

NIGERIA: unions get creative and organize informal workers

With the collapse of many traditional industries, Nigeria has seen a rapid growth of workers in the informal sector. Statistics indicate that over 60 per cent of the Nigerian workforce is found in the informal economy.*



profile

Country: Nigeria

Text: Cherisse Fredricks

Union: National Union of Textile, Garment & Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTW)

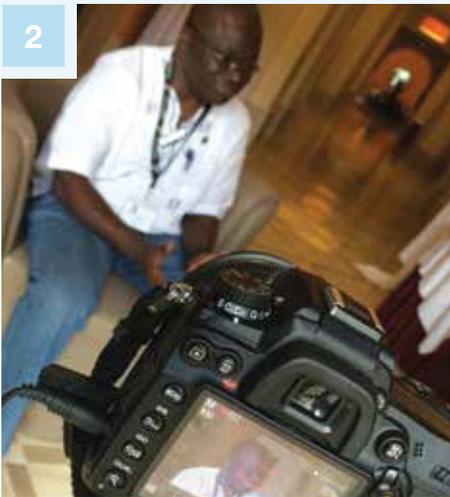
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IndustriALL Global Union affiliate, the National Union of Textile, Garment & Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTW) has used this trend as an opportunity not only to organize the unorganized, but also to strengthen union membership and increase women's participation.

A tailored approach to organizing

For the survival of the textile and garment sectors, the NUTGTW thought outside of the box and started organizing tailors. Out of 500,000 workers in tailoring, the NUTGTW has now organized around 35,000.

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For more on how Issa's union organized informal workers check out the full interview



"In the 1970s and 1990s when the textile and garment industries were vibrant, the tailoring aspect of our work was neglected and that is where the informal sector workers are found. The tailors in Nigeria are mostly self-employed and mostly women," says Issa Aremu, General Secretary of the NUTGTW.

Some of the tailors were already organized through associations in an unstructured way. The NUTGTW quickly realized it was better to get organizers who are tailoring workers with a better understanding of the issues. The tailors face a great deal of harassment by state authorities that collect multiple taxes, making it difficult for them to operate.

"These workers don't have a voice so we provide one for them. We are rooted in the community and part of IndustriALL. Now that these informal workers know that they are part of this global movement it helps to bring them into the circle," says Aremu.

To provide the tailors with a platform to discuss their issues, the NUTGTW has made efforts to connect them with government officials at local and state level.

The union also provides equipment like needles, sewing machines, buttons and textiles for the tailors. This partnership makes sense because NUTGTW members also produce textiles so the union can serve as an agent to link them to the industry allowing the tailors to have access to quality fabric at controlled prices.

"The country is being flooded with fabric from China. This damages the textile sector in Nigeria and makes it very difficult for tailors to access quality fabric which really undermines their work. So the union is providing a service to these informal workers, which pushes them to join," says Aremu.

"The informal sector workers have helped to reinforce the NUTGTW's campaigns because they are greater in number," he adds.

Creative solutions to organizing challenges

Establishing a fair system for membership dues is a challenge when dealing with informal sector workers. For a worker from the formal sector the procedure is

straightforward because they have a pay slip every month. For workers in the informal sector with an irregular income it is less so.

"If our union can find ways to provide services that workers in the informal sector find valuable, then they are willing to pay for them," says Aremu. "We have offered annual educational programs that have been amazing. The fees were reduced at the start, but now we have increased them gradually and the workers are willing to pay because they are eager for an education."

The NUTGTW has revised its curriculum to better suit the specific needs of informal sector workers, such as acquiring loans at cheaper rates to source supplies for their businesses.

"We also participate in national conferences and we want them to partake in these conferences in order to give a voice to their issues. And they are willing to raise the resources necessary to participate," says Aremu.

Integration into union structures

With pressure to meet 40 per cent women participation in union structures, some unions struggle because of low female membership. By organizing in the informal sector, the NUTGTW have not only managed to build their membership but have also reached a higher proportion of women members.

And the union has amended its Constitution to allow women to participate and to operate at higher-level positions:

"Women are now moving up in terms of our leadership structures," says Aremu.

- 1 Tailor organized by the NUTGTW in Nigeria. *NUTGTW*
- 2 Issa Aremu, General Secretary of the National Union of Textile, Garment & Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTW). *NUTGTW*