

Labour Problems in Basutoland

Sir Alan Pim, who reported to the British Government in 1932 on the financial and economic position of Swaziland, and in 1933 on that of Bechuanaland¹, has completed his survey of the British South African dependencies by the submission of a report upon Basutoland.² The new report, like its predecessors, is not only an exhaustive analysis of difficulties in the territory with which it deals, but also a contribution to the general problem of African development in contact with European civilisation.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION AND ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

Basutoland, which owing to its mountainous character has been called the Switzerland of South Africa, is entirely surrounded by territory of the Union of South Africa. The population has increased rapidly during the last 40 years and is apparently still increasing. In 1898 it was estimated at 256,000 and in 1931 at 570,000. The bulk of the people is still concentrated in the lowlands, where the density is probably as great as in any part of South Africa. With, however, the increasing pressure of population, cultivation and grazing have been extended haphazardly up the mountain slopes with detrimental effect on the land.

The main crops are maize and kaffir corn in the north and south, and wheat in the central area. A striking feature of the whole country is the almost entire absence of trees, except those lately planted, and even of bush of any type, and therefore of wood fuel. This absence of wood fuel and the resulting necessity of using cattle dung as fuel have serious results on the possibilities of agricultural advance.

The cattle were estimated in 1933 to number 400,000. In 1934 sheep and goats numbered over 1,469,000 and 530,000 respectively. In the prosperous year 1928 wool exports reached the value of £610,750.

Sir Alan Pim states that, taking the country as a whole, Basutoland has many natural advantages, and if the Basuto were a genuinely agricultural people it provides all the essentials for a substantial degree of prosperity. Its climate is favourable and it is free from the chief scourges of Africa. The character of the people and the growing pressure of population, coupled with the failure to check overstocking and the haphazard cultivation of hillsides, has, however, resulted in the production of conditions which now menace the whole future of the country, particularly owing to the rapid extension of soil erosion.

¹ *Financial and Economic Situation of Swaziland*. Report of the Commission appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, January 1932. (Cmd. 4114.) *Financial and Economic Position of the Bechuanaland Protectorate*. Report of the Commission appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, March 1933. (Cmd. 4368.) The labour aspects of these reports were analysed in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, March 1934, pp. 397-406.

² *Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland*. Report of the Commission appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, January 1935. (Cmd. 4907.) London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1935. viii + 225 pp., map. 3s. 6d. Figures in the present article are also taken from the *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Basutoland*, 1933.

The economic difficulties of Basutoland have increased in recent years. Up to 1928 the country was on the whole prosperous and very considerable reserves of money and property were accumulated. The first serious blow came with the general fall in prices in 1929. The resulting depression was greatly accentuated by the severe drought during 1932 and 1933, which caused very heavy losses in stock and also compelled the sale of a large number of plough oxen to the Union, resulting in serious difficulties during the ploughing season 1933-1934.

From October 1933 to March 1934 relief works were instituted for all able-bodied men and food was issued to those unable to work. During this period 3,015 workers and 36,793 non-workers and dependants received help. The total expenditure, including rations distributed in August and September 1933, was about £45,000. In addition, assistance was given by seed wheat subsidies at a cost to the Government of £3,750, which cost was again incurred in 1934.

LABOUR EMIGRATION

The economic distress accentuated the country's dependence on the export of its man-power. Even in relatively normal years, imports exceeded exports. Thus, in 1930, the value of imports was £477,949, while that of exports was £317,626. In 1931 the respective figures were £462,733 and £251,427; in 1932 they were £455,111 and £308,278; in 1933 they were £611,110 and £330,157. To this trade deficit there has to be added as a factor in stimulating the emigration of labour the Native tax of a minimum of 28s. a head for each adult male (for 1932-1933 the taxes collected amounted to £121,795).

The additional resources required to balance the trade figures have for many years been partly derived from the exodus of Basuto labour to the mines, formerly to the Kimberley diamond mines and at present to the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, to other industrial areas, and to the farms, plantations, and households of the Union of South Africa.

In 1933 an average of 31,207 Basutos were employed on the gold mines, while the number of labour passes issued in Basutoland to Basutos wishing to enter employment in the Union was 51,856.

Financially, this labour emigration has been of great importance to the territory for many years. Taking the three years 1931-1933, the average number of Basutos employed on the mines was 29,374. Of these about half were recruited workers who signed contracts to work 270 shifts, and, taking the average Basuto wage at 2s. 6d. per shift, the wages received would amount annually to £495,686. The other half of the workers were engaged under the "Assisted Voluntary System"; their average period of employment is not given, but it is stated that it can hardly be less than half the contract period of recruited workers. Assuming an average period of 135 shifts, the wages of workers engaged under the Assisted Voluntary Scheme would amount to £247,843. The grand total would therefore be £743,529. From this total there have to be deducted various sums on account of cash advances, taxes, food, and transport; the balance is estimated to average £662,197 a year. A considerable proportion of this sum is

spent in Johannesburg. The following amounts, however, are known to have found their way to the territory during an average year :

- (1) about £30,000 in the form of advances ;
- (2) £17,247 paid to labour agents ;
- (3) £54,190 sent in remittances to relatives ;
- (4) £51,211 paid locally as deferred pay ;
- (5) approximately £7,000 as compensation for accidents and miners' phthisis ;
- (6) a large but unknown sum as earnings brought back in cash.

No similar details are available for other sources of employment. The post office figures for the year 1 October 1933 to 30 September 1934, however, show that £32,378 were received in the territory from abroad as money or postal orders. Probably 98 per cent. of these orders were in favour of the Natives. In addition, a large number of Native registered letters were received, the annual value of which and of parcels is calculated to be about £60,000 on a very conservative estimate.

With these and with other remittances received through the Native Affairs Department of the Union, Basutoland may be said to benefit to the extent of approximately £250,000 a year from the labour emigration.

Sir Alan Pim comments that the territory could not under existing conditions dispense with this income and that any serious restriction of the present opportunities for outside labour would cause severe distress, more especially if it coincided with unfavourable agricultural seasons or low prices for wool.

He adds, however, that the economic advantages have to be paid for in the tribal and social system. The report contains two detailed analyses of the distribution of the man-power in two districts of Basutoland. The following extract from one of the tables illustrates the extent of absenteeism in one of these districts :

Particulars	Group of 100 taxpayers of less than 5 years' standing	Group of 100 taxpayers of between 5 and 9 years' standing	Group of 100 taxpayers of over 9 years' standing ¹
Number found at home	32	40	70
Number absent at :			
(a) Gold mines	55	15	17
(b) Farms	1	14	2
(c) Miscellaneous labour in Union	3	2	2
(d) Unknown and wanderers	6	19	5
(e) Dead	2	1	0
(f) Removed to other parts of Basutoland	1	9	4
(g) Total number absentees	68	60	30
Number who had never worked in Union	6	13	29
Number who had so worked at one time or another	87	62	61
Average number of years spent in Union	1.44	4.45	6.50

¹ The tax is payable by all men over 21 years of age and by recruited labourers, the minimum recruiting age being 18.

Sir Alan Pim considers that the figures for Basutoland as a whole show that more than 50 per cent. of the adult males are normally absent from the country, "a figure in striking contrast to the estimate made by the Belgian Congo Committee of 1924-25 as the maximum who could be absent without detriment to tribal life."¹ As regards the effects of this absence of men, the report states that they are unquestionably bad as far as family life is concerned; the effects on tribal organisation do not as yet appear to be serious, but there is a growing tendency to lawlessness and to resent tribal control, more especially the unpaid services exacted by chiefs.

THE RECRUITING SYSTEM

The Transvaal Chamber of Mines is represented in Basutoland by the Native Recruiting Corporation, which maintains a head office and branch offices with lodging houses, where the recruits can stay before enrolment or on return before they are paid off.

The Corporation's activities are twofold: the recruiting of workers under contract and the forwarding to the mines of workers under the Assisted Voluntary System. The contract, which is attested before a Government officer, binds the recruit to work on a certain mine for 270 shifts. Before leaving the territory the recruit is debited with advances of wages, which include about £1 for railway fares, about 33s. 6d. in cash, and a year's tax of 28s. The workers who engage under the Assisted Voluntary System are not attested for employment on any particular mine but agree to proceed to Johannesburg for work on any of the mines enumerated in a schedule; they may, as far as possible, choose the mine in which they are to work and the period of employment. They receive no advances in the territory except 3s. 6d. for food, but they can draw advances up to £2 in Johannesburg. These advances, the cost of transport, and one year's tax are deducted from their wages.

The Basuto miners can arrange to defer the payment of part of their wages until their return. This system has been largely availed of, more especially by contract recruits. There are also special facilities given by the Native Recruiting Corporation for sending monthly remittances to their families, while remittances may also be sent through the Union Native Affairs Department.

The Union coal mining, sugar plantations, and farming employers have no recruiting organisations. Recruiting is carried out by licensed labour agents, who are usually European traders. In addition, non-recruited labour is engaged for farms, municipalities and domestic service.

As regards recruiting for the mines, Sir Alan Pim states that, so far as the material conditions in employment are concerned, no alterations are required and that the recruiting agencies are satisfactorily operated. He considers, however, that on both physical and moral

¹ Cf. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE: *The Recruiting of Labour in Colonies and in other Territories with Analogous Labour Conditions*, pp. 21-24. Geneva, 1935.

grounds it is very desirable to prevent long continuous periods of work on the mines and to bring the men home on the expiry of their contracts. He supports a recommendation which has been made to endorse on the contracts a period of 18 months or two years, after which the men will not receive further mine employment for a period of, say, six months. Sir Alan Pim also considers that attention is required to the conditions in which large sums are paid out in remittances and deferred pay ; he suggests that the opening of paying stations in the districts by the Government or by the Corporation, at which payments would be made weekly, might be considered.

As regards other forms of recruiting, Sir Alan Pim states that the system of employing traders as recruiters is of old standing and, although there are some obvious objections to it, there appears no sufficient reason for recommending its abolition so long as it is confined to firms of standing and repute. He recommends, however, that all recruiting for individual farmers should cease, and that recruiting should be permitted only for agencies approved by the Department of Native Affairs in the Union. He points out that it is impossible for the recruiting agents to discriminate between farmers or to know which of them can be trusted to deal fairly with their labourers. He also proposes that it should be laid down that a separate licence should be taken out by each labour agent entering into agreements with the recruited workers.

TRIBALISM AND DEVELOPMENT

The land in Basutoland is the property of the nation. The paramount chief is the hereditary trustee and is assisted in his duties by his chiefs, sub-chiefs, and headmen. The whole territory is divided into areas commonly called wards, over which a chief has been placed by the paramount chief. Arable land is reserved for the use of married men or widows. On marriage a man applies to his chief or headman and, if land is available, is ordinarily allotted three plots, generally between one-and-a-half and two acres each. He may not be deprived of these lands without just cause ; and deprivation, though it does occur and seems to be increasing owing to the pressure on land, is still rare. Causes of deprivation which are considered just are leaving the land fallow for a considerable period or refusing allegiance to the chief. A man may also be deprived of part of his land if he has more than three plots, for which purpose there are periodical inspections, particularly if a new chief has to be placed.

A chief occupies more lands than his people in consideration both of his responsibilities as chief and of his probably very extensive matrimonial responsibilities. He is supposed to assist the destitute and to feed people attending his court or messengers sent to him on tribal affairs. For these purposes he has a large plot allotted to him and is entitled to use free labour for ploughing, cultivating, and reaping this land, on the ground that the fruits are required for tribal purposes. He is also entitled to free labour for the cultivation of the land allotted to his principal wife. Food and drink are supposed to be supplied to those providing the labour.

Sir Alan Pim considers that the system was well adapted to primitive conditions so long as land was adequate and the standard of living was low and did not involve many purchases from outside. Unfortunately, however, the customary system has been widely abused in recent years, owing largely to the great increase in the number of so-called chiefs and to their increasing desire for luxuries, more especially perhaps for motor-cars. The practice of placing chiefs has increased, and unless restrictions are applied will divide the territory into minute chieftainships under impoverished but hungry chiefs with expensive tastes which they cannot gratify. Sir Alan Pim considers that the result of this system, if continued, will be to destroy Native land tenure, to increase land disputes, and finally to destroy the authority of the chiefs themselves. The results are the more serious as every chief automatically has his court and depends for a large part of his income on the fines imposed.

Sir Alan Pim considers it incorrect to describe the system of government in Basutoland as indirect rule. He quotes Sir Donald Cameron as stating that indirect rule means not only the acceptance and preservation of the recognised tribal institutions, but also making the Native authorities a living part of the machinery of Government and instituting a degree of supervision which will enable the Government to assure justice and fair treatment to the people and to provide for the development of the Native institutions. The history of Basutoland presents a very different picture. It has been a policy of non-interference, of leaving two parallel Governments to work in a state of detachment without the Native authorities being given the guidance, supervision, and stimulus of European officers.

SCHEMES OF DEVELOPMENT

The chief recommendation for expenditure made by Sir Alan Pim is the financing of an extensive scheme for dealing with erosion in the lowlands at an estimated cost of £151,500 spread over ten years. Anti-erosion work has already been undertaken, and it is stated that while the necessity and the value of the operations are admitted by all, criticisms have been directed against their cost and against the relatively low scale of wages paid to the labourers (6d. per day plus a ration valued at 3d.). It is pointed out, however, that the rates correspond to those paid until recently on the Free State farms (they have since fallen), and that the work is near the Natives' homes and is in their own interests individually or collectively. So impressed were the majority of the chiefs at a recent council meeting that they declared that soil anti-erosion work was of national value and that the labour should be unpaid. The report comments that commoners who might have to work themselves would hardly have taken the same view.

Other important proposals are for the improvement of stock and crops and for the sale of wool.

CO-OPERATION

The report also recommends the encouragement of co-operative societies.

Up to the present the movement has made no real progress. A

few co-operative societies have been founded and have been recognised by being given some agricultural implements for their assistance. The society has then usually been regarded as having achieved its aim and has faded away.

The conception of co-operation, however, is by no means foreign to life under tribal conditions, in which a practical working communism is a striking feature. The Native family in the larger sense of the term may almost be described as a ready-made co-operative society. When, however, it comes to the conception of a society as an organisation for the realisation of certain definite aims of a progressive character, a great deal of teaching is required. The first stage is that of familiarising the mind of the Basuto with the idea of introducing progressive methods, which can best be done by demonstrating the economic advantages to be obtained from co-operative working on improved methods. Under Basutoland conditions, this can be most effectively demonstrated in the case of wool, and a scheme of classifying and marketing wool is proposed. The Government will be required to take the initiative in this scheme, but it is recommended that as the movement extends there should be a gradual withdrawal of direct action by the Government and the establishment of co-operative associations of wool growers.

Other possibilities of co-operation include the marketing of wheat, the practice of improved methods of cultivation, the purchase of agricultural implements, the purchase and proper use of improved varieties of seeds, organisations for the sale of cattle and for the construction of improved huts.

The organisation of co-operative credit societies would come at a later stage. They are not regarded as an urgent necessity at the present time, as there is no system of organised money-lending and as the indebtedness to the European traders, which is the main part of Native liabilities, would not be materially affected by such societies for a considerable time. It is pointed out, however, that, when it becomes possible to organise such societies, it will be essential to appoint an officer specially trained for the purpose and to draw up a suitable co-operation proclamation.

CONCLUSIONS

The reforms proposed by Sir Alan Pim cover almost every aspect of Native affairs. He admits that some of them are likely to meet with severe opposition, that many will be regarded as intended to limit the independence in which the Basuto take intense pride, and that the chiefs in particular will resent any changes which appear to affect their powers and prerogatives. He considers, however, that the alternative is acquiescence in a state of affairs which will result in a progressive ruin of the country and the ultimate destruction of the Native system of administration. He believes that efforts will certainly be made to persuade the mass of the nation that the necessary reforms are an attack on their cherished independence. Nothing, however, could do more to remove this suspicion than a clear indication that the British Government and the local administration are genuinely concerned for the economic and cultural development of the country and its people.