Program Summary

“Working Africa” is a research program on workers and labour, focusing mainly on Eastern Africa. It currently brings together the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) in Nairobi and the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa (CFEE). It is aimed to expand through collaborations with Eastern African research and higher education institutions with which these two institutes have had strong links over 20 years (e.g. Moi University, the University of Nairobi, Makerere University, the University of Addis Ababa) and to include other regions of Africa. Since colonization, plantation and factory workers have made up a large part of the workforce in Africa. This has even more been the case since the 1990s, after the structural adjustment programs, due to increased wage labour and the growth of local and international firms. The expansion of capitalism and free market globally have intensively contributed to the delocalization of production activities in Africa since the 2000s. These changes bring to light several crucial issues in the field of work and labour; they need in-depth understanding in view of efforts to reduce social and economic injustice in Africa. Among these issues one finds: access to employment, everyday working conditions, forced labour, children labour, gendered division of labour, workers’ rights, etc. “Working Africa” is aimed to document and explain these issues by relying upon empirical data collected through in-depth case studies in several countries of Eastern Africa.

Detailed Program

Social sciences, especially sociology, have for a long time been interested in the worlds and lives of workers in Europe and the US but much less in Africa. Despite a strong attention to the transformations of the lifestyle and working conditions of African workers during colonization and the decolonization period in the 1950-1960s – with a tendency to point out the peculiarity of labour in African plantations and factories and to look for modernization forces in Africa – and, from the end of the 1970s, to democratization trends and increased waged labour, African workers have been poorly studied in comparison to Western workers. Yet, the social, political and economic changes that followed suit the post adjustment structural reforms have brought about tremendous transformations in access to employment, working conditions or workers’ rights. Moreover, post-2000 globalization has contributed to the delocalization of production activities towards Africa (India and China becoming the first commercial partners of Africa since the beginning of 2010, especially with Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and South Africa), also impacting upon access to labour and increasingly contributing to shifting workers from rural settings to urban and peri-urban areas.

Since the 1990s, many studies have focused on economic transformations from the perspective of informal work rather than waged labour, because of the destructuration of the African work market and the weakness of state regulations in most African countries, where a very large part of employment is generated by the private sector and the informal sector. More recently, mining but also transportation (e.g. ports, rails, bus) raised the interest of social scientists studying state strategies for
developing infrastructure, notably thanks to private-public partnerships and state loans. These new public/private and bilateral partnerships push in many ways for the impoverishment of workers and increasingly harness growth and development to global neoliberal policies. These political and economic changes have been studied in political science and economics, yet most often from above and through a macro perspective, while micro approaches relying upon empirical data collected through in-depth case studies remain scarce. This program therefore aims to produce fresh materials and sources about work and labour in today’s Africa through selected case studies that will both documents and help explain recent dynamics.

Three main areas of research will be addressed in the “Working Africa” programme. These areas are broad lines of research that may contribute to guiding the conception of specific research projects submitted for funding. These areas may intersect, so much so that research projects do not need to fit in one area only.

AREA 1: Workers at work: body and subjectivity
Factories, firms, plantations are places that shape the workers’ bodies and subjectivities. Working conditions, relations between workers, and between workers and their bosses, as well as the weight of the new managerial and organizational norms on work hierarchy greatly play out in the ways in which workers physically and mentally adjust to work. Factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, race,… are essential to consider to better understand workers’ compliance and resistance. Studying the body at work contributes to understanding the relationship to work of the individual or the group and the associated processes of subjectivation that point to efforts to build distinction, respectability and prestige, on one hand, but are shaped by the effects of the arduousness of work, on the other.

AREA 2: From the workers to the working class
This area of research questions the links between individual strategies and trajectories, on the one hand, and the construction of collective identities, on the other. Studying how people become workers requires exploring individual actions and paths, notably efforts to access wage labour or to combine work revenues with other forms of revenues (e.g., maintaining a small business, working on Sundays, etc.), the role of schooling in upwards mobility, or mobilities between rural and urban areas and activities. Yet, it also implies explaining group construction in a context where waged labour remains an exception and contributes to building identity distinct from the majority of the African population. This area will integrate the study of sociability as an effect of the workers’ specific living conditions and lifestyle, and the birth – or not - of workers’ cultures and identities, both in view of objective living conditions and as the result of self-representations and imaginings.

AREA 3: Workers and politics
This area of research aims to interrogate the way in which workers relate to politics and to the state. It requires understanding the role of the state in constituting workers’ territories – especially through land grabbing in the plantation settings – but also the construction of political ties between local elites and the workers and their effects on workers’ political behaviour. This area also addresses tensions and power relations which are expressed through daily conflicts at work or outside work. More or less discrete, these tensed relations can sometimes result in mobilization and actions of protest of greater magnitude, through strikes for instance, sometimes organized by labour unions but sometimes organized without them or even against them.