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Spotlight interview with Abdou Maigandi (Niger - USTN)

"Representation has given new hope to the voiceless workers of the informal economy"

Brussels 04 July 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): The USTN has been involved in a campaign to organise informal economy workers since the eighties, working on the ground, targeting a selection of trades, organising information and awareness-raising campaigns, training.... Abdou Maigandi, general secretary of the Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Niger (USTN) and former coordinator of the BIT-DANIDA/Niger project, is in no doubt that this organising drive is stimulating initiative and solidarity, contributing to improved working and living conditions, and playing an active role in the fight against poverty.

What percentage of Niger's active population works in the informal economy?

In Niger there is a growing trend towards the "informalisation" of the economy. The informal economy currently accounts for almost 80% of GDP, thus occupying a considerable place in the national economy in terms of its contribution to the creation of wealth and jobs. The modern private sector, hard hit by the negative impact of the economic crisis, is no longer playing its traditional role as job provider and wealth creator. The result is long-term unemployment. Young people excluded from the education system, unskilled workers and young graduates are taking refuge in the informal economy, where the dynamic and flexibility is such that they are able to withstand and adapt to economic shocks.

The informal economy, which covers over 150 trades in the commerce, production and services sectors, has therefore emerged as an instant solution to the problem of unemployment and underemployment. But the precariousness of employment in the informal economy together with its unstable nature, the absence of collective organising and social protection are all factors greatly influencing its growth and competitiveness.

How did the unionisation of Niger's informal economy commence and which national and international bodies are involved in the campaign?

The drive to unionise the informal economy began in the eighties, in the transport and private security sectors. It coincided with the onset of the economic crisis and the structural adjustment programmes. At national level, trade union centres, the Labour Ministry and the municipal authorities are involved in the project. The international actors are the ILO, DANIDA and the LO/FTF Council. It should also be recalled that a new initiative is in the process of being developed in West Africa. It's a pilot project backed by Danish partners, the LO/FTF Council, which has an office in Accra, Ghana. The USTN was selected to take part in the pilot phase of the project to organise the informal economy in the sub-region.

It's a very important project because, if well structured, the informal economy can provide an alternative to unemployment. We shouldn't forget that the informal economy is driven by fully-fledged citizens and that these people are entitled to rights.

Representation has given new hope to the voiceless workers of the informal economy. It gives them the power to negotiate and defend their social rights at all levels.

It is in the interest of all the sectors to structure themselves in this way; it's just a question of raising awareness. But the interest of the services sector is much more manifest than the production and commerce sectors.

Trade union awareness among informal workers first emerged in the transport sector. The structuring of certain trades within the framework of the BIT/DANIDA (LO/FTF) project created a domino effect, to the extent that we saw a massive upsurge in trade unions in Niger's informal economy, offering clear proof that the target group is highly receptive.

What concrete initiatives have you developed?

Firstly, we carried out a study on the scope and dynamics of the sector. We also performed a partial census of the different sectors to make a selection of five trades to be targeted in 4 out of the 8 regions of Niger. Then, after drawing up the training and awareness raising materials for the target groups, we trained a number of informal economy study circle leaders and resource persons for each sector. The training was given in the workplace. Another key stage in the process was the organisation of the target groups into representative structures by trade sectors, as well as into regional federations with a national coordinating body. Capacity building activities such as literacy classes for the trade union leaders representing the different sectors gave added value to the newly created structures. This also inspired us to introduce micro-financing and micro health insurance into the informal economy as a support measure. Training was obviously given to the managers of the mutual funds created.

All these activities were backed by advocacy campaigns directed at policy decision-makers, lobbying for the inclusion of informal economy workers in the policies of the State as well as the recognition of their status as citizens and their social rights.

What place do women occupy in this campaign?

The informal economy abounds with women, who are disadvantaged when it comes to "modern" jobs, as they often have little schooling or professional qualifications. Our policy on the informal economy is very attentive to this dimension. We favour women by targeting the sectors most specific to them, such as the restaurant or garment trade.

Do you think structuring the informal economy is an effective tool in the fight against poverty?

Of course, because structuring implies representation, bargaining power and social protection. Unionisation is undoubtedly a way of achieving decent work, although in Africa a lot of patience is still required given the lack of regulations on labour relations. At the same time, however, structuring clearly stimulates initiative and reinforces the solidarity between members. It's also a means of improving living and working conditions, through negotiations and advocacy. In this sense, it's an effective tool in the fight against poverty, which is so needed in Niger. We are now looking for partners to help us make further progress in this direction.

Interview by Pierre Martinot.

-Also read Spotlight interview with Soumaila Lingani (Burkina Faso - PRASEI) "Informal economy: from information to mutual protection"

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-Also read Spotlight interview with Hélène Sawadogo (Burkina Faso - SYNATRAFLA) "From the garden to the market - Improving the fate of women workers"

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- Also read the Spotlight Interview with Mamadou Nama (Burkina Faso - USTB) entitled "The unions in the informal economy are now as vast as the entire salaried labour movement" <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223421&Language=EN>

- Also read Spotlight interview with Rosine Soubiega (Burkina Faso - FNTCS) "Planting trees to fight the desert ... and poverty among women" <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223490&Language=EN>

Also read Spotlight interview with Abdallahi Ould Mohamed - Nahah (Mauritania - CGTM) "Organising the informal economy gives us credibility as a major player in the fight against poverty"

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