

Emergency Online Solutions to the Covid-19 Pandemic for African Trade Unions:

A report based on interviews with five Africa GUF General Secretaries

BY SALIEM PATEL (IFWEA), MAY 2020



Summary

Covid-19 has disrupted the world of work and presents the trade union movement with immense challenges. It has not only exposed the vulnerability of workers all around the continent, but also the ability of the trade union movement in Africa to represent and organise workers when traditional interactions are not feasible.

The inability to travel, gather in large numbers, and hold meetings at workplaces or union offices has directed our attention to some critical communication and information deficits faced by the 5 Global Union Federations (GUFs) and their affiliated national unions.

Against this backdrop, emergency online solutions should be explored and supported so that African trade unions can effectively respond to the needs and grievances of their members.

These measures include:

- **WhatsApp groups** and the use of online applications for meetings, webinars and conferences in order to ensure the participation of grassroots leaders in decision making and strategy formulation
- **The use of websites** for improved accessibility to information and for communication with members (including offering real time text and call functions)
- **Updating membership contact details** and improving administration systems to communicate regularly with members online

- **Supporting online training** that enables grassroots leaders to use and access online resources for information, communication, research and education
- **Creating online content** for local and mainstream media to raise the voice of workers at the front lines of this pandemic
- **Popularise agreements and strategies** in response to the health effects and the socio-economic effects of the pandemic

The GUFs are connected to their African affiliates through cross-border trade union company alliances, regional gender and youth structures as well as a variety of continental campaign and organising committees. These networks could serve as multipliers for building the skills required to use information and communications technology required at a local and national level to respond to the current emergency situation.

Collaboration and coordination between GUFs at a regional and global level can increase the effectiveness and efficiency to provide emergency support for local and national organising, bargaining and participation in social dialogue during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Covid-19, the name for the new coronavirus that emerged in Wu Han, China, late in 2019 was declared a “public health emergency of international concern” on 30 January 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). This triggered governments to start taking health measures to deal with this viral pandemic spread by humans.



The aim is to articulate what kind of support can assist trade unions to improve their responses or strengthen their demands in the current context

Governments also imposed restrictive measures on the movement of people, commerce and social behaviour. The virus came late to the African continent and it is still in the early stages, with relatively few positive cases and even fewer deaths than in other regions. But this situation can change at any moment, especially if stay-at-home and physical distancing policies are not adhered to. These began to be implemented from mid-March by African governments which started to impose restrictions to freedom of movement, closing borders and banning commercial trade that was deemed non-essential. This resulted in many workers being put on leave or losing their jobs and livelihoods while only essential workers, especially health workers, selected food store workers, and related businesses were

able to continue working. The restrictions have varied slightly from country to country but have affected the operations of trade unions tremendously. No trade union was prepared for this unexpected and sudden turn of events. This report is an attempt to understand how trade unions in Africa has been affected and how trade unions and their continental federation structures – mainly the African Global Union Federations and Confederations – have responded to the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

The aim is to articulate what kind of support can assist trade unions to improve their responses or strengthen their demands in the current context to mitigate any negative or fatal consequences for their members and the broader working class constituency.

This report is based on interviews with the secretaries of five Africa Global Union Federations (GUFS). The interviews were conducted online as all the interviewees were following the stay-at-home regulations, and **the key questions asked were:**

1. How are their Federations and African affiliates affected by Covid-19?
2. How are they responding to the pandemic and how effective is their use of online tools and methods in this response?
3. What support could make their use of online tools and methods more effective during this crisis period?

The interviewees

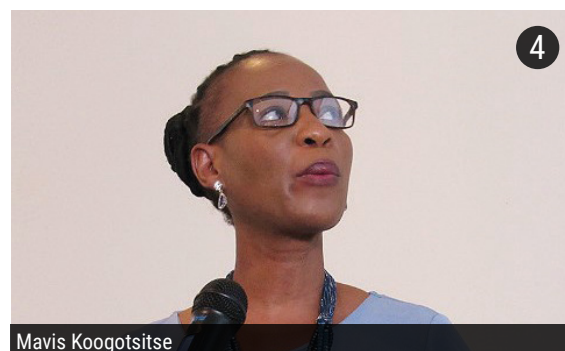
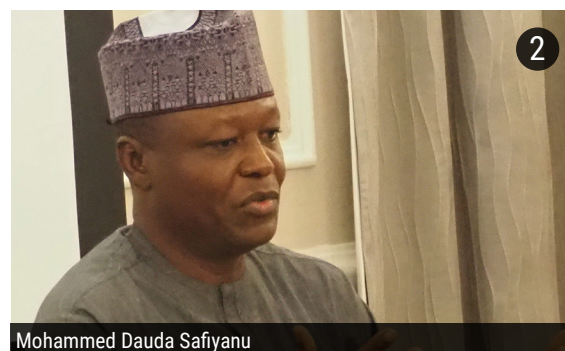
Each of the interviewees gave generously of their time and freely imparted information and shared their vast knowledge and complex understanding of the current crisis and its effects on their organisations.

They were already in response mode when interviews were conducted and their organisations were adapting to the new situation. This made their time very precious, however, they gladly accepted the request for interviews given the possibility of learning from each other and the probability of greater collaboration and unity.

This report begins with an overview of the main points raised by the interviewees with regard to how their respective African affiliates were affected by and how they responded to the coronavirus pandemic. It then highlights common threads from the interviews before providing ideas and examples of what support could immediately benefit the GUFs and their affiliates. These ideas and examples are not finite nor in any particular order of priority.

They are simply ideas that seem most relevant to the issues raised during the interviews with the GUF secretaries. Each GUF is different and requires specific kinds of support depending on their priorities, so the aim is simply to start a discussion on what can be done under these new conditions and where possible to immediately provide this support.

- 1. Paule Ndessomin**, Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Secretary, IndustriALL
Interviewed on 21 April 2020
- 2. Mohammed Dauda Safiyanu**, Africa Regional Secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)
Interviewed on 21 April 2020
- 3. Crecentia Mofokeng**, Africa and Middle East Regional Secretary, Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI)
Interviewed on 22 April 2020
- 4. Mavis Koogotsitse**, General Secretary, Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Committee (SATUCC)
Interviewed on 23 April 2020
- 5. Keith Jacobs**, Africa Regional Secretary, UNI Global Union (UNI)
Interviewed on 23 April 2020





Summary of interviews with selected GUFs

The interviews were conducted online. They were unstructured and centred on the three broad questions posed earlier allowing for the interviewees to respond freely and determine the information they felt was necessary to share, or critical for the support they required. Below is a summary of the key points that emerged during the interviews with each of them.

International Transport Workers' Federation



The ITF Africa Regional Secretary was in Senegal at the time that governments started imposing lockdown conditions. He had to cancel visits to Tanzania and Uganda scheduled to take place immediately after the Bus Rapid Transport campaign activities with Senegalese affiliates. He met with the Minister of Labour and the Trade Union Centre and visited a couple of working sites related to the transport sector in Senegal, returning back to his hometown just before lockdown where he continues to work online and is in regular contact with staff and affiliates in Africa. The Africa Regional Committee scheduled to take place in April was cancelled, though they continue to meet using online technologies and telephone.

The pandemic affected the different sectors and constituents of the transport industry differently. While air, road and rail passenger transport stopped, workers in freight transport continue to work and are at risk of being infected. Many of those not working, however, are not receiving pay and in some cases have been retrenched. This also affected the informal sector passenger drivers of motor bikes and mini-vans across the continent, which are the main form of passenger transport in numerous countries. The inability to work has affected unions of transport workers financially, in that most unions have stopped receiving membership dues and many affiliates reported that they will not be able to pay ITF affiliate fees as a result. Unions also reported that there is little to no communication with members and it is difficult to represent them due to the stay-at-home policies.

the various transport sector structures to render support where needed, and also to develop plans for the year as almost all planned activities for the year were postponed – including regional governance meetings and project workshops. Surveys were conducted through email; however, few African affiliates were able to respond as they did not have access to their office computers during the stay-at-home period.

To maintain contact with affiliates, the regional office ensured that WhatsApp and telephone calls were made by staff in charge of the various sub-regions on the continent as a follow-up to emails. The feedback they received indicated that numerous affiliates were active in sending emails to their respective governments and employers of their members regarding the safety of workers and demanding measures to counter the loss of pay where employers stopped paying employees during the lockdown.



The Africa Regional Secretary indicated that the lack of necessary skills, equipment and internet connectivity among affiliates which would enable them to work remotely is highly visible during this time.

The ITF established a global taskforce headed by the Assistant General Secretary in which Africa is one of the regions represented. The focus is on both health and safety of transport workers at work as well as securing incomes and preventing the growth of poverty and hunger amongst those not working. The taskforce meets regularly through virtual meetings to receive updates, respond to cases and plan ahead. The role of the taskforce is to develop new online methods of working to ensure the safety of ITF staff across the world, establish online communication with affiliates and

The difficulties and lack of communication experienced at a regional level were also a result of a lack of planning by affiliates to introduce effective communication and information systems using new technological developments. The Africa Regional Secretary indicated that the lack of necessary skills, equipment and internet connectivity among affiliates which would enable them to work remotely is highly visible during this time. Understandably there are high costs in Africa for doing so; however, this has really affected the ability of affiliates to be effective in responding to issues on the ground, as well as maintaining regular contact with the ITF regional office staff and representatives.

IndustriALL



The Sub Saharan Africa Regional Secretary for IndustriALL Global Union explained that many activities were just about to start before lockdown regulations came into effect, including FES sponsored activities involving youth from affiliates in southern African countries. Future activities for the year, including major regional and world conferences and the 3rd World Congress of IndustriALL, planned to take place on the African continent in Cape Town in October, have also been brought into question with a final decision pending in May. All regional office staff are working from home. The remote methods of working appear to be more intensive, especially with regard to communication with affiliates on how the pandemic is affecting workers.

The various sectors in which IndustriALL has affiliates were affected differently by the pandemic. Some sectors like mining remained operational, in many cases at less than a hundred percent capacity. In other sectors workers are at home with many of them being retrenched, furlough or not being paid during this period of no work. Some chemical and pharmaceutical companies are closed, and others open with many people working from home. Workers in the automotive and textile sectors were greatly affected as plants and factories closed thereby depriving many workers, especially contract workers, of wages. The stay-at-home orders and lockdowns shut down many oil and gas operations. This is worsened by the low demands for oil which is leading to a "jobs bloodbath" as workers in that sector fall victim to massive layoffs and retrenchments.

The Sub-Saharan African region formed part of the global IndustriALL strategy to protect workers from infection as well as from wage reductions and no-pay during the stay-at-home period. At a global level IndustriALL communicated with multinational corporations to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on workers' health, safety, and incomes. IndustriALL trade union networks, formed before Covid-19 to deal with specific mining companies including the Global Diamond Network and the Glencore Global Network, are now actively responding to Covid-19 challenges. IndustriALL also works with multinationals with whom they have a relationship, for example Anglo American, to protect workers' health on different platforms, and is participating in initiatives to develop Covid-19 protocols across the global mining supply chains.

On the continent numerous unions negotiated emergency agreements with companies or bargaining councils which are reported on the IndustriALL website and social media platforms. At the same time as unions are defending workers' rights, most of them are facing difficult financial situations as their non-working members are unable to pay membership fees. Some unions are therefore unable to pay staff and rentals

for their offices and their financial situation will remain uncertain until the end of the lockdown periods.

The region introduced some remote solutions like staff meetings once a week and meetings with the Sub-Saharan Africa executive committee members and global staff meetings with the entire IndustriALL staff around the world using video conferencing applications like Zoom, Lifesize and Skype. The activities of the youth and women's committees as well as their network meetings and programmes were put on hold. The networks are communicating regularly through WhatsApp groups. In the case of the youth, there is more participation and daily issues are being reported in the group. The Regional Secretary ensures that debates and discussion on gender issues are highlighted. WhatsApp groups are used to spark discussion on the effects of the lockdown on women and the challenges they deal with while continuing to work remotely but having the family at home. She emphasised that there is a need to maintain contact between delegates in the women's and youth committees as well as communication with affiliates in the region to ensure that they remain active and that the gains made over the years aren't reversed.

The challenge being faced currently is how IndustriALL Sub-Saharan Africa will build solidarity during this period of restriction on movement given the lack of online skills and technology among most affiliates and the workers they represent. IndustriALL leadership addresses letters to government authorities when there are reported cases of violations of workers' rights. In many cases where IndustriALL has either some working relationship or MOU with MNCs or a Global Framework Agreement (GFA) is in place, it has managed to save workers' jobs through negotiated settlements and putting agreements in place with these companies. However, there are situations where information on violation of workers' rights are reported and IndustriALL attempts to address the issue do not lead to meaningful changes taking place and workers in these circumstances continue to bear the burden of the pandemic. There needs to be more engagement with governments to prepare for lockdown periods, especially on the provision of food and ensuring that people's livelihoods including shelter are not put at risk. These are the challenges that IndustriALL may not resolve immediately but will definitely be more prepared to deal with in the future.

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Building and Wood Workers' International



The BWI Africa and Middle East Regional Representative reported that there were many activities that happened and were in progress before the lockdown. With hindsight many BWI staff and delegates from various affiliates were at serious risk of infection from the virus as they travelled to activities in Egypt and in the Middle East during the first months of the year when the virus started spreading through airport hubs. In meetings just prior to the lockdown, preparations for the BWI Regional Conference to be held in Egypt later this year were finalised.



Some people know how to use apps and others don't - this is a great challenge and there is a need to provide people with skills and access to technology for democratic participation.

Fortunately the BWI head office in Geneva suspended all travel and introduced a work-from-home policy just in time. Preparations for attending an activity in Namibia were still being planned that would have occurred in the week of the lockdown and were it not for the suspension of travel, some staff would have been stranded there. All activities involving travel have stopped since and the Regional Conference itself will probably be postponed to next year.

BWI staff are working from home and frequently communicate with affiliates in the Africa and Middle East regions remotely. The regional staff are able to work remotely and they were able to learn how to do so very fast because they were already doing this when they travelled. As a region they put in place weekly

Microsoft Teams meetings while communication with affiliates in Africa and Middle East is through Skype or Zoom. There are also many WhatsApp groups that are used to spread information on the pandemic and how to keep safe during this time, as well as provide unions with guidance to engage companies. Online communication comes with huge challenges given the level of connectivity of affiliates in this region, and many lack the ability and experience to use online communication within their unions to reach members.

The region produces an online regional newsletter where it shares information on the region and it also feeds all reports from affiliates to the global office who share this information with all regions through the website and social media pages.

Different sectors were affected differently by lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. The forestry sector was mainly operational (toilet paper, which is among the goods people were stockpiling, comes from this sector). But it was difficult to determine what working conditions were in place, especially to prevent the infection of workers with the virus, given the lockdown situation and lack of contact with union officials and workers in this sector. On the other hand building and construction were put on hold and most companies closed operations resulting in no pay for workers during the lockdown. There are also many in the informal economy who live from hand to mouth relying on day to day jobs in the building and renovations

sector that are gravely affected by the no-work restrictions. For many of these workers no pay means no food and the risk of being evicted when rent is due.

The BWI Regional Representative emphasised that this situation is unprecedented and there was no way that their affiliates could have been prepared for it. At the same time she admits that had they acted on some of the recommendations and ideas raised previously related to improving the use of information and communication technologies, they would have been able to communicate better with workers during this time and also safeguard them from the hardships through raising their voices. She recalls that there were discussions on "E-organisers" and cross-border organising, with applications for membership being done remotely and servicing workers remotely through online chat services, especially in countries where unions were too weak to organise migrant workers in the building and construction sector. These ideas did not appear appropriate at the time, given the support required by affiliates to deal with the challenge of organising growing numbers of workers in the informal building and construction sectors.

SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

Amidst this pandemic many African affiliates of BWI are experiencing financial stress given that thousands of workers are not working and paying membership fees. It is likely that BWI will lose 10 affiliates from the continent in the coming year, the Africa and Middle East Secretary laments, and these are affiliates whose members are most in need of support. She recalled the tireless work of Jin Sook Lee – BWI's Global Campaign's Director who passed away on 6 April 2020 – with vulnerable workers, specifically migrants and women. There is a need for BWI to learn from this and prepare to deal with a situation where many more workers become vulnerable during and after this pandemic.

The Regional Representative is hopeful that BWI will find ways to cope. The plan to plant trees during the International Day of Remembrance of Workers on 28 April 2020 could no longer happen in the original form, but instead of postponing yet one more activity, it was decided that people should plant trees and share stories online. Others planned online May Day activities like making videos for YouTube or sharing messages of solidarity on May Day in WhatsApp groups. Some people know how to use apps and others don't – this is a great challenge and there is a need to provide people with skills and access to technology for democratic participation.



The link for the regional newsletter is <http://bwinewsletter.ecowebplus.net/>

UNI Global Union



The Africa Regional Secretary of UNI stated that everything came to a halt in UNI Africa when the stay-at-home and travel restrictions came into effect – organisational meetings, trade union alliance meetings and project campaigns and education activities that built capacity on collective bargaining and organising. The secretariat started meeting and also liaising with the UNI Global Office online using Microsoft Teams. In this process they found ways to respond to and remain active during this period.

The regional staff started communicating with affiliates using email; however many people could not access emails at home and the response rate to email surveys in Africa was low. Staff followed up with phone calls and WhatsApp to find out about the situation in various countries. Most unions reported that workers in many UNI sectors are at risk of getting the coronavirus because they are deemed essential – retail workers, bank workers, postal workers, telecommunications workers and security workers. There are a number of cases where workers were not provided with protective equipment and unions had to intervene and expose this situation. In this way numerous companies were forced to provide protective equipment like masks and gloves. There were also reports of retrenchments and closures of stores leaving workers destitute.

the unions in the respective countries. In the online alliance meeting it was agreed that the unions from all the countries where Shoprite is based would send a letter to management to put pressure on the company to consult and negotiate with unions before implementing any changes.

So the situation went from almost complete standstill with staff establishing work-at-home procedures, to activities beginning to pick up using online tools, to conducting a survey, collecting and sharing information using WhatsApp and websites, to unions from different countries acting in unity by emailing company management as part of a process of building solidarity through trade union alliances.

The most common online tool is WhatsApp with groups for each trade union alliance as well as for the youth committee and the women's committee. Affiliates in all countries have various WhatsApp groups and are familiar with this application. When it comes to video conferencing and other online tools and methods of campaigning, however, there is very little experience among affiliates except among the youth. They are also the most active in the WhatsApp groups providing regular updates from various countries on how workers are affected by the restrictions in place and on the infection cases in their sectors and stores.



There is a need to have a database that has contacts in all companies and workplaces so that it is easy to obtain information or provide information to workers, enabling UNI and its affiliates to respond more efficiently and effectively.

In the region a number of alternative activities were decided on. The trade union alliance meetings were scheduled to take place via webinars during this pandemic and the first attempt was with the Shoprite Alliance. It was not successfully attended but with follow up and further communicating with affiliates, there was an increase in participation in the second webinar. There was also a need to send letters to big multinational companies who have Global Framework Agreements with UNI to sign a joint statement that conditions of work are not diminished during the pandemic and that the necessary safety measures will be taken to protect workers and customers from the coronavirus. Shoprite did not sign this explaining that they would sign only if other companies did so, although it was explained that other companies do not have a GFA with UNI. It was also decided to tackle issues confronted by UNI Africa affiliates head-on so letters were emailed, again to Shoprite, who dismissed workers

in one department in Lesotho, without informing the union or embarking on a process of consultation with the union. The company responded by saying that the global union should not get involved with collective bargaining issues as this is dealt with only by the local union, after which it was explained that the letter was not about the collective bargaining process but the violation of the rights of the union and workers to bargain and be consulted. In Malawi a store was closed and workers dismissed without the management of Shoprite consulting the union and in eSwatini, Botswana and Lesotho the company introduced a policy of non-payment of non-essential workers also without consulting

IDENTIFIABLE CHALLENGES

There are some clear identifiable challenges currently. The first challenge is the high cost of data. Even workers working for MTN, a company that sells data, do not have data for communication as MTN does not provide this on a cheap basis to their own employees, said the UNI Africa Regional Secretary. A second challenge is the need for training organisers to conduct online organising which is being done in other UNI regions. Another challenge is that many unions have applied for waivers to pay affiliate fees to UNI – the reason in all cases is loss of income of between 50-70 percent due to members not working and earning. This will have a great impact on affiliates' ability to organise now and after the pandemic. The last challenge is the inability to efficiently communicate with grassroots leaders at the shop floor in companies and respond effectively to their grievances due to the lack of contact information. During the survey to collect information from affiliates who are themselves federations of company unions in many cases and have to contact their union members locally, who then contact worker leaders on the shop floor, it was highlighted how contact information and communication systems are lacking. This is especially the case in West Africa where there are many local company unions; however, the lack of contact information and communication systems within unions is a general challenge throughout the continent. There is a need to have a database that has contacts in all companies and workplaces so that it is easy to obtain information or provide information to workers, enabling UNI and its affiliates to respond more efficiently and effectively.

Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Committee



The Executive Secretary of SATUCC indicated that the lockdown conditions meant a cancellation of their Annual Labour Symposium with the central theme being “Future of Work” this year. The plan was to create a united labour voice for Southern African regional economic development in a context where economies - especially the bigger South African and Zimbabwean economies - were weakening before the coronavirus epidemic became an issue. The ILO was able to conduct an online programme on the future of work in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic; however, while many affiliates participated in the online webinar, there were many people who could not access the webinar due to cost of data or unreliable data access.

The central executive committee was also cancelled and hosting an online meeting will be a challenge as there is very little experience using online technologies in SATUCC and its affiliates in the Southern African region. Some affiliates are more active and continuously update their websites and Facebook pages and even spark debates using Twitter while other affiliates have no online presence and “the leadership is not technology friendly,” said the Executive Secretary, who is eager to find solutions through practice rather than SATUCC stagnating and becoming irrelevant to the cause of workers.

At a secretariat and office level the organisation was able to continue functioning through staff working from home. There are morning check-ins using WhatsApp and emails to set deliverables. Working from home has its own challenges and distractions but the work gets done. The first task was to obtain information from the national trade union centres affiliated to SATUCC on how they are responding to the pandemic and the measures to curb the spread of the virus. The Executive Secretary made the point that the region is highly integrated economically and it is important to coordinate labour’s response; however, there is very little experience of online coordination and it will not be easy to decide what applications will be relevant and easy to use.

Many affiliates of SATUCC are also experiencing financial shortages resulting in less funds to pay affiliation fees and contribute to SATUCC activities. SATUCC also runs funded projects for which the activities can no longer be carried out given the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a need to adjust the activities of these projects and negotiate with funders and the participating national trade union centres. The main challenge is communication with the national trade union centres who are not used to participating actively in online meetings. In her experience, the Executive Secretary felt that online meetings fail to attract interest when not administered well or when the bandwidth is

not good enough, causing long pauses during the meeting. There is also the issue of multiple languages – English and Portuguese – which many online apps do not cater for and it is difficult to expect people from different countries to participate in discussions if they do not understand or if they cannot express their thoughts in their spoken languages.

SATUCC has elected youth and women’s committees and communication with national point persons from each of the national trade union centres has been through WhatsApp. The focus for the year is on Violence and Harassment at Work and the ratification of the ILO Convention 190 in the region. Here too, new plans are to be drafted that will have to include online activities that raise awareness of the C190 and encourage social dialogue with other stakeholders. The Executive Secretary said that this moment is an opportunity to reflect on what is not working in the trade union movement and establish proactive approaches, a positive image and interactive communication that encourages affiliate interaction and the interaction of union members throughout the region. There is much to learn about using the website and social media to target specific audiences as well as the need to develop skills to use mainstream TV and radio stations to send positive messages that counter xenophobia. There is a need to build solidarity in the region through examples of regional trade union unity in action. SATUCC must also work closely with all GUFs and turn the pandemic and the economic crisis into an opportunity to lay the ground for a shared vision and values for the continent.



The main challenge is communication with the national trade union centres who are not used to participating actively in online meetings. In her experience, the Executive Secretary felt that online meetings fail to attract interest when not administered well or when the bandwidth is not good enough.

Common threads from the interviews

- A.** Suspension of travel related activities of all Africa GUPS
- B.** Information gathering shows that African trade union affiliates were fighting in the interest of their members
- C.** Globally coordinated and inclusive responses
- D.** Move to internet
- E.** African trade union affiliates experiencing financial difficulties
- F.** Inadequate information and communication systems in place
- G.** E-Organising opportunity

A. SUSPENSION OF TRAVEL RELATED ACTIVITIES OF ALL AFRICA GUFs

The Africa GUFs themselves were greatly affected by the pandemic and the restrictive conditions imposed by governments. Their work entails an immense amount of travel to meet affiliates in various countries where they share experiences from the ground, assist in local campaigns defending the rights of workers and provide education and training to worker leaders for improving representation and bargaining outcomes for vulnerable workers. They also travel to participate in social dialogue events taking place in different countries where they represent workers' interests as a whole, in their particular sectors or specific sub-regions on the continent. Africa GUFs also host events bringing together participants from across the continent to strengthen connections and build solidarity across borders. Most GUFs, however, suspended all travel related activities before African countries closed borders and restricted passengers coming into countries via plane, train road or sea from mid-March onwards.

B. INFORMATION GATHERING SHOWS THAT AFRICAN TRADE UNION AFFILIATES WERE FIGHTING IN THE INTEREST OF THEIR MEMBERS

The GUFs and many of their affiliates did not fold their arms and wait for the pandemic to subside – their members are directly affected at the workplace and in under-resourced communities so they simply couldn't. Surveys conducted by the GUFs themselves indicated that their affiliated unions engaged companies and governments to ensure the safety of workers who had to work during the lockdown period. They also made demands that employers introduce measures to mitigate the hardships experienced by workers not able to work due to the lockdown, e.g., for employers to continue to pay workers or for grants to be made available due to loss of pay. Where companies were taking unilateral decisions, the Africa GUFs supported affiliates by sending letters to companies to respect collective bargaining rights of workers.



The pandemic has raised the need for E-organising in a new light where there are restriction on large gatherings, or social distancing and stay-at-home policies.

C. GLOBALLY COORDINATED AND INCLUSIVE RESPONSES

The Africa GUFs are part of the larger global labour movement and there is good communication between head offices and African offices using a variety of online applications and methods for meetings. The global head offices were very supportive of the regions and developed materials that affiliates could use to raise awareness about the dangers of the coronavirus. The head offices also provided strategic direction to the regions on how to operate and manage regional offices to ensure safety of staff and communication with affiliates.

D. MOVE TO INTERNET COMMUNICATION

All the GUFs moved beyond email as the main means of communication and started using online multimedia applications for meetings and discussions. These applications include Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp and Kudu. This worked well at a global level and even between staff in the African region. However, there are serious challenges when it comes to communication with national affiliates in Africa where there is little access to internet connection and technology due to high costs that many national unions can't afford. Some union officials and members also lack the skills to use online applications.

E. AFRICAN TRADE UNION AFFILIATES EXPERIENCING FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

The coronavirus has resulted in financial difficulties for many national unions affiliated to GUFs given that they are unable to receive membership dues from workers who are not earning during the lockdown. Many unions are unable to pay staff costs, rent and other expenses while their expenses for communication are expected to increase given the restrictions on movement and gatherings.

F. INADEQUATE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN PLACE

GUFs found it difficult to obtain information at a company and shop floor level due to a lack of information systems like contact details of worker leaders who could provide information on how workers are affected and experiencing the pandemic at a local level. This is necessary to ensure appropriate support measures can be put in place and to enable GUFs to raise concrete demands at a regional and global level. The access to agreements reached with companies on Covid-19, which can help local worker leaders to negotiate better conditions, is also lacking and requires a huge amount of communication work to find out the content of the agreements. This discourages local organisers and leaders from trying. So the lack of data, not just digital technology, is a huge gap that needs to be filled for decisions in unions to be based on verified information.

G. E-ORGANISING OPPORTUNITY

E-organising, online campaigns and remote support to worker leaders are not unfamiliar to unions in Africa although most unions have resisted using these methods as they are costly and require reliable ICT infrastructure and service providers. They also require training of organisers in online methodologies to support and educate worker leaders. With a range of pressing matters and a lack of resources E-organising never took off in Africa. The pandemic has raised the need for E-organising in a new light where there are restriction on large gatherings, or social distancing and stay-at-home policies. The decline of members in affiliates due to retrenchments will require all efforts to maintain existing members and recruit new members using E-organising methods.



Way forward

- A.** WhatsApp
- B.** Facebook
- C.** Access to and use of Covid-19 agreements
- D.** Membership information systems
- E.** Fundraising as an organising strategy
- F.** Webinars and online meetings
- G.** Online information, education and research
- H.** Mainstream media interventions: YouTube, podcasts and press statements

Way forward

“Recently, there has been much talk about the fourth industrial revolution where as a result of automation, machines will be doing most of the work raising questions about the future of work (for humans) and employment. However, the pandemic showed us how important workers are, they are needed and even declared essential during this crisis - not just health workers but miners, retail workers, transport workers, bank workers, agricultural workers, and so on.” This observation made by the Africa Regional Secretary of IndustriALL was followed by another observation that discussions were not inclusive of workers themselves. She concluded by saying: “In a way the pandemic allows us to reflect and act with clearer focus in future.”

GUFS were able to hold governance meetings using video conferencing applications and remained in touch with staff and project coordinators using internet based applications. Staff were equipped to work from home and were able to accomplish much under the circumstances at a regional level. The challenges of communication and participation appear at a national level and even more so at a grassroots level, that is, at the company or workplace level. Members need to be kept informed by shop stewards and the union's leadership. Meetings are required in workplaces to give mandates to shop stewards. There is a need for shop steward council meetings and meetings of various structures in the union including the branch, regional and national executive committee meetings. How will all this be done under these lockdown or social distancing measures? What will happen to local campaign meetings and education workshops? And how will workers meet to strategise for strikes that will happen during the pandemic?

Fortunately the Africa GUFS are quite rooted in their affiliates and connected to them in many ways over and above the few constitutionally required meetings. There are Youth Committees and Gender Committees, there are trade union company alliances and networks, and there are Climate Change Forums that involve participants from various affiliates and who are in regular contact with each other using Facebook pages, WhatsApp Groups and webinars. This is a good starting

place for Africa GUFS. The participants in these varied structures can be the ones that assist to build up the capacity at a local level as they already have some experience of using these applications.

There is a difference between liking a Facebook page or commenting on a post, and setting it up and administering it. There is a difference being invited to join a WhatsApp group and administering one. There is a difference between participating in a webinar, and setting it up and administering the webinar. There is a difference between joining an online study circle or activist group, and recruiting people to join and providing leadership to the group. The setting up, administering and providing leadership aspects come with experience that worker leaders at a national and local level do not have. This is something that is possible to accomplish collectively as the Covid-19 pandemic does not distinguish between one union and another or one GUF and another.

The following pages contain some suggestions for using the internet information, communication and research applications. These can be self-taught or learnt as a collective in online study circles and online courses using various applications and methodologies that participants are already used to. These are tools that can be learnt very easily. They are not set out in any order of priority. Unions can choose what they feel comfortable using, based on the needs they are trying to address.



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WAY FORWARD



A. WHATSAPP



There is a number of online resources for establishing and administering WhatsApp groups like this one: www.guidingtech.com/whatsapp-group-tips-tricks/

WhatsApp appears to be used widely within unions that are affiliated to Africa GUFs. It is used to communicate between shop stewards and trade union leaders and it is also used in trade union cross border alliances. The platform does not require a smartphone with very high technical specifications and it does not use much data. It is also very easy to use and probably familiar to most shop stewards who are already part of union WhatsApp groups. Those that know how to set up and administer a WhatsApp group should be encouraged to do so with the people they represent, in order to obtain information and ideas about pressing issues to be addressed with employers during Covid-19.



B. FACEBOOK



Follow this link for a "how to stream" tutorial: <https://bit.ly/36tkqJs>

A Facebook page can be used effectively to put pressure on companies that place workers at risk or are treating workers unfairly as it can be open for anybody to post remarks or information. Events can be created setting times for meetings or broadcasts to keep people informed and connected. Union leaders can also stream speeches or statements live and can therefore react in real time to companies that are mistreating workers, highlight a grievance that has arisen, or even a publicise a strike that is going on. It easy to reach large audiences and content can be shared around the world on GUF Facebook pages. Although not every shop steward or everybody in an elected position needs to know how to this, the more that know the better for the union.



C. ACCESS TO AND USE OF COVID-19 AGREEMENTS

A number of agreements have been signed to cater for the Covid-19 pandemic. Not all of these were the result of an enlightened employer. In some cases unions had to apply pressure on employers and increasingly members are resorting to strikes to reach an agreement which effectively protects them and rewards them for the work they do. The content of these agreements should be easily accessible and best practice promoted to continuously raise the level of safety protection, job protection and pay for workers. This is something that the Labour Research Service can be approached to do as it already has an Agreements Database.



D. MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Now is the time to introduce online membership databases that can be accessed easily and enable unions to perform various functions with it, such as monitor subscriptions, send email and text messages to members, and create groups of members like company shop stewards representatives or shop stewards located in the same shopping mall, industrial area or community, etc. Although taken for granted only few trade unions have such systems. (The best method is to identify the union with a versatile, user-friendly online membership database and make it available to unions that do not have an online database to avoid high costs and the lengthy process of creating a new database). The main reason for a membership database is to be able to analyse various aspects of the membership so as to improve their participation in the union and improve the communication between members and the trade union. This is to ensure that improved strategies to build the capacity, solidarity and power of members is based on empirically verified statistics and advances can be measured.



E. FUNDRAISING AS AN ORGANISING STRATEGY

The dire straits that many unions are finding themselves in will result in a lack of resources for local campaigns or strikes. Shop stewards can learn different strategies of fundraising, involving members in this process to obtain resources without depending on head offices for materials, communication or transport when coordinating a strike or running a campaign. Online study circles using WhatsApp, Google Class or an open source Learning Management System (LMS) like Moodle can be used to learn and teach each other about fundraising using readily available materials. IFWEA's Online Labour Academy is based on the Moodle application and is available for grassroots learning and online study circles. WhatsApp and Google Class may be more popular and these applications work just as well for basic skills and sharing ideas.



F. WEBINARS AND ONLINE MEETINGS

There has been an immense rise in people participating in webinars and online meetings since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared; however, very few people know how to set up and administer these. This is something that more worker leaders need to learn about as they can organise national meetings or report-back sessions using video-conferencing applications. There are a number of applications available, some for free and some requiring payment. However, they all have very similar capabilities and improvements are mainly about the quality of audio and video as well as the amount of bandwidth consumed. Zoom and Skype are very popular as these are free applications; however, many GUFs also use Microsoft Teams. There are dedicated services like BlueJeans and Kudo which offer improved quality at a cost, and with Kudo there is also the possibility of simultaneous translation which would be useful mainly for cross-border shop steward alliances or for other union structures which require multiple languages to be translated simultaneously.

Most apps have their own video tutorials to learn from and numerous short articles on conducting successful meetings or webinars can be found online.

Two sources:



a. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-it-takes-to-run-a-great-virtual-meeting>



b. <https://www.information-age.com/top-10-tips-effective-video-conferencing-123466657/>



G. ONLINE INFORMATION, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

For more on how to use various Google information and research apps (like Docs, Sheets, Jamboard, etc. go to: <https://gsuite.google.com/training/>



To create a classroom with Google Classroom go to: <https://classroom.google.com>



For learning about the Moodle Online Learning Platform go to: www.moodle.com



Although much information can be obtained from the internet, most worker leaders and union organisers do not have the skills to use the internet sufficiently to obtain the information they require for bargaining or organising. This requires training in basic internet skills, how to find information, and learning to share and cooperate when doing research or collecting information. This can be done using Google Docs or Google Sheets for example. There are a range of Google and other apps that allow online collaboration and education that grassroots leaders and organisers could use to continue to provide education for shop stewards – Google Classroom is very common and Moodle is another. These apps do require more effort and time to learn how to use, but are well worth the investment if education is a priority for unions. Organisers and educators can learn by themselves using the online tutorials, or they can form online study circles and learn together. IFWEA has a course on “How to design and run an online course”. It is open and free to worker educators and it will probably run a few times in 2020 given the need for using online education methodologies.



H. MAINSTREAM MEDIA INTERVENTIONS: YOUTUBE, PODCASTS AND PRESS STATEMENTS

Raising the voice of workers in mainstream media is tricky because there is a risk of producers or editors placing it out of context. At the same time mainstream media provides a wide audience for solidarity values and for winning legitimacy for the demands of workers. But there has been very little training available to worker leaders at all levels on how to create or use different forms of media. Smart phones now enable the creation and editing of photographic, video and audio content more easily. With less mobility and social distancing people will turn to forms of media to keep in touch with events, and by creating quality content unions can remain in the consciousness of workers and also penetrate the mainstream media and shape debates in the broader society.

Content can be uploaded to YouTube or posted on Facebook and Twitter. It can also be sent to mainstream media. Local union leaders can also participate in community radio shows or write statements for local newspapers. As union representatives may not be able to travel immediately to investigate and speak about the issues confronting workers, certain shop stewards or local organisers could be trained to create and provide media content. Already many union members make and share videos through WhatsApp and these can be bumped up a bit with improved quality and messaging. It may be useful to approach organisations like Workers World Media Productions and other organisations that have experience in assisting unions with media, branding, and publicity, to facilitate this training.



Some tips can be found online: <https://wave.video/blog/12-simple-tips-for-making-your-videos-look-more-professional/>



I. LIVE CHAT LINKED TO WEBSITE

Given current restrictions, many workers will not be able to travel to union offices to seek assistance or advice. Another way of communicating with members is through a live chat linked to the union’s website. This requires an organiser or someone knowledgeable about the union and its work to be on standby in case a worker starts using the chat to ask a question. While data is expensive, travelling to the union’s office may be more so and impossible when there are curfews. Phone calls are also more expensive than texting on a website. If there are not enough people to attend to this live chat in the union then it could be run for an hour or a few hours a day, and would be a good way to also track what information and guidance workers need and what problems they are facing. This could help with improving the strategy of the union to reach out and organise more workers.

Conclusion

When the pandemic started GUFs and their affiliated unions did not know what to do and thought that the pandemic would be over soon. Over a matter of a couple of weeks new ways of working emerged and negotiating, campaigning, organising and building solidarity started taking on new forms. Many affiliated unions are starting to follow their GUFs who were already pioneering the use of online tools and methods. Other unions are struggling and need support during this period. Hopefully some of the suggestions made in this report can help unions that are struggling with ideas about what they can do, to turn the temporary setback caused by Covid-19 into a kick-start to building workers' power from below.



It is important not to force a one-size-fits-all approach as each union has its own history, politics and priorities that needs to be respected. Solidarity requires this respect.

It is important to highlight two issues in concluding this report. To maintain participation of members and sustain democratic organisations during this period of Covid-19 requires an emergency response by the labour movement in Africa. The Africa GUFs have already stepped up to this challenge and identified the needs and support required by their affiliates. It is important not to force a one-size-fits-all approach as each union has its own history, politics and priorities that needs to be respected. Solidarity requires this respect.

The second issue is that Africa and African unions are not in this alone and that trade unions are lagging behind the use of digitisation and information and communication

technology the world over. Some of the recommendations in this report may very well apply to unions in other regions. On the other hand lessons from trade unions in other parts of the world should not be ignored by African trade unions and vice versa. While this report focussed on African GUFs and their affiliates there should be studies in other regions to determine the challenges and the support required. This will enable greater coordination and collaboration on a global level to support national unions at a time when many national unions require support to remain relevant and active. This is important because the global unions need strong local unions as much as local unions need to have strong global unions.

Further information

Websites for online strategies and activities



EVERYACTION:

<https://www.everyaction.com/resources/covid-19>



GRANTSPACE:

<https://grantspace.org/training/10-strategies-for-success-with-digital-fundraising/>



M-R:

<https://www.mrss.com/lab/coronavirus-demands-a-quantum-leap-in-organizing/>



M-R:

<https://www.mrss.com/online-fundraising-advocacy/>



SOCIAL MOVEMENT TECHNOLOGIES:

<https://socialmovementtechnologies.org/>



WONDEROPOLIS:

<https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-is-a-flash-mob>



PAYDAY:

<https://paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/>

The five Africa Global Union Federations (GUFS)



INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION

<https://www.itfglobal.org/en/region/itf-africa>



UNI GLOBAL UNION

<https://www.uniglobalunion.org/regions/uni-africa/news>



INDUSTRIALL

<http://www.industriall-union.org/sub-saharan-africa>



SOUTHERN AFRICA TRADE UNION COORDINATING COMMITTEE

<https://satucc.org/>



BUILDING AND WOOD WORKERS' INTERNATIONAL

<https://www.bwint.org/>

FES Trade Union Competence Centre for Sub-Saharan Africa (FES TUCC)

34 Bompas Road
Dunkeld West
Johannesburg

 +27 10 446 8612


 <http://www.fes-tucc.org>

 [facebook.com/festucc](https://www.facebook.com/festucc)

 [fes.tucc_sa](https://www.instagram.com/fes.tucc_sa)

International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA)

Community House
41 Salt River Road
Cape Town

 + 27 21 486 1115

 <https://www.ifwea.org/>

 www.youtube.com/IFWEA

 [facebook.com/IFWEA-839983422712289/](https://www.facebook.com/IFWEA-839983422712289/)