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Good practices and strategic recommendations for strengthening trade union cooperation and collaboration in Africa

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Abstract

This study examines trade union cooperation and collaboration across Africa as a means of strengthening workers' bargaining power, policy influence and organisational effectiveness. Focusing on eight case studies across different African sub-regions, the paper assesses the forms of union cooperation and collaboration that exist, the factors that enable or constrain them, and how they can be deepened. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining desk review, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, in-depth case studies and a survey of more than 200 trade union representatives. The findings show that Africa represents a diverse landscape of trade union cooperation and collaboration, reflecting highly varied socio-economic, political and trade union realities. While over 95 per cent of unions report some form of coordination, the report finds that deeper institutional collaboration remains limited overall. Successful cooperation depends on a shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooled resources and careful management of power dynamics.

Authors

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Acronyms

ACTRAV	Bureau for Workers' Activities (International Labour Organization)
ALREI	African Labour Research and Education Institute
AU	African Union
CESTRAR	Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Rwanda
CNSS	Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
COSYLI	Confédération Syndicale Libre du Rwanda
CNTB	Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Burkina
CSB	Confédération Syndicale Burkinabè
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FEDUSA	Federation of Unions of South Africa
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GFL	Ghana Federation of Labour
ILO	International Labour Office
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
ITUC-Africa	African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation
MOUs	Memoranda of Understanding
NACTU	National Council of Trade Unions (South Africa)
NEDLAC	National Economic Development and Labour Council
NLC	Nigeria Labour Congress
ONSL	Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres (Burkina Faso)
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PANAF	Pan African Programme (Union Education)
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SG	Secretary General
TUC	Trades Union Congress (Ghana)
TUC	Trade Union Congress (Nigeria)
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail
UAS	Unité d’Action Syndicale (Burkina Faso)

Foreword

Trade unions have long stood at the forefront of social justice, democratic participation, and the pursuit of decent work across the African continent. From their historic role in independence movements and nation-building to their contemporary struggles for fair labour markets, African unions continue to demonstrate resilience and relevance in a rapidly evolving world of work. Yet, despite their rich legacy and undeniable contributions, the challenges facing the labour movement today are increasingly complex, ranging from labour market fragmentation and widening inequalities to shifting political landscapes and resource constraints.

As this report compellingly demonstrates, cooperation and collaboration among trade unions is not simply desirable - it is essential. Across the eight African countries examined, the evidence is clear: when unions work together, workers' voices become stronger, bargaining power increases, and policy influence expands. Whether through the consolidation of common positions in national tripartite forums, the establishment of joint technical committees, or coordinated advocacy on pressing issues, cooperation has proven to be a powerful catalyst for advancing workers' rights and improving working conditions.

At the same time, the report highlights that deeper forms of collaboration remain uneven. While some countries have established structured platforms and institutionalized coalitions, others are still navigating fragmentation, leadership rivalries, political interference, or resource asymmetries. These challenges remind us that unity is not a one-time achievement but a continuous endeavour - one that requires trust, inclusive leadership, transparent communication, and mutual respect.

The findings of this study offer both a diagnostic and a roadmap. By identifying the enabling conditions that allow trade union cooperation to flourish - shared vision, institutional frameworks, effective communication, resource pooling, and the careful management of power dynamics - the report provides clear guidance to unions, governments, and international partners. It also underscores the importance of regional and international solidarity, as the global nature of today's economic and labour challenges demands collective solutions grounded in the pinciples of social justice and decent work.

For the International Labour Organization's Bureau for Workers' Activities (ILO-ACTRAV) and the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa), supporting stronger, more unified, and more strategic trade union cooperation is both a responsibility and a priority.

We therefore welcome this report and commend the authors for their rigorous analysis and thoughtful recommendations. Their work provides an invaluable contribution to ongoing efforts to strengthen workers' organisations across the continent and to build a labour movement capable of shaping Africa's future of work.

We extend our appreciation to all trade union leaders, members, and affiliates who participated in this study - through interviews, surveys, or institutional engagement. Your insights, experiences, and commitment have made this report both authentic and impactful.

We also acknowledge the coordination and technical steering provided by ILO-ACTRAV's Africa Desk, the Senior Specialist in charge of ACTRAV's Trade Unions in Transformation Programme and the study's principal researchers.

As Africa confronts the challenges and opportunities of economic transformation, digitalisation, demographic change, and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the message of this report is unmistakable: united, workers are stronger.

Strengthening cooperation and collaboration is therefore not only a strategy for trade union renewal - it is a vital path toward inclusive development, social justice, and dignity for all workers across the continent.

Oliver Röpke

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Executive Summary

Trade unions play a pivotal role in advancing workers' rights, promoting fair labour practices, and fostering social justice globally. Across Africa, trade unions advocate for equitable labour policies, address workplace injustices and inequalities, and contribute to overall socio-economic development. However, despite successes in achieving these goals, trade unions in many countries in Africa face persistent challenges. Issues such as violation of trade union rights, political interference or resource constraints limit their capacity to represent workers' interests effectively and influence policy-making processes.

This report looks in-depth into two inter-linked opportunities for effective trade union action, and that is greater cooperation and collaboration among trade unions to amplify their collective impact and achieve shared goals. Increased trade union cooperation and collaboration holds the potential to more effectively defend workers' rights and weigh on policy making by pooling resources, strengthening bargaining power, avoiding conflicting messages to membership and policy makers, building organisational capacity and advocating for inclusive policies for all workers.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of trade union cooperation and collaboration in eight African countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia.[1] The country cases span different sub-regions with distinct socio-economic, political and trade union realities. Country cases range from highly restrictive legal and political contexts to more enabling environments. This obviously determines the potential of trade union cooperation and collaboration. Also, union strength differs, from well-established unionism to emerging union landscapes. The diversity of the cases allows us to assure the relevance of the study in highly different contexts and drawing diverse lessons learned that apply broadly in the continent.

The study thus examines the nature and effectiveness of interactions among unions, identifies successful practices, assesses enabling conditions and outlines strategies to overcome barriers. Drawing on key-informant interviews, survey data from national and sectoral unions and document review, the study maps the continuum of interaction and different pathways from ad-hoc information sharing to fully merged confederations, identifies the socio-economic and political conditions that accelerate or stall progress, and distils lessons for unions, governments and international partners.

The overarching aim of the study is to show how better-aligned union coalitions can amplify workers' bargaining power and policy influence across the continent. Based on the outcomes, the study proposes a model in which outcomes depend on a number of intersecting factors: vision, leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics. Where all these factors are present, unions move steadily from co-operation to integration; where gaps persist, alliances either plateau or regress.

[1] The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining desk reviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a structured survey administered via KoboCollect. Qualitative data provided contextual insights into union dynamics across eight African countries, while quantitative data - drawn from 203 union representatives across sectors and organizational levels - enabled broader trend analysis. Triangulation across methods strengthened analytical rigour and the validity of findings.

Key Findings

A diverse landscape of trade union cooperation and collaboration

– The Africa region represents a **diverse landscape** of trade union cooperation and collaboration. There is no single template, cooperation and collaboration reflect highly different realities;

– Cooperation and collaboration is understood as a **continuum**: ranging from information exchange, ad hoc collaborations and joint campaigns, increased levels of institutionalisation to full mergers.

– At a given moment in time, unions may cooperate and collaborate through **multiple, overlapping forms**.

– Over time, **unions can move and evolve on this continuum**. Many unions evolved from a more cooperation logic to institutionalisation. Informal exchange can build personal trust among union leaders; ad hoc campaigns may forge public credibility and member support; institutionalisation of alliances (e.g. rotating leadership, joint technical committees or secretariat) may provide a first governance architecture for more sustained collaboration over time.

– However, cooperation and collaboration pathways are dynamic and not purely uni-directional (e.g. evolving from more ad-hoc to more institutionalised collaboration). **Trade unions move back and forth along the spectrum**, and cooperation may progress, stagnate or regress, in response to political opportunity, leadership change or shifting member priorities.

First-level cooperation dominates

– On the cooperation-collaboration continuum, **first-level cooperation dominates** vis-à-vis more formalized forms of collaboration. These prioritize mutual learning, knowledge exchange, and organizational strengthening.

– More than **95 percent of unions** report at least one type of coordination with peer organizations, spanning information sharing, joint training, coordinated advocacy or some form of resource sharing. 83.3% of respondents reported information sharing, 77.8% participated in joint training, 70% engaged in coordinated advocacy, and 62.1% indicated some form of resource sharing.

– 100 percent of coordinating unions report **positive outcomes** resulting from their coordination efforts.

– There is very large **willingness to pursue further coordination.**

Deeper collaboration remains limited in many countries

– **Deeper collaboration –** such as long-term strategic alliances, formal resource mobilization and sharing, and sustained policy alignment **– remains limited in many countries**.

Increased institutionalisation of trade union collaboration can take various forms

– Trade union collaboration can take **diverse institutionalised forms**, including enduring coalitions, federated alliances, and, in some instances, national or sectoral consolidations.

– Across the eight countries, **trade unions have established structures and platforms to strengthen unity**. In many countries, unions have established formal or informal "Organized Labour" platforms, umbrella bodies that bring together most or all national centres to engage governments and employers on national labour issues.

- In others, **persistent fragmentation limits the depth of collaboration**, though coordination still occurs around common causes through ad hoc platforms or joint national strikes.
- The creation of shared platforms and committees has **helped to gradually institutionalize cooperation**. This includes mechanisms like rotating leadership structures and joint technical committees that enable continuous engagement.
- There remains a strong need, however, to **formalize such cooperation** through written agreements, frameworks, or institutional charters to ensure continuity and accountability.
- A recurring **tension exists between maintaining union independence and advancing unity**, especially when organizational identities or sectoral interests compete with collective goals.
- **Full mergers** remain rare.

Effective cooperation and collaboration rest on enabling factors

- Effective cooperation and collaboration rest on a foundation of **shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics**.

Context matters

- **National socio-economic and political contexts matter**. In countries where unions for instance face a shared existential threat or rally around a common transformative goal - such as political change or resistance to austerity - cooperation is galvanized.
- In contrast, progress is slower in countries with more plural labour landscapes, where internal reforms or the legal-political environment heavily determines cooperation dynamics.

Unions face important challenges to strengthen collaboration

- Unions across all countries continue to face common challenges to deeper collaboration. Typical obstacles include **limited or asymmetric financial and human resources, internal rivalries, ideological divisions, legal barriers or political interference**.
- **Membership buy-in** and unity at the base is another challenge. Union members may have strong loyalties to their federation and scepticism of others. Overcoming these perceptions takes time and shared victories.

Structural gender disparities persist

- While women are present in governance and advocacy roles, they remain **underrepresented in core leadership and management functions**. Men account for 68.5% of decision-making positions, reflecting persistent gender imbalances.

United workers are stronger

- While cooperation and collaboration practices differ across countries and unions, ranging from formal federations to informal platforms; policy coalitions to cross-border solidarity, **the underlying rationale is the same**: united, workers are stronger.

Strategic Recommendations

- The study finds that unions only advance from loose cooperation to deep integration when the following dimensions are present: **shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics.** If one is missing, it may undermine confidence, waste effort and stall progress.
- Unions must adopt a **coordinated strategy** that simultaneously fortifies each of these five enablers.
- **Trade unions** are encouraged to embed collaboration into their everyday practice through measures such as coalition health-checks, leadership rotation and joint funded solidarity pools.
- The study calls on **governments** to establish the legal and fiscal environment to nurture rather than undermine inter-union cooperation.
- **International stakeholders** should move beyond fragmented, bilateral funding and adopt plurilateral grant models that incentivise broad-based coalitions and shared platforms.
- Together, these steps can turn key enabling factors into a concrete action plan, transforming unity from a lofty ideal into **operational reality**.

The study offers targeted recommendations for trade unions, governments, and international partners to promote more effective cooperation and collaboration:

Trade unions

- Can conduct regular **"coalition audits"** to assess the current state of inter-union cooperation, identify opportunities, and outline progressive steps toward deeper collaboration.
- May **monitor and evaluate** both the short- and long-term impacts of cooperation and collaboration on workers' welfare and trade union effectiveness.
- May want to **prioritize** quick-win joint campaigns that address urgent worker issues; institutionalize rotating leadership roles to prevent power consolidation; establish solidarity financing mechanisms; and invest in digital communication tools to enhance transparency and real-time engagement.
- May want to introduce inter-union cadre **training programmes** to strengthen internal cohesion and develop a shared strategic outlook across federations.

Governments

- Have to strengthen **legal protections** - and its application in practice - for freedom of association and collective bargaining to safeguard unions from political manipulation, bias, or undue interference.
- Have to create an **enabling environment** for trade union cooperation and collaboration by recognizing union coalitions - de jure and de facto - to discourage divide-and-rule tactics, and allow unified labour representation in national policy forums.

International partners

- Should shift from bilateral to pluri-lateral funding frameworks that **incentivize broad-based, inclusive union coalitions**.
- Should support the establishment of regional "Cooperation and Collaboration Labs" to support innovation, enable peer learning; invest in digital infrastructure for secure and efficient inter-union communication; and support pan-African labour research and observatories to systematically track progress and disseminate good practices in union cooperation and collaboration.

Most importantly, this study demonstrates that enduring unity or collaboration is not left to chance but can be systematically engineered. By deliberately fortifying the enabling factors: shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics, unions can progress along the co-operation - collaboration continuum and secure lasting solidarity.

Introduction

Trade unions play a pivotal role in advancing workers' rights, promoting fair labour practices, and fostering social justice globally. Across Africa, trade unions advocate for equitable labour policies, address workplace injustices and inequalities, and contribute to overall socio-economic development.[2] However, despite successes in achieving these goals, trade unions in many African countries face persistent challenges. Issues such violation of trade union rights, political interference or resource constraints limit their capacity to represent workers' interests effectively and influence policy-making processes.

This report looks in-depth into one opportunity for effective trade union action, that furthermore is widespread in the African region, and that is **greater cooperation and collaboration among trade unions to amplify their collective impact and achieve shared goals**. Increased trade union cooperation and collaboration holds the potential to more effectively defend workers' rights and weigh on policy making by pooling resources, strengthening bargaining power, avoiding conflicting messages to membership, building organisational capacity and advocating for inclusive policies, for all workers.

Despite these benefits, **many unions in Africa remain fragmented**, leading to inefficiencies, diluted bargaining power, and conflicting messages to their members, policymakers and the general public. External factors, such as restrictive labour laws and political interference, exacerbate these divisions. Internally, leadership disputes and competing agendas often undermine efforts to foster strengthened cooperation and collaboration. Addressing these barriers requires an in-depth understanding of trade union dynamics and tailored strategies that reflect the diverse contexts in which unions operate.

Trade union cooperation and collaboration are fundamental mechanisms for amplifying the voice and influence of workers' organisations in advocating for labour rights, decent work, and social justice. While often used interchangeably, these terms hold distinct meanings that highlight varying levels of engagement among unions.

- **Trade Union Cooperation** refers to unions working together on specific activities or initiatives while maintaining their organisational independence. This type of engagement typically focuses on short-term objectives, such as joint campaigns, coordinated training programmes, or information-sharing.
- **Trade Union Collaboration**, on the other hand, involves deeper partnerships where unions align their strategies, share resources, and establish formal alliances to pursue long-term goals. Collaboration often requires a higher degree of trust, mutual commitment, and structured frameworks for joint decision-making.

A diversity of Experiences Across the Continent

This research focuses on the experiences of trade unions in **Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Tunisia**. These cases underscore the importance of fostering internal cooperation and collaboration while mitigating external disruptions. These

2 In this study, the term trade unions is understood broadly, however, the main emphasis is on national trade union centers.

countries were selected to provide diverse insights into the dynamics of trade union cooperation and collaboration, as follows:

- First, they represent a range of **political systems, economic conditions, and labour market structures**. For instance, Tunisia exemplifies how unions, such as the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), can play dual roles in labour advocacy and broader socio-political movements. While UGTT has demonstrated resilience, it faces internal leadership struggles and external pressures[3].
- South Africa's trade unions are among the strongest on the continent, with organisations like the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) wielding significant influence. Despite this strength, the socio-economic and political environment has often undermined trade union unity and effectiveness[4].
- In Ghana, unions such as the Trades Union Congress (TUC) have a strong legacy of protecting workers' rights and promoting socio-economic reforms. However, they face difficulties in maintaining cohesion among their affiliates, especially in light of economic pressures and changing labour markets[5].
- Second, these countries illustrate **varying levels of union strength and challenges**. South Africa and Ghana demonstrate the influence of strong and well-established unions, while Rwanda offers insights into building capacity in more emerging union landscapes. For example, Rwanda's Workers' Trade Union Confederation (CESTRAR)[6] operates within a highly regulated environment, providing lessons on navigating constraints. Similarly, Senegal[7] and Burkina Faso[8] highlight the struggles of unifying fragmented unions to maximise their impact on labour advocacy.
- Third, these countries provide critical lessons on overcoming fragmentation in a context of **legal constraints and political interference**. In Cameroon, the Confederation of Cameroon Trade Unions (CCTU)[9] faces significant challenges from restrictive laws and political interference, offering insights into maintaining union independence in such environments[10]. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) contend with political pressures that test their autonomy.
- Finally, the selected countries span **different sub-regions of Africa**, ensuring that the findings of this research are broadly applicable across the continent. This geographical diversity enables the study to draw lessons that resonate with unions operating in varied cultural, political, and economic contexts, thereby enhancing the relevance and adaptability of its recommendations.

By examining the dynamics of trade union cooperation in these eight countries, this research seeks to **identify good practices and strategic recommendations** that can strengthen trade union collaboration across Africa. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for addressing fragmentation, leveraging collective strength, and building cohesive labour movements capable of driving meaningful change. This work is expected to contribute to a more unified and effective trade union movement, advancing workers' rights and promoting sustainable socio-economic development across the continent.

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3 Angrist, M. P. (2021). "Understanding Tunisia's labour movement in the context of political change." *Middle East Journal*, 75(3), 407-424.
4 Buhlungu, S. (2017). *A paradox of victory: COSATU and the democratic transformation in South Africa*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
5 Quartey, P., & Ackah, C. (2022). "Trade unionism and labour market dynamics in Ghana." *Journal of African Economies*, 31(1), 44-67.
6 Schulz, H. (2018). "Regulated labour: Rwanda's trade unions and the challenges of independence." *African Affairs*, 117(468), 543-564.
7 Diop, M. (2021). "Trade unions and economic development in Senegal." *African Affairs*, 120(478), 222-245.
8 Sawadogo, A. (2020). "Labour movements and political activism in Burkina Faso." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 58(2), 145-165.
9 Mbaku, J. M. (2020). "Cameroon's trade unions: Between repression and resilience." *African Studies Quarterly*, 21(4), 65-80.
10 Ibid.

Challenges and Opportunities

Trade unions in Africa face **numerous challenges** that hinder their ability to collaborate effectively. These challenges vary across countries but share common themes, such as fragmentation, political interference, resource constraints, and leadership disputes.

- First, **high levels of fragmentation** is one of the most significant barriers to effective trade union collaboration. In Senegal, for example, the proliferation of small, independent unions dilutes their collective bargaining power, making it difficult to present a unified front during negotiations (Diop, 2021).[11] Similarly, Burkina Faso faces challenges with factionalism, where competing interests among unions often lead to duplicated efforts and reduced influence (Sawadogo, 2020).[12]
- Secondly, **political interference** also undermines the independence and effectiveness of unions, including in strengthening cooperation and collaboration. In Cameroon, trade unions operate in a restrictive environment, where government intervention often compromises their ability to advocate for workers' rights. This interference weakens not only unions' autonomy, but also fosters mistrust among unions, its members and leaders[13]. Nigeria also experiences significant political interference, where unions like the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) Ghana are frequently drawn into partisan conflicts[14].
- Third, **resource constraints** – both financial and technical – remain a critical challenge in several of the countries studied. In many cases, limited resources hinder unions' ability to conduct large-scale advocacy campaigns or invest in capacity-building initiatives. In Rwanda, for instance, unions may lack the organisational capacity to engage in sustained collaboration due to inadequate internal resources and technical expertise. Even in countries with stronger union traditions, such as South Africa or Nigeria, the issue is not always resource scarcity but rather the prioritization and strategic deployment of available resources[15].
- Finally, **leadership disputes and governance challenges** further complicate the landscape of union collaboration. In Tunisia, while the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) has played a historic and transformative role in socio-political movements, internal tensions and contested leadership transitions have, at times, posed challenges to internal cohesion[16]. Such disputes can erode trust and reduce unions' ability to sustain unified action.

Despite these challenges, **significant opportunities** exist for strengthening trade union cooperation and collaboration. Opportunities range from strengthening bargaining power, pooling of resources to organisational learning.

- **First, enhancing bargaining power**: By uniting efforts, unions can present a cohesive front during negotiations, strengthening their ability to secure favourable outcomes for workers. For example, coordinated advocacy campaigns across sectors can compel policymakers to adopt inclusive labour reforms.
- **Second, optimising resource utilisation**: Collaboration enables unions to pool resources, share technical expertise, and reduce duplication of efforts. This is particularly beneficial in resource-constrained environments where smaller unions may lack the capacity to independently pursue their objectives.

11 Diop, "Trade unions and economic development...," op. cit.
12 Sawadogo, "Labour movements and political activism...," op. cit.
13 Mbaku, "Cameroon's trade unions...," op. cit.
14 Okafor, E. E. (2012). "The role of labour unions in Nigeria's democratization process." *African Journal of Political Science*, 10(2), 101-120.
15 Buhlungu, *A paradox of victory*...op. cit.
16 Angrist, "Understanding Tunisia's labour movement...," op. cit.

- **Third, improved organisational capacity**: Joint training, shared strategies, and cross-union exchanges build internal skills and institutional learning.
- **Fourth, building trust and mutual understanding:** Joint initiatives foster mutual understanding and trust among unions, promoting a sense of solidarity that transcends organisational boundaries. This solidarity is crucial for addressing common issues such as wage disparities, unsafe working conditions, and social injustices.
- **Fifth, increased visibility and credibility**: Coordinated actions raise public and political recognition of unions as legitimate actors.
- **Sixth, inclusive policies:** Unified representation in policy dialogues amplifies the collective voice of workers, ensuring that labour policies are inclusive and reflective of workers' needs. Formal alliances can serve as powerful platforms for influencing national, regional, and global labour agendas.
- **Seventh, adapting to emerging challenges**: The dynamic nature of labour markets demands proactive strategies to address new challenges such as digitalisation, automation, and climate change. Collaborative efforts enable unions to stay ahead of these trends by sharing insights and best practices.

1 Typology of Trade Union Cooperation and Collaboration

Empirical evidence from the eight case study countries confirms that trade union relationships rarely follow a single template; rather, they occupy points along a continuum running from light touch information exchange to full organisational merger. Each stage confers progressively greater bargaining power, but also demands higher levels of trust, resources and internal discipline. The typology below groups the most common arrangements into five distinct but inter connected forms. Although they are presented as discrete categories, unions frequently move back and forth along the spectrum in response to political opportunity, leadership change or shifting member priorities. Understanding where a partnership currently sits and what is required to progress to the next tier is therefore central to devising effective organising strategies.

The practical challenge for African trade union leaders is therefore twofold: first, to diagnose realistically where their movement currently sits on the continuum; and second, to craft incremental, resource sensitive strategies that move them one step further towards deeper solidarity and greater influence.

Exchange of Information and Best Practice

The first level of cooperation involves the routine sharing of information, data, research and lessons learned. It is typically informal, inexpensive and low risk, making it attractive to unions that have little prior history of working together.

Features

- Study visits, WhatsApp groups, joint newsletters
- No pooled finances and no joint decision making structures
- Focus on technical issues (e.g. wage trend analysis, OSH issues, , organising tactics)

Examples

- Burkina Faso's confederations circulate a single "grievance list" template each May Day, enabling affiliates to benchmark demands.
- Rwandan centres keep an active WhatsApp forum that flags new labour code amendments and donor funding windows.

Strategic value

- Builds trust gradually and provides an evidence base for later joint campaigns.
- Low barriers to entry mean that even resource poor unions can participate.

Ad Hoc Collaborations and Campaigns

Here, unions shift from mere information exchange to coordinated action around a time bound objective, usually a protest, strike or policy intervention.

Features

- Temporary coalitions with clear end points and minimal bureaucracy
- Each union funds and mobilises its own members, but public messaging is synchronised
- Typical issues: minimum wage uprating, pension fund reforms, anti privatisation drives

Examples

- Nigeria's NLC and TUC orchestrated joint national strikes (2012, 2021) that forced partial fuel price roll backs.
- South African federations mounted a one day "national shutdown" in August 2022, unifying historically rival blocs.

Strategic value

- Demonstrates the power of a united front without sacrificing organisational autonomy.
- Successes at this level often generate momentum for institutionalised alliances.

Institutionalised Alliances and Unified Representation

When ad hoc coordination becomes routine, unions frequently codify their partnership through charters, rotating secretariats or standing committees. They still retain legal independence, but they speak with one voice in national tripartite forums and sectoral bargaining councils.

Key features

- Formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs), joint technical teams, pooled training budgets.
- Agreed procedures for selecting lead negotiators or spokespersons.
- Mechanisms for dispute resolution to prevent public fall outs.

Illustrative examples

- Senegal's Coalition des Syndicats has a Conference of General Secretaries, thematic working groups and a jointly endorsed May Day platform.
- Ghana's "Organised Labour" convenes all major centres, including independent teacher unions, to adopt a single wage position before Tripartite Committee talks.

Strategic value

- Enhances policy leverage by eliminating "divide and rule" tactics from government or employers.
- Enables cost sharing, e.g. for research units (e.g. Burkina Faso's CARES) and national level mobilisation.

Merging of Trade Unions

At the far end of the continuum, unions dissolve their separate legal personalities to create a new, consolidated federation or amalgamate sector specific unions into a larger industrial union.

Key features

- Full integration of finances, staff, membership databases and branding.
- Unified Constitution and leadership elections.
- Often preceded by multi year trust building and asset valuation exercises.

Illustrative examples

- Historical mergers in Nigeria that produced today's NLC, unifying four formerly competing centres.
- Sectoral amalgamations in Tunisia's UGTT, where smaller craft unions have been absorbed into stronger industry unions for bargaining clout.

Strategic value

- Maximises scale economies, eliminates duplication and presents a singular political constituency.
- Creates stability in national social dialogue, as interlocutors are clear and undisputed.

Phased Evolution of Cooperation

Very few movements leap directly from information exchange to merger. Instead, unions traverse the typology in phases, often retreating during leadership crises and advancing again when external conditions favour unity.

Typical trajectory

- Informal exchange builds personal trust among leaders.
- Ad hoc campaigns forge public credibility and member support.
- Institutionalised alliance provides the governance architecture for sustained collaboration.
- Merger (optional) culminates when strategic gains outweigh fears of identity loss.

Enablers

- Consistent, value based leadership committed to inclusivity.
- Transparent resource sharing arrangements to allay suspicions.
- Responsive internal democracy ensuring rank and file endorsement at each step.

Derailers

- Power imbalances or unresolved historical grievances.
- External political interference offering side payments to break coalitions.
- Administrative overload when alliance structures outpace financial capacity.

▶ **Table 1: Major Union Mergers in Africa – Enabling Context & Design Choices**

Enabling context (sets the stage)	Key design choices (make the merger stick)
Democratic or constitutional transition – political opening created space (e.g. Nigeria's post-military labour decree; Zimbabwe's independence; South Africa's pre-1994 settlement talks)	**Single, federated Constitution** – one confederal charter but sectoral affiliates keep bargaining autonomy; safeguards reassure powerful legacy unions.
External threat or historic shock – austerity, structural-adjustment packages, apartheid repression: rivals realised they could only prevail together.	**One-member/one-vote at Congress** – prevents dominance by the biggest legacy union and builds trust among smaller partners.
State push for a recognised interlocutor – governments wanted one channel for social-dialogue (sometimes carrot, sometimes stick).	**Rotating leadership and term limits** – spreads prestige, nudges renewal (COSATU's three-term cap; ZCTU's regional rotation rule).
Charismatic brokers with cross-faction credibility – figures such as Michael Imoudu (Nigeria) or Elijah Barayi (South Africa) neutralised personal rivalries long enough to draft a joint programme.	**Phased financial integration** – first joint strike-fund, later pooled research & training budgets; gives time for due-diligence and cultural alignment.
Pre-existing habit of joint action – informal strike support and solidarity campaigns meant relationships of trust, commitment and communication already existed before legal fusion.	**Minority-rights clauses** – guaranteed executive seats for smaller sectors/regions; prevents "winner-takes-all" dynamics and cements commitment.
External support – ILO support, Nordic Solidarity Centres and Church networks provided negotiation venues, mediation and seed-funds for new secretariats.	**Transparent asset audit & dues-equalisation formula** – open books at the start; agreed method for converging per-capita dues over 3-5 years.

These historic mergers exemplify the **"structural-integration" end of the collaboration spectrum**: the most permanent, resource-intensive path where separate centres dissolve into one. The same five enabling factors we use throughout the framework **commitment, trust, transparent communication, institutional machinery and facilitative leadership** are visible here, simply magnified:

- Commitment was forged by shared external threats and codified in a single constitution.
- Trust grew from years of pre-merger joint actions and was protected by minority-rights clauses.
- Transparent communication took tangible form in open-book asset audits and one-member/one-vote congresses.
- Institutional mechanisms include phased financial integration and federated governance.
- Facilitative leadership came from credible brokers who stewarded negotiations and then stepped back under term-limit rules.

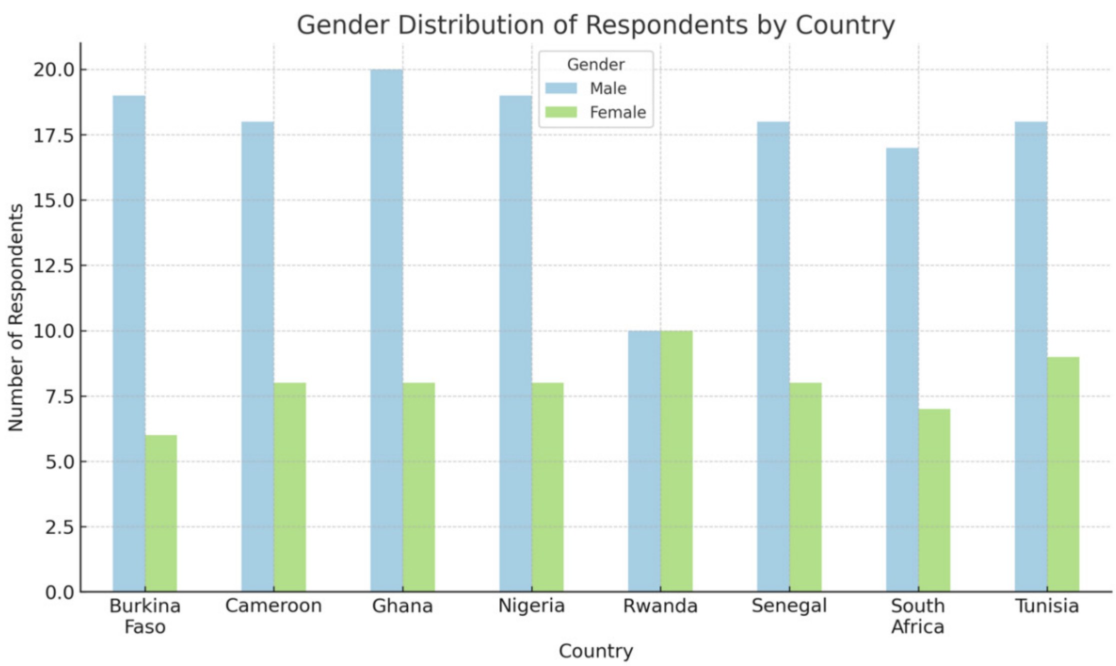
▶ 2 Mapping Cooperation and Collaboration

This section analyses **survey data** gathered from national trade union centres in eight African countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia. The instrument covered a comprehensive set of themes, including leadership representation, coordination practices, institutional constraints, and strategic priorities for advancing collaboration. The findings provide an evidence-based snapshot of how unions engage with one another and the structural conditions that support or hinder those engagements.

Gender Distribution of Respondents by Country

Figure 1 presents the national and gender distribution of union representatives who participated in the survey. Respondents are drawn from eight African countries, with representation per country ranging from 20 to 28 individuals. Ghana recorded the highest number of responses (28), while Rwanda recorded the lowest (20). The relatively even distribution of participants across countries enhances the comparative scope and regional representativeness of the dataset. The gender composition reveals a clear imbalance: **68.5 percent of respondents are male, while 31.5 percent are female**. This skewed distribution likely reflects prevailing patterns in union leadership and participation across the region, where structural gender disparities remain a persistent feature of labour representation.

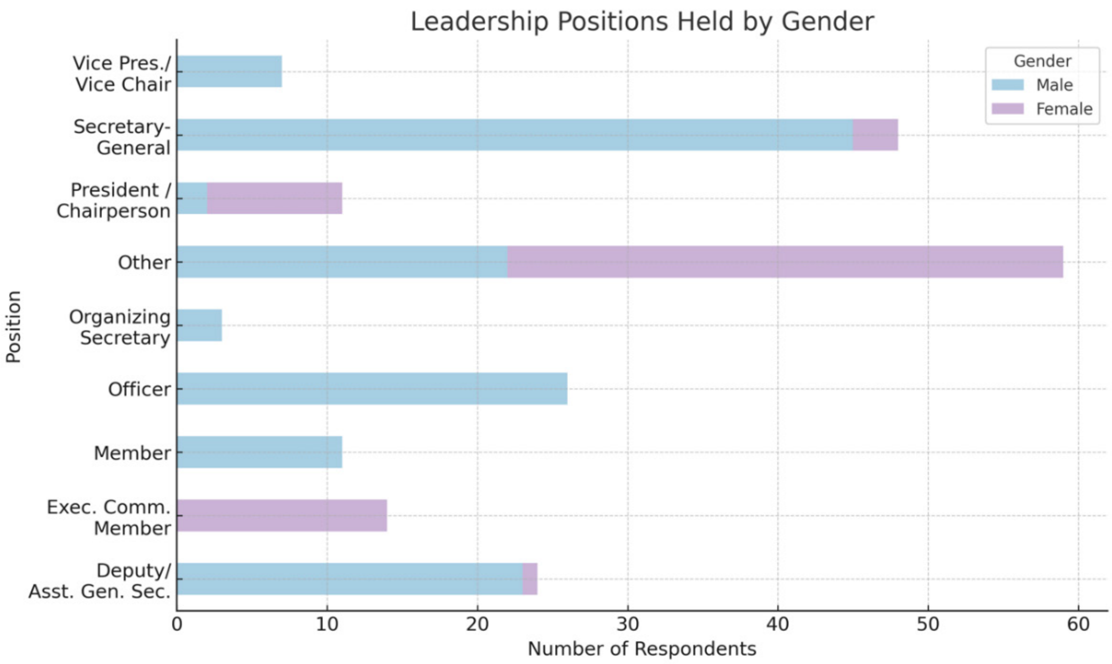
▶ **Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents by Country**



Distribution of Leadership Position by Gender

Figure 2 illustrates the gender distribution across key leadership positions within the unions surveyed. The data reflects a significant gendered segmentation of responsibilities. Female respondents most commonly occupy roles such as Executive Committee Member and President/ Chairperson, with many also falling into the "Other" category – encompassing roles in communications, training, policy, and other specialist or support functions. These positions tend to focus on governance, advocacy, and coordination rather than direct management. In contrast, **male respondents dominate core operational and executive roles**, including Secretary-General, Officer, Deputy/Assistant General Secretary, and Organizing Secretary. These roles are central to the day-to-day administration and strategic direction of the unions, indicating a strong male presence in organizational command structures.

▶ **Figure 2: Distribution of Leadership Positions by Gender**

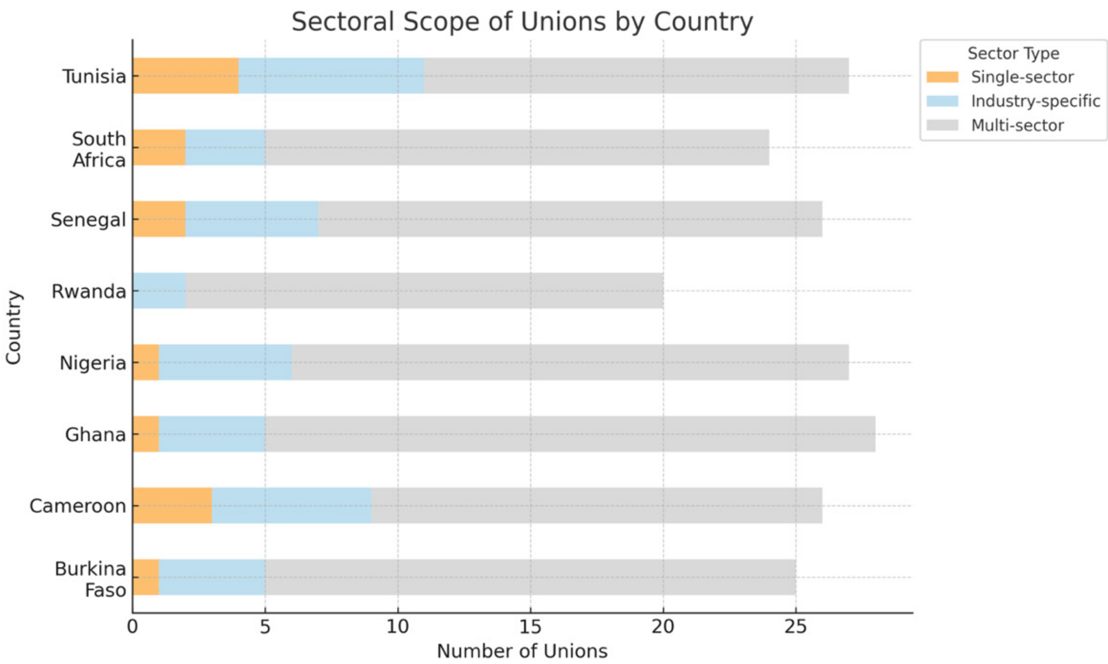


Sectoral Distribution of Unions by Country

Figure 3 presents the sectoral composition of trade unions in the eight surveyed countries, categorized into single-sector, industry-specific, and multi-sector organizations. The data reveal a **pronounced trend toward multi-sector representation**, with this category overwhelmingly dominating across all countries. Rwanda, for example, reports no single-sector unions and only two industry-specific ones; all remaining organizations fall into the multi-sector category. Similarly, countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and South Africa show a heavy concentration of multi-sector unions.

In contrast, single-sector unions are rare, just thirteen across the entire dataset and are entirely absent in Rwanda. Industry-specific unions account for thirty-six cases, forming a modest minority. The overall pattern suggests that unions in the region are increasingly broadening their mandates to represent a wider array of industries and worker groups, moving beyond narrower sector-specific advocacy. This may reflect a strategic response to complex and evolving labour market structures.

▶ **Figure 3: Sectoral Distribution of Unions by Country**



Figures 4, 5, and 6 provide a composite view of union-to-union coordination across eight African countries. These Figures examine three dimensions: the extent of current coordination practices, the outcomes perceived by unions engaging in such practices, and the degree of willingness among unions to participate in future collaboration.

Figure 4 indicates that coordination among trade unions is nearly universal. In seven of the eight countries, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia, **more than 95 percent of unions report active coordination with peer organizations**. This high level of engagement suggests that cross-union collaboration is not only normative but also deeply embedded in the operational culture of national union centres.

▶ **Figure 4: Prevalence of Inter-Union Coordination by Country**

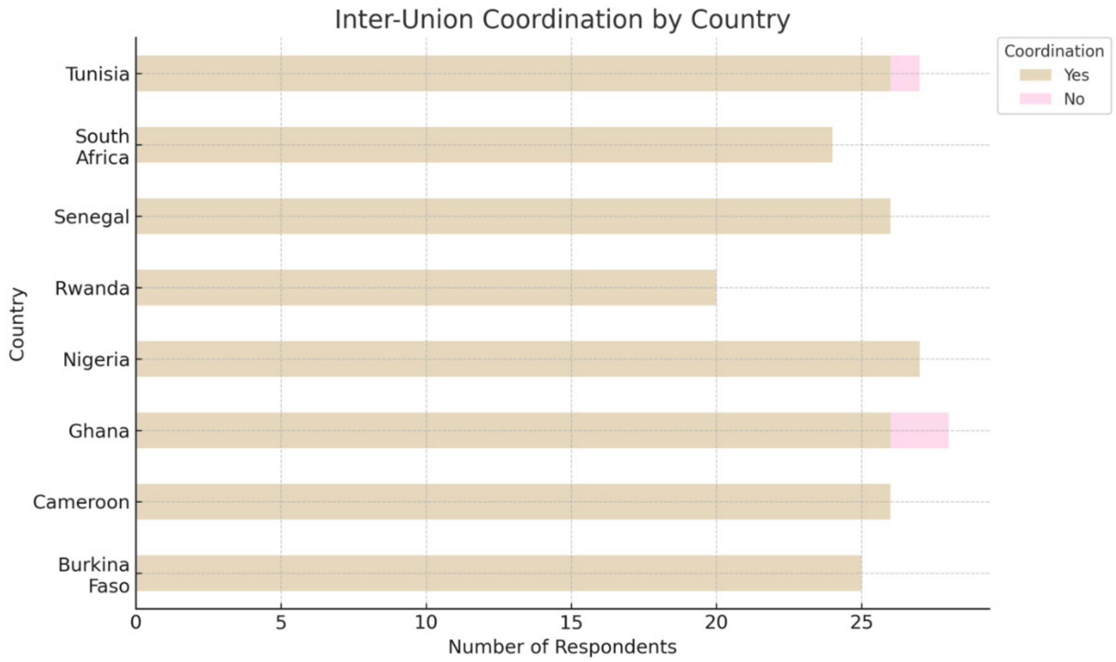


Figure 5 reinforces the perceived value of coordination. **In almost all countries, coordinating unions report positive outcomes resulting from their coordination efforts**. The two exceptions are marginal, with just one respondent each in Ghana (3.6 percent) and Tunisia (3.7 percent) noting the absence of benefits. These results suggest that coordination is not merely symbolic or procedural but is widely regarded as a means to foster trade union solidarity and progress.

▶ **Figure 5: Reported Positive Outcomes from Inter-Union Coordination**

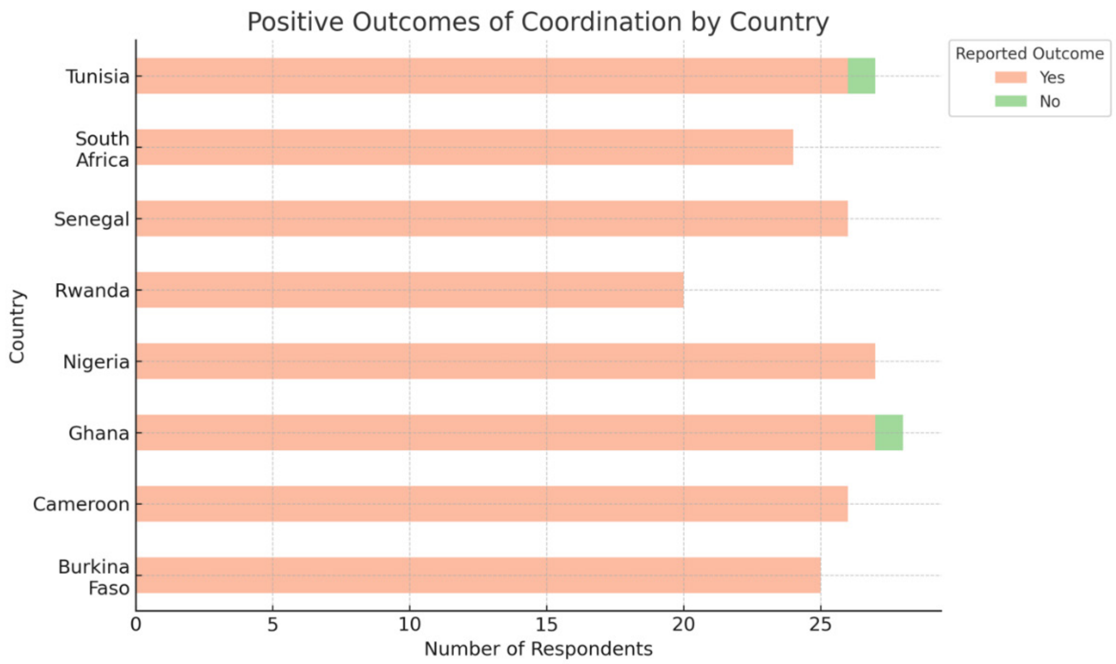
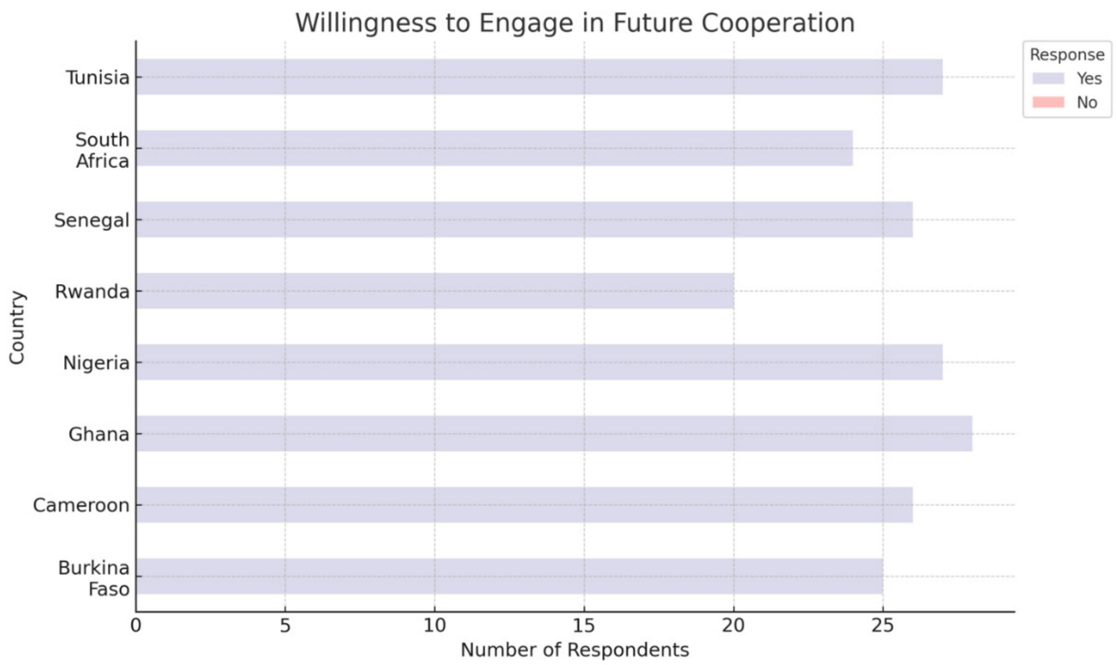


Figure 6 demonstrates an unanimous **willingness among respondents to pursue further coordination**. Every union surveyed, across all eight countries, affirmed its readiness to participate in future collaborative initiatives. This consistency indicates a strong regional consensus: inter-union partnership is not only a current reality but a strategic direction that unions are committed to strengthening over time.

▶ **Figure 6: Willingness to Pursue Future Union Cooperation**

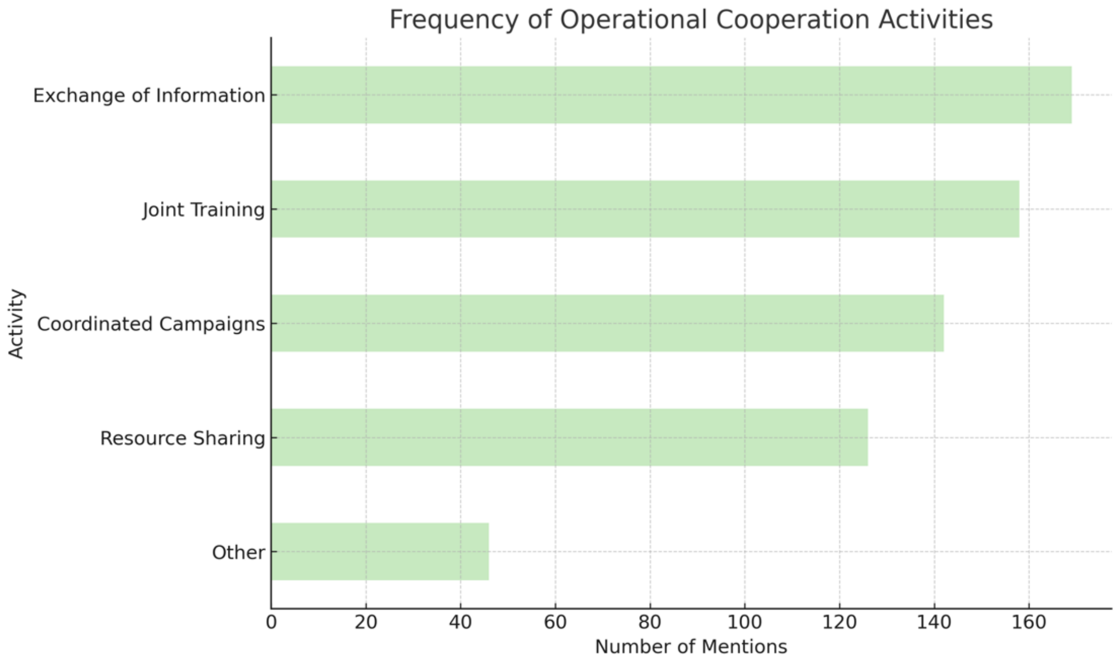


Prevalence of Union Cooperation and Collaboration Activities

Figure 7 summarizes the prevalence of key operational cooperation activities among unions across the eight surveyed countries. **The most frequently reported form of cooperation is the exchange of information and best practices**, cited by 169 respondents (83.3%). Joint training initiatives are similarly widespread, with 158 unions (77.8%) participating in shared capacity-building efforts. Coordinated campaigns (70.0%) and resource-sharing arrangements (62.1%) also feature prominently, albeit at slightly lower levels. A smaller segment of unions (22.7%) mentioned "other" cooperative practices, typically referring to informal or context-specific engagements.

The findings point to a clear regional orientation toward more first-level forms of cooperation that prioritize mutual learning, knowledge exchange, and organizational strengthening. Furthermore, **many unions participate in multiple forms of operational cooperation, reflecting a layered and multidimensional approach to inter-union engagement**. While some variation exists at the national level, with countries such as Ghana and Senegal showing especially high rates of participation, the overall pattern underscores a shared commitment to practical, results-oriented partnerships across the region.

Figure 7: Frequencies of Operational Cooperation Activities

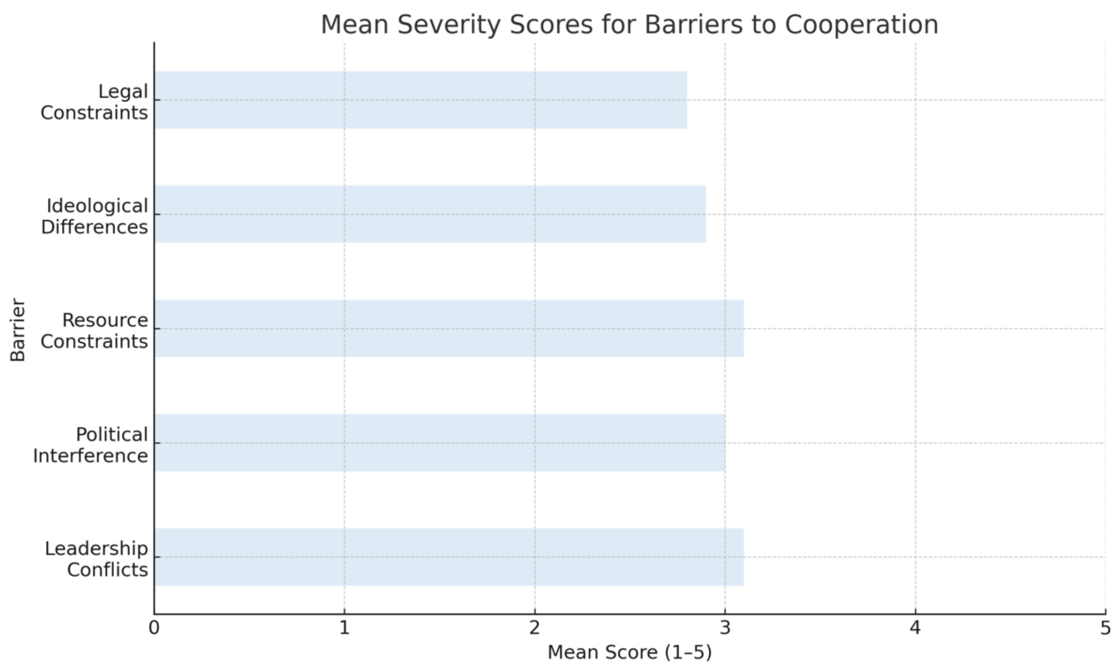


Perceived Barriers to Inter-Union Cooperation

Figure 8 presents the average severity ratings for five common barriers to inter-union cooperation, as reported by unions across eight countries. Leadership conflicts and resource constraints emerge as the most significant impediments, each receiving a mean score of 3.1 on a 5-point scale. Political interference follows closely with a score of 3.0, while ideological differences (2.9) and legal constraints (2.8) are viewed as somewhat less severe.

The relatively narrow range of scores from 2.8 to 3.1 suggests that unions across the region face a shared cluster of moderate-to-high institutional and political challenges. While country-level variation exists such as Rwanda's consistently lower severity scores, the overall pattern indicates that concerns about **leadership dynamics, funding, and political context** are widely recognized. These constraints may limit the efficiency, cohesion, or strategic alignment of union initiatives, underscoring the need for both internal reforms and supportive external frameworks.

▶ **Figure 8: Mean Severity Scores for Barriers to Cooperation**

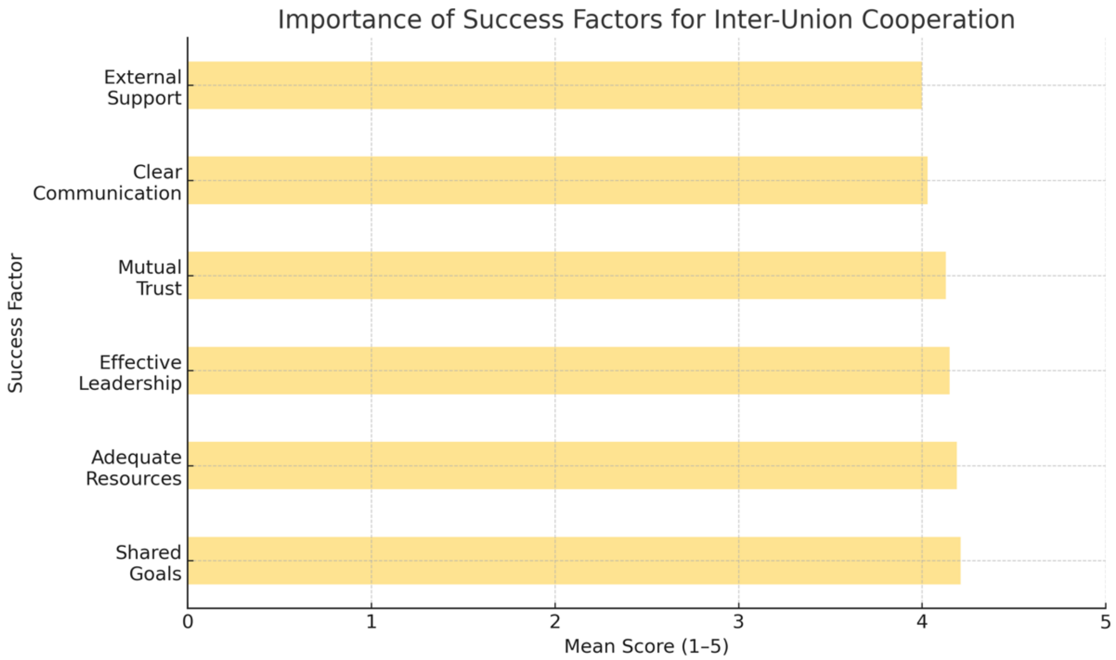


Perceived Success Factors in Union Cooperation and Collaboration

Figure 9 presents the mean importance ratings assigned to six key factors that support effective inter-union cooperation. All factors received high scores, with averages exceeding 4.0 on a 5-point scale, indicating strong consensus among respondents regarding their critical importance. **"Shared goals and objectives"** (4.21) and "adequate resources" (4.19) are the top-rated factors. **"Effective leadership"** (4.15) and **"trust and mutual respect"** (4.13) also feature prominently, while **"clear communication"** (4.03) and **"external support"** (4.00) round out the list with slightly lower, but still significant ratings.

The narrow range of scores reflects a broadly shared perspective across countries on the essential ingredients for collaboration. Rwanda tends to report slightly lower averages across all indicators, whereas Ghana and Senegal consistently rate most factors at or above 4.2. These national differences suggest that while the overall importance of success factors is widely acknowledged, institutional emphasis and implementation may vary by context.

▶ **Figure 9: Mean Importance Ratings for Success Factors in Union Cooperation**



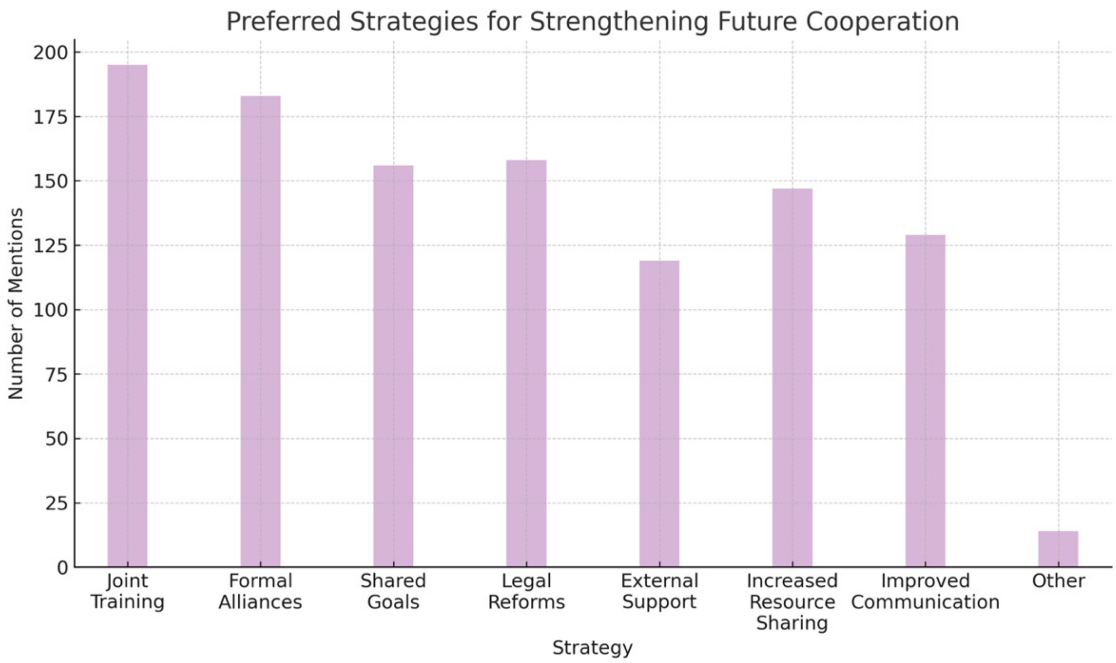
Perceived Strategies for Advancing Inter-Union Cooperation

Figure 10 outlines the strategies most frequently cited by union representatives as effective pathways for enhancing future cooperation. The most widely supported measure is joint training and capacity-building, selected by 195 out of 203 respondents (96.1%). This is closely followed by the development of shared goals (90.1%) and the formation of formal alliances or coalitions (76.8%), signalling strong alignment around both institutional and policy-based approaches.

Improved communication mechanisms (77.8%) and enhanced resource sharing (58.6%) also rank highly, reflecting continued emphasis on coordination and operational integration. Legal reforms (72.4%) and external support (63.5%) are also valued, though viewed as slightly less central. Only a small number of respondents (6.9%) proposed alternative strategies, indicating a broad regional consensus on core priorities.

The data suggest a **clear preference for strategies that reinforce institutional frameworks, align policy agendas, and expand collaborative capacity**. While national variation is evident, such as Rwanda's focus on foundational mechanisms and Ghana's high uptake across nearly all categories, the overarching pattern points to a collective commitment to structured, resource-backed, and future-oriented union collaboration.

Figure 10: Strategies for Strengthening Future Union Collaboration



▶ 3 Case Studies on Trade Union Cooperation and Collaboration

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of trade union cooperation and collaboration in eight African countries – **Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia**. The section examines distinct approaches, common themes, success factors, and challenges across these countries.

Overall, **the evidence demonstrates widespread cooperation across countries**, particularly around specific issues and campaigns. However, deeper collaboration, such as formal alliances or long-term strategic partnerships, remains rare. For instance, countries like Senegal and Burkina Faso show signs of deeper institutionalised cooperation, whereas Cameroon and South Africa generally reflect fragmented cooperation without substantial long-term collaboration.

Across the eight countries, trade unions have pursued certain levels of unity to amplify their voice in bargaining and policy advocacy. In several cases (e.g. Senegal and Burkina Faso), formerly divided unions formed enduring coalitions to present a unified front. In others (like Cameroon and, until recently, South Africa), fragmentation still limit the depth of collaboration, though some coordination exists on common causes. Many have developed what can be termed **"Organized Labour" platforms** – umbrella groupings of most or all union centres – to negotiate national issues such as minimum wage, labour law reforms, or social protection. These joint platforms, whether formal or informal, allow unions to speak with one voice to governments and employers. For example, in Ghana, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) works together with the Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL) and other independent unions under the banner of Organized Labour, enabling broad-based strikes and policy interventions. Similarly, Nigeria's two national centres (NLC and TUC) often coordinate as "Organised Labour" in national protests and negotiations. By contrast, in Tunisia, a single union centre (UGTT) dominates the landscape, so domestic cooperation is less relevant – yet UGTT engages in extensive international collaboration with unions abroad.

Despite different contexts, some **common themes** emerge.

- First, unity of action – such as joint protests, general strikes or common policy positions – has proven **effective** in all countries to raise labour's profile. In Senegal, for instance, all major federations now commemorate May 1 together with a single list of demands.
- Second, establishing shared platforms and committees has **facilitated regular cooperation**. Several countries have created rotating leadership structures or joint technical committees to manage partnerships (e.g. Burkina Faso's rotating "Union Action Unit", Rwanda's Trade Union Advisory Forum, Senegal's coalition committees).
- Third, **trust and leadership** are critical. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of mutual respect, inclusive leadership, and clear communication in sustaining cooperation and collaboration. As one Ghana union leader put it, *"Working class formations must unite and complement each other, not compete... No single trade union in Ghana is strong enough to force government to abandon neoliberalism and austerity measures."*
- Finally, **challenges persist** everywhere. Resource limitations, internal politics, competition for influence, and legal hurdles can all hinder deeper levels of collaboration. In some cases,

unions remain at a stage of basic cooperation and have not transitioned to deeper collaboration due to these obstacles.

Table 2 below summarizes key features of trade union cooperation and collaboration in the eight countries, highlighting the number of union centres, the main cooperation/collaboration mechanisms, and illustrative outcomes of these efforts.

▶ **Table 2: Trade Union Cooperation and Collaboration**

Country	Union Centres (National)	Cooperation/Collaboration Mechanism	Outcomes
Burkina Faso	6 national confederations (centrals) + independent unions	Permanent coalition “Unité d’Action Syndicale (UAS)” with rotating presidency (since 1990)	Joint demands (e.g. single grievance list; secured pension coverage for informal workers via a voluntary social insurance scheme)
Cameroon	Approx. 10 union confederations	Informal inter-union consultation platform (Cameroon Workers Forum) with occasional joint actions	Government created a national social dialogue committee for unions as a result of unions’ coordinated advocacy
Ghana	2 main union centres (TUC, GFL) + major independent unions (e.g. teachers’ unions)	“Organized Labour” coalition uniting TUC, GFL and independent unions for national negotiations and strikes	Unified front in wage negotiations (e.g. a common position on minimum wage increases) giving trade unions greater leverage in bargaining
Nigeria	2 union centres (NLC, TUC)	Joint campaigns and statements under “Organised Labour” (NLC–TUC alliance on national issues)	Joint strikes (e.g. against fuel price hikes) forced policy reversals and adoption of a higher national minimum wage (2019)
Rwanda	3 union confederations (CESTRAR, COTRAF, COSYLI)	Rwanda Trade Union Advisory Forum – an informal coordination body	Common positions in tripartite dialogue (e.g. National Labour Council) and joint union actions (e.g. coordinated collective bargaining in companies)
Senegal	5 union confederations	Formal Coalition of Trade Unions with charter, shared committees, etc.	“Unity of action” achieved: single May Day celebrations, consensus on labour law reforms (revised Labour Code and Social Security Code) through unified advocacy
South Africa	4 union federations (COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU, SAFTU)	Ad hoc unity in national strikes and policy campaigns; coordination through NEDLAC (tripartite forum including all federations)	First joint national strike in August 2022 saw federations march together against austerity measures
Tunisia	1 dominant union centre (UGTT) + smaller unions	UGTT unilaterally represents labour nationally (by law); extensive international cooperation	UGTT’s partnerships abroad have strengthened union movements in the region; enhanced UGTT’s capacity on issues like the social economy

The case studies reveal both **common themes and diverse approaches** in trade union cooperation across Africa. Many themes resonate across the cases: the tension between union independence and unity, the importance of trust and strong leadership, the need for formal structures or agreements to sustain cooperation and collaboration, and the ever-present constraints of resources and politics. Broadly, we observe a spectrum from basic cooperation (short-term joint actions while maintaining independence) towards deeper collaboration (long-term alliances that align strategies and share resources). Countries like Senegal and Burkina Faso illustrate the high end of this spectrum with institutionalized coalitions, whereas Cameroon and (until recently) South Africa have been on the low end with only intermittent cooperation.

In terms of **success factors**, virtually all cases emphasize the necessity of shared goals, mutual respect, effective communication, and strong internal democracy as foundations for successful cooperation.

Meanwhile, typical **challenges** include leadership rivalries, ideological splits, lack of formal frameworks, and external interference or lack of recognition. The interviews provided vivid illustrations, such as Cameroon's struggle with "clannishness"[17] among leaders or Rwanda's solution of a non-aggression pact to maintain unity.

A recurring insight is that **cooperation tends to evolve in phases**. Initial coordination on specific issues can gradually build trust leading to more structured cooperation (as seen in Rwanda's case of moving from informal support to creating a formal forum, or South Africa's tentative first joint strike that may pave the way for further unity). Conversely, without reinforcement, cooperation can stagnate or regress. Cameroon's case warns that without legal recognition and commitment, gains remain "sporadic" and fragile. A valuable complement to this phased view is recognising the critical role of reinforcement mechanisms at each transition point. Trust forged in initial coordination must be anchored by formal agreements, such as memoranda of understanding or joint charters that codify shared objectives and decision-making processes. Equally important in this process of reinforcement is the establishment of pooled resources, whether a joint secretariat, shared training funds, or common legal support, which both symbolises and sustains unity. External validation through recognition by labour-friendly governments or international bodies can further incentivise federations to uphold commitments. In Senegal and Burkina Faso, for instance, early joint actions were solidified into legally registered coalitions with dedicated budgets and rotating leadership, ensuring that what began as episodic campaigns evolved into enduring platforms. By contrast, Cameroon's experience shows that without these reinforcements, legal status, resource-sharing arrangements, or third-party facilitation, even well-intentioned cooperation risks remaining ad hoc and ultimately fracturing.

Notably, **context matters**. In countries where unions face a common existential threat or share a transformative goal (e.g. political change in Tunisia, or resisting austerity in South Africa), cooperation is galvanized. In contexts with stable but pluralist union landscapes, progress is slower and hinges on internal union reforms and incentives (as in Ghana and Nigeria, where unity was achieved through recognizing mutual benefits in bargaining).

The comparative lesson is that while the forms of cooperation differ; from formal federations (Senegal's coalition) to informal platforms (Cameroon's forum) to policy coalitions (Ghana's or Nigeria's Organized Labour) to cross-border solidarity (Tunisia's international links), the underlying rationale is the same: united, workers are stronger. The experiences across these eight countries reinforce that sentiment. **Each success story of unity has resulted in better outcomes for workers**; be it laws, wages, or social protection and each setback when unity faltered has illustrated the costs of division. Thus, for trade union leaders, policymakers, and international

[17] Clannishness refers to a tendency among leaders to form tight, exclusive groups based on personal loyalty, ethnicity, regional ties, or factional interests, rather than prioritising the collective good or broader organisational goals.

partners, the imperative is clear: support structures and strategies that foster cooperation and collaboration, as these are critical to a vibrant, influential labour movement.

Burkina Faso - From Fragmentation to Unified Action

Burkina Faso's labour movement has historically been fragmented among multiple union confederations. There are six main national centres - including the Confédération Syndicale Burkinabè (CSB), Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Burkina (CNTB), Organisation Nationale des Syndicats Libres (ONSL), and others - plus numerous independent unions. This pluralism often led to duplicated efforts and diluted influence. In 1990, however, the union centres took a landmark step by forming the Unité d'Action Syndicale (UAS), a unified action framework. The UAS is a formal coalition that now encompasses all six confederations along with 13 independent unions. It operates on the basis of collective decision-making and a rotating presidency, and it presents a single list of grievances on behalf of all affiliates each year. The latter ensures that all member organisations speak with one voice at the bargaining table. This annual "common agenda" is drafted through a structured process of inter-union consultations and joint working groups. Once agreed, the united list is formally adopted by the UAS council and submitted *en bloc* to employers' associations and government bodies.

This approach amplifies the movement's bargaining power by demonstrating comprehensive, cross-sector support for every demand from wage adjustments and safety provisions to pension reforms, while preventing employers from playing unions off against one another. It also institutionalises mutual accountability. Every affiliate is bound by the agreed priorities, strengthening solidarity and reducing the risk of fragmented or competing claims. This structure allows unions to maintain their organizational independence while speaking with one voice on national issues - an embodiment of collaboration as defined in this study.

Forms of Cooperation

Under the UAS, Burkinabe unions coordinate closely on a range of activities. They hold joint general assemblies and plan unified strikes and demonstrations, ensuring that major labour actions are backed by all unions rather than a single federation. For example, policy proposals or position papers are now typically *"developed and validated by all unions"*, which gives them added weight in negotiations. The unions also pool resources for shared programmes, such as the PANAF program which trained union activists from all organizations nationwide. This reflects a shift from mere short-term cooperation to deeper collaboration in capacity-building. An interview with an ONSL leader highlighted that *"there is no compromise when actions are preceded by consultations"* – indicating a high level of internal consensus-building.

Notably, the UAS mechanism has enabled unions to engage in sectoral collective bargaining jointly. A current example is the development of a collective agreement for night watchmen and private security services through cooperation among unions and the Employers' Council. Overall, Burkina Faso's unions have moved decisively into a collaborative mode, aligning strategies and often sharing responsibilities.

Successes

The unified approach in Burkina Faso has yielded tangible gains for workers. Interviewees credit the UAS with making advocacy and negotiations *"more effective because it becomes a matter for the [entire] union world… The more united we are, the stronger we are."* One significant achievement was expanding social protection to informal economy workers. Thanks to collective pressure via

UAS, a voluntary pension insurance scheme with the national social security fund (CNSS) was introduced for self-employed and informal workers. This means many informal workers can now contribute to and receive a pension - a milestone attributable to union coordination. In another case, unified union action compelled authorities to reinstate 400 municipal contract workers who had been unfairly dismissed, converting them to permanent status with compensation.

Such victories are *"tangible and visible"* to union members, reinforcing their support for cooperation. Moreover, unions report that joint advocacy has improved labour legislation over time and halted proposals that would weaken worker protections. Importantly, once won, these gains have proven sustainable: *"The results of union struggles are acquired. They become rights... materialized in agreements or communiqués,"* noted the ONSL senior official. In essence, by collaborating, Burkina Faso's unions have amplified their bargaining power and achieved outcomes none could have alone.

Several factors underpin the success of cooperation in Burkina Faso. A key element has been the unions' independence from partisan politics – the unions deliberately keep political parties at arm's length in the UAS, which fosters trust among themselves. A *"single objective"* and a philosophy that *"one party's problem becomes everyone's problem"* have created strong solidarity. Regular consultation and democratic decision-making within the coalition ensure that all voices are heard, avoiding dominance by any one union.

Also notable is a shared belief in unity in action over sectarian interests; as one leader put it, *"mutual respect, equality, team spirit"* in leadership have been crucial. The Burkinabe unions have also benefited from resource pooling and external support – for instance, a jointly established research team (CARES) serves all six unions, enhancing their collective expertise. Trust has grown as unions see that collaboration does not encroach on each organization's autonomy or identity. These factors combined to create an enabling environment for full collaboration.

Challenges

Despite its strengths, the UAS coalition faces ongoing challenges. One issue is ensuring internal democracy and renewal within each union; some unions struggle with leadership renewal and inclusive governance, which can strain inter-union relations. For example, in some unions leadership is almost automatically re-elected year after year, which makes rank-and-file members feel that their voices and concerns are not fully heard. Likewise, decision-making bodies may lack transparent procedures for soliciting and incorporating input and new ideas from younger or regional activists.

Another challenge is the uneven capacity and resources among member unions - smaller unions sometimes have limited skilled personnel or funds to contribute, putting pressure on larger unions to carry the load. There is also the matter of formalizing the partnership: currently, cooperation operates without detailed written bylaws. Some respondents suggest that developing a formal collaboration agreement would help set clearer expectations. Perhaps the most delicate challenge is political interference in the labour movement. Union leaders state that politics has, at times, bred *"treachery, betrayal, [and] compromise"* that undermines unity.

For example, rival factions aligned with different political currents have in the past splintered the movement. To counter this, unions strive to keep the UAS agenda focused on workers' interests. Finally, resource constraints (i.e. financial and logistical) may limit the frequency of joint activities and the ability to sustain campaigns. Unions are addressing this by seeking external support for training and by better dues collection to fund collective actions. Despite challenges, the Burkina

Faso case demonstrates that with commitment and structured collaboration, trade unions can overcome fragmentation and substantially increase their impact.

Cameroon - Striving for Unity Amid Fragmentation

Trade unions in Cameroon operate in a highly fragmented context. There are numerous union confederations - including the Confédération Camerounaise du Travail (CCT), Confederation of Cameroon Trade Unions (CSTC), Union of Free Trade Unions of Cameroon (USLC), Central Union of Cameroon Workers (CSAC), and several others - reflecting splits along ideological, sectoral, or leadership lines. No single federation has hegemony, and historically coordination among them was limited. In recent years, Cameroonian unions have attempted to strengthen unity through an inter-union consultation platform, referred to as the Cameroon Workers' Forum (CAWOF).

This platform brings together multiple confederations to discuss common concerns. Notably, the presidency of the platform rotates annually, indicating an effort to distribute leadership. However, unlike Burkina Faso's UAS, Cameroon's inter-union structure is relatively informal and not legally recognized by the government as a single entity. Cooperation tends to be ad hoc and issue-based - coming into play for specific campaigns - rather than a permanent alliance, which aligns more with "cooperation" than deep "collaboration."

Forms of Cooperation

Cameroonian unions have engaged in joint actions on various labour issues, albeit irregularly. The platform of confederations meets occasionally to coordinate positions on major national issues. For example, unions have cooperated to press for an increase in the national minimum wage, revisions to the Labour Code, and harmonization of pension calculations. These are broad issues affecting all workers, which naturally lend themselves to a united labour stance.

Unions also present a common front in advocating for more regular social dialogue - their collective efforts contributed to the government establishing a consultation and monitoring committee on social dialogue under the Ministry of Labour. This committee includes union representatives and is an outcome the unions cite as a win from their cooperation. Mechanisms facilitating cooperation have been fairly limited - primarily, unions use shared platforms (meetings, joint workshops) to exchange information.

Joint declarations or press conferences are occasionally organized when consensus is reached on an issue. A leader of the CSAC confederation noted that any and all resources are welcomed for the platform's activities, be it *"financial, human, informational"*, suggesting an openness to resource sharing even if it's not formalized. In practice, however, resource sharing has been minimal, and each union largely mobilizes its own base. One form of emerging collaboration is in capacity-building events: unions have come together in certain ILO-organized workshops (for instance, on minimum wage policy) - these *"group discussions... sometimes lead to an agreement or disagreement"* but at least provide a venue for dialogue. Overall, cooperation in Cameroon can be characterized as intermittent unity of action on common goals, with a basic framework in place but not strongly institutionalized.

Successes

The cooperative efforts, while overall still limited, have yielded some progress. A concrete example is the unions' joint advocacy around the minimum wage: through sustained dialogue (often under ILO auspices) the unions collectively pushed the government to consider raising the minimum wage, achieving partial updates over time. Union cooperation also forced attention on long-pending labour law reforms – for instance, their united stance on the need to revise the Labour Code has kept the issue on the national agenda.

Importantly, the mere existence of an inter-union platform is itself seen as a success in Cameroon's once very divided union scene. Unions now at least engage with each other regularly. According to a CSAC senior official, even *"apart from some sporadically obtained results, the cooperation has value in sustaining unity of action and a sustained debate while respecting each other's opinions"*. This indicates that although big victories are few, the process of working together is building mutual understanding. The platform's practice of rotating leadership and making decisions by simple majority vote has also democratized union interactions.

All confederations, large or small, have equal opportunity to propose and lead initiatives during their turn, which is an achievement in terms of fairness. Finally, one intangible success is that Cameroonian unions have learned the value of compromise and flexibility. A union leader acknowledged that his federation has made compromises such as *"refusal of interference in other unions' internal affairs"* and avoiding extreme stances, in order to keep the coalition together.

This moderation has helped maintain a united front on critical issues like opposing unfavourable labour policies. While these successes may seem modest, they form a foundation on which deeper collaboration could be built in the future.

Challenges

Cameroonian unions face significant obstacles in advancing from loose cooperation to true collaboration. A primary challenge is the lack of trust and unity among union leaders. Respondents cited *"clannishness"* and *"lack of will of certain unions to respect the agreed contribution"* as issues, indicating that some leaders prioritize their faction or are unwilling to fully commit to collective decisions. Indeed, there have been instances where *"some [unions] do not respect the opinions of others and play games that do not advance [the cause]"*. This infighting makes sustained cooperation difficult.

Another challenge is the absence of a legal framework for the union platform. The government has reportedly *"refused to recognize the platform on grounds it is not legally structured"*. Without formal recognition (e.g. as an official federation of unions), the platform cannot, for example, formally sign agreements on behalf of all unions, and this limits its influence. Unions have signed some form of protocol among themselves (they answered "Yes" regarding formal agreements), but exactly how binding these are is unclear. Moreover, resource and power imbalances create tension: some unions initially demanded large financial contributions from each member organization to fund the platform, which poorer unions could not afford, leading to conflicts over dues.

There have also been disputes about establishing a permanent Secretariat (with some federations insisting on an office which others see as too costly). These disagreements have hampered the platform's institutionalization. Internal factors like leadership conflicts also play a role - for example, arguments over who should represent the unions in international policy fora have contributed to friction.

In terms of external factors, ideological differences (e.g. unions with rival political alignments or philosophical leanings) were mentioned as a hurdle, though specifics were not elaborated. Cameroon's broader political environment – which tends to discourage independent union activity – likely has a dampening effect on union solidarity as well. Cameroon's case shows that while unions recognize the need to work together, building lasting collaboration requires overcoming deep-seated mistrust and establishing a stronger institutional basis for unity.

Ghana – Organized Labour and Unity in Diversity

Ghana's trade union movement is characterized by one large, long-standing federation and several other union groupings. The Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUC), founded in 1945, is the main national centre, encompassing over 20 affiliate national unions across all sectors. Alongside the TUC, there is the Ghana Federation of Labour (GFL) – a smaller confederation formed in the 1990s – and a number of significant independent unions and associations, particularly in the public sector. Notably, organizations like the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) and the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), which represent large numbers of teachers, are not TUC-affiliated but operate independently. To ensure labour unity, Ghanaian unions have developed an umbrella coordinating body commonly referred to as "Organized Labour." Organized Labour is an informal coalition that brings together the TUC (with all its affiliates), the GFL, and the major independent unions/associations.

It functions as a de facto national trade union front for engaging with the government and employers on cross-cutting issues. Through this mechanism, Ghana has achieved a relatively high level of union cooperation despite the pluralism of its labour movement. All unions, whether under TUC or not, are invited to participate in collective decisions on national labour actions and policy advocacy.

Forms of Cooperation

The cooperation in Ghana manifests primarily in joint national campaigns, negotiations, and consultations. Organized Labour meets to formulate common positions on issues such as the national minimum wage, public sector base pay, and pensions. For example, ahead of annual minimum wage negotiations with the government, the TUC, GFL, GNAT, and others confer and agree on a single demand (or range) to present – this prevents the government from playing unions out against each other. When necessary, Ghanaian unions undertake coordinated strikes or demonstrations under the banner of Organized Labour.

A prominent instance was in 2014, when Organised Labour (including TUC, GFL, and teacher associations) jointly protested proposed pension reforms, successfully pressuring the government to amend the policy. More recently, in 2021–2022, Organised Labour collectively negotiated significant wage increases to offset inflation, using the threat of a united strike. The existence of formal communication channels and committees under Organized Labour supports these efforts. There are often ad hoc committees formed, comprising representatives from each major union group, to handle specific negotiations (e.g. a joint negotiation committee for public sector wages).

Decision-making within Organized Labour tends to be by consensus, led by the TUC (which is the largest member). However, other unions have a voice: as one unionist noted, the advantage of the TUC is its broad coverage, *"so when we call for an action, it hits all the sectors"*, but that also requires taking into account those outside its fold.

Indeed, the coalition's credibility comes from involving groups like GNAT and NAGRAT which represent key sectors like education that TUC affiliates (such as the Teachers & Educational Workers' Union) alone cannot cover. Beyond industrial action, Ghanaian unions cooperate in policy dialogue forums. For example, Organized Labour issues joint press statements on economic policy (i.e. budget, taxes, etc.) affecting workers, and they coordinate their input in tripartite bodies like the National Tripartite Committee (which sets the minimum wage).

Even public celebrations such as May Day are often organized collaboratively: while the TUC traditionally leads May Day events, in recent times other unions have been given space to participate, to reflect the inclusiveness of Organized Labour (though not without friction, as discussed below). Overall, Ghana's model leans more toward cooperation (loose alliance) than full merger or integration – but it is a sustained, institutionalized cooperation.

Successes

Ghana's cooperative approach has yielded notable successes for workers and the unions themselves. A key success is the consistent ability of Organized Labour to negotiate national pay and benefit improvements. By presenting a unified front, they have secured significant increases in the national minimum wage over the years and protected real incomes in the public sector. For instance, during the 2021 negotiations, Organized Labour's pressure contributed to a deal for a 30% rise in base pay for public sector workers, at a time of economic difficulty. Unity has also been crucial in resisting adverse policies.

In addition to the pension reform example, in 2022 Organised Labour collectively opposed a new tax on electric power (the "e-levy" on utility tariffs), organizing a large demonstration. Facing united unions, the government opened talks which led to relief measures for lower-income consumers. Such outcomes underscore the enhanced bargaining power that cooperation brings. A press statement by the TUC General Secretary explicitly on behalf of *"TUC and all its 21 affiliates... [and] other unions in the Organized Labour Group"* underlined that they speak for virtually the entire Ghanaian workforce. This comprehensive representation has compelled the government to treat labour as a serious stakeholder.

Another success has been maintaining industrial peace while asserting worker rights – the unity has allowed more effective negotiations, reducing the need for protracted strikes. When strikes do occur, they tend to be short but impactful because all unions come on board, creating an incentive for swift government response. Internally, the cooperative framework has improved information sharing and solidarity among unions.

The TUC and non-TUC unions now regularly share data and strategies, for example on how to organize informal economy workers or how to manage union finances, learning from each other. Union leaders have also publicly acknowledged that inclusive cooperation strengthens the labour movement as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, Ghana's labour unity has preserved trade union relevance in national development. In an era when union influence is waning in some countries, Ghana's unions – by standing together – have remained central to discussions on economic and social policy (minimum wage, social security, etc.), often swaying outcomes in workers' favour.

In sum, a mix of inclusive leadership, institutional incentives, and a tradition of solidarity has underpinned Ghana's cooperative successes.

Challenges

Despite its relative success, trade union cooperation in Ghana is not without challenges. One challenge is the occasional rivalry for visibility and influence between the TUC and the smaller unions. Because of its long history, broad membership and well-developed infrastructure, the TUC frequently emerges as the default 'voice of labour.' Other organisations sometimes feel their perspectives are under-represented in that spotlight, which can create friction when coordinating joint initiatives.

A related challenge is that some affiliate unions or independent unions seek to prioritize their own brand or agenda even under the Organized Labour umbrella. An interviewee noted that sometimes certain unions prefer to highlight their individual achievements, which can *"compete with the collective interests"*. Balancing individual union identities with collective action thus remains an ongoing task.

Another challenge is ensuring cohesion in action – while unions agree on broad issues, they may differ on specifics. For instance, on public sector pay, unions representing different professions (teachers, health workers, etc.) may have differing views on pay. Reaching agreement can be slow and occasionally leads to weakest-compromise outcomes.

Political affiliations also play a subtle role. Historically, the Ghanaian labour movement has been non-partisan, but individual union leaders may have political leanings that influence their stance. If a union perceives a policy differently due to political orientation, it could strain the consensus (though this has been relatively muted in Ghana compared to some countries). In terms of structure, one could argue that Organized Labour is still an informal arrangement – there have been discussions about formalizing it into a single labour federation or congress including all unions, but this has not materialized, partly due to fears of domination by one group.

The lack of formal structure means the cooperation relies on goodwill and the current generation of leaders; a change in leadership (e.g. a more aggressive stance by a new GFL leader or a less accommodating TUC leader) could test the unity. Resource disparities also pose challenges: the TUC has far more infrastructure (i.e. offices, staff) than say GFL or GNAT, so carrying along the smaller organizations sometimes requires the TUC to shoulder more of the logistical burden.

Lastly, communication to the grassroots can be an issue – ensuring that the millions of workers represented by these various unions understand and buy into the unified positions is not easy. If rank-and-file members of a union feel that "their" union's agenda is diluted in the larger group, internal tensions could arise. So far, Ghanaian unions have managed these challenges through compromise and dialogue, but maintaining unity will require continuous effort and mutual accommodation.

Nigeria – Alliance of Two Labour Centres

Nigeria's trade union landscape is dominated by two national labour centres: the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC). The NLC, formed in 1978, traditionally organizes non-managerial workers including many industrial unions (e.g. in manufacturing, public service, oil and gas junior staff), while the TUC (formally recognized in the early 2000s) primarily represents senior staff/professional unions (e.g. senior staff in oil and gas, banking, telecom). This dual structure emerged from legal distinctions between categories of workers, but in practice both the NLC and TUC have substantial membership and often overlapping interests.

Besides these two, there have been occasional splinter groups (for instance, a short-lived United Labour Congress (ULC) broke away from the NLC in 2017, but it was reabsorbed by 2020, reuniting the movement). Nigerian unions have a strong history of cooperation between the NLC and TUC on national issues. The term "Organised Labour" in Nigeria typically denotes the combined front of the NLC and TUC (and sometimes their affiliate industrial unions) when dealing with the government. Through Organised Labour, Nigeria's unions coordinate actions such as general strikes, protests, and policy advocacy. Unlike some countries with multiple rival centres, Nigeria effectively has a bipolar union movement that has learned to speak largely with one voice on major matters, making it a model of cooperation despite the dual structure.

Forms of Cooperation

The primary form of union cooperation in Nigeria is seen in joint national actions and collective bargaining with the state. NLC and TUC routinely issue joint communiqués and press statements on policy issues – for example, they have a common position on fuel subsidy removal, electricity tariff hikes, minimum wage, and other socio-economic policies. A notable form of collaboration is the organisation of joint strikes and mass protests. Nigeria has witnessed some of Africa's largest labour mobilizations, often led by NLC and TUC together.

In 2020 and 2021, NLC and TUC jointly planned strikes over increases in fuel and electricity costs, demonstrating continued solidarity. On the collective bargaining front, the two centres work side by side in negotiating the national minimum wage. Nigeria's minimum wage laws are usually updated in a tripartite setting, and NLC and TUC form a single Labour team in those negotiations. An interviewed NLC representative explained that at the level of the labour centres, *"NLC and TUC work in areas that affect workers irrespective of region. So, we can campaign together… [and] work together."*

This highlights that despite representing different unions, they see themselves as partners on issues of common concern. The cooperation also extends to sharing platforms and resources to some extent. For example, during joint protests, the federations share logistics: NLC might mobilize transportation for workers while TUC provides financial resources for publicity, etc., reflecting a pooling of efforts. Decision-making in the NLC-TUC alliance is typically by consensus between the two leaderships. They often hold coordination meetings (sometimes daily during a crisis) to align strategies.

Additionally, at the state (regional) level, NLC and TUC branches often collaborate; many Nigerian states have a "Joint State Public Service Negotiating Council" comprising unions from both congresses to deal with state governors on local labour issues. While the two centres remain distinct entities (i.e. each with its own internal structure and affiliates), their external actions often qualify as "*collaboration in practice*", as they align strategies and even share members' support for each other's actions.

Successes

The cooperative approach of NLC and TUC has scored significant wins for Nigerian workers and enhanced the labour movement's clout. Perhaps the most celebrated successes are the instances of policymaking U-turns achieved through united action. The historic 2012 general strike – when Organised Labour and civil society jointly shut down the country for over a week – forced the government to partially reinstate fuel subsidies, rolling back a policy that would have dramatically raised living costs. This showed that a united labour front could exact concessions even from a powerful government.

Another success was the passage of the National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act in 2019, which raised the minimum wage after prolonged advocacy. The NLC and TUC had together lobbied, and at times threatened action, for years to secure this increase, and their cooperation ensured the issue stayed alive in the national discourse until it was enacted. Organised Labour's unity has also been crucial in defending labour rights. For example, when some state governors attempted to refuse implementation of the new minimum wage, the NLC and TUC jointly organized protests in those states, compelling compliance.

The federations have also combined efforts to resist proposals to weaken Nigeria's labour laws (such as attempts to decentralize or remove the minimum wage from federal jurisdiction), successfully lobbying the National Assembly to drop such plans. Internally, the partnership has helped strengthen unions; by coordinating, they have been able to hold joint training workshops for union representatives and jointly engage with international partners like the ILO on capacity building.

Furthermore, the unity has bolstered their public legitimacy – Nigerian workers and the general public often refer to "Organised Labour" as a single entity championing the people's economic interests, a testament to how closely NLC and TUC are identified together. An interview quote captures this alignment of purpose: *"there is alignment in the sense of [solidarity and unity]… when you collaborate with others, it [advances] the unions' objectives"*. The ability of Nigeria's labour movement to bring millions of workers onto the streets or to shut workplaces nationwide is directly linked to this cooperation. Unified action has given Nigerian unions leverage resulting in tangible economic gains (i.e. wage increases, policy changes) and sustained their role as a countervailing force in society.

Nigeria's political environment sometimes targets labour (e.g. arrests of union leaders during protests), and in those moments the two centres rely on each other for support and legitimacy. All these factors create a strong incentive structure for collaboration and have thus far outweighed any competitive instincts.

Challenges

Despite generally good cooperation, the Nigerian labour movement does encounter challenges in its collaboration. One challenge is the underlying competition for membership and recognition. Both NLC and TUC would like to grow their affiliations, and there have been tussles when a union switches allegiance between them or when organizing new sectors. For instance, there might be disputes over which centre should organize workers in emerging industries, and this can create tension.

There is also occasional suspicion among leaders – as one interviewee candidly noted, a bottleneck can be *"suspicion among leaders"* when it comes to pooling resources or credit. This indicates that trust, while present, is not absolute; each federation is cautious that the other might use joint platforms to its own advantage.

Another challenge is the prioritization of issues. Sometimes NLC and TUC may differ on what issue to tackle first or how hard a line to take. The TUC, being smaller, may not always have the same appetite for prolonged strikes, for example, whereas NLC with its larger rank-and-file might push for a strike – reconciling these stances requires negotiation. Also, internal politics can intrude at times. There have been instances where government or employers have tried to divide the two centres by offering concessions to one side. Such divide-and-rule tactics test the solidity of their cooperation.

Additionally, when leadership changes occur (which in Nigeria is usually every four years at congresses), the new leaders must rebuild relationships; a less collaboration-inclined leader could pose a risk. Indeed, when the ULC faction split from NLC (2017-2020), it was partly due to personal conflicts among NLC leaders, which shows how internal union politics can affect unity.

Another challenge is maintaining member unity beneath the leadership level. While the top might agree on a course of action, sometimes some affiliate unions (especially those in critical sectors like oil and gas) have hesitated or pulled out of strikes due to their specific concerns, which undermines overall unity. Ensuring that all affiliates of both NLC and TUC remain committed to collective decisions can be difficult.

Furthermore, resource constraints can be a challenge in carrying out joint activities – funding large-scale protests or logistics for nationwide strikes is expensive, and coordinating cost-sharing is not always smooth.

Finally, Nigeria's volatile socio-political environment – frequent economic crises, security issues – means new issues constantly emerge, and keeping the two centres aligned on an ever-shifting array of problems is a continuous challenge.

Nonetheless, the NLC and TUC have so far managed to overcome most of these challenges through dialogue and the understanding that they are stronger together. As one Nigerian labour leader summed up, unity is not just idealistic but pragmatic: *"We now have to rely on the unity of all of us combined. No single trade union [alone] can achieve what we need"* – a sentiment that bodes well for the perseverance of their cooperation.

Rwanda – Building Consensus in a Small Movement

Rwanda's trade union movement is relatively smaller and more centralized than those of the larger African countries, but it is not without pluralism. The main actor is CESTRAR (Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Rwanda), historically the dominant national trade union center. In addition, there are two other national centres: COTRAF (Congress of Labour and Brotherhood, in French "COTRAF- Rwanda") and a newer federation often referred to as COSYLI (or COSIDER – the exact acronym varies).

With three centres in a relatively small country, coordination could be challenging, but Rwanda's unions have managed to develop a cooperative approach. A distinctive feature of Rwandan industrial relations is the system of workplace elections for workers' representatives, which effectively gauge each confederation's support across the workforce. In the most recent elections, CESTRAR won about 90% of the workforce representatives, affirming it as by far the most representative centre. By law or practice, the centre with the majority of elected workplace delegates is given a leading role in national labour dialogue. CESTRAR thus holds a legitimate coordinating role, but importantly it uses that role to include the other unions rather than exclude them.

Rwandan unions have set up what is informally called the Trade Union Advisory and Development Forum, which serves as a platform where all three confederations meet regularly. This Forum is not a formal merged entity, but it functions as a consultation and coordination mechanism – an example of structured cooperation. The Forum has a WhatsApp group for continuous communication and convenes general meetings (a kind of union assembly) to discuss joint strategies. Moreover, the unions have agreed on certain principles, including a non-aggression pact (they will not poach each other's members or undercut each other) in a spirit of fair competition. Overall, Rwanda's case is one of close cooperation with CESTRAR as the linchpin.

Forms of Cooperation

Rwandan unions coordinate at two main levels: between the national centre and its affiliates, and among the different national centres. Within CESTRAR and its member unions, there is strong internal coordination – for instance, CESTRAR ensures its sectoral affiliates support each other's activities (if one affiliate in, say, the education sector has a rally, other affiliates from manufacturing or agriculture will send members to join in solidarity).

This fosters unity across sectors. At the inter-federation level (CESTRAR with COTRAF and COSYLI), the unions collaborate on both routine and strategic matters. They often conduct common actions such as joint petitions or letters to authorities. One interviewee noted that the centres can *"sign one letter together and give the responsibility to one of the three centres to send it and follow up"*, illustrating how they speak collectively to government or employers.

They also coordinate when receiving international delegations or participating in regional meetings – for example, if a foreign union group visits, the Rwandan centres will meet them together rather than separately.

Another important area of cooperation is joint lobbying and representation in companies. In Rwanda, it is possible for two unions from different confederations to both have members in the same company. Instead of competing, the confederations have started to cooperate in such cases: they present a united front when negotiating a collective bargaining agreement so that workers are not divided by affiliation. A recent example mentioned was a company-level collective agreement negotiation where CESTRAR and COTRAF unions worked together as a team and successfully concluded a single agreement covering members of both. This is a notable form of collaboration at the grassroots level.

Mechanisms facilitating cooperation include the Rwanda Trade Union Forum's committees. They have a structure for communication – a WhatsApp group – and they planned to hold a kind of general assembly of all confederations to evaluate and strengthen collaboration. Decisions in joint activities are generally made through consultation and consensus; because CESTRAR is much larger, it often initiates and others concur, but CESTRAR takes care to consult so that the outcome reflects a common stance.

Interestingly, Rwandan unions have not yet established formal MoUs between confederations – an interview with the CESTRAR leadership revealed they *"haven't written any single MOU… we just consult. We assume we are working for a common goal"*. They rely on trust and informal agreements, although they have thought about formalizing cooperation through the Forum's constitution or a cooperation charter. Rwanda's unions practice a collegial form of cooperation characterized by regular communication, joint representation in dialogues, occasional joint campaigns, and mutual support at both national and workplace levels.

Successes

Despite the limited resources of unions in Rwanda, their cooperative approach has yielded positive outcomes. One major success is the prevention of rivalry and the maintenance of a mostly united labour front. The decision by the confederations to avoid *"unnecessary fights"* and create a *"good working environment"* among themselves has meant that union pluralism in Rwanda did not lead to paralysis. Instead, they coordinate common actions – for example, the unions have collectively advocated for reforms in Rwanda's labour law. Their unified input contributed to revisions in the labour code that were favourable to workers (e.g. improved provisions for trade union recognition and collective bargaining rights).

Another success is joint problem-solving on workplace issues. By cooperating in companies where multiple unions operate, they have addressed worker grievances more effectively. A recent collective agreement in a large company was reached smoothly because unions from different centres negotiated together, presenting a united list of demands to the employer (as noted in the interview, *"we do it together… working on one given advocacy or Collective Bargaining Agreement"*). This meant better outcomes for those workers and no undercutting between unions. At the national level, the cooperation has given unions greater influence in policy forums. In the National Labour Council (a tripartite body in Rwanda), CESTRAR typically leads but now incorporates the views of COTRAF and COSYLI when presenting labour's position. As a result, policy recommendations from the labour side carry the weight of essentially all of organized labour, which officials cannot easily dismiss.

Another tangible benefit has been in international engagement: Rwandan unions jointly participate in regional African union meetings and present themselves as a coordinated group. This has raised their profile and possibly attracted more support/training opportunities. The cooperative stance has also enabled collective capacity building – for instance, unions sometimes hold joint trainings for union representatives (CESTRAR might invite the smaller centres' members to its training sessions).

Indirectly, union cooperation in Rwanda has improved labour unity in advocating broader social issues: the unions together campaign on matters like social security for all, occupational health, and the minimum wage (Rwanda doesn't have a national minimum wage, something unions collectively are asking the government to establish). The leadership of CESTRAR noted that through these partnerships, *"union competition has declined sharply"* and their collective social impact has increased.

Indeed, in the latest union elections mentioned earlier, even the smaller confederations gained some representation, which was accepted peacefully – a sign that they all respect the process and will continue cooperating regardless of who is bigger or smaller. Ultimately, Rwanda's cooperative model has ensured that the labour movement remains a relevant actor in a country where space for dissent can be limited. The fact that unions present relatively unified positions and avoid public schisms likely contributes to the government taking them more seriously in consultation. In summary, Rwanda's unions have leveraged mutual respect, informal but effective communication, and a common mission to maintain a united labour movement.

Challenges

While relatively harmonious, Rwandan trade union cooperation faces a few challenges. One is the lack of formalization of their collaboration. Currently, much rests on goodwill and the Forum's loose structure. The leadership of CESTRAR reflected that they have no formal MoU among confederations and that perhaps incorporating such cooperation into the Forum's statutes could be beneficial. Without formal agreements, a change in leadership or a major disagreement could, in theory, weaken the commitment to work together. They themselves recognize that formalizing some aspects (like a clear protocol for joint actions or resource sharing) might strengthen sustainability.

Another challenge is resource disparities. CESTRAR is far larger and better resourced; the smaller confederations have very limited funding and staff. This can create a dependency dynamic where the smaller ones rely on CESTRAR's generosity (like using CESTRAR's hall for meetings). If at any point CESTRAR could not or chose not to extend such support, the cooperation might suffer.

There is also the challenge of ensuring genuine power-sharing. While things have been amicable, CESTRAR could theoretically dominate decisions given its clout. The current leaders avoid this by consensus, but there's always a risk that the majority player could override the others if consensus breaks. So far, ideological or strategic differences between the centres have been minor. The interview hinted that getting some initiatives off the ground (like signing a joint MOU or setting up joint projects) can be slow because they *"discuss… but don't formalize, assuming common goals"*, which might lead to missed opportunities for deeper collaboration.

Rwanda's trade union cooperation demonstrates a notable level of cohesion, driven by consensus and a culture of goodwill. However, this unity is tested by several structural and contextual challenges. First, the unions' collective influence is constrained by Rwanda's tightly controlled political environment, where limited space for advocacy diminishes the impact of even a unified front. A key example is the persistent absence of a statutory minimum wage, despite sustained union pressure. Second, while current leaders work well together, there is concern about sustaining this spirit of cooperation through future leadership transitions. Succession planning remains weak, although efforts to involve youth committees in coalition activities signal a promising start. Finally, the dominance of one major union poses a latent risk. In short, Rwanda's union cooperation is currently strong but vulnerable – its future depends on reinforcing internal democratic practices, investing in leadership renewal, and navigating a political context that remains largely unyielding.

Senegal – A Formal Coalition for Unified Action

Senegal has a vibrant and pluralistic trade union scene with multiple union confederations, but in recent years these unions have come together in an unprecedented show of unity. The major union centres in Senegal include the National Confederation of Workers of Senegal (CNTS), historically the largest; the Free Syndicates' Union of Senegal (CSA); the National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Senegal (UNSAS); the Senegalese Workers' Confederation (CNTS-FC) – a CNTS splinter; and the Democratic Union of Senegalese Workers (UDTS), among others. In the past, rivalry (often along political or personal lines) among these centres weakened labour's voice.

However, around the late 2000s and 2010s, facing common challenges, they began to coordinate. This culminated in the formation of a Coalition of Senegalese Trade Unions, effectively a formal alliance of the five main centres. The Coalition has established governance structures – a Conference of General Secretaries (SGs) where all union leaders meet, a Technical Committee, as well as Women's and Youth Committees and specialized commissions on thematic issues. They have even adopted a charter (i.e. a governance charter) to guide their collaboration.

In short, Senegal's unions have progressed from mere cooperation to an institutionalized collaboration, creating what is essentially a united labour front while still maintaining their distinct organizations. The coalition approach is often referred to under the banner of *"Inter-syndicale"* or simply the Trade Union Coalition. This structured unity is among the more advanced models of trade union collaboration in Africa.

Forms of Cooperation

The Senegalese Trade Union Coalition engages in a wide spectrum of collaborative activities. At the highest level, the unions practice *"unity of action"* – coordinating all major actions and positions. Concretely, this has meant holding joint meetings and assemblies on pressing issues, presenting joint demands, and speaking through a single spokesperson when dealing with government or media on behalf of all. One hallmark has been the joint celebration of May 1st (Labour Day): historically, rival unions held separate rallies, but now they commemorate together and submit *"a single list of grievances"* to the government. This symbolic and practical unity shows workers and authorities that the labour movement is one.

Another key area is collective bargaining and tripartite dialogue. The unions prepare together for negotiations such as the national social dialogue sessions or any talks on labour law reforms. By agreeing on common proposals beforehand, they avoid contradictory positions during negotiations. They also issue joint declarations and press releases on issues – for example, if workers' rights are violated or on economic policies, a communique will come from the coalition rather than individual centres. The Coalition has been proactive in launching joint projects and thematic platforms: they set up a platform on migration (CARISM) and another on climate change, pooling resources to address these broader social issues affecting workers.

Under the CARES project (a project focused on improving the research capability and knowledge products of unions) the five unions collaborate on research and advocacy in areas like occupational safety and health and have created networks such as RENAFES (women trade unionists' network) for women's economic empowerment. These collaborative projects are evidence of deeper partnership – sharing not just statements but also training, research, and campaign work. Mechanisms facilitating all this include regular technical committee meetings (i.e. to draft policies, communiqués), working groups and specialized commissions on priority themes (like social protection, informal economy, law reform).

There is also a rotation or at least a common understanding on representation: interestingly, the Coalition does not have a single permanent chair; instead, leadership is collective (no one union chairs permanently). Decisions are typically reached via *"discussions, consultations, exchanges and consensus"*.

Formal agreements exist – the unions answered "YES" to having memoranda of understanding supporting the collaboration, and also "YES" to using informal platforms (suggesting they supplement formal agreements with informal networking). Thus, the Coalition operates with a blend of formal structure and flexibility. The collaborative ethos even extends to resource sharing: the unions indicated they share financial, material, human, and informational resources in these collaborations. For instance, they may jointly fund a research study or second staff to work on a coalition project. In sum, the forms of collaboration in Senegal cover the full range from unified public advocacy to behind-the-scenes joint work – a comprehensive partnership model.

Successes

The unified coalition of Senegalese unions has achieved numerous successes that would have been difficult to achieve for any one federation alone. A standout success is the influence on labour law and policy reforms. Through their coalition, the unions effectively negotiated a major revision of the Labour Code and the adoption of a new Social Security Code. These reforms strengthened protections, especially for informal and precarious workers – an outcome of years of joint advocacy and technical input. Additionally, the coalition successfully campaigned for social protection extensions (e.g. the simplified regime for small taxpayers, compulsory health insurance for contract workers). The unions credit these achievements to their collaboration.

Another area of success is defence of workers' rights and interests in the face of economic challenges. The coalition collectively opposed attempts at mass privatizations and won mitigations or compensation measures. They have also addressed workplace issues like violence and harassment. Another significant success is the conclusion of industry-wide collective agreements in sectors like bakeries, private education, private security, oil and gas, transport, press, and microfinance. Such sectoral bargaining was possible because unions pooled their efforts. Furthermore, by combining forces, the unions have achieved annual wage increases in both public and private sectors. On the social front, the coalition's joint work on topics like migration and climate change has led to policy engagement and recognition of unions as key stakeholders in those domains (e.g. the government included union reps in committees on migration policy).

One could also consider the strengthening of trade union unity and capacity itself as a success: union competition has reduced, as noted by UNSAS's leadership *"the Coalition is growing stronger year after year… working together habits are consolidating. A united approach is always favoured over individual union priorities."* This cultural shift means the labour movement is more cohesive and robust. Gains like legal reforms are lasting and the coalition has survived changes in government and union leadership.

The presence of formal agreements (a Charter) likely helped by setting ground rules and reducing ambiguity in the cooperation. Effective communication has been another factor. Internally, they share information in real-time, which *"facilitates information sharing, increases mobilization, and allows better consideration of workers' needs,"* thereby strengthening unity. Externally, speaking with one voice has increased their credibility. The coalition's success is also partly due to favourable political opportunities. Senegal's democratic environment, while not without issues, has a tradition of respecting dialogue. Additionally, international support and learning played a supportive role. Finally, trust and camaraderie built over years of joint struggle created a fraternal bond. As one respondent put it, trust and mutual respect are *"the basis for fair and productive co-operation"*. With these factors in place, Senegal's unions had the recipe for a thriving collaboration.

Challenges

Even a strong coalition like Senegal's encounters challenges that it must navigate. One ongoing challenge is the mobilization of resources to support collective activities. While the unions share resources, the coalition's ambitions (e.g. nationwide campaigns, research projects) require funding and manpower that can strain their budgets. Ensuring each member contributes financially according to their means, and seeking external funding for joint projects, is a constant concern.

Another set of challenges relates to the broad agenda the coalition has taken on. They listed numerous priority issues – from "*extending social protection, fighting high living costs, to supporting informal sector workers and youth employment*". Tackling all these effectively is difficult. There are also operational challenges like the lack of a unified communication policy initially (they identified that as a constraint and have worked to improve it). In terms of internal dynamics, while ideological differences were said to be minimal (they answered "No" regarding ideological differences hindering collaboration), there could still be differences in approach or emphasis. Leadership conflicts can arise too – they acknowledged that conflicts and differences in approach tied to each union's base interests are obstacles. Another challenge is external: although they said political interference does not play a role now, the possibility always exists. Additionally, ensuring membership engagement at the grassroots of each union is a challenge – the coalition decisions need to be ratified and supported by rank-and-file members of all confederations. Lastly, sustaining the coalition through leadership transitions will be a test. The current generation forged this unity; as new leaders take over unions over time, they must be inducted into the same spirit.

In sum, the Senegal coalition's challenges including resource needs, broad agenda, internal differences, potential and external interference are being managed, but they underscore that even in collaboration, continued diligence and adaptation are necessary.

South-Africa – Toward Unity in a Fragmented Landscape

South Africa's labour movement is one of the continent's most powerful, yet it has been fragmented among rival federations. The largest federation is the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), historically aligned with the ruling ANC and part of the Tripartite Alliance. COSATU has long been the most politically influential union body. Two other older federations are FEDUSA (Federation of Unions of South Africa), which is non-partisan and represents many white-collar unions, and NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions), historically black consciousness aligned. More recently, in 2017, a new major federation SAFTU (South African Federation of Trade Unions) emerged, founded by unions that broke away from COSATU (including the large metalworkers' union, NUMSA). As of the mid-2020s, these four federations coexist.

Whereas this fragmentation has often meant disunity, worsening economic conditions (i.e. high unemployment, austerity measures) and shared frustrations have driven these federations toward greater cooperation recently. All four are part of NEDLAC (National Economic Development and Labour Council), a formal tripartite forum where they do coordinate on labour's position in socioeconomic policymaking.

Importantly, 2022 saw a historic development: COSATU, SAFTU, FEDUSA, and NACTU agreed to unite in a one-day national strike against austerity and the rising cost of living. It was the first time all major South African federations took to the streets together. This marked a tentative but significant step from mere cooperation in institutional settings to collaboration in mass action. Thus, South Africa is a case of a fragmented movement attempting collaboration, essentially cooperation that could evolve into deeper unity if sustained.

Forms of Cooperation

Until recently, cooperation among South African federations was largely confined to institutional engagement like NEDLAC. In NEDLAC's Labour constituency, COSATU, FEDUSA, and NACTU (and now SAFTU, since it gained admission a few years after forming) coordinate their positions on laws and policies. For example, they have worked together within NEDLAC on labour legislation amendments and the national minimum wage negotiations (which led to the introduction of a national minimum wage in 2019 - a product of negotiations where federations presented somewhat united views). Outside of NEDLAC, the federations have also cooperated through an Organised Labour caucus on some issues; for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, labour federations jointly engaged the government on workplace safety regulations and relief for workers.

The more groundbreaking form of cooperation has been the planning of joint protests and strikes. On 24 August 2022, COSATU and SAFTU coordinated parallel marches in a "national shutdown" against economic hardship. Although they held separate press conferences and assembled separately, they agreed on the date, the core demands, and both took part - a clear show of *"unity in action"*.

Leaders of these federations also shared platforms at some rallies, sending a message of solidarity. Prior to that, in 2021, COSATU had declared support for a SAFTU-called general strike (though could not formally join due to timing), indicating a thawing of relations. In the lead-up to the 2022 action, numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings were held between the federations to coordinate - a form of cooperation itself. Since then, there have been further attempts to cooperate for example, in 2023, the federations discussed joint actions over public sector wage disputes and against power cuts and privatization, showing a continuing effort to align on key issues.

Another form of cooperation is emerging in advocacy: federations have started issuing joint statements on issues such as condemning austerity budgets. While day-to-day each federation runs independently, these instances of coming together suggest a move from isolated cooperation to a more sustained alliance on pressing national matters. This reflects a conscious push towards practical collaboration. Mechanisms to facilitate this are still ad hoc; there is not a formal joint committee permanently between all four federations (at least, not publicly known), but task teams have been set up for specific campaigns. Social media and informal communications have also been used; for instance, where union members from different federations coordinated via social platforms for the strikes.

In short, cooperation in South Africa is presently characterized by issue-based alliances and coordination through both formal forums and joint mobilizations, with signs of increasing frequency and depth.

Successes

The most visible success of recent cooperation was the joint national strike of August 2022, which unionists hailed as a milestone. Though the country's economic policies did not change overnight, that strike put enormous pressure on the government, raising the profile of labour's demands. Following that action, the government engaged more actively with unions on measures to cushion workers – for example, some additional social relief programs were introduced which unions partially credited to their advocacy.

Another success is the coordinated approach in NEDLAC, which enabled labour to secure beneficial adjustments in policies. One example is the National Minimum Wage Act of 2018: all federations supported the introduction of a statutory minimum wage and, through joint representation at NEDLAC, influenced the level and implementation modalities of that wage. Similarly, in debates on amendments to labour laws (e.g. on parental leave, strike balloting requirements), labour spoke with a more or less unified voice, resulting in outcomes that, if not ideal to every union, were at least acceptable and preserved fundamental worker rights.

The combined strength of federations also helped in warding off extreme proposals, such as attempts to implement wholesale privatisation of state-owned enterprises; unions collectively opposed these and were able to slow down or modify such plans. On the worker mobilisation front, cooperation has reinvigorated the labour movement's energy. After years of disunity, seeing federations march together has boosted worker morale and solidarity across union lines. This suggests that joint action carries symbolic success in breaking down walls between unions at the grassroots level.

The cooperation also arguably strengthened the unions' bargaining position in the public sector wage dispute of 2022-2023. Initially, federations were split, but later COSATU and SAFTU both planned marches, which pressured the government to revise its wage offer.

Another success is raising common demands; for instance, all federations now echo the call for a Basic Income Grant to support unemployed people, a campaign that has gained momentum due to collective labour support. In summary, although South Africa's collaborative efforts are nascent, successes can be seen in the greater impact of unified strikes, a stronger voice in policy negotiations, and an emerging culture of solidarity among formerly rival unions. Shared adversity, aligned goals, intentional bridge-building by leaders, and structural incentives have together started to overcome the inertia of fragmentation.

Challenges

Despite positive steps, significant challenges remain for trade union collaboration in South Africa. First, rivalries and political differences are not erased overnight. COSATU is allied to the ANC and part of the political establishment, whereas SAFTU defines itself in opposition to the ANC's policies. This fundamental political divergence can limit how far they trust each other or can maintain unity.

The August 2022 strike itself showed some lingering fractures: the federations "*held two separate press briefings* and *assembled separately*". This indicates a cautious distance born of mistrust. Achieving truly joint planning (one press conference, one march) is the next hurdle. Another challenge is competition for members and public influence. This competition can quickly sour cooperative spirit if not managed. There is also the issue of personal leadership dynamics. Strong personalities lead these federations, and past personal feuds could resurface under stress. Another practical challenge is coordinating structures: unlike Senegal's formal coalition, South Africa's cooperation lacks permanent joint structures. Without formal structures (like a council of federations) beyond NEDLAC, sustaining momentum relies on ad hoc arrangements and goodwill.

Membership buy-in and unity at the base is another challenge. Many union members have strong loyalties to their federation and scepticism of others. Overcoming these perceptions will take time and shared victories. Additionally, the federations differ in approach to strikes: COSATU tends to negotiate and strike as a last resort, whereas SAFTU is more strike-prone. Aligning those strategies is tough. In 2021, SAFTU called strikes that COSATU did not join, showing divergence in tactics. On the government side, a challenge is that the government might still try divide-and-rule tactics. Another challenge is resource and capacity disparities: COSATU is larger and has more resources than SAFTU; FEDUSA and NACTU have different constituencies. Ensuring each contributes fairly and benefits equally in joint efforts can be complex. Lastly, sustaining collaboration in the long term is inherently challenging as national politics evolve. For instance, if there's a change in government, the calculations of cooperation might shift for each federation.

While South African unions have begun to cooperate, bridging historical divides and maintaining a united front amid political and strategic differences will remain a crucial battle.

Tunisia – Vertical Cooperation Efforts

Tunisia's trade union movement is distinctive in that it has been historically dominated by a single, highly influential federation; the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). Founded in 1946, the UGTT has played a central role in Tunisia's social and political life, including the independence struggle and the 2011 revolution. It boasts a membership of over 800,000 and a broad network across sectors. While other union organizations exist (such as the smaller Confederation of Tunisian Worker (CGTT) and others), by law and practice UGTT is the most representative and primary labour negotiating body.

Indeed, Tunisian legislation gives the most representative union exclusive rights to engage in collective bargaining and social dialogue at the national level. This means domestically UGTT does not need to "collaborate" with other unions in the way unions in multi-federation countries do. It effectively represents all workers in national dialogues. As one UGTT official explained, *"there are other unions, but... the UGTT is still the recognized trade union centre... collaboration [with them] does not exist as such, since the UGTT is the most recognized representative."* This unitary architecture offers clear opportunities for coherent bargaining but also concentrates a great deal of power in one organisation.

Forms of Cooperation

The Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) organises its membership through different layers. Starting at the factory level, unions feed into sector federations and collective-bargaining strategies. National federations: metalworking, teaching, banking, textiles and so on convene quarterly policy councils where they aggregate shop-floor data, debate bargaining demands and elect rapporteurs on *"women, youth and OSH"*. Each federation maintains a small solidarity fund, financed by a levy on sectoral dues, which can be drawn upon to subsidise strikes. During the three-day stoppage by garment workers in Kasserine in July 2022, contributions from banking and ports federations kept pickets supplied; a gesture widely credited with sustaining morale until management conceded to pay the missed bonuses.

At the apex stands a Central Committee and an Executive Bureau, both headquartered in Tunis. This leadership drafts the single labour mandate for Tunisia's High Council for Social Dialogue, the statutory tripartite forum where wages, social protection and crisis pacts are negotiated. Any provisional national deal must be ratified by an Extraordinary Consultative Congress, anchoring the UGTT's monopoly status in an explicit internal democratic procedure. A dedicated International Relations Department, meanwhile, brokers technical partnerships with European and international (i.e. Nordic) unions.

Internationally, UGTT engages in both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Bilaterally, UGTT has numerous twinning projects and agreements with trade union centres around the world. For example, UGTT has long-standing cooperation projects with major European trade union federations such as the French CFDT, the Italian CGIL, the Spanish CC.OO, and the German DGB. These often take the form of joint programs – e.g. on worker training, social dialogue enhancement, or specific themes like migration or climate change. An interview with the UGTT's senior official revealed that with the Italian CGIL they worked *"a lot on immigration and climate change"*, and with the Spanish CC.OO on the social and solidarity economy, leading to concrete experiences and projects in Tunisia.

Similarly, the UGTT works with the Norwegian LO on social dialogue and capacity building, and with Danish unions on other social projects. Many of these partnerships involve exchange visits, sharing of best practices, and funding support for union initiatives. For instance, UGTT has hosted training for Bahraini unionists as part of helping establish unions in Bahrain. In the Arab world, UGTT has been a leader in solidarity and union development. They have cooperation with unions in countries like Morocco and Algeria (UGTT maintains *"friendly relationships"* and cooperative meetings with them), and notably, UGTT supported unionization in the Gulf states – *"thanks to the UGTT, the creation of trade unions [in Bahrain and Oman] was possible."*

Regionally, UGTT is a key player in the Arab Trade Union Confederation and works jointly on campaigns for Palestinian workers' rights, refugee support, and others. In Africa, UGTT's cooperation has been a bit less, as the interviewees noted efforts to increase cooperation with other African unions have faced challenges (more on that later). Nonetheless, UGTT participates in ITUC-Africa and has bilateral ties with some sub-Saharan unions. Multilaterally, UGTT engages through global union forums – sending delegates to international conferences, joining global union federations' initiatives, etc. Another form of cooperation is solidarity action. UGTT often mobilizes support for sister unions in crisis. For example, UGTT's historic moral and material support to South African unions under apartheid, or more recently to Sudanese or Lebanese unions has been significant. UGTT also collaborates academically and via NGOs. It might partner with international foundations (like the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) or others tied to unions) on research and education.

Lastly, UGTT's internal structure (with a full-time International Relations department and dedicated staff) facilitates ongoing coordination.

Successes

A single confederation maximises bargaining leverage. After a one-day public-sector strike in June 2022, the UGTT secured a framework accord granting an annual 5 per cent rise for 680 000 civil servants through to 2025. Because no rival centre could break ranks, the government was forced to address labour's unified claim. The model also excels in rapid crisis response. When COVID-19 reached Tunisia in March 2020, regional unions alerted headquarters that several hospitals lacked protective equipment; within forty-eight hours the Executive Bureau had forced an emergency tripartite meeting that produced binding PPE protocols and transport vouchers for health workers.

Policy coherence is a further dividend. In 2019 the confederation marshalled actuarial experts from its public and private sector branches to design a pooled social-security reform which Parliament adopted with a three-fifths majority; an outcome observers attribute to the UGTT's capacity to present a single cross-class narrative on inter-generational fairness. The Nobel-prize-winning National Dialogue of 2013-14 likewise drew on this integrated architecture: the same channels that transmit wage mandates enabled the union to mobilise local offices as neutral facilitators during Tunisia's constitutional deadlock.

UGTT's international cooperation has also brought significant benefits to both Tunisian workers and the broader labour movement. One major success has been capacity building and modernization of the UGTT itself. Through various cooperation projects, UGTT cadres received training on collective bargaining techniques, campaign strategies, and organizational development. For instance, the partnership with the Norwegian unions on social dialogue involved capacity building that UGTT credited with adding *"very important value to everything related to negotiation and social dialogue"* in Tunisia. These exchanges helped UGTT refine its approach to negotiations with employers and government, contributing to successes like the Tunisian national social contract agreements.

Furthermore, collaboration with European trade unions on the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) provided UGTT with knowledge and impetus to champion SSE in Tunisia. As a result, Tunisia now has concrete SSE initiatives (cooperatives, etc.) that the UGTT has promoted, diversifying the union agenda beyond just collective bargaining.

International solidarity has also bolstered UGTT's political influence and credibility. UGTT famously was part of the *"National Dialogue Quartet"* that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for steering Tunisia out of political crisis; an achievement partly rooted in UGTT's strong organizational capacity and moral authority, which itself is nourished by its global connections (international support helped UGTT remain resilient during tough times). UGTT's cooperation also achieved direct worker benefits. For example, training programs with foreign unions led to improved occupational safety and health practices adopted in Tunisian workplaces. Joint campaigns on issues like migrant workers' rights have heightened UGTT's advocacy for vulnerable groups domestically.

Additionally, UGTT has been able to assist workers in other countries – a point of pride and influence. By helping establish independent unions in places like Bahrain and Oman, UGTT extended the reach of democratic unionism. Such successes raise UGTT's stature internationally. A more concrete policy success from collaboration: UGTT's experience exchange with European unions likely contributed to some of Tunisia's progressive labour legislation and social policies.

The UGTT's cooperative stance has also meant Tunisia's voice is strong in international labour forums. UGTT representatives often play leading roles in the ITUC and ILO. When Tunisia faced external economic pressures or IMF reforms, UGTT leveraged international union networks to rally support or at least solidarity statements, which can impact negotiations with those international institutions.

Moreover, UGTT's insistence on values in collaboration (only partnering with unions sharing democratic principles) ensures that the cooperation it engages in reinforces core labour rights and principles, both at home and abroad. In summary, the successes of UGTT's collaborative approach include enhanced skills and knowledge, policy wins (in areas like social protection and social dialogue), greater influence for labour domestically, and contributions to strengthening unionism regionally. In short, principled partnership selection, strong capacity, mutual commitment, and a culture of solidarity have been the pillars of UGTT's collaboration strategy.

Challenges

Reconciling heterogeneous constituencies remains the hardest test. Teachers' unions routinely press for salary grids benchmarked to doctors, while tannery workers plead for lower social-security contributions to keep small workshops afloat. In February 2023 the public-service federation threatened to veto a national cost-of-living clause, prompting a five-hour adjournment of the Central Committee before a compromise indexation formula emerged. Such episodes show how a monopoly of external representation may internalise, rather than eliminate sectoral friction.

Limited rotation - and age - of leadership can be an issue. A new constitutional cap of two consecutive terms, adopted in December 2022, has brought three member under 45s into the Bureau. Yet the deeper cultural change devolving agenda-setting to regional and sectoral actors is still in its infancy. At the same time, resource asymmetries persist; prosperous banking affiliates refuse to back legal centres for seasonal farm labourers, illustrating that solidarity funds, while potent, require transparent redistribution formulas to retain credibility among disparate sectors.

On the cross-border collaboration front, a key challenge noted is the lack of enthusiasm or capacity for cooperation from some would-be partners, especially in Africa. One interviewee mentioned that UGTT tried to initiate more cooperation with other African unions but *"unfortunately, we don't really find a willingness for this kind of cooperation"* on the other side. Whether due to resource constraints, political differences, or other reasons, this has been an obstacle.

Another challenge is ensuring that cooperation goes beyond leaders to benefit the rank-and-file. International projects can sometimes be elitist (limited to union leaders travel and workshops). The UGTT seems to mitigate this by focusing on tangible outcomes and training that trickles down, but it is a constant challenge to make sure international cooperation translates to shop-floor improvements. Domestically, the UGTT has to balance being open to some level of national pluralism with its predominant status. While the law backs UGTT's primacy, that can breed resentment. Another challenge relates to resource dependency and continuity: some international cooperation projects are donor-funded and time-bound.

In principle, UGTT's refusal to cooperate with unions not sharing its values is admirable but could limit opportunities – e.g. in countries where only state-controlled unions exist. Internally for UGTT, handling so many international relationships could strain its staff; ensuring effective coordination of multiple projects simultaneously is an administrative challenge. However, the interviews suggest UGTT generally has not faced major internal or legal obstacles in its collaborations. Tunisian law and public opinion support UGTT's international role. Interestingly, legal or political constraints within Tunisia do not hinder UGTT's collaborations: *"there are no legal or political constraints impacting our collaborations,"* said the official, noting even the constitution enshrines the right to organize and by extension to partner internationally. So, the challenges are more on the strategic and practical side: finding willing and capable partners, extending benefits to members, maintaining long-term support, and juggling numerous partnerships.

4 Factors of Success

While assessing the varying degrees of success in trade union interactions across different national contexts, this study finds that that trade union relationships typically progress along a continuum, beginning with cooperation, advancing to collaboration, and potentially culminating in unity through merger processes at national or sectoral levels. Successful and unsuccessful outcomes depend on several intersecting factors:

Shared vision: A shared vision, an agreed destination, transforming individual ambitions into a jointly articulated purpose is key for successful and sustained cooperation.

Leadership: Effective, inclusive, and democratic leadership significantly contributes to the success of trade union cooperation.

Institutional frameworks: Institutional frameworks and structured mechanisms play a critical role in anchoring cooperation. Established platforms and formal or informal coordination bodies facilitate regular interactions, joint strategic planning, and collective action.

Effective communication: Continuous and transparent communication among unions is essential to building trust and ensuring effective collaboration.

Pooling of resources: Pooling resources and jointly investing in capacity-building initiatives strengthen the effectiveness of trade union cooperation.

Navigating power dynamics: Successful cooperation requires addressing internal and external power dynamics and resistance proactively.

The research shows that progression from one stage of cooperation to another is not automatic but conditional on fulfilling the above critical success factors. For instance, unions that successfully transition from cooperation to collaboration usually display high levels of strategic alignment, leadership synergy, and effective resource sharing. Conversely, unsuccessful transitions often result from weak management of power dynamics, insufficient commitment, or poor communication practices. The research also underlines the importance of systematically building on initial cooperative efforts to achieve more sustainable and impactful forms of trade union unity.

The table below indicates where these success factors may come in on the cooperation-collaboration continuum. The following paragraphs discuss each of the success factors more in-depth.

▶ **Table 3: Continuum of trade union integration from cooperation to unity**

Stages	Definition	Characteristics	Required conditions for progression
Cooperation	Joint activities with maintained independence	Short-term activities, independent resources	Shared goals, mutual benefits, basic trust
Collaboration	Strategic alliance with deeper integration of activities	Aligned strategies, shared resources, deeper trust	Effective communication, aligned leadership, reciprocal commitment
Unity (Merger)	Full integration into a single organisational structure	Complete organisational integration, unified goals	Strong leadership consensus, extensive resource pooling, effective management of resistance

Shared Vision

A shared vision, an agreed destination, transforming individual ambitions into a jointly articulated purpose is key for successful and sustained cooperation. The shared vision functions as a reinforcing loop for commitment and trust. Clear collective goals give members a concrete yardstick against which to measure progress, making it easier to justify the time and resources they pledge. Conversely, visible movement towards those goals signals that partners are delivering on their promises, *deepening trust and encouraging further investment*.

The vision also guides the institutional mechanisms adopted. If the ultimate aim is, say, sector-wide wage alignment, the coalition will prioritise bargaining councils, wage observatories, and data-sharing protocols. If the goal is legislative reform, it will lean more heavily on joint research units and parliamentary liaison offices. Crucially, leadership must ensure that these mechanisms remain servants of the shared purpose, not ends in themselves; committees that persist after their mandate has been met are a frequent cause of collaboration fatigue. The confederation's leadership plays the role of vision custodian. By convening periodic congresses and publishing progress dashboards, leaders signal accountability, keep discourse focused on agreed objectives, and counteract centrifugal pressures from individual sectors. Where disagreements arise, the shared vision provides a principled reference point for mediation: *"Does this proposal advance or hinder our collective goal?"* In short, a clearly articulated and consistently referenced vision is the glue in cooperative efforts.

This shared vision is crucial in contexts like Ghana and Nigeria, where joint positions on national minimum wage negotiations have significantly strengthened bargaining power and resulted in tangible policy changes. Similarly, Burkina Faso's unions collectively mobilised to secure enhanced social protection for informal workers, demonstrating the effectiveness of unified action toward shared goals.

Leadership

Effective, inclusive, and democratic leadership significantly contributes to the success of trade union cooperation. Leaders who foster trust, facilitate consensus-building, and demonstrate mutual respect create an environment conducive to sustainable cooperation. For instance, Rwanda's CESTRAR exemplifies this by actively involving smaller unions, ensuring broad representation, and regularly consulting across federations, thereby reducing rivalry and building mutual trust. Similarly, Senegal's coalition committees successfully manage cooperation through inclusive and rotating leadership structures, enabling shared decision-making and sustained unity. This underscores the importance of leadership models that are both representative and rotational, as these reduce institutional fatigue and power centralisation, fostering long-term trust.

Institutional Frameworks

Institutional frameworks and structured mechanisms play a critical role in anchoring cooperation. Established platforms and formal or informal coordination bodies facilitate regular interactions, joint strategic planning, and collective action. Burkina Faso's Unité d'Action Syndicale (UAS), which operates through regular general assemblies and rotating leadership roles, exemplifies an effective institutional approach. In Ghana, the informal yet institutionalised mechanism "Organised Labour" facilitates structured and regular coordination among various union groups, enhancing collective effectiveness during negotiations and industrial actions. Formalised coordination structures provide the institutional memory and continuity that ad-hoc cooperation lacks, helping unions withstand political shifts and leadership turnover.

Effective Communication

Continuous and transparent communication among unions is essential to building trust and ensuring effective collaboration. Unions utilising efficient, accessible communication tools, such as WhatsApp groups or regular consultation meetings, consistently report improved collaborative outcomes. Cameroon's trade unions benefit from regular inter-union dialogue, facilitated by digital platforms, to coordinate their advocacy on key labour issues, such as minimum wage reforms. Similarly, Rwanda's frequent inter-union consultations via digital platforms strengthen solidarity and collective bargaining capacity. Where communication is decentralised but integrated, as in digital platforms, it strengthens both horizontal solidarity and vertical accountability - key ingredients for scaling up collaboration.

Pooling of Resources

Pooling resources and jointly investing in capacity-building initiatives strengthen the effectiveness of trade union cooperation. Cooperative efforts that include resource sharing - financial, logistical, or technical - allow unions to overcome individual constraints and amplify their collective impact. Ghanaian and Nigerian unions frequently collaborate on logistics for national strikes and training programmes, enhancing their ability to mobilise effectively. Burkina Faso's unions have established joint training programmes, significantly boosting organisational capabilities and collective advocacy efforts. The success of resource pooling depends not only on availability but also on transparent management, ensuring that no single federation feels overburdened or sidelined.

Navigating Power Dynamics

Successful cooperation requires addressing internal and external power dynamics and resistance proactively. Unions that effectively manage internal disputes, maintain independence from political interference, and develop conflict-resolution strategies achieve stronger collaborative outcomes. The commitment of unions in Burkina Faso and Senegal to remain politically neutral and internally democratic mitigates internal factionalism and external manipulation, significantly enhancing the longevity and effectiveness of their cooperative structures. Conversely, the fragility of cooperation observed in Cameroon underscores the necessity of legally recognised structures and clear, enforceable agreements to mitigate internal power struggles. Ultimately, successful navigation of power asymmetries reflects the political maturity of unions and their ability to subordinate internal competition to shared strategic interests.

While most African unions advance along the co-operation, collaboration, unity continuum described earlier, a handful have leap frogged directly to full consolidation. Examining their historic experiences – notably Nigeria (1978), South Africa (1985) and Kenya (1965) – yields practical guidance for federations now weighing a permanent merger.

▶ **Table 4: Lessons from Major Union Mergers in Africa**

Country & year	Trigger & route	Key design choices	Lasting outcome	Cautionary note
Nigeria (NLC, 1978)	Government Decree dissolved rival trade union centres and compelled a single congress; another Decree compressed craft unions into a limited number of industry unions.	All-Workers' Conference drafted new constitution; industrial re-classification prevented turf wars; "equalisation grant" subsidised weaker unions for three years.	NLC remains the country's main voice of labour; subsequent splits were short-lived.	State-driven process meant old rivalries resurfaced once political pressure eased.
South Africa (COSATU, 1985)	Bottom-up initiative among independent affiliates of FOSATU and MWU, galvanised by mass strikes and apartheid repression.	Two-year unity talks, open delegate voting, one-member-one-vote principle; Constitution entrenched non-racialism and sectoral autonomy; Joint strike fund seeded by each affiliate.	COSATU rapidly became the de facto national centre.	Lengthy negotiations; required patience, external solidarity funding and high discipline to manage ideological diversity.
Kenya (COTU-K, 1965)	Government encouraged amalgamation of the Kenya Federation of Labour with rival unions to create a single interlocutor.	Tripartite working group fixed asset transfer and secretariat staffing; Statutory recognition gave COTU exclusive seat in National Social Security Fund.	Industry unions operate under COTU's umbrella, offering a consistent bargaining channel.	Closeness to the State occasionally raised concerns over autonomy; regular constitutional reviews now partly address this.

Are mergers always a "continuum" outcome? Not necessarily.

- **Nigeria** skipped the organic trust building stages: co-operation was thin, collaboration embryonic, yet the movement jumped straight to unity once the decree landed.
- **South Africa** followed an extended, bottom-up continuum: two years of joint campaigns and sectoral co-operation gradually morphed into collaboration and, finally, merger.
- **Kenya** illustrates a hybrid continuum: government nudged a merger, but only after unions had collaborated informally on wage council lobbying.

Hence, the idea of continuum remains valid, but this is complex and speed and propulsion may differ. Bottom-up mergers for instance are slower but often enjoy deeper legitimacy; state mandated mergers are faster but risk relapse if inclusive governance is not swiftly instituted.

5 Lessons Learned and Strategic Recommendations

This chapter distils the lessons learned from the various country cases, the accompanying survey and interviews, and the success factors; and translates this into concrete guidance for African trade-unions and broader stakeholders. The first section synthesises the most salient lessons that cut across national contexts; and the second section translates those lessons into strategic recommendations, grouping them by the principal stakeholders that shape labour-movement cooperation and collaboration: trade-union leaders and members; governments and social-dialogue institutions; and international partners.

Key Lessons

▶ **Table 5: Case Snapshots**

Theme	Principal lesson	Illustrative evidence
Continuum logic	Cooperation, collaboration and unity are not discrete choices but progressive stages on a single continuum.	Rwanda's unions consolidated informal WhatsApp coordination before creating the Trade-Union Forum; South Africa's federations mounted ad-hoc joint strikes before contemplating a permanent labour caucus.
Shared purpose first, structures second	Durable alliances arise when unions rally around a concrete, widely-felt problem (e.g. wage erosion, social-security gaps) *before* they negotiate governance bylaws.	Burkina Faso's UAS coalesced around a common pension platform; its formal rotating presidency followed only after the coalition had proven its worth.
Inclusive, value-based leadership	Charismatic but *pluralist* leaders accelerate trust-building, while personality cults derail it; leadership rotation and joint spokespersons diffuse risk.	Senegal's Conference of General Secretaries (no permanent chair) prevents dominance of the largest confederation; Nigeria's alternating NLC–TUC negotiation teams sustain parity.
Institutional back-stopping	Even informal coalitions benefit from a light Secretariat, dedicated technical Committees and written MoUs that codify rules, for instance on dispute resolution.	Ghana's Organised Labour uses ad-hoc Committees to craft single wage positions; the absence of such codification in Cameroon leaves its Workers' Forum exposed to leadership ego-clashes.
Resource symmetry matters	Alliances falter when weaker unions cannot meet financial or staffing expectations; deliberate cost-sharing and external seed-funds level the field.	Senegal pools donor-supported research budgets across five centres, reducing resentment; Rwanda's dominant CESTRAR provides office space for smaller partners.
Political autonomy enhances unity	Where unions maintain a non-partisan stance, they resist "divide-and-rule" tactics and reassure members that the coalition serves worker, not party interests.	Burkina Faso's UAS explicitly bars party funding; South Africa's residual tensions stem partly from differing affiliations to the ruling party.
International leverage amplifies domestic bargaining	Cross-border solidarity projects, twin-training schemes and shared research hubs professionalise national centres and toughen their negotiating hand.	Tunisia's UGTT used European partnerships to pioneer social-economy projects at home and to mentor fledgling unions in Bahrain and Oman.

Strategic Recommendations

Before turning to the concrete action points, it is worth recalling why strategic intervention is necessary. The preceding chapters have shown that unions which move progressively along the co-operation ◊ collaboration ◊ integration continuum succeed only when a number of enabling variables namely shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics work in concert. Where any one of these is missing, alliances stall, resources are wasted and members' confidence ebbs. Moreover, the political environment is shifting: fiscal austerity, digital labour platforms and rising authoritarianism all place fresh pressure on already fragmented movements. Against this backdrop, incremental tinkering will not suffice; **what is required is a deliberate, co-ordinated strategy that strengthens each of these factors simultaneously**.

The recommendations that follow therefore operate at three interlocking levels.

- First, they invite trade union centres to undertake practical steps; coalition audits, rotating leadership, pooled funds that hard-wire commitment and trust into their daily routines.
- Second, the study calls on governments to create an enabling legal and financial architecture in which genuine collaboration can flourish rather than fracture.
- Third, the study urges international partners to pivot away from piecemeal, bilateral grants and towards plurilateral support that rewards inclusive coalitions and shared digital infrastructure.

Read together, these proposals offer a roadmap for action, ensuring that the virtues of unity become lived realities rather than aspirational slogans.

For Trade Union Centres

Undertake **Coalition Audits** to Assess the State of Cooperation: Trade unions should carry out internal and cross-union "coalition audits" to map the current state of cooperation and identify concrete next steps along the cooperation–collaboration–unity continuum. Rather than aiming for full mergers, unions could identify achievable milestones such as creating shared platforms or co-organized campaigns. For example, Ghana's Organized Labour platform demonstrates how diverse unions can coordinate effectively without dissolving their structures.

Form Issue-Based Quick-Win **Task Forces**: To build momentum, unions should establish time-bound joint task forces around broadly shared grievances - such as minimum wage reviews or rising costs of living. These task forces should be co-headed by unions of different sizes or sectors to ensure inclusive leadership. Burkina Faso's UAS coalition offers a model for rotating leadership in such joint initiatives.

Institutionalize Rotation and Parity Within Coalitions: Rotating chairpersonship, spokesperson roles, and hosting duties should be embedded in coalition agreements or charters. An annual calendar of responsibilities can prevent informal power struggles and encourage transparency. This approach has worked effectively in UAS, where rotating leadership has ensured balanced participation.

Create and Manage **Solidarity Financing** Mechanisms: Unions should allocate a fixed portion of member dues or external support into a jointly managed Alliance Fund. This fund would cover shared campaign costs, litigation fees, and joint research. Senegal's use of pooled resources during coalition charter drafting illustrates the value of structured financing.

Invest in Inter-Union **Cadre Training** Programs: Trade union centres should co-develop and co-fund leadership, organizing, and policy training programs that enrol participants from multiple federations. Gender, sector, and generational diversity should be prioritized. Ghana's internal training schools and Nigeria's cadre-based programs offer scalable examples.

Digitalize **Communication** Channels for Real-Time Coordination: To overcome connectivity challenges and promote transparency, unions should adopt low-bandwidth, encrypted platforms for sharing minutes, communiqués, and alerts. In Rwanda, WhatsApp-based communication has helped sustain cooperation among federations, despite limited resources.

For Governments

Safeguard the **Right to Freedom of Association**: Governments must uphold international labour standards, with freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining at its core. This includes preventing political interference, respecting union autonomy, and refraining from discriminatory recognition practices.

Recognize Trade Union Coalitions as Valid Interlocutors: The institutional environment should allow coalitions - beyond individual unions - to represent workers in collective bargaining and tripartite forums. This would reduce divide-and-rule tactics often used to fragment union voices.

Establish **Matching Fund Schemes** for Coalition Initiatives: Governments should provide envelope grants that match union contributions to jointly approved research, campaigns, or training. This approach promotes ownership while helping close persistent resource gaps. Burkina Faso's experience with co-funded activities through UAS provides an operational example.

For International Partners

Shift from Bilateral to **Plurilateral Support Models**: Donors should adopt eligibility criteria that reward inclusive coalitions rather than single unions. Coalition-wide access to capacity-building or solidarity grants will promote unity and discourage fragmented donor engagement.

Sponsor **Regional Unity Labs** for Cross-Country Peer Learning: International organizations should convene regular "Unity Labs" - peer workshops that enable coalitions to share practices such as Nigeria's joint strike coordination or Senegal's charter-drafting. These labs should include toolkit adaptation for local contexts.

Support Scalable **Digital Infrastructure** for Inter-Union Collaboration: Investments should be made in open-source, co-managed digital platforms that support secure databases, electronic voting, and e-consultation across Federations. Rwanda's digital forums and Ghana's electronic petition systems highlight this need.

Establish a **Pan-African Research Hub** on Union Cooperation: Building on models like Burkina Faso's CARES, international partners should help create a Continental Observatory to track coalition health, cooperation trends, and disseminate evidence-based practices. This hub could serve as a policy reference for national and regional bodies.

Tie Disbursement of Funds to **Demonstrated Coalition Milestones**: Grants should be disbursed in phases, tied to measurable indicators - such as the signing of a MoU, creation of joint youth or women's committees, or submission of a unified bargaining position. This approach enhances accountability and progressive collaboration.

These strategic actions - when tailored to national realities and backed by shared political will - can significantly enhance trade union collaboration and create durable platforms for collective action across Africa.

The trajectory from cooperation to collaboration and ultimately to unity is neither linear nor uniform. Yet, across diverse political economies and labour relations systems, the same enablers recur: shared vision, inclusive leadership, institutional frameworks, effective communication, pooling of resources and navigating power dynamics.

African trade-union leaders can therefore adopt a pragmatic stance: nurture collaboration patiently where time allows, but remain alert to legislative or economic catalysts that create windows of opportunity. By blending the deliberate continuum with lessons from past experiences, today's unions can craft strengthened cooperation and collaboration pathways that are both credible and resilient, strengthening labour's capacity to champion decent work across the continent.

Coalitions that institutionalise these principles not only gain bargaining power but also position themselves as indispensable partners in national development agendas. Strategic actors, unionists, governments and international actors therefore face a common imperative: to invest intentionally in the scaffolding that moves union partnerships along the continuum, one rung at a time. Doing so will strengthen labour's collective agency, enhance social dialogue outcomes and advance the broader quest for equitable, sustainable development throughout the African continent.

Annex

Qualitative Interview Guide (Available upon request)

Quantitative Survey Instrument (Available upon request)

List of interviewed organisations (Available upon request)

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