

The Future of Work:

Worker Organizing and Power in Africa's Informal Economy

Across Africa, the structure of work and of labor markets are undergoing a profound transformation driven by a range of developments. These include the rapid digitalization of work, growing demand for care services, rising levels of labor migration, and the pressures of climate change which are propelling a transition across sectors (Kwanhi, 2024, Vogt, 2025). As a result, informal and non-standard forms of employment are increasingly common. Historically, trade unions played a central role in shielding workers from unsafe and underpaid conditions, but across much of the Global South their influence has declined, weakening worker representation and protection.

In response, new worker organizations are emerging outside the bounds of traditional unions to fill this gap, developing new forms of collective power and solidarity. In addition, unions and worker groups are increasingly advocating for reforms that not only seek protection for their members but also influence policies toward a more equitable future (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024).

This study sought to explore how worker organizing and power-building are evolving in response to these major trends. It presents four case studies that highlight successful organizing and power building strategies alongside key challenges. It also identifies the drivers of these strategies and draws replicable lessons for new worker groups. It aims to help organizers, civil society, and policymakers better understand how to build inclusive, and sustainable labor movements. The study involved 61 key informant interviews and 14 focus group discussions across five countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. A survey was administered to 497 respondents using a multi-stage sampling strategy, including worker group leaders, members, and non-members. While the findings provide practice-based and policy-relevant insights, some limitations apply. In particular, the analysis relies on self-reported survey and interview data, which may constrain representativeness.

Selected Findings

Organizing and Structuring Worker Power

In all five countries, non-traditional workers are organizing themselves. These include caregivers, waste pickers, migrants, workers whose labor is mediated by digital platforms, and wage earners in sectors undergoing just transition. In each context, diverse forms of collectives have emerged: associations, cooperatives, networks, unions, and in some cases, federations. The many forms of collectives expand inclusion and outreach to workers, but also risk fragmentation, uneven legitimacy, and diluted bargaining power.

Some worker groups are adopting hybrid models of governance, registering as nonprofits but employing governance based on union principles. This hybrid model helps navigate bureaucratic barriers to establishing worker organizations, although it may limit a group's legal recognition for collective bargaining rights.

Organizing among migrant workers and around just transition remains weak and uneven. Unlike Uganda and South Africa, where dedicated migrant worker organizations exist, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya lack comparable structures. Migrant workers are instead represented through mainstream unions, community associations, or ILO and IOM initiatives. While this enables collaboration with established institutions unlocking coalitional power, it often sidelines migrant-specific concerns and limits sustained transnational organizing. Similarly, organizing around just transition among informal and non-standard workers is underdeveloped, risking their exclusion from shaping climate narratives, institutional pathways, and net-zero transitions. Organizing efforts and power building are evident among the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa and various waste picker associations across the countries, particularly in response to mine and landfill closures and the growing pressures of land grabbing.

Many new worker groups expand their recruitment strategy through diverse tactics such as digital outreach and impromptu meetings at shopping malls, publishing success stories, partnering with influencers, and offering legal support. Together, these tactics are effectively expanding membership. Crucially, they also shape public opinion in favor of workers' demands.

Digital organizing has become the most widely used organizing tool, enabling rapid mobilization and scalable digital power, but also risking digital exclusion. **Social media is a valuable tool for recruitment and timely updates**, namely because it lowers the cost of joining, builds cohesion, and coordinates collective action at speed. However, barriers to digital inclusion remain, including: fear of surveillance by employers, digital literacy gaps, device and connectivity inequality, algorithms which deprioritize union-related content, and lack of digital strategy. Despite this, most groups continue to rely on traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings, peer recruitment, and one-on-one onboarding.

Many leaders find that social dialogue is more effective in meeting demands than confrontational strategies, especially where in sectors where the work is precarious. About half (50.2%) of surveyed leaders reported that dialogue with employers and government has enabled unions to secure



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responses to needs. This reflects replaceability, legal insecurity, and dispersion across workers in informal labor markets. These conditions constrain the strategic use of service withdrawal, leading to selective, carefully timed confrontational actions amplified through digital visibility.

A common challenge is that worker groups are invited to policy discussions after the framework has been set, or not invited at all. Late-stage participation reduces their influence and reinforces the very power imbalances social dialogue is meant to address. Similarly, most workers in the informal economy have no direct representation in formal tripartite dialogue such as the International Labour Conference, and are left with proxy representation via the main trade unions.

The strategic combination of tactics such as public protest, advocacy, and solidarity efforts was found to be most effective. The effectiveness of these tactics depended on implementation, including timing, level of member mobilization, alignment with public sentiment, and media visibility. Lawsuits were also reported as effective, particularly for migrant workers and those in isolated environments. Disruptive tactics produced stronger outcomes when combined with conciliatory approaches such as dialogue.

Important strides have been made in women's representation in leadership and recognition of GBVH risks especially among ride-hailing drivers, waste pickers and domestic care workers migrating from parts of Africa to the Gulf-region. But the current approach across all worker groups remains largely gender-responsive; achieving gender-transformative change will require systemic reforms that address the structural organization of work, economic inequalities, and institutional accountability.

Engagement with Civil Society, Unions and Worker Groups

Union and civil society partnerships are successful when they are co-designed with workers as equal partners.

Specific positive outcomes for worker groups include:

- *Greater legal and policy support* that enhances leaders' legal literacy and capacity to advocate for rights. Members' understanding of the labor laws that affect them was ranked highly influential in building the power of worker groups, as was access to legal assistance and targeted trainings.

- *Improved organizational structures* through support for outreach and training in organizing, governance, and member mobilization.
- *Enhanced framing of demands* to learn how to frame their demands in ways that shape public narratives and influence decision-makers.

However, partnerships are often constrained by structural tensions that weaken solidarity. Many CSO initiatives are not grounded in a proper needs assessment of worker groups, are poorly coordinated, and often duplicate earlier efforts instead of building on them. These tensions include:

- *Asymmetrical partnering.* CSOs shape the agenda, and worker organizations play a reactive role. Genuine partnership requires co-learning and mutual recognition of expertise.
- *Unequal power dynamics and representation.* Some CSOs prefer to speak for workers rather than amplifying the narratives of the workers themselves, leaving workers feeling sidelined.
- *Lack of infrastructure for collaboration.* Few platforms exist to facilitate sustained dialogue. Memoranda of understanding, where they exist, are often symbolic rather than operational.

Many new worker groups maintain relationships with traditional labor unions. This may be through *formal affiliation*, *provisional affiliation* while working to meet requirements such as a constitution, secretariat and audited financial records, and *solidarity partnerships* in joint initiatives.

41.1% leaders of newer worker groups rated their relationships with traditional labor unions as influential and lent credibility. Other benefits included: **Access to infrastructure** such as office space, **capacity-building opportunities**, including training in organizing, negotiation, leadership, and **conflict mediation** to help resolve internal disputes.

Nevertheless, not all affiliations work out. Large established unions can come across as bureaucratic and slow to act for workers affected by rapidly changing work trends. Several leaders of the newer worker groups feel that their specific concerns are not adequately reflected in dialogues, pointing to an institutional gap where formal-sector interests dominate the structures of representation.

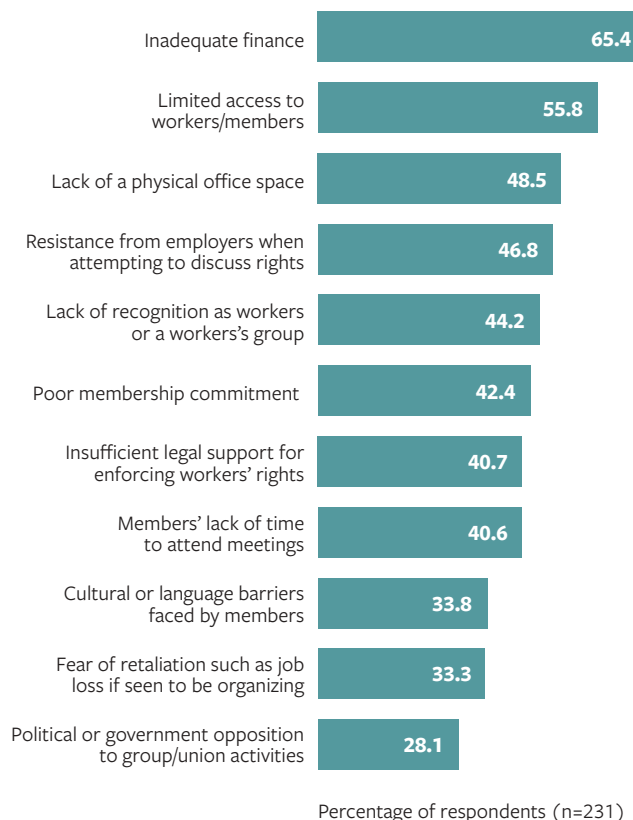
Focusing on just transition, the movement is emerging across Africa but remains thin and siloed. South Africa shows modest traction, particularly among energy workers, while waste picking, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing workers remain largely excluded despite vulnerability and significant exposure to decarbonization. In the advanced industrialized nations

of Europe and Americas, just transition narratives typically include social protection, but in Africa its meaning continues to be shaped by local politics, historically unjust arrangements, and exclusionary development priorities. More than half of leaders of new worker groups expressed clear expectations of a just transition and acknowledged ongoing efforts by relevant stakeholders. However, a substantial disconnect remains between workers' expectations and the perceived reality and pace of implementation. The most prominent concerns center on inadequate social protection and tokenistic participation.

Barriers to Organizing and Power Building among Emerging Worker Groups

Despite the growing visibility of the diversity of worker groups, many groups face constraints in mobilizing active member participation and building sustainable power. Across virtually all types of workers in the informal sectors and countries, common barriers to organizing and power building include limited funding, difficulty reaching members, a lack of dedicated office space, pushback from employers, and not being recognized as legitimate workers.

Obstacles Faced by Worker Groups Attempting to Organize



In terms of member participation, 82.5% of respondents reported that joining a worker group had met or exceeded their expectations. Yet those reporting dissatisfaction may have

insights which can strengthen organizing efforts. These reasons included: **low member engagement (50.4%)**, when members felt their voices were not heard; **poor communication (48%)** about decisions and group direction; **limited support for members** when work-related or personal challenges arise (**36.6%**); **poor organizing (33.3%)** and **unclear goals or direction (23.6%)** leaving workers questioning whether their groups were equipped to address issues; and concerns about **gender washing in leadership**.

For those who were not part of any organization, lack of awareness was a major reason. 56.6% of non-members surveyed reported simply not knowing that worker groups exist; 31.3% mentioned not knowing about the benefits of joining; suggesting that organizing campaigns have not penetrated many trade areas, particularly informal or fragmented labor environments. A notable **27.7%** of respondents feared that joining could trigger retaliation or job loss, indicating that employers may still wield coercive influence. Irregular or demanding nature of their work left them little time to participate in union activities (**25.3%**).

Selected Recommendations

These findings inform the recommendations outlined below to strengthen collective action and policy engagement for meaningful worker power and wellbeing.

For Worker Groups and Trade Unions

- Share evidence-based success stories to motivate unorganized workers and demonstrate the value of joining a worker group. Design organizing strategies which focus on delivering concrete improvements to workers' immediate concerns, and communicate those results to members to feed into success narratives.
- Trade unions should continue to make their structures more flexible to enable meaningful partnerships with new worker groups. This includes creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, ensuring these groups have genuine voice and representation, and managing expectations to foster mutual understanding.
- New worker groups should integrate just transition into their agendas and move from reactive advocacy to proactive agenda setting, such as negotiating skilling or pathways into higher-value green jobs.
- Unions and worker groups should center care and GBVH as core labor and bargaining issues and negotiate enforceable protections, benefits, and workplace standards that directly reduce barriers and enable women's full participation in their working environments and organizing movements.



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For Governments and Regulators

- Respect, recognize and extend full legal recognition to workers and self-organized groups in the informal economy within labor codes and bargaining statutes, paired with a phased pathway to formalization aligned with ILO R204, beginning with legal recognition of them as workers. Develop inclusive policies and measures to facilitate the transition to the formal economy. Penalize retaliation swiftly when employers intimidate organizers.
- Institutionalize the inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue with decision-making authority. Guarantee equal or proportional seats and procedural safeguards to prevent formal-sector interests from dominating

For Donors, Multi-lateral organizations and Civil Society

- Fund advocacy, evidence generation, and strategic litigation to advance workers' institutional power by securing legal recognition and inclusion of informal and non-standard workers in labor frameworks.
- Build the research capacity of worker organizations to advance policy positions informed by evidence, with clear outcomes to support each position.
- Provide technical and financial support to build the capacity of worker groups to conduct gender audits and restructure governance to ensure gender equity.
- Facilitate digital literacy and security training to enable digital organizing and protect worker groups from surveillance and online harassment