

Working on the margins

Informal economy workers in Africa

Background

Over the past few decades factors such as economic and financial crises, deregulation and increased flexibility of labour markets and structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have contributed to an increase in unregulated and unprotected work worldwide. Workers have increasingly been pushed out of formal employment to survive in the informal economy, which includes market vendors, street traders, tailors, cross-border traders or carpenters. Working conditions in the informal economy are often horrendous with no job security, lack of a safe and healthy work environment and a total lack of representation.



Official opening of the research planning seminar in Kitwe, Zambia with Mr Ian Mkandawire, General Secretary, Zambia Congress of Trade Unions; Mr Gabriel Namulambe, Provincial Permanent Secretary, Copperbelt Province; Mr Mike Chungu, National Co-ordinator, Workers' Education Association of Zambia and Mr Lameck Kashiwa, General Secretary, Alliance for Zambia Informal Economy Associations

In Zambia, a sharp decrease of international copper prices, downsizing of the public sector, privatisation of the copper mines and other government-owned enterprises has forced 70% of the labour force (four million out of six million working Zambians) to make a living in the informal economy by selling goods in the street or in markets under unprotected working conditions. They rarely earn more than 50 pence a day, and face many other difficulties such as displacement by local authorities, levies issued without any return in services and lack of access to credit.



In order to improve the working conditions of informal economy workers, existing grassroots associations representing marketeers, cross border traders and street vendors in Zambia resolved to promote unity and strengthen representation through the formation in October 2002 of a national alliance, the Alliance for Zambia Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA). As a result of the establishment of AZIEA, Zambian informal economy workers have managed to start a dialogue with government in order to make their needs heard.

Research planning seminar in Kitwe, Zambia

To gain a thorough understanding of the difficulties that informal economy associations are currently facing, War on Want has launched a research project together with its Zambian partner organisations, AZIEA and the Workers' Education Association of Zambia (WEAZ). Comparing the experiences of informal economy organisations in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa, the project aims to promote effective participation of associations in policy formulation processes.



In order to further plan and decide on the final scope and remit of the research project, War on Want/WEAZ/AZIEA organised a research planning seminar in Kitwe, Zambia from 2-4 November 2004. The seminar brought together researchers from the five countries and representatives from the Informal Economy Desk of the Ghana Trade Union Congress, the Malawi Union for the Informal Sector, Associação dos Trabalhadores e Operadores do Sector Informal (ASSOTSI, Association of Informal Sector Workers and Operators, Mozambique) and StreetNet International. The participants decided that the research project would consist of the following components:

I am happy AZIEA has been involved in this major international event in Zambia. It has been a good opportunity to meet other organisations. We are proud to be part of this initiative.

**Mr Lameck Kashiwa,
General Secretary, Alliance
for Zambia Informal
Economy Associations**

Component 1. Review of country-specific and international secondary literature on the informal economy and informal economy organisations.

Component 2. Overview of the number and characteristics of street vendor and/or market vendor organisations in Accra and Takoradi (Ghana), Blantyre and Mzuzu (Malawi), Maputo (Mozambique) and Lusaka, Kitwe and Mansa (Zambia).

Component 3. In-depth case study of the organisational and advocacy strategies of two street trader and/or market vendor organisations in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia.

Component 4. Overview of local, provincial and national government policy towards the informal economy, street traders and/or market vendors and street trader and/or market vendor organisations.

If the research is going to be as good as the deliberations during the seminar, the outcome will be excellent.

**Mr Gwyn Kabelu, Assistant
National Co-ordinator,
Workers' Education
Association of Zambia**

The final research report is expected to be launched in Autumn 2005.

**For further information on the research project, please contact
Wendy Willems, Research Officer at War on Want (wwillems@waronwant.org).**