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Labour administration and the rural poor in Africa

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I. Introduction

Since the end of the First Development Decade in 1970, there are signs that a sea change has come over the scope and direction of development planning. Mainly, this reflects growing recognition of the need to revise priorities in favour of rural populations and, specifically, in favour of the rural poor. No doubt the impetus for the change came from the increasing imbalance between urban and rural living standards—and between modern and traditional economies—the accelerating rural exodus, and evaporation of belief in the " trickle-down " theory and the effectiveness of the " invisible hand " in the economies of developing countries. Exactly why and how the change has occurred, however, are questions which lie beyond the scope of this article and have in any case been repeatedly examined both in the *International Labour Review* and elsewhere. But it seems certain that in any strategy to meet the needs of the rural poor the promotion of productive employment must occupy a central position. This in turn implies that within the over-all strategy there could be, and should be, a useful role for labour administration, perhaps initially through a modest extension of certain existing functions, more substantial later as its capacity is improved and some present constraints are lifted.

Rural development is still in its infancy, and despite an abundant literature there are no off-the-shelf transferable solutions to its problems. Labour administration agencies have not yet been concerned in it, and at this stage any proposals to involve them must be tentative and even, to some extent, conjectural. But the relationship—or lack of it heretofore—between labour administration and development planning has in fact been studied in recent years by a succession of round tables and seminars [1] attended by labour administrators and development planners, and sometimes by representatives of workers' and employers' organisations as well. The purpose of this article is to bring the subject of their discussions before a wider audience, and to inquire whether it is too soon for labour administrations in developing countries to begin to work out a role for themselves in the service of the rural poor.

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II. The development of labour administration and its present marginal role in rural development

The scope of labour administration, from its origin in the last century, has been progressively enlarged to meet the changing needs of industrialising societies. The role of the State, at first solely protective and limited to setting labour standards (conditions and hours of work, occupational safety and health) and enforcing them by inspection, expanded over the years to take in labour relations, the development and administration of social insurance, the provision of research and statistical services to supply the background information needed for policy-making and legislation in the social field, and the creation of employment services. All these and other services dealing with labour and social questions were consolidated within government departments, generally termed ministries of labour. Increasingly, workers' and employers' organisations came into being and took their part; and both world wars gave a powerful impetus to this process. The current concept of labour administration's role was defined at this year's session of the International Labour Conference, in the Labour Administration Convention and Recommendation, 1978 (Nos. 150 and 158 respectively), in the following terms:

For the purpose of this Convention (Recommendation)—

(a) the term " labour administration " means public administration activities in the field of national labour policy;

(b) the term " system of labour administration " covers all public administration bodies responsible for and/or engaged in labour administration—whether they are ministerial departments or public agencies, including parastatal and regional or local agencies or any other form of decentralised administration—and any institutional framework for the co-ordination of the activities of such bodies and for consultation with and participation by employers and workers and their organisations.[2]

These definitions are widely drawn, and are clearly not intended to discourage labour administrations in developing countries from extending their activities beyond the *wage-earning* sector to which they have so far been restricted, and in which the typical productive worker is a wage earner and the whole purpose of labour law and its enforcement has been to protect the status and well-being of the wage earner. However, no such extension has yet occurred.

In the English-speaking African countries with which this article is chiefly concerned, but which for present purposes can also be taken as a representative sample of the developing world, this preoccupation with the needs and problems of a wage-earning economy was imported intact by the pre-independence authorities from their own industrialised economies. And over the years labour laws, services and institutional structures suited to this strictly limited field of action have come into being. Typically, in a tropical African country the formulation and implementation of labour law and policy are the responsibility of a minister of labour, at the head of a ministry comprising a number of departments in which the labour department exercises the central functions of:

— labour inspection and the enforcement of labour law;

— industrial relations;
— occupational safety, health and welfare;
— the administration of employment services;
— the regulation of apprenticeship;
— (possibly) some part of manpower planning.

Other functions, which may be exercised by the labour department or by other departments of the same ministry, or even by a different ministry, can include:

— research and the compilation of statistical and other information;
— workmen's compensation and the operation of provident funds and social security schemes;
— youth training.

However legitimate these wage earners' needs were, and are, in developing countries, they concern less than 25 per cent and often less than 10 per cent of the working population. It can now be seen that the transfer of laws, administrative procedures, attitudes and assumptions which were a natural growth in the developed economies where they originated could not possibly meet many of the social and economic needs of societies which were not industrialised and were different in their social structure and relationships, production techniques and general life-style.

The extension of their present limited coverage to non-wage earners would involve labour administration agencies in the problems of the " working poor "—rural as well as urban—and hence directly in rural development. It would thereby raise delicate questions of respective competence, and co-ordination of policies and activities, with other government departments or agencies having equally direct responsibilities in this area. And in most of these countries it is doubtful, to say the least, whether labour administrations would be able, without substantial increases in their present budgetary allocations, to provide sufficient staff, adequately trained, paid and equipped, to function effectively in this immensely larger field, and to take on new duties outside their familiar role of keeping the industrial peace and inspecting establishments in the small, urban-centred modern economy.

Even within this traditional role it can be observed that, since independence, labour departments in some countries have tended to fall back in the order of budgetary allocations. It is a sorry fact that as a result they are often unable to discharge effectively even their present limited terms of reference. And their contribution to rural development is marginal or nil.

III. Gearing labour administration to rural development

The need to integrate labour administration systems in the development planning machinery

Partly for this reason (a presumption of their inability to participate effectively, for lack of resources) planning authorities have tended to leave

labour administration agencies outside the planning process and its co-ordinating mechanisms, and to confine them to their traditional executant role. The problems and obstacles implicit in this situation were reviewed in 1970 by an African Round Table on labour administration and development planning, which inter alia concluded that:

(a) manpower planners and labour administrators should be represented, before and during the term of the plan, on government policy-making committees and agencies whose decisions have a considerable effect on the supply of, and demand for, labour;

(b) the central planning board should include among its members the minister of labour or his representative;

(c) where the planning board is aided by sectoral or technical subcommittees, there should be a planning subcommittee for manpower and labour (of which the minister of labour or his representative would logically be chairman);

(d) a corresponding manpower planning unit should be organised within the central planning office, suitably staffed and especially responsible for relations with the ministry of labour;

(e) suitable planning and research units should be established within each ministry of labour, attached to the highest level and providing a natural link for everyday contacts with the ministry of planning.[3]

A new view of labour administration in the service of rural workers

Just as thinking about the scope and direction of development planning changed perceptibly around 1970, so—at the international level—a similar reassessment of possible labour administration services to rural workers has taken place more recently, finding initial expression in three new international instruments which together may give powerful impetus to such a role.

The first two are the Rural Workers' Organisations Convention (No. 141) and Recommendation (No. 149) adopted in 1975. In these instruments the term " rural worker " is expressly defined to include non-wage earners such as tenant farmers, sharecroppers, small owner-occupiers and other self-employed persons engaged in the informal sector; and their explicit purpose is to encourage, with official advice and assistance, the emergence and effective operation of independent workers' organisations able to defend their members' interests and play a part in economic and social development. The third instrument is the new Labour Administration Convention already mentioned. Article 7 lays a clear obligation on ratifying governments to extend the coverage of their labour administration agencies to benefit non-wage earners in the rural sector, in the following terms:

When national conditions so require, with a view to meeting the needs of the largest possible number of workers, and in so far as such activities are not already covered, each Member which ratifies this Convention shall promote the extension, by gradual

stages if necessary, of the functions of the system of labour administration to include activities, to be carried out in co-operation with other competent bodies, relating to the conditions of work and working life of appropriate categories of workers who are not, in law, employed persons, such as—

(a) tenants who do not engage outside help, sharecroppers and similar categories of agricultural workers;

(b) self-employed workers who do not engage outside help, occupied in the informal sector as understood in national practice;

(c) members of co-operatives and worker-managed undertakings;

(d) persons working under systems established by communal customs or traditions.

It may be a long time before the hopes expressed in the Round Table's recommendations, and the intentions of these instruments, are fully realised, but it is a reasonable supposition that, even as now equipped, labour administrations can develop a limited role in support of other agencies concerned in rural development, and that it will anyway be advisable to use their existing functions in the wage-earning sector as a base from which to extend them where possible to cover the rural labour force, rather than design a frame of reference for a new and enlarged role which manifestly labour departments will not be capable of undertaking in the immediate future. Essentially, this initial role would be an extension of some protective functions, such as labour inspection and safety and health advice, and of suitably adapted training facilities, to rural workers not at present covered by them.

Later, a more substantial role can be developed which, if employment promotion is really the central function of integrated rural development, should logically bring labour administration within a measurable period into the heart of its policies and programmes. But this will require *time* for the needed personnel and budgetary resources to be acquired.

Specific fields of action

The following fields are suggested [4] as offering useful possibilities. In the first place, *rural manpower data collection.*[5] Reliable manpower data are an essential tool of development planning, and the ministry of labour's ability to collect, interpret and disseminate such information can be a prime factor in enhancing its status with the other ministries and agencies requiring it, and open the way to a more positive role. In fact, field staff in labour administration, if properly selected, trained and motivated, can provide valuable labour market information on rural areas about which very little is known at present. For this purpose, refined statistics are neither necessary nor possible, and the data collected should seek to give a qualitative description of impressions among reporting officers indicative of trends, rather than an attempted snapshot at a given date. The information so gathered can be reported to, and controlled and analysed by, a central co-ordinating unit with feedback to the field and to other planning and operational agencies. As experience is gained, and progressively more reliable estimates of labour force composition and trends are obtained, indicators can be established from which it will be possible

to assess the need for vocational training, for unemployment relief programmes and for transfers of labour, seasonal or otherwise, from surplus to demand areas.

A more direct contribution would be to assist in *employment creation and employment promotion.* But in rural populations underemployment and underproductive employment are much more widespread than absolute unemployment, and the promotion of more productive employment should take priority over the creation of new employment. Such promotional activity is best planned and executed at the local level, and a labour administration network with adequate rural coverage could, if sufficiently equipped, assist the authorities primarily responsible, e.g. district development committees, by providing manpower information, by training, by recruitment of the labour force needed to carry out a work programme, and by resettlement (where possible) of the recruited workers in other employment after completion of the programme.

Similarly, the *adaptation of employment services* to the needs of rural populations would enable labour departments to offer practical help, even in the short term, based on their experience and competence. This help could be reinforced as knowledge of the rural situation was built up. Thus, by adapting its labour mobility and placement services from their modern sector uses, the labour department could, through its field officers, organise movements of labour both at periods of peak agricultural demand and, in the agricultural off-season, for special public works (road construction, irrigation, land reclamation), whether for infrastructure development or as employment promotion measures. A notable advantage of this use of the employment service would be the protection it could offer to rural workers who in some countries are still exposed to exploitation by subcontractors.

As to *vocational guidance and training*, in some countries these are undertaken by the ministry of education, in others by the ministry of labour, or the responsibility is divided. However this may be, suitably adapted career orientation and information measures, intended to match aspirations to opportunities, need to be taken for the rural school population, and whether or not labour departments have primary responsibility, they have a part to play particularly in training rural craftsmen and upgrading their skills to cope with the improved machinery and methods being introduced in agriculture and rural trades and transport. Such training is best located in the rural areas themselves where the trainees can subsequently exercise their skills to their own benefit and that of their community. The Government of Kenya is at present pioneering a scheme on these lines by setting up " village polytechnics " on an intended country-wide scale.

In the related field of *youth training and employment*,[6] many countries have special training and employment schemes for unemployed youngsters, sometimes for both sexes but more often for carefully selected young men who for one reason or another have not been able to complete their education. In some countries these schemes are run by the ministry of labour, in others

not. In either case, the provision of such training and employment opportunities is no less necessary for rural than for urban youth (if only on simple grounds of equity), and this is a field in which ministries of labour, with their labour market information and day-to-day contact with both employers and workers, have special advantages.

One of the simplest ways in which labour departments could promote the welfare of rural workers would be to devote more effort and resources to *inspection of agricultural undertakings and plantations.*[7] This reinforcement of an existing role would strengthen their presence and influence in the countryside and facilitate the gradual introduction of the other measures mentioned above. It would increase the impact of the inspection service, elicit still more information about the rural labour market, and open lines of communication with other rural workers whether organised or not. But this would require extra resources, both budgetary and staffing, and implies either a willingness by the government to allocate more funds to the labour ministry, or a willingness by the latter to revise internal priorities and allocations, or both. It would be helpful if labour ministries were to obtain powers, as in Nigeria, to declare certain areas (in general, remote areas where plantation, mining and prospecting activities are carried on) to be " labour health areas " subject to special protective measures under the labour code.

More effective discharge of these duties would also enable the ministry's field officers to advise agricultural workers on the novel hazards to which they are exposed by innovatory techniques—machinery, electricity and pesticides—and generally to give more attention to the *safety and health aspects* of rural employment.

In the matter of *advising, encouraging and assisting organisations of rural workers* to play a full part in rural development, as prescribed in Convention No. 141 and Recommendation No. 149 cited above, there can be differences of view about the help which could be offered by agricultural co-operatives, urban trade unions and labour departments. But there can be no doubt that the implementation of these provisions would add a new dimension to rural development and to the work of the district administrators and the agricultural, co-operative and other officers at present responsible for it; nor that this is an area in which labour administration, experienced in dealing with and advising workers' and employers' organisations, has a quite special contribution to offer which could hardly be made by any other agency with the possible exception of the co-operatives department, itself sometimes a part of the ministry of labour.

There are various ways in which advice and assistance to rural workers' organisations can promote more productive employment. These organisations themselves favour employment promotion by means, for example, of making more land available for labour-intensive cultivation, through agrarian reform or land settlement schemes, and through policies and measures designed to attract small-scale labour-intensive industries into rural areas and to develop non-agricultural and self-help activities in the dry season. Just as, in the wage-

earning sector in developing countries, labour administration services fulfil a legitimate and necessary duty in helping and advising trade unions, especially by encouraging the training and education of their officers and members, these new instruments seem to devolve on them (as the relevant " competent authority ") a similar responsibility in relation to rural workers' organisations. This includes in particular the duty to ensure, through labour inspection or special services or in some other way, that the laws and regulations covering rural workers' organisations and their members are effectively applied; that there are advisory services staffed by persons qualified to give legal and technical advice and to run educational courses; that there is effective consultation and dialogue with the rural workers' organisations on all matters relating to conditions of life and work in rural areas; and that workers' organisations are associated with planning procedures and institutions, such as statutory boards and committees, development agencies and economic and social councils.[8]

The extension of *social security coverage* to rural populations may well be regarded, at first sight, as one of the more obvious and pressing tasks for labour administration in this wider field. But this, viewed realistically, must be a long-term process to be introduced gradually as a function of higher incomes which have yet to be generated. A first step (itself requiring direct commitment of central or local government funds) would be compensation, or disability pensions, for those permanently incapacitated in rural employment outside the larger undertakings or services.

Some attention also needs to be given to *action-oriented research* into specific practical problems of rural employment. For example, to ensure effective protection and assistance for workers who migrate, whether within national frontiers or internationally and whether on a seasonal or rural/urban basis, the composition, direction and volume of migratory flows have to be known. Similarly, it would be useful to be able to assess the effect of incomes policy and labour standards control/wage protection methods on employment and the flow of labour between informal and formal sectors.

Finally, it seems reasonable to suggest that if labour administration succeeds in taking action along the various lines proposed above, it should be able to share in the management of the funds made available for rural employment promotion and development.

The need for priorities

It is very unlikely that any labour administration will be able to expand into all these fields of action simultaneously. Some selection will be necessary, determined first of all by the twin constraints of budget limitation and the present attitudes and capacities of labour administrators themselves. Trained and psychologically conditioned to carry out designated statutory functions in the wage-earning sector, they will not easily envisage developing a role in the much wider and unfamiliar (in a professional sense) rural world where

for the most part " workers " are not wage earners and cannot be dealt with according to the definitions and prescriptions of a labour code. Hence *time* and *training* will be needed to promote new attitudes of mind in labour administration staff, appropriate to a more dynamic role, and to develop and improve the professional capacity which this new role will entail; and it will be necessary to ensure that their employment conditions, salaries and career prospects are not less favourable than those of comparable staff in other ministries.

The choice of priorities will have to be suited to the type of rural programme for which the national plan provides. Subject to this, it seems to lie broadly between *improved utilisation of human resources* (fuller employment, and better work organisation through extended use of employment services) and the *improvement of skills* (better use and dissemination of local knowledge, methods, equipment and materials, and implantation of additional skills). For both negative and positive reasons, the more immediately rewarding course would seem to be to concentrate on the improvement of skills.

To take the negative first, the better utilisation of rural manpower is already the practical business of provincial administrators, community development authorities and ministries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, backed by whatever state or private finance may be available, and possibly incorporating World Food Programme " food-for-work " projects. These promoting agencies often have in varying degree a managerial, even an " employer ", status—a status possessed by labour ministries only where they run a national youth service. The result is that unless they become responsible for managerial or quasi-managerial functions in work organisation, promotion of productivity, etc., labour ministries take a back seat in rural development. They can of course help the government to shape its rural investment/employment policies by carrying out rural manpower and employment market surveys, indicating where under- and unemployment are most acute. At the operational level, their employment services can also organise the manpower movements normally occurring in rural development programmes; and they can recruit labour for seasonal or migratory work, assist repatriations, and maintain some skills inventories. The value of such activities will depend on the efficiency and resources of the labour ministry but will not be easy to demonstrate, and the government agencies organising rural work and economic activity on the ground will tend to regard the labour ministry role here as marginal or, at best, sporadic.

But there are positive reasons also for giving priority to the improvement of skills. In the first place, labour ministries already have experience in training for artisan skills in the modern sector, and can be correspondingly confident, and competent, in expanding this activity to make some of these skills available in rural areas to trainees who will not be wage earners but self-employed artisans or members of co-operatives. How can this contribution be fitted into the rural development process? In the field, it would be an appropriate labour ministry function to help establish, and to supervise, district training centres

and village technical centres (such as exist in Kenya and Mauritius, where the labour ministry is not yet involved in them). And the work at village centre level can be economically combined with ongoing schemes of training in agriculture, livestock rearing, forestry, fishing, etc., which have to turn out trainees in much greater numbers. There is also scope for increased resort to the World Food Programme's " food-for-training " projects. These enable schemes to be set up which provide short courses at greatly reduced cost, or train far more people than would otherwise be possible. An incidental advantage would be the opportunity to back up efforts to *promote occupational safety and health* by incorporating these aspects of rural employment, first into the training of the field extension personnel of other government agencies, and secondly into the artisan training given at district centres.

International technical co-operation

Plainly, the responsibility for rural development, and for mobilising administrative resources to promote it, lies with national governments. Equally clearly, labour administration's present relative incapacity to make more than a modest contribution stems not only from budgetary constraints but also from a lack of personnel suitably qualified and trained to support a more extended role. Is there a place here for international assistance?

Two possibilities suggest themselves—*labour administration training* and *field research.*

The training of labour administration personnel could be assisted by the grant of fellowships, by support for national in-service training courses, or by extension of the regional courses organised by the ILO and by donor governments. The content of these training activities would need to be progressively modified and enlarged to equip labour administrators, both at headquarters and in the field, to take on new functions in the rural world.

As regards field research, specific projects at country level could be undertaken, aimed at identifying new roles for labour administration in rural areas, and ways of extending its services to rural workers.

IV. Conclusions

For various reasons, planners and other responsible authorities in developing countries have now decided that development strategy must be refocused on rural populations and in particular the rural poor. International agencies and bilateral donors concerned with technical co-operation and assistance share this view. Hitherto, rural development has been the preserve of ministries of agriculture in co-operation (or sometimes competition) with departments of co-operatives or community development, or similar agencies. Their rural development programmes have so far had limited success, tending to benefit the prosperous and enterprising minority but not to reach down to the 40 per cent or more of the rural population who are really poor and most need help.

The needs of the rural poor can be met by pursuing three objectives:

— employment promotion;

— raising of incomes;

— improvement of living and working conditions.[9]

These should be pursued simultaneously, but the promotion of more, and *more productive*, employment is the key to all three.

Within this revised strategy, a valid and useful role is waiting for labour administration agencies, in collaboration with others. An early extension of some existing functions to cover rural workers is possible, and initially priority could be given to the expansion of training in artisan skills, for which labour ministries already have responsibility in urban centres. A substantially larger role can be envisaged when they have acquired the additional capacity and resources needed to undertake it, and have overcome the psychological constraints bred by their past preoccupation with the urban-based modern economy.

This would be a major advance in the concept of labour administration, requiring a commitment to it at the highest level.

Notes

[1] Cf. in particular ILO: *Report on the ILO/NORAD Seminar for High-Level Planners and Labour Administrators from English-Speaking African Countries on Gearing Labour Administration to Rural Development in Africa (Arusha, Tanzania: 9-18 February 1976)* (Geneva, doc. ILO/TF/AFR/R.24, 1977).

[2] Article 1 of the Convention; Paragraph 1 of the Recommendation. See *Official Bulletin* (Geneva, ILO), 1978, Series A, No. 2.

[3] ILO: *Report on the African Round Table on Labour Administration and Development Planning (English session: Copenhagen, 4-13 August 1970) (French session: Copenhagen, 17-26 August 1970)* (Geneva, doc. ILO/TAP/AFR/R.13, 1971), pp. 95-96, paras. 24-26, 30 and 36. Senior labour administrators and development planners from many African countries participated in the meeting.

[4] Substantially on the basis of views put forward, discussed and endorsed by participants in the 1976 Arusha seminar.

[5] In this connection see also Lothar Richter: " New sources of manpower information in developing countries ", in *International Labour Review*, July-Aug. 1978, pp. 453-463.

[6] Cf. the ILO's Special Youth Schemes Recommendation, 1970 (No. 136).

[7] As prescribed in the Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No. 129), and the Plantations Convention and Recommendation, 1958 (No. 110).

[8] These are among measures cited in Paragraphs 9-12 of the Rural Workers' Organisations Recommendation, 1975 (No. 149).

[9] Cf. ILO: *World Employment Programme: rural employment promotion through integrated rural development*, Report of an ILO advisory working group (Geneva, 1974).