



# Forging Strong Alliances: *Trade Unions Uniting Across Sub-Saharan Africa and Germany*



## Impressum

### *Forging Strong Alliances: Trade Unions Uniting Across Sub-Saharan Africa and Germany*

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**Citation:** Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Trade Union Competence Centre for Sub-Saharan Africa (FES TUCC). (2024). Forging Strong Alliances: Trade Unions Uniting Across Sub-Saharan Africa and Germany. FES TUCC.

**Published by** Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Trade Union Competence Centre for Sub-Saharan Africa

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**ISBN nr:** 978-1-0370-2237-1

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# INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, globalisation has fundamentally transformed the landscape of labour. Consequently, trade unions are confronted with ever-changing challenges. As industries become increasingly interconnected, the issues facing workers in one region are often tied to decisions and policies made half a world away. Rapid technological advancements, shifting economic landscapes, and the urgent need to address climate change are reshaping industries at an unprecedented pace. The automotive sector, for instance, is undergoing significant transformations with the rise of electric vehicles (EVs), automation, digitalisation, and new business models.

In this context, the importance of transnational trade union cooperation cannot be overstated. National unions that focus solely on local issues risk becoming isolated and ineffective against the powerful global forces shaping labour markets. Conversely, by engaging in transnational networks, unions can harness collective power, share knowledge, and develop coordinated strategies to protect and advance workers' rights globally. This cooperation is vital not just for addressing immediate concerns but also for ensuring long-term sustainability, decent work, and equity.

This article advocates for deepening transnational trade union cooperation showcasing the Transnational Network on Transformation in the Automotive Sector, which was created to protect workers' rights across global supply chains. By uniting trade unions from Sub-Saharan Africa and Germany, the network aims to address the shared challenges of automation, economic inequality, and labour rights protection amidst globalisation.

This partnership demonstrates the power of collective action to build a fair, just, and sustainable global labour market. The network members, including shop stewards, works councils, and officials from the National Union of Metal Workers South Africa (NUMSA), Amalgamated Union of Kenya Metal Workers (AUKMW), Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) of Ghana, Union of Industry, Commerce and Finance Workers (UNICOF) of Ghana, Industriegewerkschaft Metall (IG Metall) of Germany, and the Trade Union Competence Center for Sub-Saharan Africa of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES TUCC), exemplify the necessity and potential of moving beyond national boundaries to build robust alliances that can effectively tackle the multifaceted challenges of today's global economy.

Trade union cooperation and solidarity in an environment characterised by competition and fragmentation transcend national boundaries and are pivotal in addressing the global challenges faced by workers. As global challenges intensify, there is a risk that unions may focus inward, weakening their collective power and undermining workers' interests. Strengthening and expanding transnational networks is crucial to bolster trade union power and protect workers globally. Effective cooperation that includes trustworthy dialogue and provides space to disclose potential conflicting interests between the so-called Global North and Global South, can prevent the isolation of unions and enable them to tackle common issues more effectively.

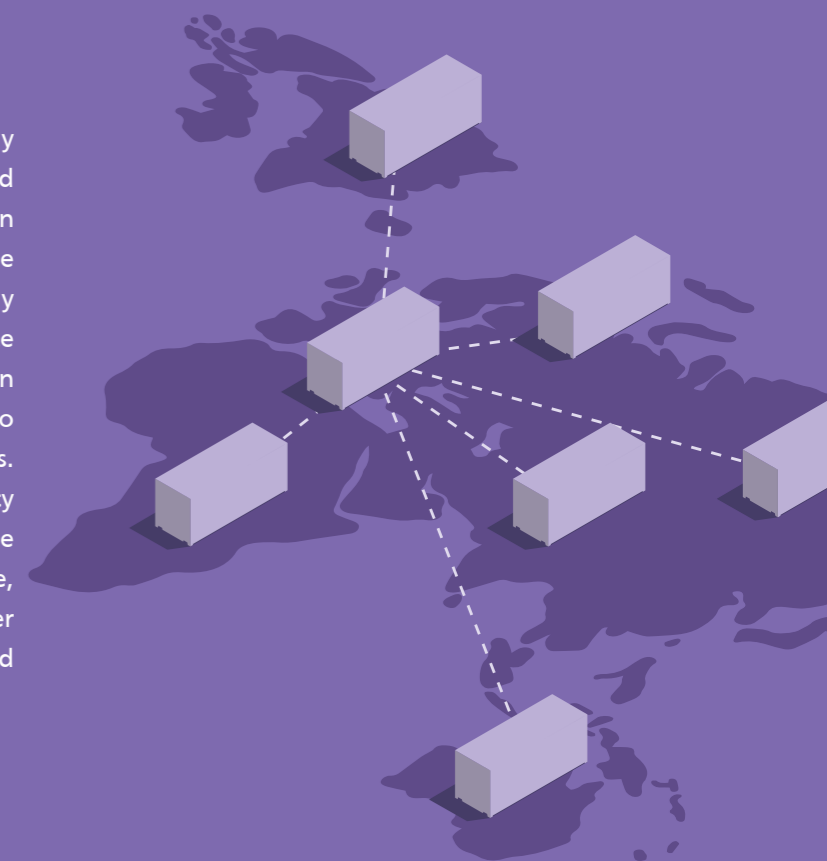


# BENEFITS OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Transnational networks enable unions to share knowledge, develop joint strategies, and amplify their voices on the global stage. For example, unions can collaborate on developing strategies to address the impact of automation and digitalisation on jobs, ensuring that workers are not left behind in the technological transition. Examples of some concrete fields of action follow.

## *Global Supply Chains:*

Actions taken in one part of the world can significantly impact workers elsewhere due to the interconnected nature of modern supply chains. For example, unions in Europe can collaborate with those in Africa to ensure that labour rights are respected throughout the supply chain, thus playing a crucial role in applying due diligence legislation adopted in Germany and the EU. Cooperation among unions along the supply chain enables them to gather information on suppliers, companies, and others. This is extremely valuable, as the lack of transparency in supply chains is a significant impediment to the effectiveness of due diligence legislation. Furthermore, by working together, unions can build workers' power to break the dominance of multinational companies and push for fair labour practices globally.





## Transformation along Supply Chains:

As industries evolve, supply chains are increasingly subject to profound changes, driven by technological advancements and market shifts. Ensuring that these transformations do not come at the expense of workers requires robust transnational cooperation. Unions must work together to develop frameworks that protect jobs, promote decent work, and ensure fair labour practices throughout the supply chain. This collaborative approach can help mitigate the negative impacts of automation, digitalisation, and other potentially disruptive technologies.

## Collective Power:

By uniting across borders, unions can leverage their collective bargaining power to advocate for better working conditions, fair wages, and labour rights, which are more challenging to achieve independently. This collective action is essential for negotiating with multinational corporations that operate in multiple countries. Global Framework Agreements can be a suitable tool if knowledge about their existence and content is made available to the respective workforces and worker representatives in a suitable manner.

## See also:

[Trade Union Perspectives from South Africa, Ghana and Kenya on the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act](#)

## Decent Work:

Promoting decent work—characterised by fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for labour rights—is a central goal of transnational trade union cooperation. By collaborating across borders, unions can set and demand standards that ensure that all workers, regardless of their location, enjoy decent working conditions. This is particularly important in industries with complex supply chains, where suppliers, among others, may otherwise evade scrutiny. The German Due Diligence Act and the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive are important levers to reinforce trade union power in the interest of workers.

Trade unions can monitor if the true experiences of workers are reflected in company reports and if stipulations of the laws, for example, transparent and accessible complaint mechanisms, are available to all workers in the supply chain. In the case of violations, trade unions in the respective country, as well as in Germany or in the EU, can cooperate to ensure that these violations are remedied by the company, or taken through the necessary legal process to force the company to comply with the law. Transnational networks can use these directives to help build power to countervail multinational companies.



# EXAMPLES OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Several success stories highlight the value of transnational cooperation.

## Due Diligence in Supply Chains:

Recent legislation, such as the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act and the European Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, underscore the responsibility of companies to adhere to human rights and environmental standards throughout their supply chains. Transnational union networks have a crucial role to play in monitoring and enforcing these standards. For example, unions can collaborate to conduct joint audits and share information about suppliers that violate labour standards, creating a unified front to hold such companies accountable. Above all, however, it is essential that knowledge of the existence of such laws is disseminated in the first place. That is why these laws and their implementation have been a central component of the network's meetings.

## Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs):

CBAs are pivotal in securing fair wages, safe working conditions, and other essential worker rights. The negotiation of CBAs can be challenging due to factors such as employer resistance, varying labour laws, economic pressures, and union fragmentation. Transnational cooperation can help overcome these challenges. For example, unions in different countries can coordinate their bargaining strategies and support each other's negotiations, leading to more comprehensive and enforceable agreements. A successful example is the case of AUKMW, which campaigned against the piece-rate system at VW's assembler, Kenya Vehicle Manufacturers in Thika, which paid workers on an hourly basis. With support from the Volkswagen Works Council in Germany, workers in Kenya were given improved contracts and monthly payments, based on the hours worked and not by pieces assembled. According to an official from AUKMW, this was a game-changer for workers.

“ This network has been a game-changer for us. By working closely with IG Metall, we've not only gained critical knowledge but have also seen tangible improvements in working conditions for our members. ”

(AUKMW official)



## Union Busting and Resistance:

Union-busting activities are a significant threat to labour organisations worldwide. In Germany and the EU, the number of union-busting cases continues to rise. Effective strategies to counter them include legal action, international solidarity campaigns, and grassroots organising. Transnational networks can provide support and share successful strategies, as happened in the case of the Ghanaian assembly plant contracted by VW. A clause in workers' contracts prevented them from joining a union. Through the transnational network, the VW World Works Council was informed and brought this clause to the attention of VW management in Germany. From there the company in Ghana was instructed to delete the clause from the contracts. Since then, workers have been free to unionise. A Ghanaian worker impacted by the cooperation, commented:

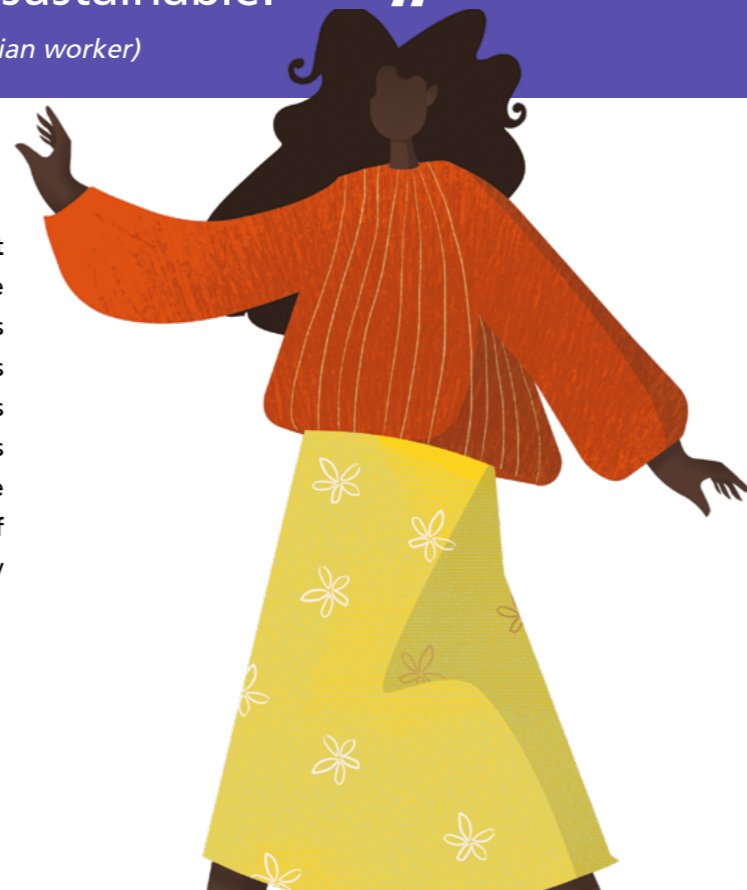


“ Before the union’s intervention, we had little control over our wages or hours. Now, with support from our partners, we’re finally able to negotiate better terms that make our work sustainable. ”

(Ghanaian worker)

## Health and Safety Issues:

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is paramount across industries. Different regions face unique challenges, ranging from inadequate safety regulations to a lack of enforcement. The exchange of best practices is crucial, such as ergonomic assessments and rigorous enforcement of safety protocols. Cooperation across regions has led to improved OSH conditions. An example from Kenya’s KVM plant includes the improvement of facilities and safety equipment after a plant visit by members of the transnational network.



## Transformation and Technological Changes:

Technological advancements, such as the shift towards electric vehicles (EVs) in the automotive sector, present both opportunities and challenges for the workforce. This transition may lead to job creation in some areas while causing job losses in others. Transnational cooperation helps unions to anticipate how the transformation will change the workplace and how workers will be affected. As a result, unions are better prepared to negotiate agreements to manage the transition in the best interest of workers.

### Training and Capacity Building:

In Africa, the shift towards EVs will have a significant impact on traditional automotive jobs. Transnational collaboration can help unions develop training programmes aimed at reskilling workers for new roles in the EV sector focusing on maintenance, battery technology, and renewable energy integration, helping workers transition to new roles and enhancing their employability. The value of peer learning within the network cannot be over-emphasised, as experiences gained elsewhere can be shared.

An example of best practices of such peer learning is the cooperation between IG Metall and its sister unions on digitalisation. Together with Ruhr-University Bochum, IG Metall has set up a learning factory that focuses on the effects of the introduction of digitalisation tools for workers. Under factory-like conditions, visitors are equipped with the skills they need to evaluate the introduction of these systems holistically, and to see how technology can be shaped in favour of workers. In 2019, NUMSA shop stewards and union officials participated in an exchange programme to visit the learning factory and experience this programme. It was clear that the challenges in multinational companies are very similar when it comes to the introduction of digital tools and that workers and union representatives can learn from each other’s experiences in overcoming and shaping these challenges.

## Organising Precarious and Informal Workers:

In many developing regions, a significant portion of the workforce is engaged in precarious and informal employment. Transnational cooperation can provide the support and resources needed to organise these workers. For instance, unions that form part of the Transnational Network on Transformation in the Automotive Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa have exchanged strategies for integrating informal workers into formal labour markets, advocating for legal reforms, and providing social protection. In particular, AUKMW in Kenya and UNICOF in Ghana were able to further strengthen their organising strategies for informal workers, such as car mechanics and panel beaters, who often work under precarious conditions. IG Metall which only organises formal workers, gained important insights into informal sector conditions, and the role informal work plays in the automotive supply chain. This knowledge of the local is key to effectively apply the existing due diligence legislation and to avoid leaving informal workers behind.







## THE ROLE OF GLOBAL UNION FEDERATIONS (GUFs)

As much as direct transnational cooperation between unions, as illustrated by the example of the Transnational Network on Transformation in the Automotive Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa, allows for very intensive cooperation and benefits, the extent to which individual unions can organise, engage with, and sustain such networks is limited. This is where the structured support of Global Union Federations (GUFs) is instrumental in driving and sustaining transnational union cooperation. They provide essential platforms and resources that enable unions to collaborate effectively across regions and industries. GUFs coordinate campaigns targeting multinational corporations, facilitate knowledge exchange, and promote the implementation of decent work. Mostly through GUFs and the trade union networks at company level that they host, Global Framework Agreements are reached. Their ability to concentrate resources and expertise enables unions to achieve more together than they could individually. GUFs empower unions to drive global change without having to shoulder the entire burden in every sector.

## CONCLUSION

Engaging with Sub-Saharan Africa is strategically crucial for the future of transnational trade union cooperation. The region faces significant labour struggles, including precarious and informal employment, inadequate safety training, and the impact of technological shifts, such as the transition to EVs. Addressing these challenges requires robust collaboration between unions across borders. The efforts of stakeholders, such as IG Metall, NUMSA, AUKMW, ICU, UNICOF, and the FES TUCC, highlight the importance of such engagement. By fostering collaboration, sharing best practices, and building capacity, unions can ensure that workers' rights are protected and advanced.

Transnational cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa not only helps to improve labour conditions locally, but also strengthens global labour movements, ensuring that the benefits of economic and technological transformations are shared equitably. Furthermore, high labour standards in supply chains make them more resilient—a priority of many governments, especially in Europe, after having experienced the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Sub-Saharan Africa's strategic importance is underscored by its role in global supply chains, its enormous potential for economic growth, and its young and dynamic workforce. Engaging with this region can drive progress in promoting decent work, enhancing safety standards, and addressing the broader impacts of globalisation. Therefore, continued collaboration and engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa is essential for building a more equitable and sustainable future for workers worldwide. This call to action for unions worldwide emphasises the importance of joining and contributing to the mission for the continued success and growth of this initiative.

Above all, transnational cooperation is the most efficient option to stop a race to the bottom. While employers try to pit different locations and therefore workers against one another, transnational cooperation can counteract this and serve as a strong sign of solidarity among workers worldwide.



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