

ICTs, Distributed Discourse and the Labour Movement in Cabo Verde: Why Weak Communications Remain a Crucial Barrier to Trade Union Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Based on interviews with trade union officials from different islands and the Inspector General of Labour, this article examines the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by labour organisations in Cabo Verde. Distributed discourse is used as a conceptual framework to provide insights into ways in which the ability of trade unionists to engage in debates and formulate initiatives is influenced by the pervasiveness and control of digital technologies. ICTs are premised as complementary tools and not as substitutes for existing face-to-face union communication strategies, a perspective substantiated by all the interviewees. The research reveals that frail communication channels are major problems for unions in Cabo Verde, which significantly impede their ability to defend the rights of members effectively. Despite localised improvements, involving particular organisations, ICTs are not being utilised systematically and equitably across all the Cabo Verdean islands to enhance the effectiveness of the work of unions. Limited financial streams, high levels of informality in the labour force, a dispersed geography, the uneven penetration of digital technologies across islands and economic sectors, and government policies are major barriers to trade union communication. Policy implications are put forward in the light of the main research findings.

KEYWORDS

trade unions; Cabo Verde; ICTs; distributed discourse; labour democracy

Introduction

The entrenching of neo-liberal policies in Cabo Verde since the 1990s has led to the country being lauded by Western development organisations, think tanks and some academics as a “success story” (Baker, 2006; ADB, 2012; World Bank, 2018; Freedom House, 2021). The government receives particular praise for its economic policies and transparent and accountable political culture, which have attracted considerable amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI). Within this discourse, trade unions have raised substantive concerns about the situation of the labour force. However, they have found it difficult to make these concerns known to audiences, both nationally and internationally. One of the reasons for this is their weak channels of communication. This article examines which methods of communications are employed by trade unions in Cabo Verde, drawing on interviews with senior union officials and the Inspector General of Labour (IGL). This line of inquiry is significant because an increasing variety of information and communication

technologies (ICTs)¹ have been developed since the 1990s and a body of literature has emerged assessing the extent to which their employment can contribute to the revitalisation of trade unions. However, there is little empirical information on which ICTs trade unions in Cabo Verde employ and what effect, if any, their use is having on union renewal.² The interviews in our study, as well as secondary research methods, shed new light on the usage of ICTs by trade unions in Cabo Verde. They thus add to one of the core elements of research on trade unions and the use of ICTs – the generation of “empirical insight into how the various actors … that constitute the trade union movement *can* and *are* using the internet [and] social media” (Geelan, 2021: 123). Distributed discourse is utilised as a conceptual framework to illustrate ways in which the ability of trade unionists in Cabo Verde to participate in debates and actions is affected by the prevalence and control of digital technologies.

The article starts with an overview of the conceptual framework employed in analysing the use of ICTs by trade unions. This is followed by a contextualisation section, which contains brief overviews of the use of ICTs in Cabo Verde, the political economy of the country, focusing on labour issues, and the position of trade unions, since context-specific organisational change among unions is important if revitalisation is to occur (Behrens, Hamann and Hurd, 2004). The methodology section follows. The case study is then presented and the findings discussed in the subsequent section. The central lines of argument are reiterated in the conclusion and policy implications are put forward.

Distributed Discourse

Distributed discourse was selected as a conceptual framework for this research because it provides a useful way to undertake an initial general analysis of ways in which the usage of ICTs by the Cabo Verdean labour movement might be shifting the nature of relationships within unions, between individual unions and their centre of affiliation, and between unions and the government. The concept of distributed discourse became influential during early assessments of trade union use of ICTs, dating approximately from the 1990s to the mid-2000s.³ During this phase, a body of research emerged which pointed in general terms to both the positives and negatives of the employment of ICTs by unions as a revitalisation tool, (See Carneiro and Costa, 2020, and Geelan, 2021, for overviews.)

Distributed discourse centres on assessments of ways in which ICTs can be employed to increase the participation of members, leading to the “reimagining of union democracy” (Hodder

¹ ICTs are defined as “devices, networking components, applications and systems that combined allow people and organizations … to interact in the digital world” (Pratt, n.d.). ICTs can be broadly divided into new and old forms. The “old forms include the telephone, fax, radio, television, audio and video. New ICTs include the personal computer, mobile phone, the internet and social media” (Geelan, 2021: 135).

² The lack of research on the use of ICTs by trade unions in Cabo Verde extends to the case of Africa more generally. Among the few studies are an analysis by Lewis (2005) of the use of ICT tools and platforms by the labour movement in South Africa and Otenyo’s (2017) detailed examination of the use of ICTs by Kenyan trade unions.

³ Different phases of Internet use have been delineated: Web 1.0 (1995–2004) “read only” web – static websites, email and intranets; Web 2.0 (2005–2016) “read and write” web – interactive tools, notably social media and user-generated content; Web 3.0 (2016 to date) “executable web” – artificial intelligence machines, software and algorithms capable of responding intelligently to their environment (Choudhury, 2014; Geelan, 2021). While these periods do not correspond exactly with phases of research on the use of ICTs by trade unions, they are useful in contextualising the topic.

and Houghton, 2019: 41). More specifically, the approach has been used to examine ways in which the accessibility of ICTs can diffuse power in trade unions by democratising the tools employed to frame issues and narratives, thus enabling greater visibility and equality of knowledge, distributed control over the means of communication and the reconfiguration of the time–space dimension (Greene, Hogan and Grieco, 2003; Zivkovic and Hogan, 2006; Upchurch and Grassman, 2016). In overall terms, studies using the distributed discourse approach have addressed ways in which ICTs may be harnessed to provide “possibilities of a more distributed form of trade union organisation” (Greene et al., 2003: 288), through widening representativeness, raising the visibility of issues facing workers, and democratising structures and procedures.

From the latter half of the 2000s, studies have increasingly highlighted the complexities involved in the nature of the relationship between trade unions and ICTs, and focused on particular topics rather than general overviews. The issues addressed include the employment of ICTs to stimulate membership growth and enhance participation among underrepresented groups, notably women (Thornthwaite, Balnave and Barnes, 2018), youth (Hodder and Houghton, 2019), the self-employed (Haake, 2017) and the geographically dispersed (Pasquier and Wood, 2018). These are salient lines of research, since revitalisation requires unions to become “more adept at weaving the interests and identities of so-called ‘outsiders’ into a larger narrative and practice” (Murray, 2017: 11).

While acknowledging the virtues of the recent approaches, it can be noted that most focus empirically on the work of trade unions in developed states, often examining their use of social media. The situation in Cabo Verde concerning ICT usage by trade unions is different in significant ways to its employment in developed states. First, social media usage in Cabo Verde is markedly lower than in developed countries, both among the general population and by trade unions. In 2021, 53.7 per cent of the total population in Cabo Verde used social media compared to 86.5 per cent in Germany in 2022 (DataReportal, 2021, 2022). Second, many trade unions in Cabo Verde make little, if any, use of social media platforms. This point is outlined further in the Methodology section. Third, the Lusophone context influences trade union use of ICTs in Cabo Verde. A study by Carneiro and Costa (2020) found that trade union confederations in Portugal and Brazil employ a largely one-way model of communication via ICTs, where they provide information but little interaction occurs with members. This is also the case in Cabo Verde, where structures and systems regulating labour relations are influenced by more than 500 years of Portuguese colonial control.⁴ Given this context, a general assessment of whether, if at all, the use of ICTs by trade unions in Cabo Verde is leading to a distributed discourse is provided as a platform, from which more sharply focused analyses can be undertaken.

Two further points concerning the conceptual framework used in this research are significant. First, ICTs are premised as neither good nor bad in themselves. The analysis draws on the affordance approach, outlined by Hennebert, Pasquier and Lévesque (2021), in examining the objective features of ICTs employed by Cabo Verdean trade unions and the subjective perceptions of their users. Second, several researchers make the point that the employment of ICTs by trade unions is more effective if it complements traditional face-to-face work, rather than playing a substitution role (Schoemann, 2018; Pasquier, Daudigeos and Barros, 2020). This perspective is captured by Schoemann (2018: 76), who states that the “major challenge for employee representation seems to be the joining of the online world … with the analog, presence-based form

⁴ The Inspector General of Labour (Interview 6, 2021) provided examples of ways in which Cabo Verde draws on labour structures and systems used in Portugal. It is recognised that the provision of a largely one-way model of ICT communication by trade unions is not limited to the Lusophone context.

of democratic procedures”. Examining the ways in which trade unions in Cabo Verde are engaging with this challenge is a notable aspect of this research.

Potential problems with the use of ICTs by trade unions

There are several issues regarding the use of ICTs by trade unions which can hinder the achievement of a distributed discourse. Three of them are outlined below and then examined in the context of Cabo Verde in the “Case Study” and “Discussion of Findings” sections.

First, digital communication is more likely to be misinterpreted than face-to-face contacts, since the former lacks the context provided by body language (Holtzman et al., 2017). People can find it hard to express their perspectives and feelings in any depth in online settings, where they are concentrating on trying to use the technology correctly. Face-to-face interactions are generally perceived to be more useful in building solidarity, as people feel more relaxed and better understood when communicating in this form (Schiffrin et al., 2010; Kerr and Waddington, 2014). When ICTs are used frequently as a means of communication, and little face-to-face interaction takes place, there is the possibility that a concentrated group of frequent users will play a critical role in deciding the content of issues for discussion (Fuchs, 2014).

Second, the adoption of digital technologies comes with notable risks in sub-Saharan Africa, where most ICT infrastructures “are frail and poorly protected from cyber threats and attacks” (Open Access Government, 2020).⁵ Cybersecurity awareness is low, and formal training on how to avoid data and identity theft is needed (Steyn and Van Greunen, 2015). ICTs can also be used by employers for surveillance of union members. For example, Hennebert et al. (2021: 195) make the point that a high level of visibility and transparency, based on trade union use of ICTs during disputes, “can lead to management surveillance” which may discourage some workers from pursuing union membership.

Third, a number of governments in sub-Saharan Africa have exerted influence over the service providers they license to provide ICTs, in order to circumscribe or prevent public access. Such actions can prevent trade unions using ICTs to communicate. For instance, the Ethiopian government has taken ownership of a single gateway to the Internet, which allows it to block access as it deems necessary (Gagliardone, 2016). The Ugandan government ordered a four-day nationwide shutdown of the Internet during the 2021 presidential election. Internet providers complied with the order unquestioningly in order to protect their contracts (Anthonio, 2021).

Contextualisation: Cabo Verde as a Case Study

ICT usage in Cabo Verde

As it is important to consider the national context when assessing the use of ICTs by trade unions, issues concerning their employment in Cabo Verde are outlined in this section. Access to the Internet and freedom of information in Cabo Verde are good compared to most African countries. The country is ranked first in Africa by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2020) in the category of Digital Rights (94.7/100 score). For Reporters Without Borders (2021), a “distinguishing feature of Cabo Verde is the ... exceptional media freedom, which is guaranteed by the constitution”. At

⁵ The Inspector General of Labour (Interview 6, 2021) reported delays in launching the Inspectorate’s website and Integrated Management System in 2020 due to a cyberattack on the government’s network system.

the national level, 61.9 per cent of the population are Internet users, just under the world average of 64.3 per cent (DataReportal, 2021).⁶ However, this aggregate figure masks the fact that Internet access varies across islands and sectors of economic activity. The ability of trade unions – and individual trade unionists – to make use of ICTs in Cabo Verde is substantially affected by their geographical position.

Labour matters are regularly reported in the media, where it is not unusual for the policies and actions of trade unions to be directly criticised. For example, in 2021 a proposed strike was called by the Transport, Communications and Public Administration Trade Union (SINTCAP, Sindicato dos Transportes, Comunicações e Administração Pública), over the failure of the Institute of Meteorology and Geophysics (INMG) to publish an official Career, Positions and Salaries Plan (PCCS, Plano de Cargos, Carreiras e Salários). The view of the INMG President that SINTCAP “instead of rejoicing in the progress made on labor issues … for more than 15 years … intended to organize shamefully and at all costs an unnecessary strike” was reported in the press (Inforpress, 2021a). The SINTCAP position on the strike was not outlined in the report.

This type of reporting is influenced by media structures and systems which have developed as the product of a political system, in which only Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde (PAICV) and the Movimento para a Democracia (MpD) form the government. The media are split in their support for these two parties, which influences the way information on labour issues is presented. Whichever party is in power, a substantial part of the publicly owned media supports their policies and programmes (Salgado, 2014).

Within such a climate, the ability of trade unions to communicate effectively to a domestic and, on occasion, international audience is vital. Trade unions need access to, and command over, modern ICT systems, in order to present information on labour issues to their rank-and-file members, the wider public and international labour organisations, including counter-arguments to partial views presented in the media. This point was outlined as important by a number of interviewees. To contextualise points concerning trade union communication methods raised in the interviews, key political economy matters in Cabo Verde affecting labour are outlined in the following section.

The political economy of Cabo Verde

Following a revolutionary struggle, Cabo Verde achieved independence from Portuguese control in 1975. Since transitioning to a liberalised market economy in 1991, Cabo Verde’s central problems have concerned high rates of joblessness and the existence of a large informal sector engaged in precarious forms of labour. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic problems in the country. The Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE, National Institute of Statistics) indicates that the unemployment rate rose from 11.3 per cent in 2019 to 14.5 per cent in 2020; out of the employed population, 51 per cent work in the informal sector, 22 per cent hold precarious jobs and 13 per cent work less than 35 hours per week (INE, 2020).

Chronically high levels of unemployment can be partially attributed to structural factors, including a dispersed and isolated geography, lack of natural resources, small agricultural and industrial bases, and a modest domestic market (World Bank, 2018). The government’s policy response since the 1990s to these constraints on development has been the adoption of a good governance agenda to attract FDI and Official Development Assistance (ODA)⁷. This policy,

⁶ The figures are for January 2021 and are presented as the percentage of people who have access to the Internet either at home, at work or in public spaces.

⁷ The Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) (2020) employs four overarching categories to

combined with market-led development and a clean electoral history, was effective in attracting sizeable amounts of FDI from Western states and China, until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Haugen and Carling, 2005; Alves, 2008; Davies, 2008; World Bank, 2018; Sousa, 2020).

In 2007, Cabo Verde achieved the status of Lower-Middle Income Country (LMIC) (Sousa, 2020). Unfortunately, graduation to LMIC status has negatively affected ODA flows of donor aid to Cabo Verde. Between 2006 and 2017, ODA from OECD-DAC⁸ donors declined by 19 per cent and the form of financing moved from grants to concessional loans, while tied aid rose, increasing transaction costs and reducing local ownership (OECD/WTO, 2019). In addition, help for Cabo Verdean trade unions from international support organisations decreased, which is discussed further in the case study section.

Moreover, lack of economic diversification undermines claims that the country's economic policies since the 1990s have made Cabo Verde a developmental "success story" (Sousa, 2020). Inward FDI has primarily focused on tourism, with the sector accounting for 65 per cent of labour force participation and 70 per cent of economic activity before the start of COVID-19 (World Bank, 2018). The government's focus on developing a geographically concentrated form of international tourism as the point of entry for FDI, while failing to stimulate inclusive domestic economic development, has resulted in negative outcomes for the domestic labour force. There are several reasons for this.

First, local retail outlets and restaurants do not benefit from spillover effects, thwarting the development of the domestic economy (Semedo Lopes, 2020). The large foreign-owned resort complexes use an all-inclusive business model, importing all the necessities tourists consume in hotels, including water and toilet paper.

Second, focusing economic investment and infrastructure development within only three islands (Santiago, São Vicente and Sal) has resulted in the marginalisation of populations on the peripheral islands, such as São Nicolau and Santo Antão, where there are substantial problems concerning the provision of water, sanitation, electricity and transport, as well as high unemployment rates (Sousa, 2020).

Third, employment has become increasingly precarious (Lee, Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2015). The majority of all informal sector jobs in Cabo Verde are in the tourism sector, where there are high turnover rates and workers are the least informed about labour legislation. In consequence, workers in the sector are difficult for trade unions to reach, represent and mobilise, while being the most in need of assistance (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021). Less than 3 per cent of those employed in the informal sector have a written contract (INE, 2015).

The average monthly income in the informal sector is 30 600 escudos (US\$321), while the estimated cost of living in cities is 75 214 escudos (US\$797) per person (INE, 2015; Livingcost, 2021). This discrepancy is a major reason for the rise in urban poverty rates over the past decade (ADB, 2021). The number of slums around big resorts has increased, and hotel complexes are staffed by local workers who cannot afford to rent accommodation in the area. Consequently,

Os trabalhadores trabalham no luxo e dormem no lixo. Luxo-lixo [Workers work in luxury and sleep in litter. Luxury-litter] (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021).

measure the quality of governance: Security and Rule of Law, Participation, Rights and Inclusion, Foundations for Economic Opportunity and Human Development. Cabo Verde was ranked second best governed country in Africa in 2020 by the IIAG.

⁸ The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is a committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Gender is an important cross-cutting labour market issue. Women represent the most vulnerable segment of the workforce, accounting for 58 per cent of the population in poverty. A study on gender status in the labour market concluded that “poverty has a female face in Cabo Verde” (Carvalho, 2020: 161).

Overall, changes in the nature of work in Cabo Verde since the 1990s have followed global trends, notably a decreasing wage share for workers, underemployment and unemployment across segmented labour markets, and informalisation. There has also been a move away from collective bargaining to individual and firm-level agreements. Around 80 per cent of people apply for jobs through information based on word of mouth, rather than arrangements coordinated by government institutions and labour organisations (Lopes and Semedo, 2020). In addition, petitions requesting the Inspector General for Labour to intervene in labour disputes are primarily submitted by individuals or groups (92 per cent), rather than union representatives (IGL, Interview, 2021). The work of trade unions is, therefore, difficult in collectively representing a labour force which is being atomised and pushed into precarity. Before focusing on the case study, a brief overview of the labour movement in the post-independence period is provided to underscore its strengths and weaknesses in defending the interests of workers in the country.

The trade union movement in Cabo Verde

Currently there are fifty trade unions in Cabo Verde, divided between affiliation to União Nacional dos Trabalhadores de Cabo Verde - Central Sindical (UNTC-CS) and Confederação Cabo-Verdiana dos Sindicatos Livres (CCSL).⁹ UNTC-CS (2018) was created in 1978, under the period of one-party rule by Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), which became PAICV in 1980.¹⁰ CCSL was formed in 1992 under an MpD government (República de Cabo Verde, 2017). There is a clear politicisation of the trade union movement at its apex, with UNTC-CS maintaining links with PAICV, while CCSL has ties to MpD.

There has been considerable tension between the two trade union centres since the formation of CCSL, which has coalesced to create a discordant labour movement. The inter-union rivalry has led to fragmentation of the interests of labour and, along with weak channels of communication, inhibited the presentation of a united front by the workers’ representatives in the Conselho da Concertação Social (CCS, Council of Social Consultation),¹¹ leading to deadlocks on important topics (Rocha and Morabeza, 2019). This rivalry is publicised in partisan ways in the mainstream media (Inforpress, 2021b), making distributed control over the means of communication vital for the trade union movement, in order to outline counter-narratives.

Methodology

Selection of trade union case studies and informants

Primary and secondary data sources are integrated in this research. Primary research entailed six one-hour, semi-structured interviews in Portuguese (see Figure 1), undertaken in 2021, with

⁹ CCSL did not respond to requests for interviews.

¹⁰ Following the Guinean coup d'état in 1980 (Davidson, 1989).

¹¹ The CCS is a tripartite consultative body (government, workers’ representatives and employers) for the harmonisation of economic and social policies, work relations and salaries (Republic of Cabo Verde, 2017).

officials from individual trade unions and the Secretary General (SG) of UNTC-CS, as well as the IGL, the senior government official leading the department which monitors compliance with labour legal provisions.¹² All the interviews were conducted online using Zoom, with verbal consent obtained from all interviewees.

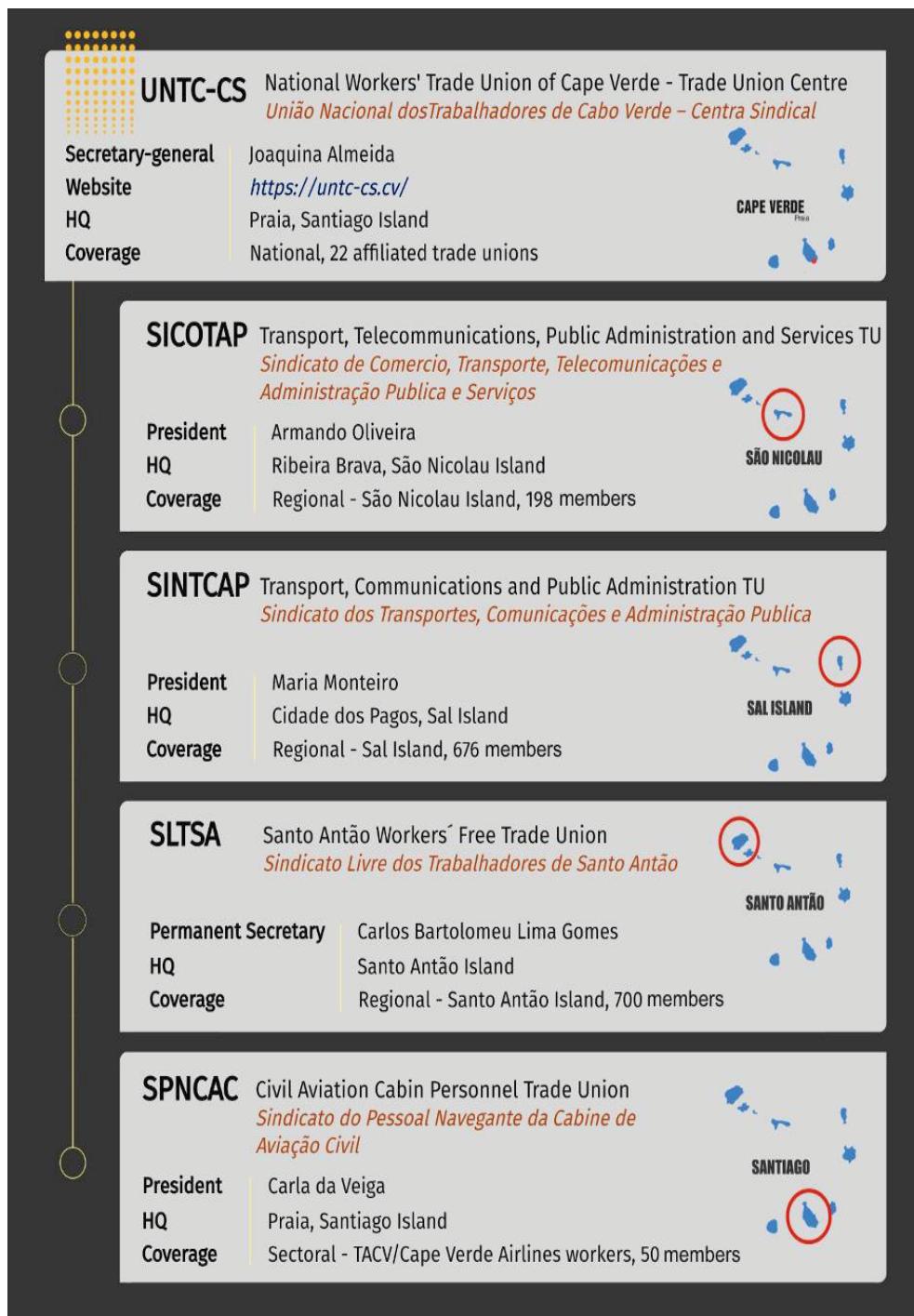


Figure 1: Overview of the trade unions interviewed

¹² For details of those interviewed see Figure 1 and the “List of Interviews” which forms part of the Reference list.

A total of twenty-two trade unions were invited to take part in interviews, out of which almost half replied. UNTC-CS has a website, which provides contact details for the individual unions affiliated to the organisation. This was used as the main source of contact information. CCSL does not have a website and did not reply to email requests for an interview. Finding contact details for individual unions affiliated to CCSL proved challenging, as neither the centre itself nor the government website provides such information. Consequently, only representatives of unions affiliated to UNTC-CS were interviewed. The largest share of the unionised labour force in Cabo Verde are members of unions affiliated to UNTC-CS.¹³ The interviews are, therefore, with officials from organisations representing a majority of unionised workers.

Officials from trade unions on core islands (Sal and Santiago) and peripheral islands (São Nicolau and Santo Antão) were interviewed to illustrate the dispersed geographical nature of Cabo Verde. For the purposes of the research, core islands are categorised as those having an established and substantial services sector, within which tourism is an important provider of jobs, as well as an international airport. Peripheral islands are classed as deriving most of their employment from agriculture and fishing.

During the last five years on Sal, tourism has become the primary source of income and employment. The island attracted 45 per cent of total visitors to Cabo Verde annually before the COVID-19 pandemic. The capital city, Praia – the economic, political and cultural hub of the country – is located on the island of Santiago, which drew just over 10 per cent of all visitors before the pandemic. In contrast, São Nicolau and Santo Antão received 0.3 per cent and 3.4 per cent, respectively, of all annual visitors to Cabo Verde prior to the pandemic (Caboverdeislands.org, n.d.).

All trade union representatives were first asked general questions about their organisations, including membership numbers, the level of human resources, facilities available and services provided. Following this, interviewees were asked about the main issues facing the union and then communications-related questions. Questions on the latter focused first on IT infrastructure and then on the primary methods of communication utilised by the union. Respondents were asked about positive impacts of the use of ICTs on the work of the union and to outline their main communication problems, as well as the forms of support they needed for improvements. The interviewees were given the chance to add additional comments and insights, which is where the relationship with the government was highlighted as important. Subsequently, efforts were made to contact government representatives for comments on the perspectives of the trade unionists. In response, the IGL agreed to an interview.

The methodology also entailed an analysis of secondary literature in Portuguese and English, in order to contextualise the topics raised by interviewees about labour regimes and dynamics in Cabo Verde. This includes academic research, trade union and government documents, media coverage of labour issues, and reports by international bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs). The key findings from the examination of secondary literature were triangulated with the points made in the interviews. An analysis of the use of social media by trade unions was excluded, because only half of the trade unions invited for an interview had a Facebook account, and few posted regularly on the platform.

Limitations

The research is limited by the lack of online information about the Cabo Verde trade union

¹³ The only study on union representativeness in Cabo Verde found that UNTC-CS represented 87 per cent of the unionised labour force (MNC, 2004; Inforpress, 2021b).

movement. This is explained by several factors. First, the digital activity of trade unions is minimal, which is reflected in the number of interviewed representatives. Second, cloud-based digital archiving has yet to become widespread in Cabo Verde, which impeded access to trade union reports, budget statements and membership lists online. Several interviewees, when requested, provided digital copies of reports by their organisations, which were shared as email attachments. Third, local production of information and analysis is minimal, a point which was raised by a number of interviewees as concerning. In addition, labour studies by non-locals tend to overlook trade unions.

Overall, the lack of detailed analyses and official reports on the trade union movement in Cabo Verde illustrates the need for more research on the topic. The last official paper on trade unions in Cabo Verde was published in 2004 and indicated that weak financial capacity and poor communication within and between unions were major problems (MNC, 2004). Both remain salient matters eighteen years later, as points made by interviewees in the following case study section reveal.

All trade union officials named in the overview, except the President of SPNCAC, personally participated in the interviews. The interviewee from SPNCAC wished to remain anonymous.

Case Study

The five interviewees from the trade union movement spotlighted a number of hindrances to their work. These include the deleterious effects on labour of the COVID-19 pandemic, high levels of unemployment, informalisation, declining wages, adversarial relationships with the government and employers, and lack of assistance from international support organisations. In addition, two key related topics, which stood out in every interview, were financial and communication problems. A government report in 2017 also highlighted limited access to financing as a severe constraint on the effectiveness of trade unions (República de Cabo Verde, 2017). While the focus of this research is on communication issues, a brief overview is undertaken below of financial problems outlined by interviewees, since the two factors are inextricably linked.

Financial problems facing trade unions

Trade unions in Cabo Verde receive their revenues from members' fees, calculated at the rate of 1 per cent of their gross monthly salaries (SLTSA, Interview 1, 2021). In turn, by statutory law, unions have to pay their centre of affiliation a monthly subscription of 10 per cent of their declared income (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021). An ongoing conflict has emerged from the alleged non-compliance with this obligation on the part of some unions affiliated to UNTC-CS. The Secretary General of UNTC-CS maintains that many unions do not present accounts and reports of their activities, restricting the ability of the centre to collect revenues, thus negatively affecting its operational capacity. For example, given its poor financial situation, UNTC-CS can only afford to employ five people, which is insufficient to deal effectively with the workload of the organisation. Consequently, there are work backlogs, which cause unrest among trade unions waiting for their matters to be addressed (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021).

The trade unions involved in the dispute have countered with a formal complaint against UNTC-CS. This is based on the alleged imposition by UNTC-CS of illegal increases in the subscription rate during times of great hardship created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw many members lose jobs or work on reduced salaries (ASemana, 2020). This complaint followed the suspension of four trade unions, which allegedly had not paid their subscriptions to UNTC-CS

for over two years (Amaral and Martins, 2019). When interviewed, the SG pointed to the wider issue of gender bias as a factor in the conflict, believing that the dispute originated from the fact that she is a woman (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021). The SG stated that she faces a non-cooperative attitude from a number of organisations and individuals, stemming from gender bias (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021). Opposition to the current leadership of UNTC-CS is led by a man and, in general, women face considerable difficulties when occupying traditionally male-dominated employment positions in Cabo Verde due to patriarchal attitudes (Carter and Aulette, 2009; UN Women, 2018; UNSDG, 2020).

On top of its reliance for funds on the subscriptions of affiliated trade unions, two other factors have contributed to the financial crisis at the UNTC-CS. First, support from the government, in the form of subsidies, was withdrawn in the 2002 Labour Code revision. UNTC-CS has been vocal about the need to have it re-introduced, though without success (Inforpress, 2019). Second, since Cabo Verde attained LMIC status, external funding for the labour movement has shifted to countries classified as “Least Developed Country” (LDC) (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021). This means that UNTC-CS is unable to leverage funds to cover the costs of the organisation of the bi-annual National Council meetings (approximately 1 140 300escudos or US\$12 000). Consequently, it has appealed to external organisations for finance to run these meetings, which is not a sustainable practice in the long term (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021).

Interviewees from individual trade unions also indicated that a dearth of finance was a major concern.¹⁴ Few trade unions are based in their own headquarters, the majority having to rent space for their operations and training courses. The situation is more acute on peripheral islands, where trade unions not only lack their own head offices but mostly hire staff on a part-time basis, to do only tasks which are absolutely necessary. This impedes the development of solidarity within unions and reduces their institutional memory.

Trade union communication

Levels of digitalisation and Internet penetration vary among trade unions in Cabo Verde.¹⁵ All the interviewees confirmed having access to the Internet. However, only UNTC-CS has a dedicated website. Digital technologies have been incorporated into internal communication strategies since most trade union officials and ordinary members have phones. Social media and instant messaging apps have been adopted by some trade unions as a means of disseminating information and holding discussions. The leading digital communication platforms, ranked by amount of use by trade unions, are email, mobile phone and Facebook.¹⁶

There are marked disparities between trade union and government access to, and deployment of, ICTs, which reflect their differing financial and technical capacities. Many government institutions have well-designed websites with integrated points of access to public services, notably Casa do Cidadão (Citizen’s House) and Portal do Governo (Government Portal)¹⁷ as a result of the implementation of the Strategic Plan for an Information Society (SPIS). This plan, which dates from the early 2000s, is based on enhancing digital culture in Cabo Verde through increasing the use of ICTs by the government and citizens (República de Cabo Verde, 2005a; 2005b; Brito and

¹⁴ This point was cited as vital by all interviewees, except the IGL

¹⁵ See the statistics provided in the Introduction on Internet use.

¹⁶ Based on information provided by the five interviewees from the trade union movement.

¹⁷ Casa do Cidadão: https://portondinosilhas.gov.cv/portonprd/porton.portoncv_v3?p=B4B7B8B4B4C4CECCCDDBC9C4C4; Portal do Governo: <https://www.governo.cv>.

Jorge, 2020). The initiative facilitated the adoption of e-governance by public institutions and has taken the government far ahead of trade unions in relation to the utilisation of ICTs. Although some SPIS funds are earmarked for CSOs, the trade union movement has not received any financial and technical support as part of this initiative to build ICT infrastructure. Therefore, during labour disputes, the government can present its narratives to the public much more quickly and more fully than the trade union movement. This is a concern for the SG of UNTC-CS and officials from individual unions who were interviewed.

Communication constraints facing trade unions

The main communication issue facing trade unions in Cabo Verde concerns the cost of purchasing good quality digital technology. Problems cited by interviewees as most important were lack of access to hardware devices, networking software and support services, and the digital divide across islands. Figure 2 provides a summary of communication issues affecting the trade unions that participated in the research.

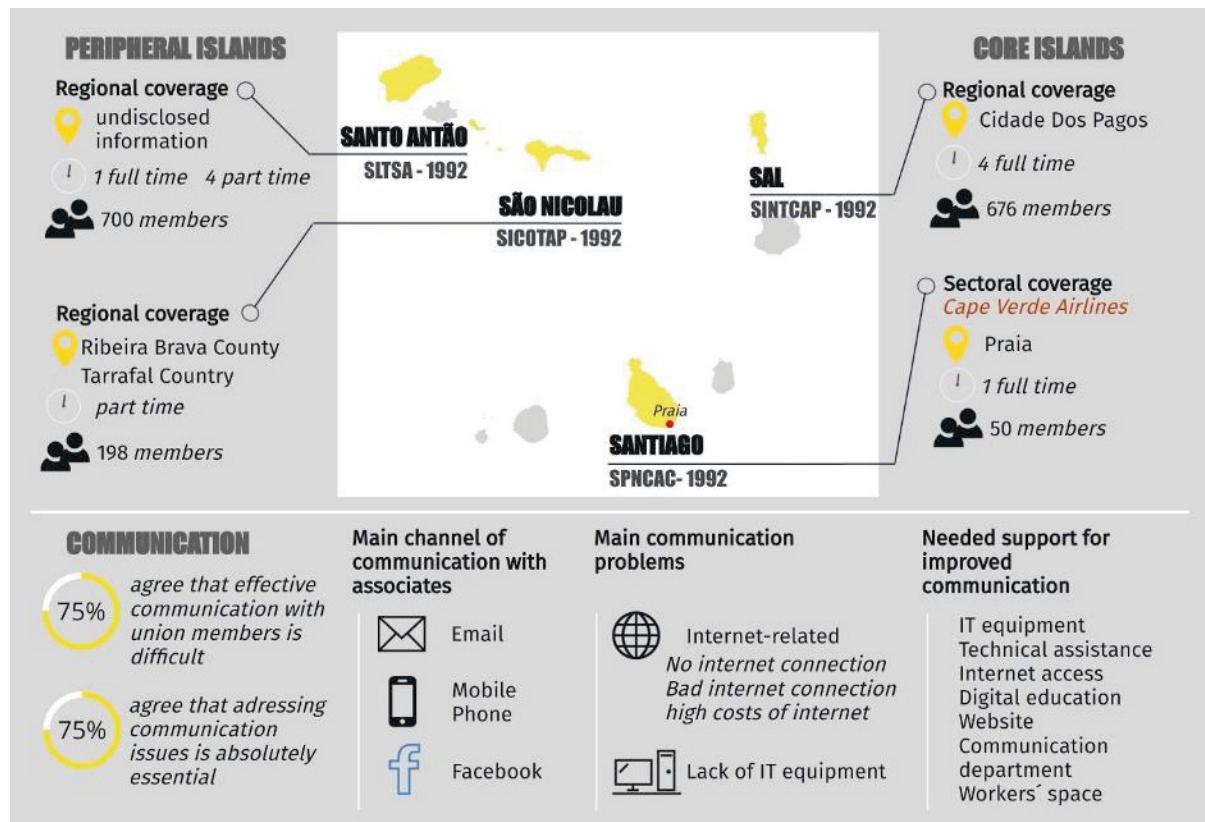


Figure 2: Overview of key points made by trade unionists in interviews

All the interviewees had problems at times with Internet services while undertaking trade union work. Over half the respondents cited occasional difficulties with the Internet signal, with interviewees on peripheral islands reporting the highest levels of interruption to services. Trade unions on peripheral islands have outdated equipment and limited access to technical support. The interviewee from the island of São Nicolau used a borrowed computer for the interview, as the machines at the trade union office were broken. São Nicolau is one of the three poorest Cabo

Verdean islands and ICT services there are limited. Demand for the work of IT technicians on the island greatly outstrips the supply. As a result, trade unions have to wait a long time to get faulty devices repaired (SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021).

Poor connectivity obstructs communication with the minority of union members on peripheral islands who do have access to the Internet. The ability of workers to purchase a smartphone is influenced by differing salary levels across the economic sectors in which they are employed. Those employed in services connected to the port and post offices are more likely to be able to afford mobile devices than are sanitation workers, for example. In cases where most trade unionists cannot afford to buy mobile devices, communication via non-digital channels, such as letters or newsletters, is used (SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021).

Trade union representatives from core islands were more concerned about the high cost of using ICTs than about access, since almost all their members own digital devices. The representative from the aviation sector union on Santiago reported that some members spend 50 per cent of their income on Internet usage (SPNCAC, Interview 2, 2021). The trade union representative from Sal stated that the long-planned creation of a communications department and a dedicated website to improve dissemination of information and increase union visibility had not materialised because of the cost of purchasing and maintaining ICTs (SINTCAP, Interview 3, 2021).

In contrast, Internet access is not difficult for officials at government institutions. They use a private state network that provides free mobile phones and Internet packages for officials (IGL, Interview 6, 2021). However, when communicating with workers about labour issues, the Inspector General for Labour stated that the government employs a diverse selection of digital and non-digital means of communication, including radio, television, Facebook, letters and leaflets (IGL, Interview 6, 2021). This is because the government is aware that, although most Cabo Verdeans own a mobile phone, not all have Internet access. The IGL also made the point that the government is conscious that important messages may not reach the workforce because citizens may not be able to access state communication channels consistently. Consequently, he admitted that there are many workers who do not have information about their labour rights (IGL, Interview 6, 2021).

As a way of addressing problems caused by lack of knowledge about labour rights, the IGL organises periodic visits to trade unions across the islands. The main problem when visiting trade unions on peripheral islands is transportation, notably expensive flights, inefficient maritime services, lack of public buses and poor roads. This situation means that more time and money is sometimes spent on travel than on discussing and addressing concerns raised by trade unions on behalf of members during these visits (IGL, Interview 6, 2021).

The fact that the government finds it difficult to make workers aware of their labour rights using ICTs and face-to-face contact methods illustrates the need for trade union officials to be active in this area. Physical inspections of workplaces by local trade union officials to check on the conditions which exist and to communicate information to workers about their labour rights are important. This is one example highlighting the significance attached to conducting work on a face-to-face basis by the trade union officials interviewed. The importance of face-to-face trade union work is discussed in more detail below.

A further problem with the use of communication apps by trade unions in Cabo Verde is that misunderstandings can occur. Constant monitoring of devices is often required to keep up with information sent digitally, which can be difficult and tiring. The aviation sector union representative made the point that flight attendants are unable to access ICTs when they are at work and are often too tired to closely follow Viber discussions about labour issues after completing long shifts,

involving unsocial hours. He stated, therefore, that despite the advantages digital technologies have brought to the work of the union, face-to-face communication is important, as misunderstandings can be addressed on the spot through supportive conversations, where information can be rephrased if it has been initially misunderstood (SPNCAC, Interview 2, 2021).

All the other interviewees emphasised that good trade unionism is based on continual grassroots groundwork. The SG of UNTC-CS provided an example of how she combines employment of ICTs with person-to-person communication in her work. Increased appearances on various media platforms have raised her profile nationally. This enhanced visibility has motivated women who have experienced sexual harassment at work to seek direct consultations with her at the UNTC-CS head office, where she has been able to discuss their situations in depth on a person-to-person basis and provide focused assistance (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021).

Benefits of the use of ICTs by trade unions

All the trade union representatives interviewed regard ICTs as essential tools to complement in-person communication. The interviewee from SINTCAP captured the opinions of all the participants in the research, in stating that the use of ICTs is vital:

We are living in the era of digital trade unionism. Actually, everything is digitally and remotely based now (SINTCAP, Interview 3, 2021).

Three main advantages to their work of using ICTs were outlined by trade unionists.

First, the utilisation of video conferencing software has reduced inequality of participation between trade unions from core and peripheral islands during important meetings held in Praia. Before the employment of ICTs became common, the problems of trade unionists on peripheral islands, represented through the power of attorney, tended to be neglected in favour of addressing issues faced by the workers whose trade unions had a representative present physically (SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021). The utilisation of Zoom has reduced this inequity by facilitating the direct participation of trade unions from peripheral islands and enhanced inclusivity in the labour movement. Furthermore, ICTs can be useful tools in addressing the territorial discontinuity of Cabo Verde. Both representatives from São Nicolau and Santo Antão stated that being located on peripheral islands, with poor transport links and far from the capital city, made establishing ICT connections with the rest of the trade union movement vital (SLTSA, Interview 1, 2021; SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021).

Second, greater equality of participation on the part of individual union members in internal decision-making has been facilitated by the introduction of cross-platform centralised instant messaging software. SPNCAC operate a Viber group, to which all fifty members belong. Documents, such as policy proposals, are shared, discussed and voted on, with each vote having the same weight. Beyond increasing inclusivity in decision-making, this has helped in disseminating information effectively, improving accountability and transparency of union leaders, and building a sense of solidarity among members (SPNCAC, Interview 2, 2021).

Third, the use of ICTs makes communications discreet, if they are organised carefully, which is valued by many ordinary union members. One of the main problems for rank-and-file members when attending person-to-person union meetings was their fear of being identified by anti-union employers. The interviewee from SICOTAP stated:

[Many workers] do not want to show their faces to avoid complicated situations, which may jeopardise their salaries. This is especially the case with jobs that are seasonal or based on fixed term

contracts. There is a climate of fear that people have about their employment (SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021).

Using ICTs to improve trade union communication

All the interviewees from the trade union movement agreed that improving communication with members, the government and international organisations was vital to increasing the effectiveness of their work. Weak communication links with the mainland of the continent mean that initiatives created by organisations outside the country, such as the ITUC-Africa, take a lot of time to become known in Cabo Verde.¹⁸ The weak flow of information between trade union organisations on the mainland of Africa and Cabo Verde has also led to a discrepancy between external perceptions of the state of Cabo Verdean trade unions and the reality on the ground. The UNTC-CS SG commented that fellow union leaders are always surprised during international meetings when she outlines the severity of problems afflicting the Cabo Verdean trade union movement (UNTC-CS, Interview 4, 2021).

The provision to trade unions across all the islands of modern IT equipment and guaranteed Internet access for all citizens were cited by all interviewees as key requirements. The first would, according to interviewees, have a transformative effect on internal operations, serve as an archiving source and facilitate much-needed outreach to external organisations. The second would boost the dissemination of information to, and communication with, a larger segment of the labour force than is currently the case. Interviewees also stressed the importance of complementing the provision of modern equipment with regular training courses in the use of ICTs.¹⁹

The value of having dedicated union websites to increase the cachet of their work was outlined by many interviewees. Creating websites was seen as a vital way to gain greater visibility at national and international levels. All the interviewees were aware of the low profile of their organisations and attached importance to the creation of websites as a way of promoting their work and increasing its visibility. None of the interviewees expressed an interest in producing blogs or vlogs to highlight their work.

The SINTCAP representative argued that in order to raise the profile of the union's work, communication channels must be diversified, since the workers registered with them have different characteristics and interests. The best way to achieve this, according to the official, is the employment of a full-time Communications Officer, who would utilise ICTs to work on developing outreach strategies to promote union activities and increase recruitment. She stated that while some colleagues joke that this is a luxury, for her,

[it is] a great need, which would make a huge difference to the work of the union (SINTCAP, Interview 3, 2021).

The representative from São Nicolau emphasised the human element in union communication. He suggested the establishment of physical spaces for socialising, where workers could meet periodically to discuss day-to-day problems but also, if necessary, live together (SICOTAP, Interview 5, 2021). This would, he argued, help bring union members together physically and instil a greater sense of social solidarity.

¹⁸This point was made by a number of interviewees, though outlined in most detail in Interview 2: SPNCAP.

¹⁹The points in this paragraph were made in some form by all the trade unionists interviewed.

Discussion of Findings

The government does not impose undue restrictions on access to the Internet in Cabo Verde, although this has been a problem in other African countries (Gagliardone, 2016; Anthonio, 2021). Additionally, the use of ICTs by governments and employers to engage in surveillance of trade union actions, outlined by Hennebert et al. (2021) as a potential problem, is not an issue of significance in Cabo Verde.

However, it may be argued that, since the government has raised its capacity to use ICTs far above that of trade unions, it does not need to resort to undue restrictions on Internet use or to engage in surveillance tactics. The government has substantially enhanced its capacity to use ICTs through the national Strategic Plan for an Information Society. Consequently, trade unions are embedded in a system of labour relations where the government can use ICTs to reach a wide audience quickly and effectively to support its narratives. In contrast, trade union capacity to outline counter-narratives is hampered by lack of modern equipment and expertise in ICT use on the part of staff. In this context, it is extremely difficult for trade unions in Cabo Verde to employ ICTs to bring about transformative change in labour relations.

Nevertheless, ICTs have been used by trade unions in Cabo Verde to widen the distribution of the discourse in certain ways. The argument of Zivkovic and Hogan (2006) that the utilisation of ICTs by trade unions can lead to greater equality of knowledge and distributed control over the means of communication has validity in the context of this research. The perspective of Hodder and Houghton (2019) that ICT usage by trade unions can result in the lowering of some of the bureaucratic barriers existing between union officials and rank-and-file members is also borne out empirically in this research.

First, the use of Zoom for national-level meetings in Praia has enhanced the ability of trade unions on peripheral islands to participate, thus widening the distributed discourse and increasing inclusivity. Second, the successful employment of Viber as a discussion platform by the Civil Aviation Cabin Crew Union (SPNCAC) has led to its officials becoming more accountable to members. It has also enhanced the effectiveness of union work and inclusivity by providing the means for rapid diffusion of important information on labour issues, which are then discussed by all members.

Greene et al. (2003) make the point that ICTs can be employed by union members to track and evaluate the digital footprint of their representatives. This has occurred in the case of the SPNCAC, who regularly utilise Viber to assess the work of their union officials. Furthermore, trade union employment of ICTs in these two examples has not become dominated by a few voices promoting their agendas, a concern raised by Fuchs (2014).

Several interviewees were optimistic about the attainment of a distributed discourse if their use of ICTs was enhanced. First, SINTCAP's objectives include the creation of a website and the recruitment of a Communications Officer to ensure wider outreach to members, particularly those currently underrepresented, such as youth. This resonates with the arguments of Houghton (2020) and Schoemann (2018) that greater visibility, via a website or a social media presence, could be a step in unionising younger labour market entrants. Second, several interviewees outlined the need of trade unions to get their information and narratives across more effectively to national and international audiences, in order to balance the discourse on labour issues, which at present is skewed towards the views of government officials. To do so, they argued that upgrading their ICT infrastructure is vital.

Finally, the case study findings underscore the validity of the point made by Pasquier et al. (2020) and Schoemann, (2018) that the use of ICTs by trade unions is likely to be more effective if

it complements face-to-face work, rather than playing a substitution role. The need for the use of ICTs to be combined with communications in person-to-person settings was outlined by all the interviewees, with the SG of UNTC-CS providing a clear example of the value of such complementarity in her work on gender issues.

Conclusion

This research focused on going beyond the positive mainstream narratives about Cabo Verde's development model to examine communication problems facing trade unions, as they try to defend the interests of the country's workers. The labour force is increasingly being atomised and many union members are working in precarious conditions. In this situation, it is vital for trade unions to have fast and effective communication channels. Freedom of association and expression, including digital rights, are enshrined in legislation and largely observed in practice in Cabo Verde. However, respect for these rights and freedoms occurs in a structured setting where trade union officials find it difficult to communicate effectively among themselves and with individual members, as well as with national centres and international support groups. Trade unions are well aware of the need to increase their use of ICTs in order to communicate more effectively but this is happening slowly and unevenly. Nevertheless, their increasing utilisation of ICTs in recent years has led to a more democratically distributed discourse within the trade union movement in particular settings, illustrating the potential for wider use.

Several policy implications can be drawn from the research. First, in line with its espousal of good governance, the government could initiate and fund a modernisation programme for trade unions. The offering of competitive grants to enhance use of ICTs, as part of such a programme, would provide a source of much-needed finance for trade unions. The Union Modernisation Fund (UMF), launched in 2005 by the government of the United Kingdom (UK), could provide a guide to setting up a funding mechanism (Department for Business Innovation and Skills and the Trades Union Congress, 2010).

Second, international support organisations should reconsider how much weight to give to the income status of countries as a criterion when considering which trade union movements to finance. Instead, the local context of trade unions needs to be given greater attention. The classification of Cabo Verde as a Lower-Middle Income country, which has led to a reduction in international support for its labour organisations, means little to a trade union movement that finds it hard to communicate effectively both internally and externally.

Third, trade unions in Cabo Verde could better deploy the ICTs they currently have to increase their visibility in general and to reach out to wider sections of the workforce, particularly the large numbers working in the informal sector, who are not union members. The majority of the workforce possess a mobile phone, so trade unions could use this means of communication to engage more imaginatively and effectively with non-unionised workers than they do at present. This is noteworthy, since it "will be of decisive importance for the future of trade unions to ... represent the interests of self-employed workers with and without market power, and people voluntarily working or forced to work in a self-employed capacity" (Haake, 2017: 64).

Finally, the interviews carried out for this research show that the utilisation of ICTs should not supplant face-to-face communication, which is the staple of trade union work in Cabo Verde. A strategy to develop the use of ICTs by trade unions should be integrated with a plan to enhance person-to-person methods of communication. Over-concentrating on the employment of ICTs would risk dehumanising trade union work. Trust needs to be fostered within the labour

movement, given the multiple strands of discord that exist. This will take time to build and requires the formulation of an overarching strategy which has personal human contact at its heart. The integration of the enhanced use of ICTs with face-to-face communication needs to be carefully adopted, taking account of different ways in which individual trade unions operate in Cabo Verde and the employment status of members.

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Interview 2: Representative of SPNCAC - Cabo Verde Civil Aviation Cabin Crew Personnel Trade Union, 20 July 2021.

Interview 3: Maria de Brito Monteiro, President of SINTCAP - Transport, Communications and Public Administration Trade Union, 23 July 2021.

Interview 4: Maria Joaquina Almeida, Secretary General of UNTC-CS - Cabo Verde Workers National Trade Union Centre, 6 August 2021.

Interview 5: Armando Oliveira, President of SICOTAP - Transport, Telecommunications, Public Administration and Services Trade Union, 12 August 2021.

Interview 6: Anildo Fernandes Fortes, Inspector General of Labour, Ministry of Family and Social Inclusion, 17 September 2021.

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