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Iddrisu, Yakubu

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ORGANIZING INFORMAL WORKERS FOR DECENT WORK: THE CASE OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

[A research report submitted to the Department of Sociology, School of Social Science, Humanities Faculty, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a ***Master of Arts Degree in Labour Policy and Globalisation****]*

By: Yakubu Iddrisu, Student Number 517747

Supervisor: Andries Bezuidenhout, Associate Professor

(SWOP Institute, Wits University & Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria)

Abstract

This report focused on *organising informal workers for decent work, the case of the agricultural sector in South Africa.* It recognizes that the future of the working class unions hinges on their ability to effectively organise the informal workers, more so in the African context, given the global rise in various forms of non-standard employment, including the informalisation of labour. Since the agricultural sector in South Africa is faced with extremely low organisation, especially among seasonal, casual and migrant farm workers, organising of this category could be strategic for union revitalisation and ensure decent work. The research sought answers to the question of *what the drivers and barriers to organising the informal workers in the agricultural sector in South Africa are*. It considered specifically *what social and economic factors, and policy framework affect organising informal workers in the agricultural sector,* and *in what ways this category of workers could be organised to ensure decent work*. A case study design focusing on the trade union, social movements and land rights organising among farm workers in South Africa was employed. Data was gathered through *documents*, *interviews* with farm workers, organisers and key informants and *observation*, from July to September, 2010.

The study isolated key social factors such as the *paternalistic farmer-farm worker relationship, limited access to social services* and *social interaction due to spatially distant location of the farms and the workers*, as the major barriers to organizing them. However, issues of gender, housing and migrant labour on the farms were the key social factor drivers for organizing among farm workers. Prevailing economic factors such as, *poor working conditions, low wages and poor remuneration, land* and *the extremely low state of unionization* were identified as major drivers for organizing informal workers on the farms. Also, the availability of legislation and policies in the post-apartheid state such as, the *new labour relations act, the extension of security of tenure act, the basic conditions of employment act* and *the sectoral determination,* were established as key instruments addressing the inequities associated with the informalities in the agricultural sector in South Africa.

The study concludes that, although availability of the policy frameworks is a necessary condition for organising through their facilitation of stakeholder engagements, it is not a sufficient condition without awareness and compliance for the realisation of decent work. Arguing that the extremely low organising among farm workers in South Africa contributes to the decent work deficit, and that effective organising would result in decent work and improved living standards among them, the study established that the most effective organising strategy for the farm workers is one that works with them as social beings, including their entire conditions and not only restricted to employment related, as witnessed with the traditional trade unions. The emerging social movement organising through farm and area committees with structures strongly rooted at the level of farms, encompassing all who live and work on farms, are strategies that ought to be encouraged.