

TITLE: Organizing Labour in the Informal Sector: The Conditions of Rural Agriculture in Ghana

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The growing informalization of the economy under neo-liberal reforms in the Third World has left in its wake grave concerns especially in the area of labor. This situation necessitates activism of various kinds. Labour unions, women's rights groups and economic justice advocates are unsettled over the cunning ways that the corporate world backed by profit maximizing liberal economics is exploiting the informal sector through micro-management and segmented production regimes. After decades, perhaps millennia, of thrashing the informal sector, it has all of a sudden become an important asset to the formal sector in its profiteering maneuvers, which have included the sub-contraction of production activities into units in contradiction of its economies of scale principle; use of home-based labour, considered unprofessional as the factory site gained currency under industrialization and; increased casualization of factory floor labour and use of women's labour, hitherto viewed as non-productive labor.

An African Development Fund study (1997) found that in Ghana while the formal sector was employing only 5% of women and 19% of males, the informal sector employs 95% was women. It is this role as a dominant employer but perhaps as a somewhat "equity" employer that makes it an area of interest. That the for-

mal sector has in spite of its massive growth and sophistication is now resorting to the informal sector and its unorthodox production methods, which have been typically informal, is quite worrisome. The labour exploitation and socio-economic subversions that have characterized such informalization have been well critiqued and documented.

The increasing nature of the informalization of labor and production suggests a growing respect for the informal sector. Not only is the informal sector servicing itself, it is now also servicing the formal sector, in spite of the inherent exploitations (Ninsin 1992). The informal sector continues to support the livelihoods of majority of Third World peoples by giving employment, incomes and livelihood support to people. Yet, the age-old problems of that sector such as social security and protection remain. Ironically, the informal sector remains the oldest locus of human enterprise and will remain so for a long time. It is in view of this that Hutchful (2002) and Ninsin (1992) conclude that the informal sector is a dynamic and buoyant part of the Ghanaian economy that cannot be ignored. Its continued existence, growing sophistication and increasing popularity means that that sector can no longer be dismissed or treated with disdain as has tended to be the case under modernization and industrialization.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2002: 10) in a study on "Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture" observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South Africa, informal employment is around 81%. It was found in that study that in Kenya not only has the "traditional sector expanded to profitable and efficient enterprises as well as marginal activities," it was also exhibiting such characteristics as efficiency, creativity and resilience; these are characteristics hardly attributed to the oft dismissed informal sector in the march toward modernization. Ninsin (1992) also found similar characteristics as follows:

... the segment of the local economy which is dominated by self-employment, in which management practices and the organization of enterprise are purely ad hoc, non-bureaucratic and primitive; where labor is at best marginal to both production and distribution, and usually combines with other roles which may not be directly related to the labor process; and where wage system is highly personalized, irregular and variable. The economic activities that constitute the informal sector are not just non-farming activities. More especially, they are distinguished from traditional artisanry by their intimate linkages with the modern exchange economy. They span petty trading, repair and other services as well as manufacturing.

It thus makes sense that the collaboration between the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) and the Centre of Development Studies, University of Cape Coast has resulted in a study on the conditions of the informal sector. The GTUC, as the dominant and encompassing workers organization, would be failing in its duty if it continues to ignore the plight of workers of this very important sector, who form the majority of Ghanaian workers.

The authors, Britwum, Gharthey and Agbesinyale provide the painstaking and analytical research leadership that has yielded an important documentation on the largely rural based agricultural workers who operate in the informal sector and can be found across the country. Their multisite study entailed various interactions with multiple actors in their rural location and in strategic locations including northern, middle and southern belts. Not only has their exposure of the socio-economic conditions of rural agriculture, which provides the food and nourishments as well as jobs and incomes of majority of Ghanaians been revealing of the weaknesses and failures of Ghana's development planning, it also provides much-needed information for the GTUC in its labour mobilization and advocacy initiatives. The near neglect of the informal agricultural sector in national social policy planning and the unfair

dealing and even exploitation of its workers by corporate investors are key concerns of interest to that the GTUC as a labour union.

For the GTUC, which has been hit by structural adjustments in terms of reduced numbers through downsizing and retrenchment of public sector workers, it can only be acting responsively if it can extend its operations beyond the formal sector. For the majority of those who lost out of the formal sector and have found places in the informal sector, it makes sense to follow-up to them in their new found locations. The GTUC needs to strengthen its constituency and grow its numbers by directing its efforts to hitherto mobilized informal sector. In fact, the GTUC will not be counting loses if it had recognized from start that majority of Ghanaian workers operate in the informal sector. The numerous challenges of workers at the informal sector, which they expose such as high levels of illiteracy, lack of representation, poor service condition, child labour and gender disparities should drive the GTUC as the voice of Ghanaian workers to seek to represent and mobilize workers in that sector. The recommendations that Britwum and her associates make regarding grassroots mobilization, productivity enhancements and work conditions improvements are useful for stepping-up the production outputs and improving socio-economic conditions of the various actors,

However, the authors have tended to dwell on the weaknesses (and rightly so) while failing to place similar emphasis on the strengths of that sector as the basis for mobilization. They fail to learn useful lessons from both the ILO and Ninsin regarding the activist, resilient, subversive and organizing potentials of that sector. The many ways that workers in that sector respond to public sector policy and often force national budget re-writes as well as penetrate and upset political directions point to a history of resistance and mobilization. If the GTUC is to succeed in working with this sector as so rightly articulated by Britwum and her associates, they will not only need to enter that territory properly and mobilize from the grassroots but also learn from and build on tools and ex-

periences from that system. By so doing, it will be possible to introduce alternatives that are informed by such histories, sensitive to the plight of labour and can respond appropriately. Against the background of growing informalization of economies, Ghana and elsewhere, researchers will be fair with that sector if they can point out not just the exploitative nature of such efforts but also the key attractions of that sector as learning points for enhancements. The failures of the formal sector to reach its goals and deliver purported benefits as well as the increasing weakening of that sector should send signals to researchers, especially those working in Third World environments, to lead the crusade of seeking culturally relevant alternative ways of boosting national productivity and socio-economic well being without sacrificing justice for growth. Corporate entities in their mass production, export-oriented, foreign investments efforts have consistently failed to serve the interests of the majority of Third World citizens who are often targeted to benefit in terms of jobs, incomes and general socio-economic improvements. The emergence of sweatshops, forced labor and other exploitative tendencies as found in the Oil Palm initiative at Birim area by Britwum and her associates as well as the profit repatriation rather than local investments and extractive nature of such foreign investments have neither helped local economies nor peoples. In spite of Ghana's relatively positive performance in sustaining its GDP growth rates of around 5% or more over a period of 10 years, poverty rates remain high. These concerns should drive future efforts of the GTUC in its mobilization of rural agricultural and informal sector workers.