

Industrial Relations Beyond Formal Employment: An Empirical Analysis of Labour Organisation and Worker Representation in Nigeria's Informal Economy

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The informal economy accounts for a large share of employment in Nigeria, yet industrial relations scholarship and labour policies remain largely focused on formal employment. This study empirically examines labour organisation and worker representation in Nigeria's informal economy, with reference to selected informal organisations in Cross River State. Anchored in pluralist industrial relations theory, the study analyses the forms and effectiveness of collective organisation among informal workers and the challenges they face in engaging state institutions and regulatory agencies. A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining survey data from informal workers across trading, transport, and artisanal sectors with in-depth interviews of association leaders and labour officials. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings show that informal workers have developed alternative organisational structures, notably trade associations, cooperative societies, and occupational unions, which facilitate welfare support, dispute resolution, and negotiation with local authorities. However, their representational capacity is constrained by weak legal recognition, limited bargaining power, and inadequate policy inclusion. The study concludes that industrial relations in Nigeria extend beyond formal employment and calls for inclusive labour policies, legal recognition of informal worker organisations, and stronger linkages with formal trade unions to enhance worker representation and decent work outcomes.

Background to the Study

Industrial relations scholarship has traditionally focused on formal employment relationships characterised by written contracts, regulated working conditions, and legally recognised trade unions. In Nigeria, however, the reality of work deviates significantly from this model. The informal economy absorbs most of the labour force, accounting for over 80 per cent of total employment, particularly in urban centres and sub-national contexts such as Cross River State (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Despite its dominance, the informal economy remains marginal within industrial relations research, labour policy, and institutional frameworks. This disconnect raises fundamental questions about how labour organisation, worker representation, and collective voice are constituted outside formal employment structures.

Empirical studies consistently show that informal employment in Nigeria is characterised by precarious working conditions, absence of social protection, low earnings, and limited access to legal remedies (Chen, 2012; Meagher, 2018). Informal workers are often excluded from statutory labour protections under existing labour laws, which primarily recognise employer-employee relationships within formal organisations (Adewumi & Adenugba, 2010). As a result, the dominant industrial relations institutions, such as collective bargaining, grievance procedures, and union representation— are largely inaccessible to workers operating in informal settings. This exclusion has contributed to weak worker voice and vulnerability to exploitation, harassment, and arbitrary regulation by state authorities (Onyeonoro, 2015).

However, emerging empirical evidence suggests that informal workers are not entirely unorganised. Studies across Nigeria indicate the presence of indigenous forms of labour organisation, including occupational associations, cooperative societies, market unions, transport unions, and artisan guilds (Aderinto, 2020; Meagher & Lindell, 2013). These informal organisations perform functions analogous to those of formal trade unions, such as dispute resolution, welfare provision, regulation of entry into occupations, and negotiation with local governments. In southern Nigeria, including Cross River State, informal worker associations have been particularly active in mediating conflicts with municipal authorities over taxation, levies, and space allocation (Ojong & Anam, 2019).

Despite these developments, significant gaps remain in empirical understanding of how labour organisation and worker representation function within Nigeria's informal economy at the sub-national level. Much of the existing literature adopts a macro or national perspective, with limited attention to localised industrial relations dynamics and sector-specific experiences (Meagher, 2018). Furthermore, informal worker organisations often operate without legal recognition, limiting their capacity to engage effectively with employers, state institutions, and formal labour unions (ILO, 2020). This has reinforced a policy environment in which informal workers are visible as economic actors but invisible as labour subjects with collective rights.

The problem addressed by this study, therefore, lies in the persistent marginalisation of informal workers within Nigeria's industrial relations system, despite their numerical dominance and economic significance. In Cross River State, where informal activities such as petty trading, transportation, artisanal production, and informal manufacturing constitute key livelihood strategies, there is limited empirical evidence on how workers organise collectively, represent their interests, and navigate labour relations in the absence of formal employment structures. This gap constrains the development of inclusive labour policies and undermines efforts to promote decent work and social protection for informal workers.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to empirically examine labour organisation and worker representation within Nigeria's informal economy, with specific focus on selected informal organisations in Cross River State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the forms and structures of labour organisation among informal workers in selected sectors in Cross River State;
2. Analyse the roles played by informal worker organisations in representing workers' interests and resolving labour-related issues;
3. Assess the challenges confronting labour organisation and worker representation in the informal economy; and
4. Explore the implications of informal labour organisation for industrial relations theory and labour policy in Nigeria.

Conceptual Literature

Industrial Relations

Industrial relations broadly refer to the system of interactions among workers, employers, and the state that governs work, employment conditions, and workplace conflict resolution (Anam, 2013). Traditionally, industrial relations scholarship has focused on formal employment relationships characterised by wage labour, collective bargaining, trade unions, and legally enforceable contracts (Dunlop, 1958; Fajana, 2000). Within this framework, industrial relations institutions such as labour laws, employers' associations, and trade unions are designed to regulate power relations between capital and labour in formal organisational settings.

In the Nigerian context, industrial relations have historically evolved around the public sector and large private enterprises, where employment relations are regulated by statutory instruments such as the Labour Act and overseen by institutions like the Ministry of Labour and Employment (Fapohunda, 2012). This narrow focus has resulted in an industrial relations system that inadequately reflects the realities of a labour market dominated by informal employment. Consequently, the concept of industrial relations requires reconceptualisation to capture labour processes, representation, and regulation beyond formal employment structures.

Informal Economy

The informal economy refers to all economic activities that are neither regulated nor protected by the state yet contribute significantly to income generation and employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). Informal employment is typically characterised by the absence of written contracts, job security, social protection, and access to labour rights. In Nigeria, the informal economy encompasses diverse activities including street trading, artisanal production, informal manufacturing, transport services, domestic work, and small-scale agriculture (Meagher, 2018).

Conceptually, the informal economy challenges the binary distinction between formal and informal work. Scholars argue that informality exists along a continuum, with varying degrees of regulation, organisation, and state engagement (Chen, 2012). In Nigeria, informal work is not merely a survival strategy but a structural feature of the economy, shaped by unemployment, weak industrialisation, and limited state capacity (Adewumi & Adenugba, 2010). This structural embeddedness necessitates an industrial relations perspective that acknowledges informality as a legitimate and enduring sphere of labour relations.

Labour Organisation in the Informal Economy

Labour organisation refers to the collective arrangements through which workers come together to pursue shared interests, improve working conditions, and exert influence over labour-related decisions. In formal settings, labour organisation is typically institutionalised through trade unions recognised by law. In the informal economy, however, labour organisation assumes diverse and often unconventional forms.

Empirical and conceptual studies identify occupational associations, cooperatives, market unions, transport unions, artisan guilds, and faith-based groups as dominant organisational forms among informal workers (Meagher & Lindell, 2013). These organisations often emerge organically, rooted in shared occupations, geographic proximity, ethnicity, or kinship ties. Conceptually, they perform hybrid roles, combining economic, social, and regulatory functions (Aderinto, 2020). For instance, they may regulate entry into trades, set prices, enforce codes of conduct, and provide welfare support during illness or bereavement. In Nigeria, informal labour organisations often fill institutional voids created by the absence of effective state regulation and formal union coverage (Onyeonoro, 2015). Although they lack formal recognition under labour law, these organisations constitute critical areas of industrial relations, mediating labour processes and power relations within informal production systems.

Worker Representation and Voice

Worker representation refers to mechanisms through which workers express their interests, influence decisions, and negotiate conditions of work. In classical industrial relations theory, representation is primarily achieved through collective bargaining between trade unions and employers (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). However, this model is poorly suited to informal employment contexts where employers may be fragmented, invisible, or embedded within household and micro-enterprise arrangements.

In the informal economy, worker representation is often indirect and collective, mediated through associations that engage with local authorities, traditional institutions, and market leaders rather than formal employers (Chen, 2012). Representation may involve negotiations over taxation, levies, workspace allocation, harassment by law enforcement agencies, and access to basic services rather than wages and formal contracts (ILO, 2020). Conceptually, worker voice in informal settings is shaped by power asymmetries, legal exclusion, and socio-cultural norms. Informal workers frequently rely on collective solidarity and informal negotiation rather than legally enforceable rights. This redefines representation as a process of survival-oriented advocacy rather than institutionalised collective bargaining.

Informal Organisations as Industrial Relations Actors

Within an expanded industrial relations framework, informal worker organisations can be conceptualised as non-traditional industrial relations actors. Dunlop's (1958) industrial relations system identifies workers, employers, and the state as core actors, interacting within a context shaped by technology, markets, and power. In the informal economy, these roles are blurred. Informal organisations often act simultaneously as worker representatives, regulators, and intermediaries between workers and the state (Meagher, 2018). In Nigeria, informal organisations engage local governments over issues such as market management, transport regulation, and environmental sanitation. These interactions constitute a form of decentralised industrial relations operating at the local level (Ojong & Anam, 2019). Conceptually, this suggests that industrial relations in informal contexts are multi-actor, decentralised, and embedded in local governance structures rather than national-level institutions.

Decent Work and Informal Employment

The concept of decent work, advanced by the ILO, provides an important normative framework for analysing informal labour relations. Decent work encompasses productive employment, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue (ILO, 2018). Informal employment is often associated with deficits across all four pillars, particularly in relation to rights and representation. Conceptually, labour organisation in the informal economy can be understood as an attempt to approximate elements of decent work in contexts where formal institutions are absent. Informal worker organisations contribute to social dialogue by creating platforms for collective engagement, even if such dialogue occurs outside legally recognised frameworks (ILO, 2020). This underscores the relevance of informal organisations in advancing inclusive labour governance.

State Regulation and Informality

State regulation plays a contradictory role in the informal economy. On the one hand, weak enforcement of labour laws enables the expansion of informal employment. On the other hand, informal workers often experience excessive regulation through taxation, levies, and harassment by local authorities (Meagher, 2018). Conceptually, this selective regulation creates a paradox in which informal workers are over-regulated as economic

actors but under-protected as workers. In Nigeria, labour laws largely exclude informal workers from statutory protection, reinforcing their marginalisation within the industrial relations system (Fapohunda, 2012). This legal exclusion limits the capacity of informal organisations to gain formal recognition and engage in structured social dialogue. Consequently, labour organisation in the informal economy operates within a constrained regulatory environment, relying on informal norms and negotiated authority.

Industrial Relations Beyond Formal Employment

The concept of industrial relations beyond formal employment captures the need to extend analytical and policy frameworks to encompass diverse forms of work. This perspective challenges the assumption that industrial relations institutions are only relevant within formal employment relationships. Instead, it recognises informality as a legitimate site of labour relations, conflict, cooperation, and regulation (Meagher & Lindell, 2013). In the Nigerian context, this conceptual shift is particularly important given the scale and persistence of informal employment. Informal worker organisations, though imperfect, represent embryonic forms of labour representation that can inform more inclusive industrial relations policies. Conceptually, studying these organisations contributes to a broader understanding of how labour relations are constructed in contexts of weak formal institutions and pervasive informality.

Assessment of thematic Issues

This section reviews relevant literature based on the key objectives of the study. The review situates the study within existing empirical and theoretical debates, highlighting gaps the current research seeks to address.

Forms and Structures of Labour Organisation Among Informal Workers

Empirical studies demonstrate that informal workers organise in diverse and adaptive ways that differ markedly from formal trade unions. In Nigeria, labour organisation in the informal economy often takes the form of cooperatives, micro-trade associations, market unions, and worker collectives rather than traditional industrial unions. For example, Olowu and Abatan (2015) find that petty traders and artisans in Lagos organise into local associations based on occupation (e.g., tailors, carpenters) or market location (e.g., roadside markets). These associations often combine traditional leadership structures with modern organisational roles, including elected secretaries and treasurers. Similarly, Afolabi (2018) observes that transport workers (e.g., motorbike taxi riders and mini-bus operators) form associations known locally as *unions* to regulate membership, negotiate with authorities, and manage shared resources.

Empirical research in other African contexts corroborates these patterns. In Ghana and Kenya, informal economy associations range from community-based savings groups to federated union-like structures that engage with local authorities (Anarfi et al., 2017; ILO, 2002). These findings highlight that informal worker organisations are often heterogeneous, informal in legal status, and rooted in local socio-cultural dynamics, yet they perform many functions comparable to formal labour organisations.

Also, literature recognises labour organisation in the informal economy as markedly different from formal trade unionism. Early industrial relations scholarships largely ignored informal workers, if labour organisation presupposes formal employment contracts and identifiable employers (Dunlop, 1958; Fajana, 2000). However, more recent studies challenge this assumption, demonstrating that informal workers develop alternative organisational forms suited to their socio-economic realities. In Nigeria, informal labour organisation is predominantly occupational, and community based. Studies by Meagher (2010, 2018) show that market associations, artisan guilds, transport unions, and cooperative societies play central roles in organising informal workers. These organisations regulate entry into occupations, mediate disputes, and provide mutual support services such as credit, welfare assistance, and social insurance. Similarly, Adeyemi and Aturu (2016) observe that informal organisations often function as de facto regulatory bodies in contexts where the state's presence is weak or inconsistent.

Empirical evidence from southern Nigeria indicates that such organisations are particularly strong in urban informal economies, where collective action is necessary to negotiate access to space, infrastructure, and security (Onyeonoro, 2015). In Cross River State, studies on market women associations and transport unions suggest that informal labour organisation is shaped by local governance structures and cultural norms, reinforcing solidarity but sometimes entrenching exclusionary practices (Ojong & Anam, 2019). These findings underscore the relevance of labour organisation as a central objective of this study.

Worker Representation and Voice in Informal Employment

Worker representation constitutes a core objective of industrial relations, traditionally achieved through trade unions and collective bargaining. In the informal economy, however, representation takes more fragmented and indirect forms. Freeman and Medoff's (1984) concept of "voice" has been widely applied to explain how workers express grievances and influence decisions outside formal bargaining frameworks. Chen (2012) argues that informal workers' representation is often mediated through associations that engage not with employers but with local authorities and community power brokers. In Nigeria, this pattern is evident in the activities of market associations and transport unions, which negotiate levies, operating conditions, and protection from harassment rather than wages or contracts (Fapohunda, 2012). Such forms of representation reflect the structural characteristics of informal work, where employers may be multiple, invisible, or embedded within family enterprises.

Empirical studies also highlight gendered dimensions of representation. Barrientos (2013) notes that women-dominated informal occupations, such as petty trading and food processing, tend to rely more on cooperative societies and savings groups than on unions. In Cross River State, women's market associations have been shown to provide important platforms for collective voice, although leadership structures are sometimes hierarchical and exclusionary (Ojong, 2020). These insights inform the study's objective

of analysing how informal workers in selected organisations articulate and pursue their collective interests.

State-Informal Organisation Relations

Another key objective of the study is to examine the relationship between informal worker organisations and the state. The literature presents this relationship as ambivalent and often contradictory. On the one hand, the informal economy is under-protected, as labour laws and social security frameworks largely exclude informal workers (ILO, 2018). On the other hand, informal workers are frequently over-regulated through taxation, levies, and enforcement actions by local authorities (Meagher, 2018). Grindle's (2004) concept of "good enough governance" is useful in explaining how informal organisations emerge as coping mechanisms in contexts of weak state capacity. In Nigeria, informal worker organisations often act as intermediaries between the state and individual workers, collecting taxes, enforcing rules, and mobilising members for government initiatives (Aderinto, 2020). This interaction constitutes a form of decentralised industrial relations, albeit outside formal institutional frameworks.

Empirical evidence shows that informal worker organisations in Nigeria play multiple representational and advocacy roles. These include collective bargaining with local authorities, conflict resolution, mutual aid, and access to social protection mechanisms. Okafor (2019) finds that market women's associations in Onitsha regularly negotiate with municipal councils on issues such as taxation, market fees, and security, acting much like formal unions in representing collective interests. Similarly, research on transport unions by Adeoye and Olaoye (2021) indicates that associations of motorcycle taxi riders engage with police and traffic authorities to mitigate harassment and protect members' operating rights.

Informal worker organisations also play a crucial social function, providing informal credit, welfare support, and insurance-like mechanisms. In Kano, Muhammed and Ibrahim (2020) report that craft guilds contribute to members' funeral expenses and medical needs, functioning as social safety nets where formal protection is absent. These roles extend beyond economic interests to include labour dispute mediation, where associations adjudicate conflicts between members and customers.

Comparative studies in the Global South reinforce these findings. For example, Carr and Chen's (2002) multi-city research shows that informal worker networks and associations often take on advocacy roles, negotiating for improved work conditions, access to utilities, and recognition by local governments. In Cross River State, local governments rely on market and transport unions for revenue collection and order maintenance, granting them informal recognition without extending labour protections (Ojong & Anam, 2019). This selective engagement raises questions about accountability and representation, which the present study seeks to explore.

Challenges of Industrial Relations in the Informal Sector

The literature consistently highlights that industrial relations in the informal economy are constrained by a complex set of structural, institutional, and organisational challenges. These challenges undermine the capacity of informal workers to organise effectively, articulate collective interests, and engage meaningfully with employers and the state. In the Nigerian context, and particularly in less industrialised states such as Cross River State, these constraints are deeply embedded and mutually reinforcing.

1. Legal and Institutional Exclusion

One of the most fundamental challenges facing industrial relations in the informal sector is legal exclusion. Labour laws and industrial relations frameworks in Nigeria are primarily designed around formal employment relationships characterised by written contracts, identifiable employers, and registered enterprises. As a result, most informal workers fall outside the scope of statutory protections related to collective bargaining, minimum wages, occupational safety, and dispute resolution mechanisms (ILO, 2020). This exclusion denies informal workers legal recognition as legitimate actors within the industrial relations system, weakening their bargaining power and limiting their access to institutionalised channels of representation.

2. Fragmented and Atypical Employment Relationships

Informal employment is characterised by fragmented, irregular, and often ambiguous employment relationships. Workers may be self-employed, casually employed, or engaged through multiple short-term arrangements with different employers. In many cases, the distinction between employer and worker is blurred, particularly in family enterprises and micro-businesses (Fapohunda, 2012). This fragmentation complicates collective organisation and makes it difficult to define clear bargaining counterparts, thereby undermining traditional industrial relations mechanisms such as collective bargaining and grievance procedures.

3. Weak Organisational Capacity of Informal Worker Associations

Unlike formal trade unions, informal worker organisations often lack the organisational capacity required for sustained advocacy. Many operate without stable sources of funding, professional leadership, or administrative infrastructure. Their activities are frequently limited to welfare support, conflict mediation, and informal regulation rather than strategic engagement with policy processes (ILO, 2020). Limited technical expertise in labour law, negotiation, and policy advocacy further constrains their ability to influence labour governance outcomes.

4. Internal Governance and Accountability Deficits

Internal governance challenges represent a significant obstacle to effective representation within informal organisations. Leadership structures are often informal, hierarchical, and personalised, with limited mechanisms for accountability and democratic participation. Decision-making processes may be dominated by a small group of leaders, marginalising ordinary members and undermining trust (Meagher,

2010). These governance deficits weaken collective solidarity and reduce the legitimacy of informal organisations as representative bodies.

5. Political Interference and Elite Capture

Political interference and elites capture further complicated industrial relations in the informal sector. In Nigeria, informal worker organisations are sometimes co-opted by political actors seeking to mobilise support, control urban spaces, or extract revenue. Meagher (2010) documents cases where leaders of informal associations become intermediaries in patron-client networks, prioritising political loyalty over worker interests. Such dynamics distort representation, weaken collective bargaining capacity, and entrench inequalities within informal organisations.

6. Economic Insecurity and Precarious Livelihoods

Economic vulnerability constitutes a major constraint on collective action among informal workers. Income insecurity, irregular earnings, and lack of savings reduce workers' capacity to pay membership dues, attend meetings, or participate in collective activities. Survival concerns often take precedence over long-term organisational goals, limiting the scope for sustained industrial relations engagement (Fapohunda, 2012). This precariousness also increases workers' susceptibility to coercion and exploitation by both employers and state agents.

7. Absence of Social Protection

The lack of social protection mechanisms such as health insurance, pensions, and unemployment benefits further weakens informal workers' bargaining power. Without safety nets, informal workers are less willing to engage in collective action that could disrupt their livelihoods, such as strikes or protests. The absence of social protection reinforces dependency on informal coping strategies and limits the effectiveness of labour organisation (ILO, 2018).

8. Arbitrary and Selective State Regulation

Informal workers are often subject to arbitrary and selective regulations by state authorities, particularly at the local government level. This includes harassment by law enforcement agencies, multiple taxation, eviction from workspaces, and inconsistent enforcement of regulations. Such practices create an environment of uncertainty and fear, discouraging open collective mobilisation and reinforcing informal negotiation rather than rights-based engagement (Meagher, 2018).

9. Limited Economic Diversification and Local Constraints

In less industrialised states such as Cross River State, limited economic diversification exacerbates the challenges of informal labour organisation. The dominance of small-scale trading, artisanal work, and subsistence activities restricts opportunities for large-scale worker mobilisation and reduces the leverage of informal organisations. Weak private sector development and limited formal employment alternatives also reinforce informality as a survival strategy rather than a transitional phase (Ojong & Anam, 2019).

10. Marginalisation within National Labour Movements

Finally, informal workers and their organisations remain marginal within national labour movements. Mainstream trade unions in Nigeria have historically prioritised formal sector workers, with limited institutional mechanisms for integrating informal workers into labour federations (Adewumi & Adenugba, 2010). This marginalisation limits solidarity across sectors and constrains efforts to develop inclusive industrial relations frameworks. Industrial relations in the informal sector are constrained by interrelated legal, economic, organisational, and political challenges. These constraints are particularly acute in contexts such as Cross River State, where structural underdevelopment and weak institutional capacity limit opportunities for collective labour action. Understanding and addressing these challenges is central to rethinking industrial relations beyond formal employment and to advancing more inclusive labour governance in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Pluralist Industrial Relations Theory

This study is anchored in Pluralist Industrial Relations Theory, which views the labour system as comprising multiple actors with divergent interests, including workers, employers, and the state. According to pluralist theorists, conflict in employment relations is inherent and legitimate, arising from unequal power relations and competing economic and social interests (Dunlop, 1958; Fox, 1966). Rather than eliminating conflict, pluralism emphasises collective organisation, negotiation, and institutional regulation as mechanisms for managing and balancing these interests.

The relevance of pluralist theory to this study lies in its emphasis on worker representation and collective voice. In contexts where power is asymmetrically distributed, collective organisation is essential for protecting workers' interests and enhancing bargaining capacity. Although originally developed around formal employment, pluralist theory is increasingly applicable to informal labour systems, where workers also experience conflict over regulation, access to workspaces, income security, and state enforcement practices.

Within Nigeria's informal economy, labour organisations such as occupational associations, transport unions, cooperatives, and artisan groups function as substitutes for formal trade unions. These organisations mediate relations between workers, employers, and state institutions through negotiation, dispute resolution, and collective advocacy. The theory therefore provides a useful lens for analysing the forms, structures, and effectiveness of informal labour organisations, as well as the challenges they face in engaging regulatory agencies and local authorities. By demonstrating that membership in labour organisations significantly enhances effective worker representation, the study empirically supports the pluralist argument that collective organisation is central to industrial relations, regardless of employment formality. Pluralist theory thus offers a coherent framework for understanding industrial relations beyond formal employment in Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts mixed-methods, cross-sectional research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design is suitable for examining the structural patterns of labour organisation and worker representation in the informal economy, while also capturing contextual and experiential insights from informal workers and their leaders. Data was collected at a single point in time across selected informal labour organisations in Cross River State.

Study Area

The research was conducted in five selected local government areas (LGAs) in Cross River State; Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Ikom, Ogoja, and Ugep. These LGAs were purposively selected because they represent major urban and semi-urban centres with high concentrations of informal economic activities, vibrant occupational associations, and regular interaction between informal workers and local authorities.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of members of selected informal labour organisations operating within the study areas. These include market traders' associations; artisan and craft associations (tailors, mechanics, and carpenters); road transport workers' unions; motorcycle (okada) and tricycle (keke) riders' associations; and hairdressers and barbers' associations. These organisations were selected because they are among the most organised and influential groups within the informal economy of Cross River State and play important roles in labour coordination and representation.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. First, the five LGAs were selected. Second, key informal labour organisations within each LGA were identified based on organisational stability, membership size, and relevance to informal employment relations. Third, respondents were selected from each organisation using systematic random sampling.

The total quantitative sample size is 240 respondents, which is considered adequate for statistical analysis and for capturing diversity across occupational groups and locations. The allocation of respondents reflects the relative size and dominance of each informal occupational group across the LGAs. Market traders were assigned the highest number due to their numerical dominance across all study areas, while hairdressers and barbers received fewer respondents due to their comparatively smaller membership base.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Organisation and Local Government Area

Informal Labour Organisation	Calabar Municipality	Calabar South	Ikom			Total
			Ogoja	Ugep	Total	
Market Traders' Associations	20	15	10	8	7	60
Artisan and Craft Associations	15	12	9	6	6	48
Road Transport Workers' Unions	15	12	9	6	6	48
Motorcycle (Okada) and Tricycle (Keke) Riders' Associations	10	11	10	8	9	48
Hairdressers and Barbers' Associations	10	10	7	7	2	36
Total	70	60	45	35	30	240

Table 1 shows how the 240 respondents were distributed across informal labour organisations and local government areas in Cross River State. Higher numbers were allocated to market traders and to Calabar Municipality and Calabar South because of their larger populations and concentration of informal economic activities. Other LGAs and occupational groups received fewer respondents in line with their relative size and organisational presence. The distribution ensures balanced representation across locations and labour organisations while aligning with the study's objectives and total sample size.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire elicited information on respondents' socio-economic characteristics, forms of labour organisation, mechanisms of worker representation, interactions with government authorities, and challenges facing informal labour organisations. In addition, 20 key informant interviews were conducted with leaders of informal labour organisations, selected local government officials, and representatives of labour-related civil society organisations to obtain in-depth qualitative insights.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and tests of association, with the aid of SPSS. Qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, with emerging themes organised around the objectives of the study. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the robustness of the analysis through triangulation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The study ensured respect for the rights and dignity of all participants.

Data Analysis and Results

Research Question 1

What forms of labour organisation exist among informal workers in Cross River State?

This question was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify dominant forms of labour organisation among respondents.

Table 2: Forms of Labour Organisation among Informal Workers (n = 240)

Form of Labour Organisation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Occupational/Trade Associations	102	42.5
Cooperative Societies	58	24.2
Informal Unions/Unregistered Unions	46	19.2
Religious or Community-Based Groups	21	8.8
No Organised Group	13	5.4
Total	240	100.0

The results indicate that occupational and trade associations constitute the dominant form of labour organisation among informal workers in Cross River State (42.5%). Cooperative societies also play a significant role (24.2%), particularly in welfare and savings mobilisation. Only a small proportion of respondents (5.4%) reported having no form of collective organisation, suggesting that informal workers actively seek collective platforms despite the absence of formal labour institutions.

Research Question 2

How do informal labour organisations facilitate worker representation and collective voice?

This question was analysed using descriptive statistics, focusing on respondents' perceptions of representation outcomes.

Table 3: Perceived Functions of Informal Labour Organisations in Worker Representation (n = 240)

Representation Function	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Negotiation with local authorities	74	30.8
Protection from harassment and eviction	61	25.4
Welfare support and dispute resolution	53	22.1
Regulation of members' conduct	32	13.3
Advocacy on labour rights	20	8.4
Total	240	100.0

The findings show that informal labour organisations primarily represent workers through negotiation with local authorities (30.8%) and protection against harassment and eviction (25.4%). Welfare support and dispute resolution are also significant functions. However, formal advocacy on labour rights remains relatively weak (8.4%), reflecting the limited legal recognition and institutional capacity of informal organisations.

Research Question 3

Is there a significant relationship between labour organisation and effective worker representation in the informal sector?

This question was analysed using a chi-square (χ^2) test of association, examining the relationship between membership in labour organisations and perceived effectiveness of worker representation.

Table 4: Labour Organisation Membership and Effectiveness of Worker Representation with Chi-Square Test Result

Labour Organisation Membership	Effective Representation	Not Effective	Total	χ^2	df	p-value
Member of an organisation	148	39	187			
Not a member	18	35	53			
Total	166	74	240	42.67	1	0.000

The chi-square (χ^2) test indicates a statistically significant relationship between labour organisation membership and effectiveness of worker representation at the 5 per cent level ($p < 0.05$). The result shows a statistically significant relationship between labour organisation membership and effective worker representation ($\chi^2 = 42.67$, $p < 0.05$). Informal workers who belong to labour organisations are significantly more likely to report effective representation than those who are not members. This finding confirms the importance of collective organisation as a mechanism for worker voice and representation in the informal economy. The results demonstrate that informal workers in Cross River State rely heavily on occupational associations and cooperatives as substitutes for formal trade unions. These organisations play a crucial role in representation, particularly in negotiating with local authorities and providing protection and welfare support. Statistical evidence further confirms that labour organisation significantly enhances worker representation, reinforcing the argument for expanding industrial relations frameworks beyond formal employment.

Discussion of Results

The results from Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide important empirical evidence on the nature of labour organisation, modes of worker representation, and the effectiveness of collective action within Nigeria's informal economy, with specific reference to Cross River State.

Forms of Labour Organisation among Informal Workers

Table 2 shows that occupational and trade associations constitute the dominant form of labour organisation among informal workers in Cross River State, accounting for 42.5 per cent of respondents. This finding reflects the occupationally segmented nature of informal employment, where workers organise around shared skills, trades, or economic activities such as trading, transport, and artisanal services. Similar patterns have been documented in Nigeria and other developing economies, where occupational associations serve as the primary organisational vehicles for informal workers due to their flexibility and contextual relevance (Meagher, 2010; Fapohunda, 2012).

Cooperative societies, representing 24.2 per cent of respondents, also play a significant role, particularly in addressing welfare needs through savings, credit provision, and mutual assistance. Empirical studies indicate that cooperatives function as hybrid institutions in the informal sector, combining economic support with elements of collective organisation and representation (Develtere, Pollet, & Wanyama, 2008). In contexts where formal social protection is weak or absent, cooperatives often substitute for state welfare mechanisms.

The presence of informal or unregistered unions (19.2%) suggests that informal workers increasingly adopt union-like structures despite operating outside the formal regulatory framework. This supports ILO (2020) findings that informal workers frequently create parallel labour institutions to address representation gaps left by traditional trade unions. Notably, only a small proportion of respondents (5.4%) reported having no organised group, underscoring the strong inclination towards collective organisation even in precarious employment conditions.

Functions of Informal Labour Organisations in Worker Representation

Table 3 highlights the primary functions through which informal labour organisations facilitate worker representation and collective voice. The most prominent function is negotiation with local authorities (30.8%), followed closely by protection from harassment and eviction (25.4%). These findings reflect the everyday realities of informal workers, who often face regulatory uncertainty, eviction threats, and harassment from state and municipal officials.

Empirical literature confirms that engagement with local authorities is a central concern for informal labour organisations, particularly in urban and semi-urban settings (Chen et al., 2015). In Nigeria, such negotiations often revolve around access to trading spaces, transport routes, licensing, and informal taxation (Meagher, 2010). The prominence of protection-related functions also aligns with Lindell's (2010) observation that informal worker organisations frequently prioritise defensive strategies aimed at securing livelihood stability rather than pursuing expansive labour rights agendas.

Welfare support and dispute resolution (22.1%) further demonstrate the social protection role of informal organisations. These functions are critical in contexts characterised by

income insecurity and absence of formal dispute resolution mechanisms. Fapohunda (2012) notes that informal associations often serve as first points of mediation for conflicts involving members, employers, customers, or authorities.

However, advocacy on labour rights remains relatively weak (8.4%), reflecting limited legal recognition, weak institutional capacity, and constrained access to policy-making processes. This finding is consistent with the ILO (2020), which argues that while informal worker organisations are effective at local-level engagement, they often lack the resources and legitimacy required for sustained rights-based advocacy at higher governance levels.

Labour Organisation Membership and Effectiveness of Worker Representation

Table 4 provides strong statistical evidence of the relationship between labour organisation membership and effective worker representation. The chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 42.67$, $p < 0.05$) indicates a statistically significant association between membership in labour organisations and perceived effectiveness of representation. Members of labour organisations were far more likely to report effective representation than non-members.

This finding empirically confirms the central proposition of the study that collective organisation enhances worker voice and representation in the informal economy. It supports earlier studies which demonstrate that organised informal workers are better positioned to negotiate, resist exploitation, and secure incremental gains compared to unorganised workers (Chen et al., 2015; Bonner & Spooner, 2011). In the Nigerian context, Fapohunda (2012) similarly finds that informal workers who belong to associations experience greater protection and collective leverage than those operating individually.

The results demonstrate that informal workers in Cross River State rely heavily on occupational associations, cooperatives, and informal unions as functional substitutes for formal trade unions. These organisations play a critical role in mediating relations between workers and the state, providing welfare support, and facilitating collective voice. The statistically significant relationship between labour organisation membership and effective representation reinforces the argument that industrial relations frameworks in Nigeria must extend beyond formal employment to recognise and strengthen informal labour institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined labour organisation and worker representation within Nigeria's informal economy, with specific reference to selected informal organisations in Cross River State. Guided by the objectives of identifying forms of labour organisation, examining their representational functions, and assessing the relationship between organisation membership and effective worker representation, the study provides empirical insights into industrial relations beyond formal employment.

The findings reveal that informal workers are far from atomised or unorganised. Rather, they actively participate in a variety of collective structures, particularly occupational and trade associations, cooperative societies, and informal unions. These organisations function as practical substitutes for formal trade unions in a context characterised by weak labour regulation and limited social protection. Their prominence underscores the adaptive capacity of informal workers in constructing institutional arrangements suited to their socio-economic realities.

The study further demonstrates that informal labour organisations play a significant representational role, particularly through negotiation with local authorities, protection against harassment and eviction, and provision of welfare support and dispute resolution mechanisms. However, formal advocacy on labour rights remains relatively weak, reflecting the limited legal recognition, organisational capacity, and political leverage of informal worker organisations. This constrains their ability to influence broader labour policy debates and institutional reforms.

Importantly, the statistical analysis establishes a significant relationship between labour organisation membership and effective worker representation. Informal workers who belong to labour organisations are considerably more likely to report effective representation than those who are not organised. This finding confirms the central role of collective organisation in enhancing worker voice, protection, and bargaining power within the informal economy.

Overall, the study concludes that industrial relations in Nigeria extend well beyond the confines of formal employment and that informal labour organisations constitute critical, though under-recognised, actors in the country's labour governance landscape. Strengthening these organisations is therefore essential for promoting inclusive labour relations and decent work in the informal sector.

Recommendations

Based on the objectives and empirical findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Legal Recognition of Informal Labour Organisations: Government and labour regulatory institutions should develop flexible legal frameworks that recognise informal labour organisations without imposing rigid formalisation requirements. Legal recognition would enhance their legitimacy, protect their activities, and enable structured engagement with public authorities.
2. Capacity Building and Institutional Support: Targeted capacity-building programmes should be provided to informal labour organisations to strengthen leadership, internal democracy, financial management, and advocacy skills. Such support would improve their ability to represent members effectively and engage in sustained policy dialogue.
3. Integration into Labour Policy and Social Protection Systems: Informal worker organisations should be systematically integrated into national and sub-national labour policy processes, including consultations on employment regulation and

social protection reforms. Their inclusion would ensure that informal workers' perspectives are reflected in policy design and implementation.

4. Strengthening Local Government Engagement: Given the central role of negotiation with local authorities, state and local governments in Cross River State should establish formal channels for dialogue with informal labour organisations. Regular engagement can reduce harassment, improve regulatory compliance, and foster cooperative governance.
5. Promotion of Inclusive Trade Unionism: Formal trade unions should be encouraged to build alliances with informal labour organisations. Such collaboration can facilitate knowledge transfer, expand worker representation, and contribute to the development of a more inclusive industrial relations system.

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