperscript{279}

As is usual with all global crisis, working people have had to bear the brunt of sacrifices, often intense for those at the lower end of the labour market.

\textsuperscript{277} Kagoye 2021
\textsuperscript{278} Schwettmann 2020
\textsuperscript{279} IMF 2021, Kagoye 2021
Thus, informal economy workers were the most affected everywhere: first, since their incomes are derived daily from their economic activities; second, because most have no savings or social protection cover and third, because their economic activities required human contact and public gatherings that did not make social distancing possible. Thus, street vendors, transport operators, operators in hospitality, performing artists were the hardest hit.\textsuperscript{280} African governments were slow to deploy support to meet the consumption needs such as food and utility costs for poor households, and their economic situation deteriorated fast with each passing day they remained out of work.\textsuperscript{281} In places where interventions were finally deployed, their administration, fraught with inefficiencies and corrupt practices, further compounded their inadequate reach. Lockdowns have remained highly unpopular with informal economy workers as a result. They are worsened by the fact that the impact on their reduced earnings remains months after lockdowns had been lifted. In Ghana, for example, a report by WIEGO\textsuperscript{282} on informal workers in Accra revealed that, except for waste pickers, they were by June/July earning only one third of their pre-pandemic incomes.

The report further states that none of the informal economy workers covered in the study reported receiving financial help from government-announced interventions, whereas only about 15 per cent received some form of food relief during the lockdown.\textsuperscript{283} In addition to loss of income and livelihoods, informal economy workers were faced with harassment from the police deployed to enforce containment measures. In Uganda, Kagoye\textsuperscript{284} reports of violence meted by law enforcement personnel to street vendors and market women forced to stay in markets for days with their nursing babies devoid of adequate sanitation.

The direct and indirect impact of COVID-19 on informal economy workers is compounded by fiscal and other measures governments have instituted to recover spending to manage the pandemic in 2020. The Government of Ghana’s budget statement for 2021 announced new taxes ostensibly to recoup spending on COVID-19 interventions. Already, informal economy

\textsuperscript{280} Kagoye 2021, Trades Union Congress (Ghana) 2020
\textsuperscript{281} Kiaga, Lapeyre and Marcadent 2020, Kagoye 2021
\textsuperscript{282} WIEGO 2021
\textsuperscript{283} WIEGO 2021
\textsuperscript{284} Kagoye 2021
workers are feeling the impact of the taxes, especially levies on fuel that have a wide-ranging effect on transport costs for the movement of goods and services. Unlike Ghana, Uganda has, however, retained support to agriculture and instituted tax waivers as well as labour-intensive public works to generate employment. As would be expected, the transport sector suffered some losses with the lockdown, and it is still uncertain how the tax waivers will help the operators in the Ugandan informal transport sector.

Conclusions

The chapter has shown some entry points for union-informal economy workers’ relations for interest representation and how these factors are shaping union structures and organizational strategies. Using the power resources approach has enabled an appreciation of the gains that unions organizing informal economy workers bring to both parties in the case studies. The clear impact is the expanded membership for both the TUC and its national affiliate GAWU. Even more so in the case of Uganda where ATGWU was transformed from a small, weakened union into a mass movement. It used its workplace-based institutional power to release the structural and societal power of workers in the informal economy. Also, by their location within the society, it was possible to generate societal power, dispelling the negative beliefs held about informal economy workers. This elevated them as responsible citizens worthy of social support in their struggle against police harassment. Combined, they unleashed structural power to command a respected position in national policy spaces.

In both cases, it is the extension of legislative cover using additional legal instruments, as well as the connection with the communities in which the self-employed are located. Thus, the structural and societal powers of the unions were extended. Their capacity to turn from weak unions with declining membership was based on new organizational actors which enhanced their sources of associational and societal power resources, as well as their expansion of the institutional power through the widening of legislative cover.

Another lesson is a delineation of the sources of contention, which could threaten trade union and informal economy workers mobilization. The
problem lies in how associational power, once gained, is managed. Inherent in the membership are hierarchies embedded in additional identities such as educational background, income, as well as differential relations to the critical productive resources such as land for rural dwellers and vehicles for transport workers. Enhanced unions’ coverage and membership generates institutional power because of the location of unions within the State legislative apparatus – a fact that speaks to the resilience of unions despite the neoliberal attack.

The full impact of COVID-19 on the national economies is still unfolding, with signs that informalizing factors are set to intensify and vulnerabilities of workers in the sector will also deepen. Even though institutionalized collective bargaining limits structural power to the workplace, union membership merges of formal with informal economy workers are set to release the needed societal and associational power to make this a combined labour movement, a force to reckon with in the post-COVID-19 labour market.

The fact that our findings point to the importance of associational power – especially the discursive aspect to connect to broader social issues to improve their structural power – remains consistent with ITUC-Africa’s New School recommendations that underscore the need for unions not only to identify and map out the operational terrain of informal workers but also to deploy resources and overcome their structural inadequacies. Thus, unions should seek to extend organizational cover to informal economy workers, as well as additional organizational actors it can connect with, to enhance its power resources in all the various dimensions.
Bibliography


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African trade unions and the informal economy: lessons from Ghana and Uganda


The climate crisis is now a climate emergency. This calls for the need to accelerate efforts towards a low carbon and sustainable economy. To achieve this goal, it is imperative for all stakeholders to get on board in the development, implementation and follow-up of climate reduction plans towards a Just Transition to a low-carbon economy. Trade unions have a responsibility to contribute towards climate policy through mobilization and effective social dialogue mechanisms. The coronavirus pandemic provides concrete lessons that can be applied to accelerate the implementation of climate goals towards achieving a Just Transition.
Over the past decade, the New Year School organized by ITUC-Africa has assessed African trade unions’ actions and responses to climate change at regional, national and sectoral levels. It further highlighted concrete examples of trade union responses to COVID-19 applicable to addressing the climate crises. The assumption is that African trade unions have the requisite resources through their membership base to mobilize for climate action and effectively frame climate issues in a way that resonates with their members and broader society. However, African trade unions must assert their power, mobilize the necessary resources and develop concrete plans and a policy framework for action. This is necessary to build the mobilizing frame needed to push for emission reduction towards a Just Transition.

One of the most daunting threats of the twenty-first century is the ecological crisis, what we commonly describe as the climate crisis. The Global Risks Report 2019\textsuperscript{285} launched at the World Economic Forum in January 2019, highlights the following as the key threats of failure of climate change adaptation and mitigation: extreme weather events; water crises; natural disasters; biodiversity loss and ecosystems collapse. The 15th edition of the same report,\textsuperscript{286} published in 2020, further highlights increased risk of stagnation, climate change and fragmented cyberspace as anticipated threats for the year. Likewise, the 2021 report\textsuperscript{287} establishes that fractures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic include widening gaps in health, jobs and digital access, with young people most at risk of missing out on future opportunities. The report further identifies the worsening environmental and technological risks as threats to leadership’s role in healing social fragmentation and ensuring a brighter collective future.

The ILO identifies climate change and environment as one of the key drivers of change or megatrends in its Synthesis Report\textsuperscript{288} of the National Dialogues on the Future of Work. The discourse around climate change has taken a huge turn over the last few years. This is primarily due to the severity of climate impacts all across the world. For sub-Saharan Africa, the implications of the world’s warming by more than 1.5°C would be profound. Temperature increases in the region are projected to be higher than the global mean temperature increase; regions in Africa within 15 degrees of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{285} World Economic Forum, \textit{The Global Risks Report 2019}.
  \item \textsuperscript{286} World Economic Forum, \textit{The Global Risks Report 2020}.
  \item \textsuperscript{287} World Economic Forum, \textit{The Global Risks Report 2021}.
\end{itemize}
the equator are projected to experience an increase in hot nights as well as longer and more frequent heat waves.\textsuperscript{289}

The ILO publication \textit{Working on a warmer planet: the impact of heat stress on labour productivity and decent work} emphasizes that rising temperatures and increasing heat stress at work will lead to the loss of 80 million full-time jobs and to global economic losses of US$2.4 trillion in 2030.\textsuperscript{290} Thus, the impacts of climate change on jobs and workers are daunting and must not be overlooked.

Of significant importance is the fact that productive activities also contribute to climate emissions leading to climate change. Studies show that Africa contributes immensely to climate impacts. Likewise, the impacts of climate variations are deepest felt in key sectors. Thus, while these sectors contribute to climate change, they are at the same time heavily impacted in various forms. Hence, the correlation between climate change and employment is glaring. These include effects on productivity, quality of work, income distribution and loss of jobs.

The ILO stipulates that while some jobs would be eliminated through changes in the climate, several others could be created. Specifically, according to the World Employment and Social Outlook 2018 Report, entitled \textit{Greening with Jobs}, 24 million new jobs can be created globally by 2030 if the right policies to promote a greener economy are put in place.\textsuperscript{291} Likewise, a Greenpeace report, entitled \textit{Employment Effects of a Global Energy Transition}, indicates that at least 4.7 million jobs will be created by 2050 across energy sectors through a shift to renewable energy.\textsuperscript{292} Hence the impacts of climate change on the labour market could not only be disruptive but would also provide opportunities.

The factors that contribute to climate change are many and the impacts enormous, meaning that it is important to adopt a multidimensional approach to finding real solutions to climate impacts. To achieve this, all stakeholders including governments, the private sector, civil society

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\textsuperscript{291} ILO, \textit{Working on a Warmer Planet}.

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groups and non-governmental organizations and communities including marginalized groups must join in designing and implementing sustainable solutions to the climate crisis. And trade unions, as agents of change and an active part of society, have a key role to play.

It is imperative for trade unions to broaden their scope of work to include climate issues and to advance the course for a Just Transition. An effective way to do this is to overcome the jobs versus environment dilemma by establishing and drawing the linkages between the ecological crisis and jobs, as asserted by Räthzel and Uzzel.293 Furthermore, it is important that they adopt a prognostic and diagnostic frame in articulating the causes and impacts of climate change in more relatable terms to their constituencies and the broader society. Lastly, there is a need for adequate resources – technical and financial – to advance the work on climate change and a Just Transition within trade union organizations.

▶ African trade unions and climate change

ITUC-Africa in its “2016–2019 Strategy Plan” acknowledges that the current mode of production and consumption built on the capitalist system underpins the climate and ecological crises.294 This notion is premised on the neoliberal thinking of overproduction in the interest of capital. Likewise, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in its Policy Framework on Climate Change notes that climate change is part of a larger economic and ecological crisis that represents a serious challenge for the working class in general and the trade union movement in particular.295 Thus, for

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trade unions, the fight against climate change is a fight against the capitalist system which is essentially a threat to the working class.

This notion is reinforced by the General Secretary of ITUC-Africa, Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, who continuously emphasizes that “trade unions do recognize that climate change is integral in the broader fight against existing economic and social injustices faced by workers and the poor. In that regard, finding a viable solution to the global and growing environmental crisis is a fight against social and economic injustice”.296

Essentially, trade unions as organizations representing the working masses and as agents of change play a key role in addressing social issues and prevailing crises affecting the working class. Thus, it is imperative that trade unions prioritize the existential threat that climate change poses to the planet and humanity today, and the threat to the livelihood of working people. Accordingly, the fight against climate change is a global fight that warrants collective action through building alliances and networks, forming social movements and deepening international solidarity – which are essential hallmarks of trade unionism. This notion is also supported by the General Secretary of ITUC-Africa, who clearly highlights this point in his keynote speech at the 6th ITUC-Africa New Year School,297 which took place under the theme “Industrial development and employment in Africa: challenges and opportunities for trade unions in the face of climate change”. In his words, “as trade unions, we need to harness our efforts and leverage on the climate opportunities that are being created and also to make progress in implementing interventions at the national, subregional and regional levels”.

At regional level, the work on climate change is guided by the ITUC-Africa “2016–2019 Strategy Plan”. The strategy is based on five main pillars, covering: education and training; research; policy development; lobby and advocacy; and campaigns.298 The work at regional level is further enriched by the ITUC-Africa “Climate Change Strategy” document which was

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298 ITUC-Africa, “Strategic Plan”.

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developed in 2016\textsuperscript{299} in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. These two documents provide the strategic direction and highlight the activities and expected results of the climate change programme. Generally, these documents have provided the blueprint for establishing climate change as a priority for trade union and workers’ organizations in Africa.

Over the past few years, the work at continental level has produced significant outcomes. Notably, there is increased awareness and greater knowledge of ITUC-Africa affiliates of causes and socio-economic impacts of climate change within specific sectors. There is also increased participation and understanding in the UN climate negotiations and processes. This has been enabled through the work of the Africa Trade Union Climate Change Network – a network of climate change focal persons drawn from ITUC-Africa affiliates. Importantly, the relative increase in participation of African delegates at the Conference of the Parties (COP) has greatly enhanced visibility and contributed to strengthening the position of African workers\textsuperscript{300} in negotiations and advocacy work. To further strengthen the work on a Just Transition at regional level, there is a need for a concrete policy position for African Trade Unions on a Just Transition, and the process of developing one is under way.

In addition to action taken at regional level, African trade unions also actively dealing with climate issues at national level. Generally, a rapid assessment indicates a rise in overall engagement on climate issues among trade unions at country level over the last few years. This work is mostly facilitated by members of the Africa Trade Union Climate Change Network. In different countries, this progress includes a pool of trained climate activists, and an active engagement on policy issues at national level.

In 2014, ITUC-Africa in collaboration with the Trade Union Competence Centre of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the African Labour Research Network undertook a study on trade union responses and strategies on climate change in Africa.\textsuperscript{301} The study sought to assess the extent to which trade unions in Africa have been engaged in the design, implementation,


verification and evaluation of climate change processes, policies and programmes.

At the time of the study, evidence showed that very few African trade unions had policies, structures or educational programmes on climate change. Specifically, only two trade union organizations saw climate change and environment as a priority area for workers’ organizations. The two organizations were the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUC-Ghana). The work of these two organizations was guided by a “Policy Framework on Climate Change” adopted in 2011 for COSATU 302 and a “Policy on Occupational Safety, Health and Environment” adopted in 2016 for TUC-Ghana.303

Over the last few years, tremendous progress has been made among trade union organizations at national level. Of note, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in 2015 developed a climate change policy document to define the organizational position on climate change and to provide strategic guidance to the work on climate issues and a Just Transition. Through defining the scope of work and further engagement with social partners in Nigeria, the NLC has become a strong voice that provides policy input on a Just Transition to support the Government as well as contributing to sharing good examples from Africa at global conferences.

Likewise, in Zimbabwe, the Labour and Economic Development Research Institute of Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ), together with the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and through the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - Zimbabwe, have developed an education and training manual for trade unions in Zimbabwe on climate change, green jobs and the role of trade unions.304


The Central Organization of Trade Unions - Kenya (COTU-K) has further reinforced its organizational position on climate issues through the development and adoption of a policy document on climate change.\textsuperscript{305} COTU-K is prominent in national dialogues on climate change and in providing policy input at national level through its representation within the Task Force on Climate Change Policy in Kenya. The task force, set up under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, comprises a 15-member team with the sole responsibility of providing oversight for the development of the national climate change law and policy in Kenya. The team is also mandated to spearhead dialogue and advocacy at national and county levels to ensure stakeholders are aware of and understood the implications of the policy and Bill.\textsuperscript{306}

The COSATU, through its representation within NEDLAC, continues to provide input into national policies such as the Carbon Tax Bill.\textsuperscript{307} In Zimbabwe, LEDRIZ, as well as ZCTU, continue to provide input into policy documents and discussions on a Just Transition and green jobs\textsuperscript{308} at national level and with partner organizations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Trade union activism on climate change also took the form of denunciation and protest against national governments’ anti-environmental policies or inactivity vis-à-vis the protection of the environment. In November 2018, after the South African Government decided to shut down coal-fired power plants, workers from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) took to the streets of Pretoria in a protest action against government plans to privatize energy and award renewable energy contracts to independent power producers without a Just Transition plan. Protesters marched to government offices where they read out their grievances. The demands were clear and summed up in a statement by Irvin Jim, General Secretary of NUMSA, which read


\textsuperscript{306} Kenya Ministry of Environment and Forestry, “Taskforce on Climate Change Policy,” accessed 18 May 2022, \url{http://www.environment.go.ke/?p=216}.


\textsuperscript{308} Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, LEDRIZ, and ZCTU. “Climate Change and Green Jobs: A Trade Union Priority.” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, n.d. \url{http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/simbabwe/13737.pdf}.
“we demand a Just Transition, which will ensure that workers at coal-fired power plants who may lose their jobs as a result of the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy will be trained and absorbed into the renewable energy sector”.  

There is good cooperation between national trade union centres and civil society organizations in other countries as well. In Nigeria, for example, a joint project on a Just Transition is being implemented by the NLC and the Environment Rights Action – a member of Friends of the Earth. Likewise, we see partnerships between unions and developing partners to deepen climate action emerging in countries such as Senegal. One such example is an ongoing project between the National Confederation of Senegalese Workers (CNTS) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung - Senegal on a Just Transition in the transport sector.

African unions also support environmental and sustainable policies worldwide at a sectorial level. Global Union Federations (GUFs) prioritize climate change and a Just Transition within the work of their respective organizations. At its 2016 Congress in Rio de Janeiro, IndustriALL re-affirmed its commitment to achieving a Just Transition. Noting that industrial manufacturing is experiencing and will experience the revolution of technology and further digitization of production even more in the future, the organization resolved to develop a sustainable industrial policy and campaign against transformation without much-needed social justice for affected workers. For IndustriALL, the objective of a Just Transition is to provide a hopeful and optimistic future for all workers, especially for those in industries that may be impacted by efforts to limit greenhouse gases or by the introduction of new technologies. This notion essentially informed the development of A Trade Union Guide to a Just Transition for Workers by the sectorial union.

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311 IndustriALL, “Just Transition”.

The Building and Workers International (BWI) notes that the construction, building materials, forestry and wood industry, employing around 200 million workers, plays an important role in contributing to and reducing CO$_2$ emissions. Deforestation is the second largest source of carbon in the atmosphere. The organization affirms that buildings are responsible for about 8 per cent of global CO2 emissions and their use increases their contribution upwards of 40 per cent.$^{313}$

However, the organization emphasizes that the construction and wood industry can deliver a substantial contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gases and the problem of global warming. As the world’s largest union of construction and forestry workers, BWI stresses that while workers from the sector are frequently on the front lines of climate disasters and are the first in line to suffer from a class-blind de-carbonization transition, these workers know how to build and maintain energy-efficient buildings and deliver sustainable forest management”.$^{314}$

Likewise, the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) recognizes that transportation emissions are rising faster than those of any other sector. Its policy proposal for 2020–23 on guaranteeing a Just Transition for transport workers$^{315}$ emphasizes the need for a Just Transition for workers in the existing transport sector and for transport workers of the future to enjoy decent pay, decent conditions of work and employment stability.

The organization’s model of *reduce, shift, and improve to lower transport-related emissions*$^{316}$ involves three main approaches: (a) reducing the movement of people; (b) shifting the ways in which people move, away from

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high-carbon to low-carbon modes of transport and (c) improving the use of both existing and new methods and technologies to promote energy efficiency.

The North-South debate over environmental restructuring and job creation

Although the climate crisis is a global phenomenon that calls for an urgent global response, differences exist in the approaches and responses needed by countries to address the crisis. While reports and evidence show that developing countries face the biggest threats of climate impacts,317 records indicate that less developed countries have contributed minimally to global carbon emissions.

Largely, historical cumulative data highlight very low global emissions prior to the Industrial Revolution, with relatively slow growth of about 6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide until the mid-twentieth century, and a steep rise in emissions from 1990, reaching more than 22 billion tonnes. Emissions have continued to grow rapidly, at over 36 billion tonnes each year.318 Despite the fact that emission growth has slowed over the last few years, records show they have yet to reach their peak.

According to 2019 estimates of global greenhouse gas emissions, China alone contributed over 27%; with the United States being the second highest emitter with its cumulative emissions, contributing to 11% of the global total, and India contributing to 6.6%. The European Union contributed to approximately 6.4% of global emissions319. Meanwhile, Africa’s cumulative

share of global carbon emissions remained minimal at 4%.\textsuperscript{320} The need to drastically reduce global carbon emissions is therefore more critical now than ever.

For African trade unions, it is imperative that all countries embark on stringent emission reduction programmes in line with the commitments in the Paris Agreement. However, while climate policies for industrialized countries focus on mitigating and drastically transforming economies to carbon-free economies in line with climate-reduction commitments, these countries must take on the responsibility for drastically reducing emissions in line with the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC), as enshrined in the Paris Agreement and in line with international environmental law. Even more importantly, industrialized countries must support the adaptative capacities of developing countries to build resilience in pursuance of climate targets and ambitions.

For African trade unions, climate policies for both industrialized and developing countries must centre on a transformative approach based on the Just Transition Framework and in line with national development targets. These targets and responses must ensure the creation of green and decent jobs and deliver sustainable and inclusive growth within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

COVID-19 pandemic and climate change in the African context

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been comprehensive, ranging from strict lockdowns of countries, ban on air and road travel, leading to restrictions on movements within and between countries, and limits to public gatherings including closure of schools and public spaces. Indeed, the COVID-19 crises have exposed and exacerbated existing crises and inequalities in societies with the most marginalized being the worse affected by the negative impacts. Oxfam warns that the economic fallout from the spread of COVID-19 could force more than half a billion more people into poverty.\(^{321}\) All this does not take into consideration labour and how the livelihoods of workers have been affected by the pandemic. Poverty means, after all, income and wage disparities, and all sort of injustices, especially gender injustice.

Thus, the interlinkages between the COVID pandemic and the climate crisis cannot be overlooked when discussing labour, and African trade unions have confronted the issue. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Africa in March 2020, African trade unions have been involved to varying degrees in efforts and initiatives towards curbing the spread of the virus. While some have been directly involved in the work of national response measures, others have provided direct support to workers and communities through sensitization and through providing basic material including personal protective equipment (PPEs) to reduce the spread of the virus and support workers’ well-being. At all these levels, the response from trade unions to COVID-19 has been relatively proactive.

At the regional level, ITUC-Africa called for its affiliates to “put Africa on a war footing” by proposing a range of actions in the interest of the working class. Likewise,\(^{322}\) in April 2020, the organization called on the African Union

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to take strategic and decisive leadership on the fight against COVID-19 in Africa. It further initiated a series of actions including launching three special newsletters to highlight trade union responses and actions regarding COVID-19. The newsletters include reports on union action in the 52 African countries in which ITUC-Africa has affiliates. The organization also launched a campaign on PPEs for essential workers as well as sensitization on the use of face masks as a way of reducing the spread of the virus.

Reports indicate that trade unions across Africa responded robustly to COVID-19 and undertook diverse initiatives and actions in response. Actions in different countries included recommendations and proposals to governments to guarantee labour provisions for the protection of workers and their livelihoods; education and raising awareness on the causes and impacts of COVID-19 and its dangers; continuous sensitization of workers and union members about preventive measures both through campaigns and through information, education and communication materials; contribution to government funds and donation of PPEs to support workers, vulnerable communities and victims.

An assessment of trade union responses to COVID-19 highlights the following key lessons, which are useful and can be adopted in climate policy and advocacy. Unions are key actors in society, especially in moments of crisis. A strong labour movement can contribute to the curbing of the negative effects of lockdowns and related labour rights abuses. Trade unions can take responsibility and stay resolute in combatting the crisis and protecting workers and vulnerable populations. Unions can work together


with employers in establishing preventive measures to contain other future, possible crises connected to climate change. Unions can propose recommendations and conduct concrete actions for better social protection provisions for workers and vulnerable groups in relation to the crises – an example of this is the development of appropriate workplace-specific protocols for preventing and containing the spread of crises. These lessons are derived from the assessment of trade union responses to COVID-19. The strategies and actions must be applied in addressing the climate crises and African trade unions, including ITUC-Africa, have not shied away from their responsibilities.

**Conclusions**

When dealing with climate change, African trade unions must respond to two major and interlinked challenges: (a) protecting workers and their rights and (b) developing African industry. Productive activities, particularly industrial ones, contribute to global warming through carbon emissions from high-emitting sectors such as manufacture, transport and intensive agriculture. At the same time, Africa is still in need of its own industrial revolution. This is especially so in order to improve infrastructure and reduce the continent’s economic dependence on external actors. African trade unions have addressed climate change, and they have done so by highlighting the importance of reconversion in connection to job creation.

To a large extent, trade unions have made significant progress in identifying climate change as a priority at regional, national and sectorial level. However, labour organizations have not yet managed to formulate and articulate the linkages between climate change and job creation in a way that resonates with wider social demands for income through work. Thus, the work on climate change and a Just Transition remains very much a policy-driven issue in the hands of so-called climate professionals. African trade unions are in an ideal place to insert and champion popular interests in the agenda.

Despite the tension between the need to create jobs, expand the industrial base and mitigate climate change, African unions have managed to embrace environmental issues as organizational priorities. Just like the
fight against the coronavirus pandemic, the fight against climate change warrants collective action bringing together everyone – women, men, young, old, formal and informal-sector workers, the unemployed, as well as communities. African trade unions are best placed to do this in the continent.

Bibliography


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Postface

ITUC-Africa’s New Year School, trade unions and the transformation of the world of work

Stefano Bellucci (Leiden University & IISH Amsterdam)

This book represents a collaborative effort between ILO-ACTRAG, the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa), trade unionists and scholars cooperating with the ITUC-Africa New Year School (NYS). The NYS is organized every year as part of ITUC-Africa’s trade unions education programme. The first edition of the NYS took place in 2011. Now, after over a decade of NYS activity, this book tries to summarize the key discussions, debates and issues that African unions affiliated to ITUC-Africa felt were crucial for the world of work in Africa. The book therefore constitutes a compendium of ten years of trade union education, as well as a corpus of issues that matter for African trade unions and the workers they represent and struggle for.

The core themes covered by the different chapters are crucial insights into the world of work, trade union organizations and workers in Africa. They range from the relationship between trade unions and politics to issues of gender and youth; from education to research; from organizational strategies to environmental and climatic issues; and from decent work to structural economic transformations.

These subjects represent areas for action that African trade unions identified for themselves to be able to continue to make a difference in the world of work and in society at large. In other words, the “core themes” of
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Trade unions’ education listed above – and as identified by ITUC-Africa itself – are defined by their relevance to the future of work in Africa.328

The studies presented here demonstrate that African trade unions have well-informed positions on key global social and economic issues, derived from a vibrant internal debate. African trade unions have their own “lived experiences” and therefore particular perspectives on the world of work and its meaning, including its past and future. Besides their informed views, trade unions are also crucial representatives of labour. Whereas trade unions typically organize formal-sector workers, they are the voice of all workers.329 This aspect is often neglected by scholars who insist on the old-fashioned concept of “labour aristocracy”.330 Aristocrats or not aristocrats, who else in Africa speaks for labour, if not trade unions? African trade unions are the largest membership organizations in most African countries – the one mass organization, in many cases.

The labour question is one of the most neglected issues in local and global public debates, in mainstream media and in political programmes. Regrettably, the world of work also tends to be neglected by various donors, international organizations, especially international and regional financial institutions, and funders of international and national NGOs.

Neglecting labour is a global problem, and at the same time it is an incomprehensible – or socially paradoxical – position, since labouring is the main activity of most human beings. It is what people do in order to live and to survive. Labour is a universal and fundamental aspect of human life. This is true from the poorer to the most affluent parts of society all over the world. Yet what happens to labour is seldomly on the first page of newspapers, as it should be.

The first decade of the ITUC-Africa NYS (2011–21) ended in coinciding with the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, the NYS also debated how the pandemic affected or exacerbated pre-existing challenges in


329 Cf. ILO, Trade Union Density Rate, available online: https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/union-membership

the realm of labour. African trade unions responded to the global health crisis and the problems it created for workers and societies. They offered solutions, on a workplace level, but especially at a national level. Whether these solutions were embraced by governments varied in different African countries. However, ITUC-Africa proposed several solutions at a regional, continental level.331

Almost all chapters in this book attempted to analyse one core theme concerning the African world of work, trying to answer a series of overarching research questions: Which kind of transformation is labour undergoing in Africa? Which active and passive role did trade unions have and will have in such transformation? How did exogenous factors, such as climate change or COVID-19, affect the realm of work and what is or was the response of labour organizations? Besides these overarching questions, there is a more crucial issue that this work delves into, which is the daily struggles of trade unions and their members.

Answers to such questions directly connect to the following issues: (a) the nature of African economies and employment; (b) the lack of decent work conditions, especially for young people and women; (c) inadequate social protection programmes and coverage and (d) how African trade unions are constantly under pressure to remain relevant and able to promote and defend the interests of their members.

The transformation of labour and the call for a new social contract

In Chapter 3, Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Michael Watt, Dickson Wandeda, and George Owidhi, analyse the state of African trade unions and their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from the point of view of ILO-ACTRAV.

The chapter gives a detailed overview of an important aspect of labour in Africa: the transforming nature of trade unions and their organization.

Trade unions are not representative of all workers in Africa – not all wage workers belong to trade unions. Given the high levels of informality in Africa, only a fraction of the labour force is unionized. Having said this, the role of trade unions and their agency goes well beyond the realm of formal labour. Trade unions tend to also have a political role as all-embracing organizations that struggle for dignifying labour as a whole. For example, the concept of decent work, which African unions embraced fully and with conviction, was developed as an idea, concept and policy programme applicable to all workers and not just formal wage workers, as Andreas Admasie and I explained in Chapter 5. Therefore, discussing the state of trade unions in Africa means dealing also with labour in its wider sense, including precarious, household and self-employed labour, and not only with formal wage labour.

The assumption made is that if trade unions are successful and effective in their struggle to dignify labour, this would ultimately benefit all African workers, including non-unionized ones. After all, countless studies point to the fact that labour is more protected not necessarily only where trade union density is high, but rather in situations where trade unions are properly organized and their rights legally recognized and respected. This must occur at national level (by law) as well as in the workplace (by the employer). This is evident if one compares the labour conditions in Western Europe or South Africa, where labour rights standards are high, with that of the United States or South Sudan, where they are much lower.³³²

Labour rights tend to be protected where trade union organization is solid. Organizational aspects of trade unionism are decisive for improvement within the world of work. The relevance and importance of a well-organized and institutionalized African labour force is more evident in moments of crisis, such as for example during the COVID-19 health crisis. Indeed, the global pandemic hit not merely as a medical emergency, but also as a social and economic calamity. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a litmus test for the labour movement in contemporary societies. Labour has clearly been badly and negatively affected by the pandemic, because of the subordinate

³³² For a global comparison between countries on the level labour rights, see: the ITUC Global (Labour) Rights Index 2022: https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2022/countries
position labour has in the dominant, neoliberal discourse – labour is de-humanized as a “human resource”, a factor of production, a commodity. Whereas for the ILO, labour is not a commodity.333

However, what the authors in this book and ITUC-Africa have pointed out is that the social and labour injustices and inequalities that intensified during the pandemic were already in place. As explained in studies and reports cited in the book, a new social contract is needed, centred on labour and workers. Former ILO Secretary-General Guy Ryder developed the idea for new social contracts at ITUC, and carried it over to the ILO. The ILO point of view on the new social contract can be found in World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021, where prospects for recovery are outlined.334 Hence it is important to recall here that the idea of a “human-centred” strategy and a new social contract is central for both the ITUC and the ILO. During the pandemic, the ITUC outlined demands “to build recovery and resilience, putting people, jobs and the environment at the centre of the new social contract”.335

ITUC-Africa contributed to this discussion by putting forward its particular analysis, claims and demands, and this book represents a compendium of such views – i.e. how African trade unions should engage in global debates. Chapter 3 presents an important ILO-ACTRAV survey conducted during the pandemic among trade unions and all the worker constituents of the ILO.

In Africa alone, 136 trade unions from different African countries were involved in the research. The information collected is important for understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African trade unionism and on labour more generally. It has been observed that “the pandemic impacted negatively on the overall activities of trade unions in the region”.336


335 Cf. ITUC, A New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience, Brussels 2021, https://www.ituc-csi.org/new-social-contract-five-demands The ITUC document contains five demands: creation of climate-friendly jobs; rights for all workers; universal social protection; equality; and inclusion. These are the basis of the new social contract according to the ITUC.

336 See page 51 in this book.
Membership, activities and services were all trade union activities that were affected by the crisis. The crisis also influenced collective agreements, workers’ rights and labour conditions, and contributed to unemployment, which is already the perhaps the major problem in Africa. Taking all this into consideration, Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, General Secretary of ITUC-Africa, repeated on various occasions that it was about time to put “the trade union movement on a war footing”.  

African trade unions have now shouldered a new post-crisis task: re-building a better world of work. This is only possible through a reinforcement of trade unionism. Governments, if serious about a new social contract and a more just society – as they often publicly claim – must recognize and encourage trade unionism and unionization of workers. It cannot be possible to discuss labour without taking into consideration the state in which trade unions find themselves due to the pandemic crisis.  

Other chapters explain how the pandemic has negatively affected trade union functioning, producing tremendous inequalities of treatment among workers. The pandemic happened in the aftermath of the ILO deliberations on the Future of Work (FoW). It is an irony of history that the pandemic hit in the very early days after the ILO’s Centenary Declaration. Various authors in this book, therefore, explain how COVID-19 was an aggravating circumstance and not the cause of injustice and inequality in the world of work and in society at large. The ten-page-long ILO Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work calls for a “human-centred approach” focusing on people’s and institutional capabilities as well as on decent and sustainable work. In article II/C, the International Labour Conference, in Geneva, established that to “ensure safe and productive workplaces” it is crucial to ensure “not to undermine the role of trade unions”. 

337 See citation of Kwasi in Chapter 9 in this book.
341 Ivi, p. 6.
Hence, African trade unions can and must play a central role as representatives of African workers for the purpose of the FoW initiative. The symbiosis of labour and life is the basis of a constructive social dialogue and a crucial element of the “new social contract” (as proposed by both ITUC and the ILO). Labour and life must inevitably be conceptualized beyond the pandemic crisis, for a just future regardless.

As Dung Pam Sha explains in Chapter 1, on the relationship trade unionism and politics, collective bargaining and social dialogue have been constantly hampered by governments. One of the crucial contributions of the chapter is its explication of the relationship between trade unions and political parties. In most African countries, trade unions have to navigate difficult and exclusionary political terrains in order to pursue their goal of improving workers’ rights. It did not always weaken the trade unions’ position, but the continent-wide balance shows that political – particularly ruling – parties have tended to prey on the trade unions’ position.

On several occasions, governments used COVID-19 to break agreements between themselves and trade unions. Government decisions were taken unilaterally, disregarding the principle of a tripartite balance between governments, trade unions and employers. Dung Pam Sha uses the example of the Nigerian Labour Congress and the memorandum of understanding it signed with the government and the Nigerian Employers Consultative Association to defend jobs. This agreement was completely disregarded during the pandemic, which was actually used precisely to hinder the tripartite deal. As a result a decrease in wages and allowances occurred.

So far, it seems that the two or three decade-long transformation of labour did not result in an improvement for the world of work. Capital seems to have won on many fronts. It is very important to note, though, that in Africa capital does not necessarily coincide with the employers. It is not paradoxical to state that stronger African employers’ organizations would perhaps be more beneficial for the African world of work as a whole than weak employers’ associations.

Increasing unemployment, declining income (and increasing profit) and “precarization” of labour represent three negative trajectories that most chapters in the book identify as the way in which African labour is transforming. These issues have been widely debated at the NYS. All economic sectors have been affected by this trend. And the pandemic crisis
only exacerbated an existing tendency and was certainly not the cause of
the problem.

Women and youth are usually the most affected by negative labour trends. This is clear after over ten years of debate at the NYS. Naome Chakanya, in Chapter 6, and Grayson Koyi, in Chapter 7, explain how African women and youth have been affected the most by negative transformations in the realm of work. These two chapters explain how limited access to formal jobs for these two categories of workers contributed to the marginalization of women and youth not only in society but within the trade unions themselves. Marginalization is caused by low numbers, which results in the exclusion from decision-making positions. More likely to be excluded from the formal sector, women and youth are more present in the informal economy. This, of course, has implications for their involvement in trade union activities and membership. Further research is needed to explore ways to include categories of workers within trade unions without legitimizing precarity. As explained in various chapters of the book, informality remains a problem that has not only to be acknowledged but seriously tackled.

As constantly emphasized by the ILO, it is not possible to talk of labour or the FoW without giving working women and youth a prominent place in the discussion. Gender and generational inequalities remain a major concern in Africa. Koyi suggests that trade unions should be more attentive to the composition of their ranks. Youth should be given more space in trade union organizations and more effort should be placed on trying to attract younger workers to join trade unions. This is not easy as youth and early career workers tend to be in a weaker position vis-à-vis employers, who often do not welcome trade unions into the work floor. Hence, African trade unions have a role to play also in the enhancement of weaker categories of workers. The ITUC-Africa NYS has constantly stressed both aspects by addressing them in all its editions (see Appendix 1, which provides an overview of the NYS themes and debates).

The transformation of labour in Africa cannot leave aside the problem of labour informality or precarity. Informal or precarious labour was discussed at various editions of the NYS. It is not coincidental that representatives of informal economy workers’ organizations, such as for example WEIGO, StreetNet International as well as those of domestic labour such as the International Domestic Work Union (IDWN) and organizations representing Workers with Disabilities such as the Africa Disability Alliance (ADA), have been invited to the NYS. Akua Britwum and Angela Akorsu give their account
of labour transformations in terms of its informalization in Africa (Chapter 8). The authors examine African trade unions’ responses to informality.

In Africa, precarious labour has a long history. Indeed, according to some observers, the extent to which this phenomenon is so widespread makes the concept of precarity almost analytically meaningless. This does not of course mean that precarity is not an important issue. Quite the contrary. Moreover, the very fact that of its ubiquity renders every act aimed at tackling the problem a socially subversive act, at least potentially. In the past, efforts have been made by various African governments to create better employment conditions. In the 1950s and 1960s, a good job was a stable and legally protected job. More recently, however, the hegemonic idea is that a growing or efficient economy depends on a flexible labour force. This is the dogma advanced by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF since the 1980s. The application of this paradigm – called the neoliberal paradigm – did not lead to an improvement in the world of work. With neoliberalism, precarity seems destined to persist undisturbed in African societies.342

African governments, one after the other, adopted structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that cancelled many gains that trade unions had managed to achieve before and after independence,343 when most African countries registered a very slow but steady process of labour formalization, accompanied by a relative expansion of welfare State measures. The SAPs reversed this trend. First, they produced a generalized weakening of the public sector and a process of de-industrialization of the continent. Secondly, major job losses occurred, especially in labour-intensive sectors of the economy such as commercial agriculture and manufacture. Thirdly,  

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the SAPs contributed to an impoverishment especially of rural workers and therefore resulted in mass urbanization (rural-to-urban migrations) and the expansion of poor urban settlements, where informality thrives. And lastly, thanks to SAPs, Africa saw an increase in income inequalities. African trade unions, which in the 1990s had emerged as major civil society actors, resisted or tried to resist these trends, but the struggle was simply overwhelming. The balance of forces was completely averse to workers’ organizations.

At the turn of the century, African trade unions seem to have increasingly adopted a variety of strategies that included critical confrontation of capital-friendly policies (as designed by the international financial institutions and similar organizations). Confronting means an acknowledgement of the historical situation and the current balance of forces. Education and continental unity (discussed below) are two pillars of this new strategy.

In Chapter 4, Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa make clear how workers consciousness is crucial to mobilize workers. To reverse the neoliberal trend, it is necessary to emancipate workers. Worker education is an important tool of trade unions in this regard. The NYS is in fact a key part of this new strategy. It represents, in this sense, not only a space for dialogue but also a platform for action.

If the transformation of labour in Africa has been a neoliberal one, African trade unions have not remained inactive. This is because deteriorating working conditions and declining labour rights were possible because neoliberal policies imply a weakening of trade unions. Being aware of these processes, trade unions responded in at least two ways: the call for a new social contract (that the ILO acknowledged) and the expansion of trade union education at a continental level.

The message is clear: the negative trend cannot continue. A transformation of labour must lead to more and better jobs, more inclusion (of women and youth), more stable employment (less precarity) and increased remuneration.
Trade unions: the reorganization of a unitarian path

A point of convergence among the authors in this book is that trade unions not only matter for workers themselves but to African economic development and social progress in general. The decline in union membership and density (the number of unionized workers over the total labour force in a given country or sector) is often used to as an argument to assert that trade unions are increasingly irrelevant actors in the economy and society. On the one hand, it is true that when trade union density declines, income inequality increases.344 Furthermore, the social and political roles of trade unions – as promoters of social progress – do not always depend on their size or density. More research is certainly needed on this topic.345

Contrary to what most people believe, trade unions, whose history pertains to the history of global capitalism, remain the best suited institutions for dealing with labour rights and workers’ conditions. The legal recognition of workers as individuals and not as property of a local chief or a commodity for companies is one of the main achievements of African trade unions. Diverse ideologies (from socialist to Christian and Islamic) as well as the ILO played a role in achieving this goal.346

Trade unions have also contributed to the introduction and the development of collective agreements and social welfare provisions (even if smaller in scale compared with the rich world) in many African countries. Trade unions contributed to the formalization of labour relations. Since precarity is a major contributing factor to the decline of labour income, it is possible

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346 See, for example, the ILO’s Declaration of Philadelphia in 1944, where it is clearly stated that “labour is not a commodity”.

to understand how precarious labour affects the entire labour force and ultimately society as a whole.

On various occasions, the ITUC-Africa NYS has called for the African labour movement to join forces with informal economy workers. This is by no means a way to recognize the legitimacy of informal conditions – which trade unions seek to eradicate – but rather a way to forge an alliance for the mutual benefit of both workers in the informal economy seeking to attain formal legal rights and trade unions struggling to expand their presence.

Enlarging trade unions’ labour constituency would be a great achievement for labour in Africa. However, as noted by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, ITUC-Africa’s General Secretary, in Chapter 2, an increase in trade union density and membership in Africa has often coincided with a fragmentation and weakening of the labour movement. On the one hand, plurality is a welcome development for any democratic setting, including the labour movement; but on the other hand, it has its limits. Kwasi Adu-Amankwah points to the damage that disunity and trade union proliferation has caused to the continental movement.

Some researchers call for a balanced relationship between proliferation and unity. This is not the point of view of trade unions, which tend to pursue unity rather than plurality. But the two are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to have plurality and unity. There are currently two major regional organizations in Africa, ITUC-Africa and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). As Kwasi Adu-Amankwah explains, these organizations are, in many respects, replicating the same functions. And many African trade unions even belong to both organizations, thus making the continental labour movement weaker. This is especially true if one considers that, due to ever-expanding markets and trade integration, many trade union struggles are to be conducted at an international level. It is indeed also at this level that unity is crucial.

To further complicate matters, at an international and global level there also exist sectorial trade unions. “Regional formations of the Global Union Federations (GUFs) also exist and provide a home and support to sector unions in various countries. The GUFs operate autonomously even though they try to find common voice among themselves and with the ITUC-Africa.

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347 See Appendix 2 for an overview of African trade unions and their regional or continental affiliations.
and OATUU”.³⁴⁸ So the view presented by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah on GUFs is not necessarily one of replication and confrontation but rather one of complementarity.

A final issue concerning trade union unity in Africa is the existence of subregional organizations. Like for unity at a continental level, subregional organizations are seen by Kwasi Adu-Amankwah as functional actors within a hierarchical, continental structure. They serve to increase plurality and hence have an overall positive function for the African labour movement as a whole. The attention to coordination, however, remains fundamental. Subregional trade union centres are autonomous organizations and some – such as the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC) and the East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC) – are more active than others. It is crucial that subregional centres coordinate their actions with the national and the continental trade union organizations. The territorial element is important and the national-subregional-continental structure is actually a positive instrument of coordination and policy. Issues can arise when unions multiply at the same geographical level (local, national, regional) or in the same economic or industrial sector.

During the Cold War, a divisive aspect of trade unions generated from the confrontation between ideological blocks; each constituting an invisible force that pulled trade unions towards each other.³⁴⁹ Trade unions competed fiercely for members and for political support on the basis of ideology. Therefore replication existed on the basis of important and fundamental differences on how to conceive and shape the world of work.

However, it has been noted that pluralism existed next to competition even during the Cold War. This is because ideological alternatives were indeed real alternatives, and this ultimately benefitted workers. Another major problem caused by the Cold War was authoritarianism, which badly affected trade unions. Authoritarian governments unrestrainedly tried (with success) to co-opt or repress trade unions.³⁵⁰

At the NYS, the question asked is the following: if trade unions’ proliferation continues, not based on ideological divisions, does this produce pluralism

³⁴⁸ See page 37 in this book.
or fragmentation? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. However, proliferation creates a problem at least in connection to decision-making processes. A formula widely used at the NYS has been: “unity amidst pluralism but following a coordinated logic”. In other words, pluralism is a positive element for democratic practices, but it cannot distract trade unions from their ultimate goal, which is the protection of the rights and conditions of workers. Unity does not mean suppression of plurality; it means not to forget the role of trade unions as representatives of the labour force.

### Trade union responses to exogenous factors: COVID-19

Government programmes and employers’ strategies are not the only cause of labour transformation in Africa. As explained above, “transformation” meant precarization and declining workers’ income. As most authors in this book point out, this is a trend that was not caused by exogenous factors such as COVID-19, climate change, war, etc. The negative transformation of the world of work was already in motion when COVID-19 hit. A factor is “exogenous” when it did not belong to an existing trend but interferes with it, either improving or worsening the situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent negatively impacting exogenous factor. In Chapter 1, Dung Pam Sha explains how the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics reported 42 per cent job losses in the country’s manufacturing, construction, aviation, hospitality and tourism sectors, directly related to COVID-19 measures.\(^{351}\)

Wage cuts and loss of allowances and income were other problems workers had to face in Africa during the pandemic. Without the support of the State, workers in Africa had to bear the dire consequences of COVID-19-related restrictions. As already explained, COVID-19 is not a cause but an exogenous factor that exasperated the already precarious condition of African labour.

\(^{351}\) See page 23 in this book.
The pandemic has put a strain on the Decent Work Agenda programmes and provisions. As noted by me and Samuel Andreas Admasie, African trade unions rallied to prevent worsening of precarisation of working conditions in the wake of the pandemic.352

In relation to workers’ education, Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa put forward another argument: how COVID-19 affected the transmission of knowledge.353 This is a crucial aspect of contemporary trade unionism. Not only have workers’ educational structures themselves been affected, but “while the overarching impacts of COVID-19 on trade union education provision in Africa is not yet fully documented, the rapid change from face-to-face interactions, enhanced through social distancing measures have massively affected worker education”.354

Naome Chakanya highlights another paradox: the “opportunities” offered by the pandemic crisis. COVID-19, while affecting women more negatively than men, has also brought to the fore the vulnerabilities of women vis-a-vis men.355 Discussions and actions are taking place on issues such as domestic work, unpaid care and reproductive work. These are all issues that disproportionately affect African women in comparison with women in other parts of the world. In Africa, COVID-19 has produced a feminization of vulnerable employment and of non-standard employment. In other words, decent work deficits pertain particularly to women. The central message in this chapter is that trade unions must advance policies that ensure that women are adequately represented in the workplace. Hence, trade unions will have a major role to play in fighting for decent work for women during the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Climate change is also an exogenous factor that affects the African world of work. Some political economy approaches would categorize climate change as an endogenous factor, because climate change would be the result of the capitalist mode of production and market-driven economies. The point made by the authors in this book is that although this might be, true African workers have suffered proportionately more than employers and even workers in other parts of the world.

352 See Chapter 5 in this book.
353 See Chapter 4 in this book.
354 See page 76 in this book.
355 See Chapter 6 in this book.
Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are somehow issues connected to one another as they are both the result of humans unwisely intermingling with nature. The consumerist culture nurtured in capitalist societies is what drives the climate and environmental crisis. ITUC-Africa and the NYS have repeatedly emphasized the importance of trade unions in dealing with climate change. After all, climate change affects workers and society directly, and therefore trade unions as well. Hence, workers’ organizations cannot avoid tackling these issues. As stated by Rhoda Boateng in Chapter 9, “trade unions as workers’ organizations, have a responsibility to contribute towards climate policy through mobilization and effective social dialogue mechanisms”. 356

Certainly trade unions in Africa have the capacity to mobilize sections of the society to meet ecological goals. Extreme weather events, water crises, natural disasters, etc. affect workers and their families. Also, the lower the income, the worse the effect of climate change on the household. This is why ITUC-Africa and its affiliates regard climate change as a major labour issue in Africa. This is also why the NYS constantly tackles the climate and environmental issues. Africa is a continent deeply affected by changing climatic conditions. Since the causes of this crisis are also to be found outside the continent, the struggle inevitably becomes a global one. Here, too, African trade unions have some capacity to engage in global action thanks to their international ties. After all, ITUC itself is a global network of trade unions.

The ILO has also committed itself to tackling the issue of climate change, as the matter was made part of the dialogues that take place nationally on the Future of Work. 357 The ILO calculated that the losses for African labour will

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357 “The ILO marks its Centenary at a time of transformative change in the world of work, driven by technological innovations, demographic shifts, environmental and climate change, and globalization, as well as at a time of persistent inequalities, which have profound impacts on the nature and future of work, and on the place and dignity of people in it“, ILO, ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2019, available online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_711674.pdf
be significantly higher than for those in other regions of the world. African societies and the African labour movement must also be prepared for these challenges. The NYS and African trade unions’ education programmes must pay close attention to the global economic reconversion – often referred to as the “great reset”.

Finally, let’s not forget that when a crisis occurs, those in weaker positions tend to be more negatively affected than other categories. In the African world of work, these are precarious workers or the working poor, often women and children in rural areas. Precarious labour being a widespread phenomenon in Africa, unprotected workers are even more marginalized than they were before the crisis. Britwum and Akorsu present a proposal for fiscal and other government policies to alleviate the position of precarious or informal economy workers. This shows that although trade unions are not representative of informal economy workers, they are certainly proponents of dignified labour.

Conclusions

This book has brought together trade unionists, academics and practitioners who have been involved in different ways with ITUC-Africa’s NYS, which is a major workers’ education exercise in Africa. As explained by Hilma Mote and Michael Akuupa, education is crucial to building “workers consciousness”, which can develop only via “critical thinking”. Mote and Akuupa continue by stating that education cannot be an abstraction and should always be linked to the needs and aspirations of workers as a group and individuals as part of a political society. Trade unions can be (and have been) fundamental actors in this: they have the knowledge and experience to pursue their

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359 See Chapter 8 in this book.

360 See Chapter 4 in this book.
goal of improving working condition in Africa. Apart from this structural capacity, trade unions connect the world of world with society at large.

There are at least two major points raised in this book. First, African trade unions are certainly better equipped than many civil society organizations operating in Africa to make a real difference in society. The problem is actually that trade unions do not always realize they have this social potential. Education also serves this purpose. Education for workers is not like traditional education. Workers’ education means knowledge based on needs. If based on workers’ needs, knowledge can only be “critical”.

Secondly, the ITUC-Africa NYS identified crucial problems in the African world of work: from the difficult relationship of trade unions with politics and governments to the issue of unity in order to form a united block with greater bargaining power; from the attention to the weaker sections of the labour force within market-driven capitalism, women and youth, to the debate on decent work; from the ecological to the health crisis. Looming over these issues is precarity and informality in labour relations. All chapters more or less deal with informal labour, which is basically the result of excessive labour exploitation, which is linked to the inactivity of many African governments in dealing with industrial planning, which is the cause of unemployment, the major problem for Africans. In this respect, the ITUC-Africa NYS message can be resumed as follows: to tackle the labour question and make work more decent in Africa means to critically rethink societies and the economy. This also implies reconsidering the historical position that Africa assumed in the global economy. African workers’ debate and education must continue, and African trade unions are in the best position to advance it.
## Appendix 1 - ITUC-Africa New Year Schools: themes and objectives, 2011–21

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Theme(s)</th>
<th>Objective(s)</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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• Develop African trade union perspectives for interventions in African and global processes and institutions.  
• Reflect on the State of the African trade union movement. | Poverty, the Decent Work Agenda; trade union capacity-building (education and training); engagement /consultations on policies; living wage, employment and unemployment in Africa; food security; governance (corruption, fragile States, weak public sector capacity, confrontational politics); climate change (water, agriculture, and forestry); infrastructure development. |

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[361] The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) New Year School (NYS) began in 2011 with the aim of offering “a regular forum for the exchange of ideas and the education of trade union leaders, activists, labour academics and researchers on issues of interest and concern to trade unions in Africa. The 2011 NYS report indicates that the school was set up to “generate new ideas, build the capacity of trade union leaders and activists to engender new dynamics through social dialogue and industrial action to promote sustainable human development.

[362] All editions were held at the ITUC-Africa Headquarters in Lomé, Togo, except for the 2012 edition. Initially, the School was to be convened on a rotational hosting basis in various countries, but the idea was not sustained because of the complex logistics involved.
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| 2012 | Emancipation, decent work, and development in Africa: the challenges for African trade unions | • Provide education for trade union leaders.  
• Present a platform for trade union leaders to discuss and analyse specific issues that confront the continent and as leaders look at ways to deal with them in the coming years. | Labour in African history –nineteenth century to present; culture; African languages, renaissance and development; World Bank, IMF, UNDP, UNECA reports: issues for trade unions; State of industrialization in Africa; WTO/Doha development agenda and Africa’s development; economic partnership agreements as well as social protection in Africa; ILO 2012 Governing Body. |
| 2013 | Strong trade unions for Africa’s emancipation                           | • Reinforce the capacity of union leadership to deal with the challenges of development.  
• Share experiences of good practices in terms of recruitment strategies, gender mainstreaming, youth inclusion, structuring of organizations, trade union leadership, services to members and initiatives of financial self-reliance. | Climate change, food sovereignty and land grabbing; African mining vision; human capital development – including Africans in the diaspora; the State in Africa - question of the developmental State, Africa and strategic relationships (new scramble for Africa); international institutions and Africa’s sustainable development; gender equality and sustainable development; African regional integration; state of trade unions in Africa; trade union services and benefits and building union power. |

This edition of the school was held at the Tom Mboya College, Kisumu, Kenya, under the auspices of the Confederation of Trade Unions in Kenya (COTU-K). The African Labour Research Network (ALRN) – a network of representatives of labour research organizations and academicians – took a leading role in the activities of the school including the setting up of the agenda, presentations and moderation.
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<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Promoting decent work and sustainable development in Africa through workers’ power</em></td>
<td>• Discuss how trade unions can promote sustainable development and decent work with workers playing a central role.</td>
<td>Decent work, sustainable development, sustainable income; organizing to achieve workers’ power; social protection; human and trade union rights.</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Organizing and mobilizing workers for Africa’s development</em></td>
<td>• Raising trade union consciousness on the importance of organizing and worker mobilization to achieve Africa's development.</td>
<td>African emancipation and working class consciousnesses; state of the labour movement in Africa today; new forms of organizing and mobilizing; unpacking the neoliberal agenda and its impact on Africa’s development; reigniting working-class consciousness: trade union ideologies and values, culture and language as means to African emancipation; African integration and unity; Ebola health crisis and impact on workers; infrastructure development and the role of trade unions; youth; environmental, wage issues.</td>
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| 2016 | **Industrial development and employment in Africa: opportunities and challenges for trade unions in the face of climate change** | - Interrogating the specific policy and enabling imperatives for industrial development.  
- Opportunities and challenges for industrial transformation and employment in the face of climate change.  
- Analysing the intricate link between national industrial development and employment outcomes in the context of climate change.  
- Outline of issues to deepen trade union research and education by ITUC-Africa. | Structural transformation and agricultural development: policies and perspectives; climate change and jobs; UN 2030 and AU 2063 agendas; trade agreements and Africa's industrialization; new forms of development partnerships and implications for workers' rights. |
| 2017 | **Halting illicit financial flows to accelerate Africa's structural transformation** | - Emphasizing the need for trade unions to heighten their awareness, actions, and involvement in efforts to curb illicit flows in Africa.  
- Understand the changing nature of work and devise strategies on what trade unions needed to do to respond to challenges associated with the new transformations in the world of work. | Tax justice and Africa's structural transformation; ILO's Future of Work initiative ‘the future of work in Africa and the role of African trade unions; resource generation and illicit flows, closing the tax loopholes and addressing inequalities; resource governance, extractives and the challenge of resource mobilization; tax justice and public services. |
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<td>The changing nature of work and growing income inequalities: African trade union response.</td>
<td>• Trade union mobilization to influence the future of work in Africa.</td>
<td>Work and human development; whanging nature of work and the future of work we want; world employment and social outlook and implication for workers in Africa; work, poverty and inequalities; wage inequalities; state of trade union organizations; organizing and youth participation.</td>
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<td>African trade unions: time for change</td>
<td>• Preparing trade unions to embrace change and re-position themselves to effectively deal with new challenges arising from transformations in the world of work as they are threatening the rights of workers in Africa and globally.</td>
<td>Trade union unity, gender, and women’s empowerment in trade unions, state of African trade unions, membership, recruitment and worker organizing, trade union finances and financial dependence, trade unions and politics, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), rights of workers with disabilities, conditions of domestic workers, bridging the informal/formal worker divide, trade union education and trade union membership.</td>
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<td>2020</td>
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<td>ILO Centenary Declaration, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), democracy, human rights peace, and security; youth, equality and organising action plans; social protection for all; economic and social development (including climate change) and internal democracy of trade unions.</td>
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<td>Building back better from COVID-19: African trade unions seizing the opportunities for recovery</td>
<td>• Discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers in Africa and how trade unions can engage in the policy formulation on recovery and resilience.</td>
<td>Trade and investments, employment, and incomes; social protection including inequality and violence in the world of work, working conditions and labour rights. Strengthening trade unions: youth, organizing, social dialogue and communication, flexible working arrangements, conflicts and insecurity, climate change and occupational health services; SDGs for recovery and resilience in Africa.</td>
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### Appendix 2 - Comparative affiliates: ITUC-Africa/OATUU/WFTU

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**Responses, Challenges and Opportunities**

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## African Trade Unions and the Future of Work
### Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

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# African Trade Unions and the Future of Work

## Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

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## African Trade Unions and the Future of Work
### Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

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## African Trade Unions and the Future of Work
Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

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## African Trade Unions and the Future of Work
Responses, Challenges and Opportunities

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### Affiliates
- **ITUC-Africa affiliates**: 105
- **OATUU affiliates**: 61
- **FSM affiliates**: 5
- **Common affiliates for ITUC-Africa/OATUU**: 51
- **Common affiliates for ITUC-Africa, OATUU and FSM**: 2
- **Other TU centres listed in the chart with no recognized international affiliation**: 37
- **Number of countries/organizations listed**: 54/160