International Labour Review, Vol. 117, No. 6, November-December 1978

Relating industrialisation in Africa to people's needs

Rajaona ANDRIAMANANJARA *

Introduction

A look at the current state of industrialisation in Africa shows that, with very few exceptions, those countries which have embarked upon this course have done so at one or other extremity of the manufacturing process: either they are engaged in the extraction of minerals (including enrichment or concentration) and the processing of agricultural produce, or else they are producing consumer goods or assembling components prefabricated elsewhere. One cannot help noticing the almost total absence of key industrial activities such as the production of raw materials that are needed not only for building and public works but also for agriculture and other industries (iron and steel, fertilisers, wood-pulp, etc.); the production of capital goods for agriculture, various industries and transport; or, finally, the production of machine tools.

Obstacles to industrialisation

How has this state of affairs come about? Why has it not been possible to progress beyond it? Numerous studies have been carried out on the subject and the traditional reasons put forward (e.g. the limited size of the market, the lack of management skills, profitability, etc.) are too well known to need any further elaboration here. In my view one should seek out the deeper causes, which are to be found in the current approach to development in general and to industrialisation in particular.

Of all the obstacles which impede industrialisation in Africa, one of the most serious is the failure to involve the population as a whole. Industrialisation has hitherto been the preserve of a minority; this can be seen in the choice of products, in the way industry is financed and in the management of industrial undertakings.

The *choice of products* obviously determines the type of industries that are established. In colonial times the choice was simple and it was made by the colonisers themselves. The colonies, which meant most of Africa, were expected

* Director-General of Planning in Madagascar and head of the ECA/OAU/UNIDO special team on industrial strategies and policies. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institutions with which he is associated.

to supply the raw materials needed by the colonising powers, hence the emphasis placed on mining. Secondly, they formed a market for the products of these same metropolitan powers: if necessary, and if the volume of business justified it, metropolitan undertakings set up local plants in the colonies to manufacture certain consumer goods, but they remained in expatriate hands. Naturally, the mining industries paid no heed at all to the needs of the local population, and what local industries existed were designed to meet the " needs of the market ". As a rule the market consisted simply of the expatriate colonisers and a tiny proportion of the local population who between them monopolised most of the money income. It was therefore in the very nature of the system that these local industries should have only the remotest of connections with the needs of the people.

Later on, when the colonies gained their independence, the majority of African countries inherited this industrial infrastructure and continued to be dominated by its rationale: hence the many examples of import substitution. At the present time there are very few countries which have passed beyond this stage, but they do exist. It should be pointed out, moreover, that the other solution which is often advocated—the development of exports—falls into the same logical error since the type of industry required for this purpose, being essentially aimed at satisfying the needs of foreign markets, also ignores the needs of the local population.

The *financing* of industry to a large extent mirrors the state of affairs obtaining in the choice of products. During the colonial period Africans in general participated very little in such financing. Subsequently, responsibility for this was assumed by a national minority who possessed the necessary capital resources and sometimes the State also participated, although on the whole its intervention has been on a rather limited scale.

Finally, the *management* of industrial undertakings has also remained in the hands of a minority—consisting originally of expatriates but now increasingly composed of African nationals.

We may legitimately conclude that one of the major obstacles currently impeding industrialisation in Africa is the fact that, in respect of the choice of products, financing and management, industry has remained the concern of a minority in almost total disregard of the real needs and possibilities of the people as a whole. For it must not be forgotten that the people represent an enormous potential. To take just one example, it stands to reason that in the present system the industrial worker only sells his labour and sees no reason for suggesting technical innovations which he would often be capable of introducing in his own field. Yet such innovations, although often of apparently little consequence, can in fact have a substantial impact on the production process or on output, as the experience of other continents has shown.

Policies and strategies

What then is to be done, and how is one to lift industrialisation out of the rut in which it seems to have become inextricably bogged down? There is of course no complete or infallible remedy. Bearing in mind the preceding diagnosis, however, it would seem that three principles should be applied in selecting the policies and strategies required to ensure that industry in Africa develops along increasingly autonomous lines. These principles are as follows:

— policies should be geared to the satisfaction of the needs of the majority;
— strategies should give priority to the efficient use of national and regional resources; and
— industrialisation should begin at the bottom and work its way up the manufacturing ladder step by step.

First, then, industrial policies should be reorientated and geared to satisfying the needs of the greatest number. To do this one first has to discard the traditional formulae of import substitution or export promotion and display imagination and inventiveness in the search for appropriate solutions. Of course there is no question of immediately satisfying all the people's needs: that would be physically impossible. One has to take a medium- to long-term view and start by drawing up a list of what are considered to be the most urgent needs: food, clothing and shelter should, in my view, feature on this list, which could usefully be further refined. Industrial policies should then aim to achieve these objectives.

Thus, if the objective is to feed the population, emphasis will have to be placed on developing those industries which supply raw materials and capital goods for agriculture: fertilisers, agricultural tools and equipment, etc. These in turn require the establishment or development of other " upstream " industries such as basic chemicals or iron and steel.

The same applies with respect to clothing and shelter for the masses. In pursuing the latter objective, in particular, it is essential to develop the construction materials industry; this should not be taken to mean just modern materials (cement, concrete reinforcing rods, etc.) but also traditional materials (bricks, tiles, etc.) which are often better suited to local conditions and do not require costly investment.

This brings us to the second principle, namely that the strategies should give priority to the efficient use of national resources with consideration being given first of all to national or regional needs and only secondarily to the demand on international markets. Thus countries which are not oil producers should perhaps try to find a local substitute: making better use, for example, of their hydro-electric potential or using wood to run steam-engines! Such alternative solutions would be entirely justified in countries which have an abundance of waterfalls or forests.

If some people consider such proposals bizarre it is because they have not understood that one of the causes of our current problems is the pursuit of the most up-to-date and hence most complex production methods. Unfortunately, it is still true at the moment that the more advanced a technology is the less capable we are of mastering it and the more dependent we become on the industrialised countries. Why, for example, insist on using computers when manual calculation or a calculating machine can do the job just as well? Apart from differences in the purchasing and operating costs—which are substantial and plead in favour of using the most easily mastered technology—one must also consider the employment creation possibilities: this last aspect is a particularly important one since the majority of African countries still suffer from unemployment or various forms of underemployment.

It is precisely for this reason that efforts must be undertaken to make full use of the human resources available on the spot. Industry must begin by creating the greatest number of jobs possible. It must then use the skills and abilities that exist already and not count on the more or less permanent services of expatriate " experts ". As more skilled personnel are trained, industry will be able to progress from one level of technology to the next in such a way that the techniques employed never outstrip the capacity of the African countries (or the continent as a whole) to master them.

The choice of technology is another important factor in the optimal use of national or regional resources. After all, every nation and every continent has its own special character and abilities. As was pointed out above, advanced techniques are not necessarily the most suitable in present conditions: the production methods used should vary according to the resources available, whether it be a question of raw materials, manpower or finance.

The principles that should guide the choice of industrial policies and strategies, as outlined above, have been deliberately expressed in somewhat general terms. If they prove useful it will be possible to elaborate on them at a later stage, identifying in greater detail their practical implications and, in particular, spelling out precisely what steps should be taken.

Conclusion

To sum up, it seems to me that the time has come to jettison the traditional industrialisation concepts and formulae, particularly those advocated by the already industrialised countries. Of course, the proposals I have put forward here could entail some short-term drawbacks (for example, a loss of foreign currency earnings), but these probably represent the price that has to be paid if industrial development in Africa is to be placed on an increasingly autonomous footing. What we have to do is to generate the political will to establish industries not solely on the basis of profitability but in the light of long-term strategic considerations as well.

The approach advocated here implies closer co-operation between African countries, with fuller exchanges of technology and trade in raw materials and in semi-finished and finished products alike. A special study, however, will need to be made of the case of island nations.