



Photo credit: Marta Moreiras (Dakar, Senegal, 2022)

Advocating for informal cross-border traders

Experiences from West & Central Africa

About the project

StreetNet International organized a series of webinars between March and June 2021 to discuss in depth the topic of informal cross-border trade, together with its affiliates in West and Central Africa – one of the regions where this form of informal trading is very prevalent. The project was carried out with the cooperation of StreetNet's partners, including SACBTA (South African Cross Border Trade Association), an experienced partner in the ICBT issues, ITUC Africa (African regional organization of the International trade Union Confederation) OTUWA (Organisation of Trade Unions in West Africa) and ATUMNET (African Trade Union Migration Network).

The goal of the webinars was to engage our affiliates in exploring the issues of cross-border trade, enabling them to identify transnational and cross-cutting problems that different trade unions and associations from various countries might have in common; as well as ascertain their particularities and differences. After the end of the webinar series, StreetNet affiliates who shared borders worked together to put their knowledge into practice and advocate for the rights of informal cross-border traders.

This short report showcases their experiences.



Informal traders of Koundara Market at the border between Senegal and Guinea // Credit: StreetNet Youth Reporter Djenabou Sow

Border of Niger + Benin

- **SYNAVAMAB-UNSTB**
(Syndicat National des Vendeurs, Vendeuses et Assimilés des Marchés du Bénin)
- **UGSEIN** (Union Générale des Syndicats Economie Informelle Niger)



Border between Benin and Niger - with the indication of the two cities of Gaya and Malanville

The activities conducted by SYNAVAMAB-UNSTB and UGSEIN took place in the city of Gaya, in Niger and Malanville, Benin.

The problems identified at this border were the following.

- **High taxes at the border.**
- **Confiscation of food, in particular cereals.**
- **In Gaya and Malanville markets, this impacts the cost of food.**
- **The other problem is the border control points.**

The organizations prepared a document to be signed by two parties, in order **to reduce the payment requested for the transfer of goods at the border**. They have asked the authorities of the two countries to **reduce the checkpoints**.

On behalf of the traders, the organizations have asked to deliver a **special authorization** to go through the border crossing from Gaya to Malanville: the traders have to take with them a lot of documentation (ID, passport, vaccination document...). Another request was to **make the documentation burden lighter**. The special authorization was asked in particular for the traders selling cereals across the border. For smaller quantities, the organizations advised the traders to inform the customs authorities about the transactions they intended to make, in order to avoid taxes.

Way forward. The group is committed to continue the activities that have been carried out at the borders: the Niger - Benin border is very important for the region, and for ICBT activity. The group intends to continue supporting the women informal economy workers. Another key goal is to open new markets and improve the access of traders to international markets. Modernization of existing markets and of communication channels are two other goals of the project.

The extortion activities are not limited to the routes, sometimes the officials raid the markets or the houses of people, during the night, on the suspicion that they might be hiding contraband. **The picture altogether is very difficult: the economies of the border communities have been ruined by the ban and by the corruption, as well as the extortion practices.**

FIWON held a press conference last month. They have been able to disseminate information to the public, amidst specific demands for the authorities. They tried to reach the government official but failed to have any response.

Lastly, the group has reached to the ECOWAS commission to share the findings and seek their support in addressing the situation. After several weeks of efforts, **the response of ECOWAS was that they are still observing the COVID-19 situation and are not able to act on the aspect of cross border trade yet.**

Way forward. Looking forward, the group wants to consolidate the results achieved so far. They want to organize trainings to educate workers about their rights. One goal is to **liaise with civil society organizations in order to get the attention of the governments**, especially of the ECOWAS commission; and engage with them and get them to **implement the trade instruments** and agreements in order to have concrete impact on the people's lives. Furthermore, the associations want to improve their communication work and draw more media attention to the human rights violations happening in Nigeria.

Border of Côte d'Ivoire + Burkina Faso

- **FETTEI-CI** (*Fédération des Travailleuses et Travailleurs de l'Economie Informelle de Côte D'Ivoire*)
- **SYNAVFL** (*Syndicat National des Vendeurs des Fruits et Legumes*)



The city of Niangoloko, at the Burkina - Ivory Coast border

In this border, the issues identified for now are the following:

- **High taxes at the borders**
- **Difficulties in understanding the documents to provide**
- **Women are treated badly at the borders and by the border authorities; and have difficulties speaking up about their issues.**
- **There is not enough information about the simplified trade regimes.**
- **There is no exchange of information and harmonization of legislation between the two countries. This issue is also the difficulty in implicating the authorities in the project.**

As for measures, the group has tried to form a focal point composed of 15 actors, whose purpose is to organize meetings with different parties, informing them about relevant issues.

For this purpose, they have also created a Whatsapp group and elaborated a document with recommendations for negotiations. The stakeholders agreed to be involved in this project.

The group reached to the Ministry of Commerce and to the Ministry of Economics and Finances and to the Ministry of Defense of the two countries.

At the local level, the group engaged with the prefect of Niangoloko, the mayor of the Niangoloko community, the custom authorities of the two countries. The trade unions have assisted in the activities, and so have the Commercial Centers.

The results of the campaigns were satisfactory, especially under the point of view of sensibilisation of actors, who understood the importance of working in a union and being federated.

ICBT is one of the most important activities in the region. Making this process easier for the workers means improving a lot of other activities in the region.

The specific challenges identified are:

- **Contribute to reducing the current problems of corruption, security and bribery that plague cross-border trade**
- **Advance the need for greater harmonization of customs tariffs, abolishing stringent travel requirements, such as the Laissez-Passer and Emergency Travel Certificate, as prerequisites for crossing international borders,**
- **Reduce travel formalities at all borders and reduce the burden of excessive taxation, extortion and harassment of cross-border traders**
- **Encourage the training of informal cross-border traders, Customs, Immigration, Police and other security officials on the need for a Simplified Trade Regime.**

Way forward. Looking forward, the group aims at organizing a meeting with customs services, especially in Burkina Faso. The goal would be to organize a common bureau where all the communication can be carried out. This will go parallel with the improvement of workers' education.



Members of FETTEI-CI (Ivory Coast) and SYNAVFL (Burkina Faso) meeting in 2021

Border of DRC + Congo

- **LDFC** (*Ligue pour le Droit de la Femme Congolaise*)
- **SCS** (*Confédération Syndicale Congolaise*)



Kinshasa and Brazzaville, at the border between Congo Brazzaville and DRC

SCS is not an affiliate of StreetNet, but it is based in Congo Brazzaville. The border tackled in the one between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Congo Brazzaville. The problems identified at this border by LDFC and SCS are the following:

- **Excessive taxes.**
- **Excessive border services / agencies.**
- **Excessive customs fees**
- **Total decrease in the movement of traders.**
- **Insecurity of goods and services .**
- **Covid-19 limiting services and imposing too many restrictions (compulsory and costly tests).**
- **Lack of frank collaboration between the different officials of the services at the borders.**

Moreover the speaker underlines the fact that traders are not informed about the regulations and requirements in relation to cross-border trade. Traveling from Kinshasa to Brazzaville costs 150 dollars. The conditions are not very safe.

The measures undertaken by the group are the following:

- **Reducing taxes and other related costs.**
- **Establishment of a memorandum of understanding facilitating trading.**
- **Awareness raising of border officials.**
- **Sensitize cross-border traders to choose the official route for crossing.**
- **Loss of economic capital of traders.**

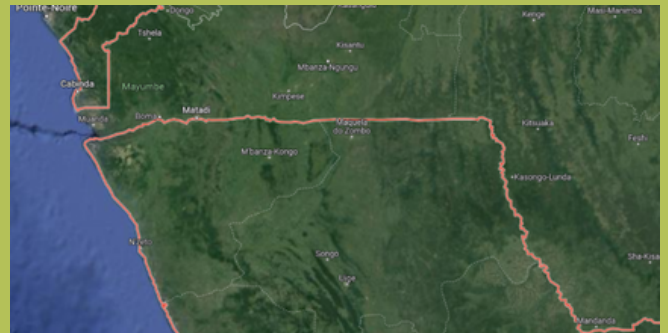
Way forward

The group has identified several dimensions for the project development

- **Raise awareness to end harassment;**
- **Respect protocols to make cross-border trade flexible;**
- **Popularise the sub-regional protocols on the free movement of goods and people;**
- **Involve services and traders to collaborate;**
- **Organise more meetings for experience exchange between the two countries**

Border of DRC + Angola.....

- **SNVC** (*Syndicat National des Vendeurs du Congo*)
- **FENSTACHS** (*Federação Nacional de Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Industria Alimentar, Comércio, Hotelaria, Turismo e Similares*)



The northern border between Angola and DRC

SNVC has tried to go to the border twice. The delegation identified a lack of information and knowledge about the taxes and legislation between the two countries. The border service exhibits a poor treatment of traders at the border. **Generally traders from Angola can easily travel and trade to Congo. For Congolese traders it is not the same, they are not treated the same as Angolan ones in the Angolan markets. There is a disparity between the treatment received by Angolan and Congolese people.**

Sometimes the traders have to buy the place to sell the goods, and this leads to discrimination against Congolese traders.

SNVC and FENSTACHS have contacted the border to push them to inform the traders correctly when they cross the border. The group has noted that sometimes authorities do not provide the necessary documentation to traders. The two associations tried to inform the people about the necessary documents.

The trade unions have organized a meeting at the border with the relevant tax authorities: they have had a promise from them to reduce the taxes at the border. The main problem is that the information is lacking and generally not transparent.

At the border level it is important to sensitize the traders: in case of danger, they need to know which agency to contact.

Way forward. In the future, the group aims at establishing a permanent dialogue with authorities, sharing information and working to open more markets to traders.

Border of Burundi + DRC + Rwanda

- **ASSOVACO** (*Association de Vendeurs Ambulantes au Congo*)
- **SYVEBU** (*Syndicat des vendeurs de Rue du Burundi*)
- **SYTRIECI** (*Syndicat des Travailleurs Independents de l'Economie Informelle*)



The objectives of the group working on this project are the following:

- **Negotiate with the border services authorities in favor of our members, small-scale cross-border traders, given the harassment they suffer at the hands of border officials.**
- **Strengthen the capacities of the members of our respective organizations on how to deal with border formalities.**

The obstacles identified by the group relate mainly to the lack of interest from the authorities to join the meetings. It was also difficult to cover all the DRC Borders. The activities were carried out by each organization singularly and jointly by the group. Each organization selected a team of negotiators and collected data about border activities. Each affiliate organization that met with the border authorities of its country invited its counterpart on the other side and some members among small-scale traders. The activities were undertaken in the cities of Uvira, Gatumba (Burundi - RDC border) and in Ruzizi (Burundi, close to the Rwandan border).



Meeting of the representatives of the three organizations.

Way forward. For the future, the group aims at working on signing bilateral agreements between the countries and compiling a list of goods that can be exchanged at the borders. Another goal is to establish an office that can provide complete and transparent information to the traders. Of particular importance is the aspect of taxation and knowledge of taxation mechanisms. A permanent dialogue can be established with the authorities. Another issue is the translation of documents: many traders do not speak more than one language, it is therefore crucial to ensure that the documents are translated and disseminated.



Ruzizi I & II, south of the border between Rwanda and Burundi

Border of Senegal + Guinea

- **CNTS** (*Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Sénégal*)
- **CNTG** (*Confédération Nationale de Travailleurs de Guinée*)



The town of Koundara, at the Guinea - Senegal border

A delegation from Senegal has traveled directly to Guinea, and the first meeting has been held in the city of Koundara.

The administrative authorities, particularly the mayor and the prefect, have encouraged the delegation to continue its activities in the region. They have accompanied the Senegal delegation to meet the comrades from Guinea and the customs authorities, the police and the border service.

The two organizations held a 4 hours advocacy meeting with the authorities in Guinea. This meeting has helped shed light on many difficulties. The authorities have proved helpful and interested in improving the situation.

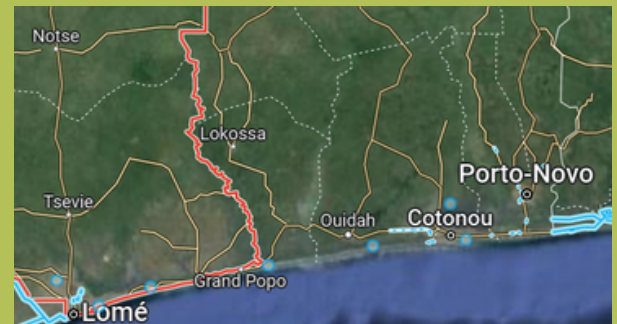
Way forward. The organisations want to continue engaging with authorities, who have proven helpful, and build on the already established dialogue.



Meeting of representatives of CTNG and CNTG at Koundara // Credit: StreetNet Youth Reporter Djenabou Sow

Border of Benin + Togo

- **FAINATRASTI** (*Faitière National Travailleurs du Secteur Informel du Togo*)
- **CSA Bénin** (*Centrale des Syndicats Autonomes du Bénin*)



Part of the border between Benin and Togo.

FENATRASIT has established contact with the border authorities. They sometimes misunderstand the kind of activity that cross-border traders carry out and fail to identify cross border traders correctly. The association kept contact with the authorities in the attempt to influence their decisions.

Many traders could not find the right information on how to proceed with the trading and how to establish contact on the other side of the border. The association has identified key people and officials and maintains contact with them. Simply establishing this relationship has meant a lot for the ICBT traders, who have the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the authorities. This contact with authorities is also a way for the trade unions to increase their membership. The main issue is helping informal traders be recognized and obtain ID cards. The goals of the group are now to tackle the issue at a higher level while continuing mobilizing the people.

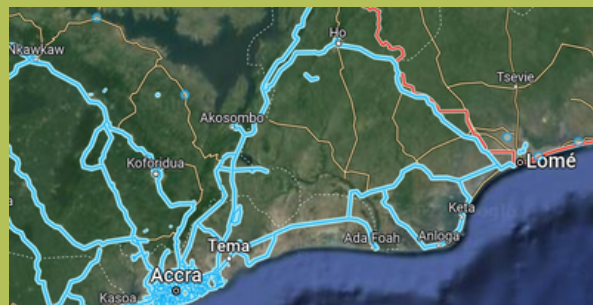
Way forward. Looking forward, the group wants to establish a dialogue with all structures involved in border activities, and conduct a workshop in the future with authorities. The main direction undertaken is improving communication and cooperation with relevant stakeholders.



Members of FAINATRASIT and CSA -Bénin gathered for the educational workshop on trade unionists' capacity building for cross-border trade.

Border of Ghana + Togo

- **UNIWA** (*Union of Informal Workers Associations*)
- **FAINTRASTI** (*Faitière National Travailleurs du Secteur Informel du Togo*)



Part of the border between Ghana and Togo.

The identified problems by UNIWA and FAINTRASTI were:

- **The borders are often closed for informal traders.**
- **There is often difficulty in obtaining the certificate of origin of the products.**
- **at the borders, multiple taxes are asked.**
- **The officials at the borders are often corrupt.**
- **Crossing the borders presents specific problems for women: they have trouble carrying heavy luggage and are often forced to make long journeys.**
- **Informal economy traders have sometimes difficulties in obtaining the appropriate documents to cross the border.**

Together, the organization identified the following stakeholders involved: the Togolese custom division, the Ghana custom division, the Ghana immigration service.

Way forward. For their future work, the group intends to push forward the collaboration between the two countries and create an enabling environment for relationships with authorities. **The goal is to organize a quarterly meeting with stakeholders to discuss the policies affecting the lives of the traders.** The group intends to improve the capacity of members to negotiate with authorities, through training and workshops, both for capacity building and to inform them about government policies.

Additional Resources

- Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) Webinar Series Report
<https://streetnet.org.za/document/informal-cross-border-trade-icbt-webinar-series-report/>
- Article "All you need to know about informal cross-border trade"
<https://streetnet.org.za/2022/02/14/all-you-need-to-know-about-informal-cross-border-trade/>
- Pamphlet "How to improve conditions for informal cross-border trade?"
<https://streetnet.org.za/document/how-to-improve-conditions-for-informal-cross-border-trade/>

HOW TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR INFORMAL CROSS-BORDER TRADE?



Demands of SNI affiliates which are part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

<div style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">STOP HARASSEMENT AND VIOLENCE</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decency and dignity in treatment at border posts when authorities are engaging cross-border traders; End all forms of intimidation and harassment to which traders become victims Ban on extortion; Negotiation of ICBT facilities and decency in treatment at border posts concerning tariffs and violence; An end put to the various harassments of which traders are victims; Security for traders and their goods (often victims of the lawless); Provide facilities for women who engage in cross-border trade; Clean up the customs and police corridors of certain countries (e.g., Nigeria) and make them respect the rules established in the ECOWAS or FTAA area. 	<div style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">TAXATION</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Custom Tariffs harmonization at border post to allow for free movement of people and goods; Access to certificate of origin to cross-border traders; Simplified custom tariffs at all entering post of our borders; Everything concerning goods i.e., paying of duty, checking goods and other relevant documents are carried out at one particular point; Special tellers for informal traders with fast tracked declarations/transactions without extortion at borders. Harmonize the different fees to be paid; A border access document is available; significant reduction of taxes within borders; Exchange of different currencies; Reduction of customs duties on quantities and specific products.
<div style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">ACCESS TO RIGHTS AND SUPPORT</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying & organizing all ICBT across our countries which are not recognized or organized; Promotion of Social Protection, workers' rights and active/participatory social dialogue; State provision of informal cross-border traders' loans with reasonable interests/grants to enable them to restart their businesses where there have been casualties and losses on the borders due to abuses suffered; Psychosocial support for ICBT especially those who lost their jobs within the COVID-19 period. Direct investment to generate more wealth in place/reduce poverty; Promotion of ILO recommendation 204 and formalization of activities and recognition of informal economy actors. 	<div style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">POLICIES AND REGULATIONS</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance with agreements between ECOWAS countries; Introduction and enforcement of ECOWAS ID Cards; Close monitoring of harmonization of regulations; Proper documentation allowing easy crossing of the border through legal routes; Ratification of international documents and instruments to facilitate trade in Africa sub-regions.
	<div style="background-color: #800080; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">INCLUSIVE NEGOTIATIONS</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of a platform of decision-making forums; Create a framework for consultations between related stakeholders who work at the borders of neighboring countries; Establishment of a border listening and guidance office for traders; Establishment of a bipartite consultation framework (Government-Trade Union).



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Photo credit: Marta Moreiras (Dakar, Senegal, 2022)

