

## SUMMARY

### WHAT ARE TRADE UNIONS?

Trade unions are organisations that define, promote and fight for the collective interests and rights of workers, particularly in relation to employers but also in relation to the state.

Trade unions represent their members' interests, through collective bargaining over wages and other terms and conditions and provide them with social and welfare services. However they are involved in many other activities such as:

- Campaigning for legislative or regulatory change to affect the working lives of members and non-members alike – for instance, maternity leave or minimum wages.
- The organisation of education and awareness building.
- Helping build respect for governance and democracy.
- Campaigning against broader social prejudices and discrimination – e.g. gender and HIV/AIDS discrimination.
- Helping to create mutual financial institutions – such as credit unions, co-operatives and insurance companies.

At a national level, trade unions may represent particular occupations or industries or general sectors of the economy, in many countries they are strongly represented in the public sector. They may also affiliate to one or more national centres (like the UK Trade Union Congress (TUC)). The union movement has a long history of international cooperation. National bodies come together in global union federations and in confederations of national centres (such as International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)).

Trade unions have traditionally been associated with the formal economy but in many developing countries a more 'informal' labour movement is developing, particularly championing the rights of poor women workers.

Unlike many other civil society organisations in DFID's partner countries, free trade unions are democratically accountable and financially self-reliant. However, government, employer or criminal interference in union matters is not uncommon in

some countries. Not all trade unions are in fact free or democratic (see paragraph 3.2 for a list of question to ask before you decide to work with a particular union or federation). Corruption or political control may mean that they are not accountable to their members and may work against rather than for the poor. *Further details of trade union structure and organisation follow the link (What are Trade Unions).*

## **WHY WORK WITH TRADE UNIONS?**

Democratic trade unions are potential partners in the elimination of poverty and achievement of the MDGs. Although the primary responsibility of trade unions is not international development, there is significant overlap in their aims and values and those of DFID. This offers the potential for constructive and strategic partnerships to reduce poverty.

By securing better conditions for their members, trade unions can help tackle the conditions in which poverty thrives. By promoting human rights, international labour standards, fair industrial relations, productivity and adult learning across broader society, they can also play a useful role in the fight against poverty.

Trade unions are a good indicator of and foundation for democratic processes and structures. In countries where organised trade union workers can defend rights through negotiation and dialogue, there are fewer abuses than in sectors or countries where democratic trade unions do not exist.

Trade unions have been vital advocates in promoting human rights, core labour standards, and social responsibility in business, consumption and investment. They are also important pressure groups supporting and challenging government efforts to develop laws and institutions that guarantee human rights, particularly in the workplace. Operating at workplace level, trade unions have direct links with workers at the grass roots.

Areas of trade union activity which might offer opportunities for taking forward a poverty reduction agenda include:

### **Advocacy**

Trade unions have a history of achieving social reform. Unions can have a significant role in holding governments to account on issues of democracy, good governance

and popular participation. Meaningful dialogue with unions through national policy processes (like poverty reduction strategy processes) can facilitate policy development and implementation. Trade unions also have a voice in key regional and international policy fora.

### **Development Education**

Trade unions have a tradition of helping to organise workers for democratic and developmental purposes. They are respected for promoting and providing education and information programmes for workers and building mutual understanding across a variety of social, cultural, political, organisational and geographical divisions.

### **Development Programmes**

Trade unions already undertake a wide range of educational activities with their membership and in the wider community. They also support social and welfare programmes which cover issues such as women's empowerment, the elimination of child labour and workers' health. They are engaged in programmes to enhance the life chances of retirees and 'retrenched' workers including income-generating activities, micro-finance, transport and provision of clean water. Increasingly this work includes workers in the informal economy. The trade unions' extensive grassroots networks also provide effective channels for raising awareness about issues such as HIV/AIDs.

Further information on current trade union activity to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the Informal Economy is set out in the more detailed background notes (Why Work with Trade Unions).

## **HOW TO WORK WITH TRADE UNIONS?**

The decision to work with trade unions, as for any other civil society organisation, will have to take account of the local political, social and economic context. Local trade unions' priorities may not always be aligned with those of DFID. In assessing the potential of trade unions as partners in development, country offices should consider the following questions.

## **Identifying potential effective partners**

### **Which trade unions should we be talking to?**

- Who are the key local trade union network/federations and how can you contact them?
- Are they democratic, independent of government or under corporate or criminal control?
- What is their relationship with political parties (trade unions may chose to affiliate to a particular political party)?
- If there are several, potentially rival, trade unions or federations, which one/s is/are the most effective/appropriate partners?
- Are they affiliated/recognised by respected international union bodies?
- What proportion and what sectors of the workforce do they represent?
- To what extent are local trade unions engaged with international bodies e.g. International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Financial Institutions (IFIs)?
- To what extent to poor people belong to trade unions?
- To what extent do poor women belong to trade unions and how well are they represented in the hierarchy?
- Have unions identified shortcomings in their operations (eg on gender or with informal economy workers) and are they working towards overcoming them?

### **What is the local political context?**

- To what extent does local legislation and practice allow for freedom of association and collective bargaining to occur?
- Does lack of legislation or limited legislation impedes the formation of independent trade unions for all or specific groups of workers?
- What is the climate of industrial relations in your country?

### **To what extent do their agenda and priorities overlap with DFID's?**

- What activities are local trade unions already undertaking in fields related to poverty reduction?
- How are local unions seeking to improve representation of workers in the informal economy, particularly women workers?
- Have local trade unions already participated in the PRSP process and how effectively?

- What North-South and South-South development partnerships are local trade unions already engaged in, and who are their partners?
- To what extent are they aligned with broader civil society movements for poverty elimination?

### **What capacity do they have to deliver?**

- What activities has DFID previously carried out in partnership with trade unions in the region and how successful was that experience?
- What financial and human resources do they have to deliver sustainable programmes?
- Are trade unions primarily urban based or do they reach out to rural areas?
- What capacity do they have to participate in policy research and analysis?

### Identifying opportunities to strengthen poverty elimination outcomes by supporting or influencing trade unions policies and activities.

Opportunities may be found through the following.

#### **Consultation on Policy**

- Invite trade unions (national and international organisations as appropriate) to relevant conference, seminars, receptions and other events
- Consult trade unions in the development and review of Regional and Country Assistance Plans.
- Support trade union efforts to contribute to PRSP and other policy processes.
- Consult with trade unions when working on measures that will have social or labour market consequences.
- Establish a regular meeting between DFID (perhaps jointly with other development agencies) and trade unions in each country of operation.

#### **Advocacy Campaigns**

- Produce a short guide to trade union contacts and activities in country.
- Utilise trade union structures to help communicate on development education issues or specific issues such as HIV/AIDs.
- Assist trade union advocacy campaigns in support of poverty reduction.

## **Projects**

- When appropriate, support innovative projects through local mechanism – small project schemes, civil society funds.
- Encourage and facilitate the collaboration of trade unions and other civil society organisations.
- Consult and work with teaching and health trade unions when developing and implementing education and health programmes.
- Seek union input to work on democracy and governance.
- Support trade union efforts on education of members and their families in core health areas, e.g. HIV/AIDs
- Work alongside trade unions, employers and ILO when seeking to combat child labour.

## **Capacity Development**

- Support trade union efforts in membership education and in building or accessing capacity (e.g. research and policy analysis) to contribute to national policy processes including poverty reduction strategy processes.

## **CONTACTS AND LINKS**

### **Local unions**

If you do not already have details the UK TUC international department in London will facilitate contact with the right person. [TUC International Department](#)

[International Confederation of Free Trade Unions \(ICFTU\)](#)

[Global Unions – website of Global Union Federations and OECD Trade Union Advisory Committee](#)

[International Labour Organisation](#)