INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Informalisation of Employment and the Transformation of Industrial Relations in Nigeria: A Sociological Analysis of Precarious Work and Worker Protection

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Abstract

This article examines how the continuing informalisation of employment is reshaping industrial relations in Nigeria. Drawing on secondary evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics, International Labour Organization, legislation, policy documents and published scholarship, it argues that informality should not be treated simply as a residual sector outside labour regulation. Rather, it has become a central terrain on which employment security, collective representation and social citizenship are being renegotiated. The analysis combines labour-process theory with a power-resources approach to show how fragmented employment relations, verbal contracts, subcontracting and irregular earnings weaken workers' capacity to bargain collectively. Yet the article also cautions against portraying informal workers as unorganised. Market associations, transport unions, artisan groups, cooperatives and kin-based networks frequently supply welfare, dispute settlement and political access, although these institutions rarely deliver the enforceable rights associated with formal collective bargaining. Recent labour-force data underline the scale of the problem: informal employment accounted for 93.0% of total employment in the second quarter of 2024. The article concludes that worker protection requires an institutional shift from a narrow, enterprise-based model towards portable social protection, association-based representation, credible labour inspection and bargaining arrangements suited to dispersed workplaces.

Keywords: collective bargaining; industrial relations; informal employment; Nigeria; precarious work; social protection

1 Introduction and background

In Nigeria, the question is no longer whether informal employment matters to industrial relations. The more difficult question concerns the kind of industrial relations system that is possible when the overwhelming majority of workers earn a livelihood beyond stable, registered and contractually governed employment. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024a) reports that 77.6 million persons, or 92.2% of those employed in 2023, were in informal employment. The quarterly series places the rate still higher at 93.0% in the second quarter of 2024, with rural informality at 97.5% and urban informality at 90.0% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024b). These figures invite a conceptual correction. Informality is not a marginal remainder awaiting absorption by a modern formal economy; it is a durable and differentiated mode through which work is organised, governed and, often, made insecure.

This condition has significant implications for the study of industrial relations. Classical industrial-relations institutions were developed around a recognisable employment relationship: a relatively identifiable employer, a workplace, a stable workforce, registered trade unions and an enforceable collective agreement. Nigeria's Labour Act defines collective bargaining as a process of arriving, or attempting to arrive, at a collective agreement (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). However, a legal definition cannot by itself create the organisational preconditions for bargaining. Where workers are hired verbally, paid intermittently, classified as own-account operators or placed in long subcontracting chains, there may be no clear employer against whom a claim can be directed. The problem is therefore institutional as well as economic.

Precarious work provides a useful bridge between informal employment and industrial relations. It refers not merely to low income, but to a broader constellation of insecurity: uncertain tenure, weak control over the labour process, absent or unreliable benefits, exposure to occupational risks and constrained representation. Akinwale (2014) usefully associates precarious work in Nigeria with underemployment, ambiguous employment relationships, inadequate social security and curtailed union rights. Such features are observable among street traders and artisans, but they also appear in formally registered firms that use casual labour, outsourced services or temporary arrangements. Informalisation, in this sense, is partly a process occurring within and across the formal economy, rather than a simple location outside it.

The article investigates the continued importance of informal employment and its implications for collective bargaining, social protection, employment security and worker organisation. It makes three arguments. First, the scale of informality is transforming the social base on which conventional collective bargaining rests. Second, informal workers possess forms of organisation and mutual aid, but these do not automatically amount to effective collective voice or statutory protection. Third, policy responses will remain limited if they equate formalisation with registration alone. A more credible approach should connect labour rights, social protection and representation to the realities of dispersed and heterogeneous work.

2 Objectives and questions

The broad objective is to analyse the relationship between informalisation and the transformation of industrial relations in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to: (a) examine the scale and character of informal employment; (b) assess its consequences for collective bargaining, employment security and social protection; (c) analyse the organisational resources available to informal workers; and (d) propose institutional measures capable of extending worker protection without assuming that all informal work can immediately be converted into conventional wage employment.

The analysis is guided by the following questions: How does informalisation alter the conditions for collective bargaining? Why do existing social-protection mechanisms reach so few informal workers? What forms of worker organisation have emerged, and what are their limits?

3 Literature review

3.1 Conceptualising informality

The literature contains a long-standing tension between dualist, structuralist and legalist interpretations of informality. Dualist accounts tend to portray informal activity as a survival response to

insufficient formal job creation. Structuralist perspectives, by contrast, stress how firms and states may reproduce low-cost, unprotected labour through subcontracting and regulatory segmentation. Legalist arguments focus on the costs and exclusions generated by cumbersome regulation. Each perspective captures part of the Nigerian reality, but none is sufficient in isolation. Survivalist enterprises coexist with commercially connected workshops, platform-mediated tasks, private security jobs and outsourced cleaning services. Their common denominator is not simply small scale; it is their partial or complete detachment from enforceable employment rights.

The International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization, 2018) distinguishes informal-sector employment from informal employment more broadly. The latter includes informal jobs located in formal enterprises, households or the informal sector. This distinction matters because it prevents analysts from treating a registered employer as proof of decent work. Nigerian labour-market evidence similarly suggests that educational attainment lowers, but does not eliminate, the likelihood of informal employment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024b). Gender is equally consequential. In the 2023 annual survey, 95.6% of employed women were informally employed, compared with 88.7% of employed men (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024a). The gendered distribution of care work, trading and home-based production therefore deserves more than a passing mention in discussions of labour regulation.

Kate Meagher's work is particularly important for a sociological reading of Nigeria's informal economy. Her analysis of enterprise clusters in Aba shows that social networks can sustain trust, training, credit and commercial coordination where state institutions are weak (Meagher, 2010). Yet networks can also deepen particularism and limit accumulation or wider solidarity. The point is not that informal workers lack institutions. Rather, their institutions often operate through membership, locality, ethnicity, religion or occupation, and may not be equipped to secure universal rights. This is a crucial distinction when market associations are described as substitutes for trade unions.

3.2 Informality, precarity and employment relations

Precarity is sometimes used too loosely, as if every informal livelihood were identical. A more careful approach recognises gradients of insecurity. A self-employed trader with an established customer base and association membership may face a different risk profile from a day labourer, domestic worker or casual factory hand. Still, the absence of a written contract, predictable hours, income continuity, paid leave, injury compensation and accessible grievance procedures creates a pattern of vulnerability across these settings. The International Labour Organization (2021) notes that informal workers frequently lack social-security access and, even when legal protection nominally exists, may not be able to exercise collective-bargaining rights or obtain minimum-wage compliance.

Nigeria's industrial-relations scholarship has traditionally concentrated on public-sector unions, formal manufacturing, collective disputes and state intervention. This focus is understandable, given the historical significance of the Nigeria Labour Congress and sectoral unions. However, it risks obscuring the fact that a system centred on the standard employment relationship speaks directly to only a minority of workers. Recent research on small-scale enterprises finds that informal labour relations are commonly marked by unregulated hiring, cash payments and absent worker representation (Akinyemi et al., 2025). The issue is not simply that labour law is old. It is that enforcement and representation remain tied to a workplace model that many workers cannot readily enter.

At the same time, informalisation should not be interpreted as the disappearance of industrial relations. It changes its sites and actors. Negotiation may take place between traders and local government officials over levies, between transport groups and regulatory agencies over routes, or within craft associations over entry, apprenticeship and discipline. Such arrangements can provide order and voice. Nevertheless, they may remain vulnerable to patronage, coercion or elite capture, and they usually do not guarantee the rights to which workers in standard employment can lay claim.

4 Theoretical framework

4.1 Labour-process theory

Labour-process theory, associated most prominently with Braverman (1974), directs attention to the contested organisation of work and to employers' efforts to control labour while reducing its cost. In the Nigerian setting, informalisation may be understood as one technique of labour control. Casualisation, outsourcing, task-based payment and verbal recruitment can transfer commercial risk from firms to workers. They weaken continuity of employment and make it harder for workers to acquire workplace-based solidarity. The analytical advantage of this perspective is that it does not romanticise flexibility. Where flexibility is imposed under unequal conditions, it may be a mechanism for intensifying labour or externalising the costs of reproduction.

The theory also helps explain why legal coverage and actual protection diverge. A worker may appear in a formal supply chain while being hired by a labour contractor, classified as a vendor or paid per task. Responsibility for wages, safety and representation is then diffused. Rather than treating this diffusion as accidental, a labour-process analysis asks whose interests it serves and how it rearranges managerial authority. Its limitation, however, is that an exclusive focus on employer control can understate workers' practical agency, especially in the self-employed and association-based parts of the informal economy.

4.2 Power-resources theory

Power-resources theory complements this analysis by asking how workers develop the capacity to influence employers, the state and other labour-market actors. Structural power derives from workers' position in markets or production systems; associational power from collective organisation; institutional power from law and formal rules; and societal power from alliances and public legitimacy (Schmalz et al., 2018). Informal workers generally have weak institutional power because their employment relationships are poorly documented and labour inspection is limited. Their associational power is uneven, though not absent. Occupational associations, cooperatives and transport unions can mobilise members, collect dues and negotiate with public authorities.

Taken together, the two theories generate a balanced interpretation. Labour-process theory clarifies how informalisation can reproduce employer advantage and insecurity. Power-resources theory shows why this outcome is not inevitable: collective capacities can be built through forms other than the conventional enterprise union. Yet association alone is insufficient. Organisations need legal standing, democratic accountability, bargaining targets and links to social-protection systems if they are to convert mutual aid into durable worker protection.

Figure 1 summarises the conceptual pathway, synthesised from International Labour Organization (2018, 2021), Meagher (2010, 2011), Akinwale (2014) and the National Bureau of Statistics (2024a).

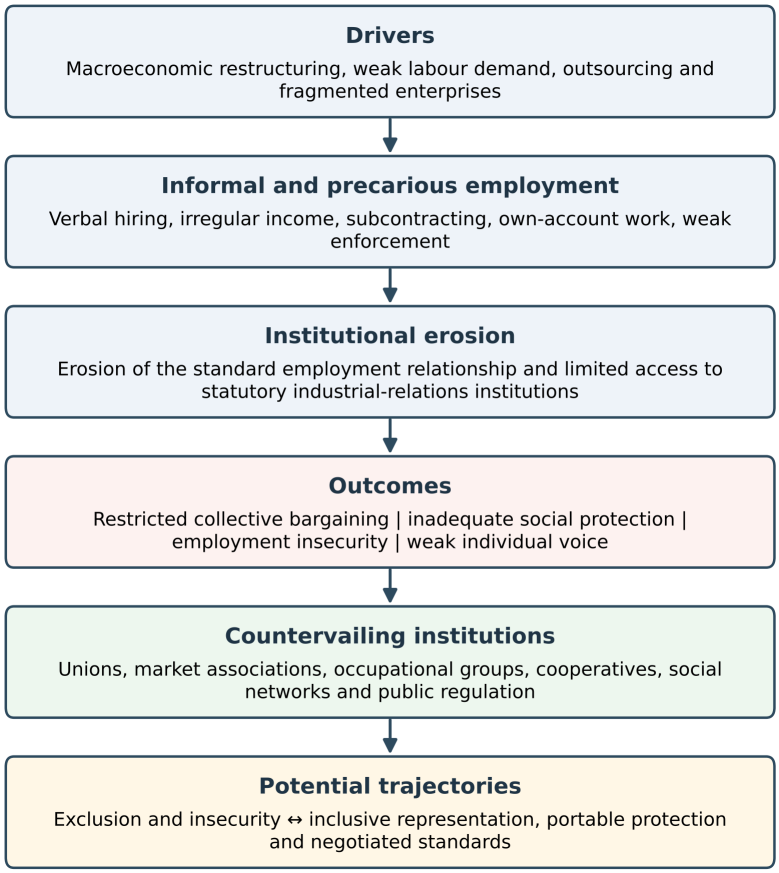


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway: informalisation and the reconfiguration of industrial relations in Nigeria.

5 Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative secondary-data design. Documentary materials were purposively selected because the research question concerns national patterns, institutional arrangements and scholarly debates rather than the experiences of a single occupational group. The corpus comprises the Nigeria Labour Force Survey annual report for 2023 and quarterly report for Q2 2024, ILO reports and statistical guidance, the Labour Act, the Trade Unions Act, PenCom micro-pension guidelines, national social-protection documents and peer-reviewed or scholarly publications on Nigerian informal work, precarity, associations and labour relations.

Analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis. First, documents were read for definitions and estimates of informal employment. Second, material was coded around four outcome domains: collective bargaining, social protection, employment security and worker organisation. Third, the findings were interpreted through the two theoretical lenses outlined above. Documentary analysis has clear advantages: it permits triangulation across law, policy, statistics and scholarship. Its limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. National surveys may not fully capture hidden, intermittent or multi-activity livelihoods, while administrative sources reveal policy design more readily than actual uptake. The article therefore does not claim causal measurement; it advances a theoretically informed synthesis of available evidence.

6 Findings and analysis

6.1 The scale of informal employment

The available data indicate an employment structure in which informal work is normal rather than exceptional. In 2023, informal employment represented 92.2% of total employment. The Q2 2024 estimate, 93.0%, suggests persistence rather than a short-lived post-pandemic distortion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024a, 2024b). These figures must be interpreted with care because the new NLFS follows internationally aligned measurement standards. Yet the broad conclusion is robust: most Nigerian workers occupy employment arrangements with limited legal and social protection.

Table 1. Selected indicators of informal employment in Nigeria.

Indicator	Estimate	Reference period	Source
Informal employment, all employed persons	92.2% (77,561,393 persons)	2023 annual	NBS (2024a)
Informal employment, all employed persons	93.0%	Q2 2024	NBS (2024b)
Informal employment, men	88.7%	2023 annual	NBS (2024a)
Informal employment, women	95.6%	2023 annual	NBS (2024a)
Informality, rural areas	97.5%	Q2 2024	NBS (2024b)
Informality, urban areas	90.0%	Q2 2024	NBS (2024b)

The rural-urban difference should not lead to the conclusion that urban industrialisation has resolved labour insecurity. A 90% urban rate points instead to the incorporation of informal practices into commercial cities. Lagos, Aba, Kano, Onitsha and other urban centres contain dense networks of trade, transport, repair, garment production, food vending, logistics and personal services. Some are economically dynamic. Nonetheless, dynamism does not necessarily translate into employment security. The relevant distinction is between income-generating activity and work endowed with enforceable rights.

6.2 Collective bargaining under fragmented employment

Collective bargaining presupposes a reasonably identifiable constituency and counterpart. Nigerian law recognises registered unions for bargaining purposes, while the Labour Act defines the process and the Trade Unions Act provides a framework for union recognition (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004; Trade Unions Act, 2004). In informal settings, both sides of that relationship may be elusive. Workers can move frequently between tasks and employers; production may occur in homes, markets or public spaces; and the person who controls the work may be an intermediary rather than the economically powerful firm. The conventional bargaining unit consequently becomes difficult to establish.

This fragmentation weakens associational power in several ways. First, income insecurity raises the immediate cost of participation: a worker paid daily may be unable to attend meetings or sustain a strike. Second, high turnover reduces opportunities for durable solidarity. Third, employer retaliation is difficult to document where recruitment is informal. Finally, many workers are treated as independent operators even when their economic dependence is obvious. The International Labour Organization (2021) observes that informal wage workers are often unable in practice to secure rights associated with collective bargaining, minimum wages and protection from excessive hours.

Yet it would be analytically mistaken to infer that no bargaining occurs. Informal workers bargain constantly over prices, levies, access to space, hours, supplies and terms of apprenticeship. The difficulty is that such bargaining is frequently individualised or mediated by associations whose mandate is commercial order rather than labour rights. For example, a market association may negotiate sanitation fees or protection from eviction, while leaving members without a mechanism to challenge harassment, arbitrary deductions or unsafe work. This distinction between negotiation and collective bargaining is important. The former may produce short-term accommodation; the latter aspires to enforceable rules governing employment conditions.

6.3 Social protection: legal extension and practical exclusion

Nigeria has taken steps to extend selected social-protection instruments beyond standard employment. Section 2(3) of the Pension Reform Act 2014 allows self-employed persons and employees of organisations with fewer than three workers to participate in the contributory system through guidelines issued by the National Pension Commission. The Micro Pension Plan explicitly includes informal-sector employees with or without written employment contracts (National Pension Commission, 2018). Similarly, the National Health Insurance Authority Act 2022 made health insurance mandatory in principle, and policy frameworks have repeatedly invoked universal social protection (Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2017).

Extension in law is not equivalent to effective coverage. Contributions are difficult to sustain where earnings fluctuate daily and household demands are immediate. Registration procedures, low trust in public institutions, limited information and distance from service points may further restrict participation. The mismatch is conceptual as well as administrative. Systems built around regular payroll deductions assume an employer, predictable wages and stable accounts. Many informal workers have none of these. The ILO's 2026 dialogue on Nigeria's informal economy reported that 85.2% of Nigerians lacked social protection and identified pensions, health insurance, maternity protection and employment-injury compensation as major gaps (International Labour Organization, 2026).

What follows is not that contributory schemes should be abandoned. Rather, protection needs to be portable, flexible and partly subsidised for workers with irregular incomes. Associations and cooperatives may assist with enrolment and contribution collection, but they should not become a pretext for transferring the state's responsibility to communities with limited resources. A rights-based approach would combine individual entitlements with public financing and transparent accountability.

6.4 Employment security and the changing employment relationship

Employment security has at least three dimensions: continuity of work, predictability of income and security against arbitrary treatment. Informal employment often undermines all three. Verbal agreements can be flexible in a benign sense, but they also make proof of wages, working hours and dismissal difficult. Workers may accept delayed payment or hazardous conditions because the alternative is immediate loss of livelihood. In such conditions, the legal category of employee becomes contested precisely when protection is most needed.

Precariousness is intensified when subcontracting obscures responsibility. A cleaning worker in a formal office, for instance, may be managed daily by the client organisation but employed nominally by a contractor. If wages are withheld or safety equipment is absent, each entity may deny responsib-

ility. This is a familiar labour-process problem: control is retained, while obligations are dispersed. Policy that focuses solely on informal enterprises will miss these forms of informalisation within formal value chains.

The evidence also calls for a gender-sensitive interpretation. Women's greater concentration in informal employment reflects not only occupational choice but unequal care responsibilities, restricted asset access and gendered segmentation in trading and home-based work. A worker-protection agenda that ignores maternity security, childcare constraints, harassment in public workplaces and access to health care will reproduce these inequalities.

6.5 Organisation beyond the enterprise union

Meagher (2010, 2011) demonstrates that informal economic life in Nigeria is embedded in social and occupational networks. Market associations, artisan guilds, transport bodies, savings groups and cooperatives can regulate entry, mediate disputes, organise welfare support and represent members before public authorities. Their institutional presence challenges the stereotype of the isolated informal worker. In a context where state regulation is uneven, such organisations may be indispensable to everyday survival.

However, their protective capacity has limits. Membership may be contingent on fees, locality or social identity. Leadership can be unaccountable; women, migrants and younger workers may have less voice. Some groups manage commercial territory rather than promote labour rights, and others may be entangled with political patrons. The appropriate policy response is therefore neither to dismiss associations as informal relics nor to idealise them as unions by another name. They should be recognised as potential partners in representation, while standards of internal democracy, non-discrimination and financial transparency are strengthened.

Trade unions also have a strategic interest in this terrain. Organising workers by occupation, supply chain, community or platform rather than by a single establishment may widen representation. Alliances with cooperatives and associations can create societal power, especially around issues such as market evictions, occupational safety, transport regulation and social-protection registration. Still, organisational innovation cannot substitute for legal reform. Without mechanisms that oblige economically dominant actors to negotiate, collective voice may remain consultative rather than transformative.

Table 2 summarises how informalisation reshapes the core industrial-relations domains.

Table 2. How informalisation reshapes core industrial-relations domains.

Domain	Mechanism of informalisation	Likely consequence	Potential institutional response
Collective bargaining	Diffuse or hidden employer; unstable workforce; verbal hiring	Weak recognition, fragmented bargaining unit and costly mobilisation	Sectoral/occupation-based bargaining; supply-chain responsibility; association-union alliances
Social protection	Irregular income; lack of payroll; low administrative reach	Exclusion from pensions, health cover, maternity and injury protection	Portable accounts, flexible contributions, public subsidies and simplified enrolment
Employment security	Casual, outsourced or task-based work; unclear employment status	Income volatility, arbitrary termination and weak grievance access	Presumption of employment where dependency/control exists; joint liability

Domain	Mechanism of informalisation	Likely consequence	Potential institutional response
Worker organisation	Dispersed workplaces and membership heterogeneity	Uneven associational power; reliance on informal bodies	Legal recognition, democratic association governance and organising support
Labour inspection	Small units and hidden worksites	Low compliance with wages, hours and safety standards	Risk-based inspection, local outreach and complaint channels accessible to informal workers

7 Discussion

The findings suggest that Nigeria's industrial-relations challenge is not adequately described as a failure to formalise an otherwise separate informal sector. More fundamentally, it is a crisis of institutional reach. The dominant architecture of labour law assumes a bilateral employment relation and a bounded workplace, whereas workers' economic dependence increasingly arises through networks of contractors, traders, clients and digital or physical intermediaries. Informalisation thus stretches the conventional distinction between employer and entrepreneur. Some workers are genuinely self-employed, but others bear entrepreneurial risk without possessing meaningful autonomy.

From a labour-process perspective, this arrangement may function as a method of labour control. By making employment temporary, indirect or legally indeterminate, firms can limit liabilities for wages, social insurance and collective bargaining. From a power-resources perspective, the same arrangement reduces structural and institutional power, though it may generate new forms of associational and societal power. The two theories therefore converge on a central proposition: worker insecurity is not only a matter of low productivity or individual informality. It is shaped by how responsibility and power are distributed within production and governance.

There is also a policy tension. Formalisation is often presented as the route to decent work, and registration can indeed improve visibility, tax administration and access to services. Nevertheless, formalisation pursued mainly through taxes, permits or enforcement against petty traders may deepen insecurity if it is not accompanied by benefits. Workers and micro-enterprises will have little incentive to comply with institutions that make demands but offer no credible social protection, infrastructure or voice. A developmental approach would make registration a gateway to rights, not merely an extension of fiscal surveillance.

Finally, the data point to differentiated vulnerabilities. The higher incidence of informal employment among women and rural workers indicates that a uniform intervention will be inadequate. Informalisation is experienced through gender, location, occupation, age and disability. A national strategy must therefore combine universal floors of protection with targeted measures for occupational groups whose exposure to risk is unusually high.

8 Policy implications

First, Nigeria should move towards a worker-centred rather than enterprise-centred definition of protection. Where a worker is economically dependent on, and controlled by, a lead firm, contractor or client, legislation and adjudication should be able to identify responsible parties. Joint liability across contracting chains would reduce incentives to evade obligations through outsourcing.

Second, collective representation should be broadened. The Trade Unions Act's framework remains important, but it should be supplemented by legally recognised bargaining and consultation mechanisms for occupational, sectoral and association-based worker bodies. Recognition should not mean uncritical incorporation. Minimum safeguards are needed for democratic leadership, inclusive membership and transparent finances.

Third, social protection should be portable. Micro-pension rules already recognise the eligibility of self-employed persons and employees without written contracts (National Pension Commission, 2018). The next task is implementation: low-friction digital and physical enrolment, interoperable accounts, flexible contribution schedules, matching subsidies for low-income contributors and grievance systems that work beyond formal workplaces.

Fourth, labour inspection needs redesign. Inspectors cannot rely only on factory gates and registered payrolls when work occurs in homes, markets, garages and dispersed service sites. Risk-based inspection, municipal cooperation, occupational mapping and confidential complaints can increase reach. Enforcement should be accompanied by advisory support for small enterprises, but persistent wage theft, child labour, dangerous work and anti-organising conduct require credible sanctions.

Fifth, unions and civil-society organisations should invest in forms of organising that match workers' actual locations and rhythms. Community-based meetings, occupational campaigns, legal clinics, digital communication and partnerships with cooperatives may prove more effective than an exclusive focus on the conventional workplace. The aim is not to replace unions with associations, but to build bridges between them.

9 Conclusion

Informal employment has become a defining condition of Nigerian working life. Its significance lies not only in its numerical dominance, but also in the way it unsettles the institutional assumptions of industrial relations. Collective bargaining becomes difficult when employers are diffuse, social protection falters when income is irregular and employment security weakens when contractual responsibility is obscured. These are not peripheral concerns. They go to the heart of whether economic participation can provide dignity, voice and a measure of social citizenship.

The article has argued that informal workers are not devoid of organisation. Associations, cooperatives, occupational groups and networks offer important resources, particularly where public institutions are thin. Still, such arrangements cannot fully substitute for enforceable rights. Nigeria's policy task is therefore to connect the associational vitality of the informal economy with statutory labour protection, portable social security and bargaining arrangements that recognise contemporary work realities. If that connection is not made, informalisation will continue to reproduce a divided labour market in which employment is abundant in statistical terms but protection remains scarce.

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