

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU Online
030/200206

Spotlight interview with Mamadou Nama (Burkina Faso – USTB)

“The unions in the informal economy are now as vast as the entire salaried labour movement”

Brussels, 20 February 2006 (ICFTU online): Backed by the ILO and Danida, joint trade union action across the country has led to the creation of five informal economy unions in Burkina Faso. Mamadou Nama, general secretary of the USTB (Burkina Workers' Union) draws the first lessons from this experience and charts the strategy for extending it to other trades. The aim is to provide informal workers with greater social protection.

What percentage of the active population in Burkina works in the informal economy?

The private sector employs 300 to 400,000 workers and the public sector employs 70,000. If you subtract these workers from the total of 10,000,000 in Burkina, you realise the scope of the informal economy, which covers over 80% of the active population.

How was the unionisation of the informal sector in Burkina initiated and organised?

The Structural Adjustment Programme and globalisation made organising the ever-expanding informal economy a necessity. We have been benefiting from the support of the ILO and DANIDA since 1998 and, during the research stage, we identified five trades that in the end formed national sectoral groupings. We progressively assisted these groupings to transform themselves in 2005 into trade union organisations.

The workers in these five sectors (fruit and vegetable vendors, bike mechanics/spare parts vendors, welders, seamstresses/tailors, hairdressers) are concentrated in the country's main cities, that is, Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, Tenkodogo, and Koudougou.

It came to light that many of our former members had turned to these sectors as a means of survival, so we went with the ILO, DANIDA and the various trade union centres to find them and recruit them.

What weight do these new trade union organisations carry in the informal economy?

These five unions in the informal economy are as vast as the entire salaried labour movement. Over 200,000 members had already been recruited by 31 December 2004. We need additional resources to welcome the workers who would still like to join.

What initial lessons can be drawn from this experience?

Prior to 1998, the sectors existed in a disorganised manner within the various trade unions ... five butchers in such and such an organisation, 7 hairdressers in another... It wasn't working.

The first lesson was drawn, first and foremost, from having dared to organise the sector. This system of organising provides an insight into the activities, at the same time as helping to draw up the texts that will help manage the informal economy in a more social manner.

The second lesson is that we succeeded, without any commotion, in gathering the opinions and support of the workers, who went on to join the trade union movement of their own volition, through the five sectoral unions.

Another triumph is the fact that some of the union members have joined mutual societies, as our work is increasingly geared towards the social security of these workers, who are currently deprived of any form of social protection. One example of our achievements in the area of providing social protection for these workers is the creation of Mupresi, a health insurance fund for informal workers, which the ILO and Danida are supporting with a system of advance payments to supplement the membership levies.

What type of services and protection are offered?

They have a duty to respect the texts governing the trade union movement. In exchange, they have the right to make demands. One result, in Ouagadougou, for example, are the kiosks selling paper and spare parts. These small stands are now well organised and very clean. This has contributed not only to the cleanliness and hygiene of the city, but also to the fact that these vendors are now recognised and registered. As a result, they now enjoy lower taxes. This measure also contributes to the fight against unemployment.

At the same time, the workers benefit from training about their rights and obligations as citizens, and the role of trade unionism. These training sessions are organised by the ILO and national and international experts.

How have the workers reacted to the structuring of the informal economy?

Initially, there was some reticence, on ideological or political grounds, as they didn't know what we were asking of them. But now that the situation had been clarified, it is they who approach us, demanding such and such working conditions. Workers from other major cities, such as Dédougou, want to join the movement. We organise them, even though they do not benefit from any funding.

Burkina's unions have also set up a joint trade union action unit, the UAS, which is aimed at developing common stances, in order to strengthen the unions' position when they take action in companies where there are several different unions, for example.

In 1999, we recognised the need to form an alliance to fight against some of the measures taken by the national authorities and the machinations of international organisations such as the World Bank or the IMF. The unions were being decimated and the workers were left to watch in dismay as companies were closed down or sold off cheaply. In view of the situation, the various unions decided to organise themselves and formalise things to put an end to disjointed action to address national issues (salaries, social protection, security measures, etc).

The UAS not only groups trade union centres, but also independent or sectoral unions, whether they are affiliated or not. The five unions in the informal economy thus also form part of the UAS.

Can you give some examples of concrete achievements?

Yes. Take the example of the mechanics or the motorbike engine vendors.

Before, with Burkina's porous borders, there were numerous thefts benefiting Mali and Niger. Engine or parts vendors used to risk losing a lot of money and a lot of engines. Now, thanks to their structuring, they are protected and speak in the name of their organisation. The authorities are obliged to listen to them and take their grievances on board.

They are also given training on human and trade union rights. They play an active role in the dynamic of trade union life. They know their rights and obligations. And being aware of their obligations provides them with a greater awareness of the scope of their rights.

What specific obstacles are there to mobilising resources in the informal economy?

The workers in the various informal sectors are not easy to mobilise. If each individual trade union centre worked in isolation and recruited members however it pleased, it would not have the resources needed to raise awareness and convey the trade union message to these groups of people. But thanks to the structures we have created, this is now becoming feasible. Decisions can be made and conveyed more easily, even in an informal economy union.

This project is being supported by the ILO and DANIDA. Are you working with any other institutions, other associations or NGOs?

It's an ongoing effort.... We also have projects with international institutions. The USTB has subscribed to the FAED project (EU funding to promote the rule of law) and we have also received support from the European Union to train some of our members. The training course involved members from the private and public sectors as well as the informal economy. It was held in the country's 13 regions and concluded with the translation of numerous texts into the most widely spoken national languages. It also benefited the members of other unions, as well as the USTB.

Which other sectors do you intend to organise in the future?

Our priorities include the butchers, small cattle farmers, coalmine, forestry and agricultural workers. The first five unions received support from the ILO. We are now looking for outside help to organise these other four sectors. We are also thinking about the alcohol vendors. It's important to organise them, to ensure that the rules of hygiene are respected and to fight racketeering.

The informal economy is very strong in Burkina Faso. It represents almost 32% of GDP, which makes it an important part of the national economy. Almost 80% of the population is employed in the agricultural sector. So these are the sectors that we would like to organise. But we lack the financial resources.

Organising the informal economy is also a way of fighting against child labour...

It's true that by organising the informal economy we also hope to curb the phenomenon of child labour. We are mainly working on the worst forms of child labour. But child labour cannot be viewed in isolation, hence the bitter fight against poverty first... Parents must also be given an opportunity to send their children to school... But free schooling is no longer guaranteed in Burkina Faso. In the agricultural sector, for example, parents tend to take their children to work with them so that they do not become delinquents, and learn a trade at least. But given how fragile they are, they will never manage to contribute to the country's harmonious development. It should also be pointed out that many parents are out of work. In the end, it creates more problems than benefits...

What place do women occupy in the informal economy unions?

They occupy an important place within our trade union movement. With the exception of the mechanics and welders unions, they occupy all the top posts in the informal unions. They also occupy an important place in the formal economy. They represent 52 % of the Burkina Faso's population. Women are more educated than in the past. For the last 30 years, in our culture, particularly among public sector employees, it has been seen as an honour for a family to have a successful daughter. As a result, many

efforts are made to ensure the success of girls. Their success is a guarantee of the family's success and of their own children's education in the future.

Have other countries been inspired by the organisation of the informal economy in Burkina Faso?

Burkina was one of the pilot countries, along with Niger. We will be receiving a visit from our Nigerian colleagues soon, to compare our experiences and look into extending them to other countries in the sub region.

Interview held in Ouagadougou by Pierre Martinot.

(box) Key dates in the progressive organisation of the informal economy in Burkina Faso

-1998/1999: launch of the project, with the support of the ILO and DANIDA

-2001: creation of national sectoral groupings within the informal sector

-2005: formation of 5 trade unions within the informal sector

- o SYNATRALFA (fruit and vegetables)
- o SYNATEDRA (two-wheeler engines and associated workers)
- o SYNACEB (barbers/hairdressers)
- o SYNATRAFOS (welders/solderers)
- o SYNATRACA (tailors/seamstresses)

Also read the Spotlight Interview with Jean-Apollinaire Kafando (Burkina Faso – ONSL) entitled “The main obstacle to organising the informal economy is the lack of resources” at <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223420&Language=EN>

-
Also read the Spotlight Interview with Soumaïla LINGANI (Burkina Faso – PRASEI) entitled “Informal economy: from information to mutual protection” at: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223423&Language=EN>

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0232 or +32 476 621 018.