

## Employment, wages and living conditions in a changing industry – Plantations

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For the past 20 years or so the ownership and production structures of plantations have been undergoing major changes, and while traditional plantations still exist in the form of foreign enclaves in some countries (banana plantations in Central America, rubber in Liberia), they now form only one type among many others.<sup>1</sup>

The first of the big changes that have occurred in ownership patterns is the increasing take-over of production units by nationals, whether private interests or governments. In some countries the agrarian reforms undertaken over these past 20 years have led either to complete nationalisation of the plantations sector (for example, Cuba and Sri Lanka) or to partial nationalisation (for example, the sisal plantations in the United Republic of Tanzania or the oil-palm plantations in Benin).<sup>2</sup> In other countries, such as Malaysia, it has been national private interests which, through purchases on the free market, have gradually bought out the foreign investors.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, multinational enterprises have increasingly withdrawn from production activities while maintaining and even reinforcing their presence upstream (supply of chemical products – fertilisers, pesticides – and machinery) and downstream, particularly in transport, processing and marketing.<sup>4</sup>

The second big change is the growing intervention of governments in the producer countries. We have already referred to direct intervention by the State through agrarian reform accompanied by nationalisations, but in fact, in almost all countries where there are plantations, the State has also played an important role over the past 20 years by intervening indirectly to control, regulate or merely encourage or guide activities in this sector.

By facilitating access to credit either generally or selectively and using the tax weapon, numerous governments have promoted transfers of ownership to their own nationals and channelled investment towards products deemed more profitable and more compatible with their development objectives. With the creation of commodity boards in the English-speaking

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countries or stabilisation funds in the French-speaking ones, governments have sought to exercise greater control over the markets while at the same time guaranteeing the steadiest possible income for the economic agents engaged in production. Sometimes they have intervened more directly as partners in joint public and private companies, in participation with foreign or local private capital. They have also frequently promoted the formation of associations or co-operatives of small planters with a view to achieving economies of scale and improving output. In some cases this policy has been accompanied by the setting up of specialised governmental agencies such as the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) and the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (RISDA) in Malaysia or the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTD) in Kenya.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in discussing the role of governments, mention must be made of their participation in international negotiations designed to stabilise the markets and prices for plantation crops. Such negotiations, often conducted in consultation with the social partners, have rapidly grown in number over the past ten years and have sometimes, though not always, produced tangible results. Here we might recall the three Lomé Conventions signed by the ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific) countries and the European Economic Community<sup>6</sup> (the Lomé III Convention was signed in December 1985), and the five international agreements covering coffee, cocoa, rubber, sugar and jute. The growing integration of smallholders into the plantation crop markets is also a new phenomenon which can be explained first of all by the efforts made by the governments of developing countries, often with the support of the employers' associations, to group together small planters into more viable units and to help them export their crops. At the same time, in some countries large private or public plantations have allowed small "village plantations" or "nucleus estates" to grow up around them. These plantations, run by individual smallholders, generally benefit from technical assistance, help in getting started and the possibility of using all or part of the infrastructures created by the large production units, including processing plants. In Indonesia, for example, thanks to the Nucleus Estate Smallholders' Programme, small planters have been able to gain entry to the palm-oil market and have improved their position on the tea and natural rubber markets.<sup>7</sup> In Côte d'Ivoire village plantations have grown up around the large industrial blocks (integrated plantation-processing units) set up on the initiative of the Government.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, among the major changes that have affected plantations, we should mention the attempts made in many developing countries to change or diversify the crops produced on plantations in order to make the sector less vulnerable to outside influences. The world prices of plantation crops have been marked by big swings in recent years: suffice it to recall the plunge in the price of sugar in 1984 and 1985 or the surge in the price of coffee in 1985. When unfavourable, these often unforeseeable fluctuations hit the economy of the producer countries even harder if their export earnings are derived from only a limited number of products. The only thing to be done in such an uncer-

tain situation is to attempt to diversify production in order to cushion the shock of a sudden fall in prices. A number of countries that are heavily dependent on a single crop have encouraged the production of others compatible with their climatic and geological conditions, often also gradually phasing out a crop whose world price is tumbling and promoting more profitable ones. During the 1960s and early 1970s Malaysia altered its order of priority for plantation crops in the light of changes in world prices and moved progressively away from rubber into palm oil. Then at the beginning of the 1980s the successive oil shocks led the authorities to think that natural rubber, because of falling competition from substitute products derived from petroleum, offered better prospects than palm oil, and the rubber plantations regained their leading position in the economy. The future will tell whether the present drop in oil prices will lead to a new reduction in rubber cultivation in Malaysia.

The importance of these changes in the structures of plantations might lead one to expect substantial changes also in the employment, pay and, above all, living conditions of workers in this sector. The fact of the matter is, however, that the present situation of plantation workers is in many respects much the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago.

## Employment

It is extremely difficult to estimate the volume of total employment on plantations since the definition of the term "plantation" given in the Plantations Convention, 1958 (No. 130), has not yet received universal acceptance. The legislation of a country such as India (Plantations Labour Act, 1951, as amended in 1981) does contain a definition of plantations and lays down precise criteria – type of crops, minimum area and minimum number of workers employed – but in other countries the concept of a plantation is vaguer and is linked more with the cultivation of particular crops than with any such formal definition. Another difficulty arises from the lack of separate statistics in many countries for plantation workers, who are often included under the general heading of "agricultural employment". In these circumstances, it would be useless to try to aggregate data covering different realities. Furthermore, any global estimate would at most offer only an anecdotal interest of much less social significance than information indicating for example that the sugar-cane sector in Mauritius employs 70,000 workers.<sup>9</sup> While this may not seem a large number compared with employment on plantations in India (approximately 1,300,000 workers), it is seen in a different light when one considers that the economically active population of the island numbers only about 300,000 people all told. An analysis of the employment situation and the way it is developing can be really telling only at the country level; a comparison of individual cases does, however, enable us to identify certain trends.

The employment situation on plantations is not the same everywhere; whereas in some countries the sector is marked by unemployment and

underemployment, in others there is a serious shortage of labour, particularly at harvest time. In Malaysia the large plantations employed approximately 250,000 workers in 1982. A labour shortage began to be felt at the beginning of the 1980s<sup>10</sup> and has become worse in recent years, creating major problems mainly for the rubber plantations. Young people, in particular, have shied away from a sector where living and working conditions are arduous and earnings inadequate, preferring to try their luck in the towns where the manufacturing industries are booming. A study carried out by an employers' organisation (United Planters' Association of Malaysia) estimated the average labour shortage on plantations at 6 per cent in 1980 but as high as 20 to 30 per cent on some. Despite the increasing employment of migrant workers, mainly from Indonesia, the labour shortage increased between 1981 (when the shortfall was estimated at around 10,000 workers) and 1985 as the proportion of Malaysian workers continued to drop. Consequently it proved impossible on several occasions to bring in a complete harvest of latex and palm oil; in 1980 this meant an estimated loss of US\$23.5 million in export earnings.

A similar situation exists in Kenya, where all the major plantation sectors have, since 1975, been suffering from a shortage of labour, particularly at harvest time.<sup>11</sup> In 1974, when there were 35,000 permanent workers on the tea plantations, the actual labour requirement was 42,000 and managers had enormous difficulties in recruiting the temporary workers needed for the harvest. On the coffee plantations the situation was even worse: whereas 125,000 persons were needed at picking time, there were only 35,000 permanent workers available. Since then the authorities have endeavoured to promote mechanisation so that, although there has been a relative stagnation in the volume of permanent employment in recent years, the cyclical manpower shortages have become less damaging. In Côte d'Ivoire, too, despite a large influx of migrants from Burkina Faso (estimated at around 1 million) and other neighbouring countries (Guinea, Mali and Ghana – approximately 500,000 migrant workers from these three countries alone), plantation managers have been forced to cut down on certain crops, including coffee, because of a particularly severe shortage of labour at harvest time.<sup>8</sup>

In the United Republic of Tanzania the plantations have also always suffered from the lack of a steady workforce.<sup>12</sup> Even before independence they were unable to attract permanent workers and the workforce, composed mainly of migrant workers, was marked by a high rate of turnover. The economic difficulties currently being experienced, particularly in the nationalised sisal plantations, have so aggravated the situation that it is now difficult not only to recruit new temporary workers but also to keep the existing workforce on the plantations. To give an idea of the scale of the problem, it may be noted that between 1961 and 1978 total employment on the sisal plantations fell from 109,800 to 47,000; and since then the situation has deteriorated. In 1978 the Government of Mozambique launched a

programme to revive the tea plantations that had been left in a state of neglect after the departure of the expatriate planters when the country gained its independence in 1975. EMOCHA, the public enterprise in charge of this operation, achieved its goals on schedule and since 1981 has increased output and productivity on the 23 tea plantations under its control, providing employment to 30,000 workers, of whom 16,000 were permanent in 1983-84. Nevertheless, according to EMOCHA's own estimates, in recent years the plantations could have taken on an additional 6,000 or even 12,000 workers at harvest time, depending on the year, but it had proved impossible to find them.<sup>13</sup> In Papua New Guinea, the manpower shortage has acted as a spur to the mechanisation of plantations and prompted managers to hire women workers, which has altered the sex structure of employment. Lastly, there is the case of Mauritius where, despite a high unemployment rate, the sugar-cane plantations have been in a similar position for a number of years owing to the shortage of cane-cutters. Here, too, this situation has led to increasing mechanisation of cane cutting and transport. Most of the big sugar-cane plantations in Latin America and the Caribbean are following the same line. The example of Mauritius also underlines an important point: the fact that plantations suffer from a manpower shortage does not mean there is no unemployment in the country or even the region concerned; it simply means that many workers will not accept poorly paid jobs with arduous working and living conditions.

In a number of countries unemployment and underemployment have increased as a result of the difficulties facing the plantations sector as a whole or because of the fall in the price of a specific crop. The Philippines provides the most typical and most recent example of this relationship between falling prices and unemployment: the employment situation on the sugar-cane plantations deteriorated abruptly in 1984 and 1985 following the collapse of sugar prices. The sugar sector is one of the pillars of the economy: it is estimated that around 3 million people depend directly or indirectly on it, with the sugar-cane plantations providing direct employment to some 500,000 people. The first fall in prices in 1977 had already hit 70,000 workers; that of 1984-85 was even more dramatic and had a particularly devastating effect on Negros Occidental, the main sugar-producing province (50 per cent of the country's total sugar-growing area and 56 per cent of its production). ILO experts who visited this region in 1985 estimated that around 200,000 workers, 95 per cent of whom worked on plantations, would be affected by this crisis in the immediate future as a result of seasonal underemployment of varying intensity (less pronounced in the north, more acute in the central parts of the province). They also estimated that another 220,000 workers would have to be moved out of sugar and into other sectors as a result of inevitable reductions in the sugar-growing area.<sup>14</sup> Many other countries in which sugar-cane plantations play an important role have been affected by the fall in prices. In Jamaica, where the sugar sector accounts for 35 per cent of total plantation employment, hundreds of permanent workers

have lost their jobs and the Government has been forced to close down seven refineries. Only a few countries like Brazil, where there is a large domestic demand, especially for sugar used in making ethanol, or Cuba, which sells its sugar on a highly protected market, have been less hard hit by the collapse in prices.

Elsewhere administrative difficulties have been the cause of unemployment and underemployment. In almost every instance the nationalisation of plantations has resulted in a deterioration in the economic situation of the industry, often accompanied by an increase in underemployment and unemployment, during the first years of operating under the new system of ownership. For one thing, the prospect of nationalisation often prompted the former planters, for the most part expatriates, to cut their risks, e.g. by reducing or postponing the replacement of plantation areas that were past their prime and unproductive, and hence it was often plantations that had been neglected for a number of years that were nationalised. For another thing, nationalisation generally meant a replacement of managerial personnel and a massive exodus of expatriates. Lacking experience, the new managers often failed to implement the most appropriate policies so that the plantations collapsed, with the inevitable repercussions on employment. For instance, the Government of Sri Lanka found itself faced with major difficulties following the two waves of nationalisation in 1972 and 1975. It was only thanks to the implementation of a vigorous policy of management training and restructuring that the industry regained some of its former vitality, leading in 1978-79 to the first increase in employment on plantations since their nationalisation.

### **The nature of the jobs offered and the structure of the workforce**

One of the social characteristics of large plantations in the past was that they offered the workers stable employment, generally full time, all year round and sometimes for the whole of their active life. This characteristic subsists in a number of countries today and it is not rare, for example, to find tea plantations in India where the workers were born on the plantation and will remain there all their life. However, such absolute attachment to plantation life, with its positive aspects but also its implied dependence on the system, is gradually tending to grow weaker. Young people born on a plantation are less and less inclined to follow in their parents' footsteps and, if they do, it is often because they have no other choice. The structure of the workforce on plantations is gradually being modified as a result. In many countries the plantation labour force has been ageing while at the same time the proportion of immigrants from neighbouring low-income countries has increased. It has also been observed that women tend to account for a growing proportion of total employment. In Malaysia, for example, women made up more than 50 per cent of the plantation labour force in 1982 (124,382 women as against 122,841 men) whereas 15 years earlier men were

well in the majority. A similar situation is found in the Indian tea plantations which employed 382,000 women and 379,000 men in 1981. In Sri Lanka, too, more than 50 per cent of the plantation labour force is female. In the developing regions of America, coffee and banana plantations also employ many women; and if the statistics for sugar-cane plantations do not show a large proportion of women workers it is because, under the existing pay system (payment by volume of cane cut), only the husband appears as a wage earner on the payroll, although in fact women take an active part in the harvest. In Africa, where women were traditionally confined to tending subsistence crops, things are changing too and, although there are no precise statistics available, cross-checking various sources reveals that in many countries almost 50 per cent of plantation workers are women. As we pointed out earlier, the shortage of labour has also helped to speed up the integration of women into the economically active population. Children also constitute an extra source of labour, particularly at harvest time, but it is extremely difficult to gauge the numbers involved because of the lack of official statistics and the irregularity of their participation in plantation work.

The nature of the employment offered on plantations has also changed and the hiring of seasonal workers for the harvest has become a widespread practice. Seasonal workers, who sometimes form a substantial part of the workforce during the peak season, are generally recruited in the rural areas adjoining the plantations where small farmers are often willing to supplement their income by doing temporary work. In some cases, however, it is migrant workers who provide the extra labour. The most typical example here is perhaps that of Haitian workers who, under an agreement concluded each year between the Governments of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, were sent to the sugar-cane plantations of the Dominican Republic at harvest time. In 1982 40,000 Haitian seasonal workers were employed on the public sugar-cane plantations to reinforce the 30,000 permanent workers, and 12,000 others on plantations belonging to multinationals to reinforce the 7,000 permanent workers.<sup>15</sup> The use of seasonal labour has increased in almost all countries, though to varying degrees depending on the type of production and the region.

More advanced production techniques and, in particular, increasing use of fertilisers and pesticides as well as mechanisation have also helped to bring about a reduction in the permanent workforce and an increase in temporary employment. The introduction of new machinery and techniques has thus made it possible in some cases to cut back the number of permanent workers by retaining on a year-round basis only those who are responsible for day-to-day operations and the upkeep of the equipment and installations and by hiring seasonal workers for the harvest. However, while this practice has been adopted here and there in Latin America for crops such as sugar-cane, where mechanisation is easy, it is not a general rule since in many countries the farming and harvesting techniques used for numerous crops, though they

have evolved, have not undergone fundamental changes. Similarly, while the skill structures have been altered somewhat by the recruitment of skilled and semi-skilled workers (machine operators, vehicle maintenance staff, etc.), basically the workforce employed on plantations remains unskilled and training is provided more often than not on the job.

## **Wages: Gradual extension of the minimum wage and the shift towards time rates**

One of the factors permitting the development of plantations was the availability, in the countries where they were established, of an abundant and cheap workforce. In recent years, however, there has been increasing recognition of the need to extend protection to plantation workers. Many countries have adopted measures to guarantee minimum wages in agriculture, including plantations. To date 49 countries have ratified the ILO's Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery (Agriculture) Convention, 1951 (No. 99), and most of the developing countries in which plantations are found now have such systems; some of them have minimum wages specifically applicable to plantation workers. In Asia few countries have adopted legislation governing the fixing of minimum wages in agriculture but those that have done so generally have a plantations sector which plays an important role in the economy.<sup>16</sup> In the Philippines, for instance, the minimum wages of plantation workers are fixed by the Government on the recommendation of the National Wages Council. In Indonesia minimum wages for plantation workers are established in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Social Affairs. In India and Sri Lanka tripartite consultation machinery is used to fix minimum wages, which vary according to the crop grown, the job held and, in the case of India, the state in which the plantation is located. In Papua New Guinea plantation workers are legally protected by the existence of minimum agricultural wages. In Latin America the minimum wage system applicable to agricultural workers is more widespread than in Asia. In Argentina, for example, the minimum pay offered to any agricultural worker may not be lower than the minimum subsistence wage defined by law. In Colombia the minimum agricultural wage is calculated on a regional basis and is subject to periodic revisions. In Mexico minimum agricultural wages are fixed by a tripartite body; they differ from region to region and are so calculated as to enable the workers to meet their basic needs. In Cuba the minimum agricultural wages for plantation workers increased considerably (by around 30 per cent) in 1980 following a general review of wages. In Jamaica the minimum agricultural wage, which is the same throughout the country, was 30 Jamaican dollars<sup>17</sup> in 1984 for 40 hours' work and the majority of unskilled plantation workers were paid at this rate or a slightly higher one. In Africa, too, the minimum wage system is becoming more widespread. In the United Republic of Tanzania the introduction of an agricultural minimum wage in



1961 was accompanied by a significant improvement in the purchasing power of plantation workers; but since then increases in the minimum wage have been few and have not kept up with price rises, so that some plantation workers at present barely manage to make ends meet. In Côte d'Ivoire the Government fixes the minimum guaranteed agricultural wage (SMAG) for unskilled workers. At the start of 1986 the SMAG was 600 CFA francs<sup>18</sup> per day for a labourer receiving free food. In Mozambique the minimum wage fixed by the Government for tea plantation workers was 82.5 meticals<sup>19</sup> per day in 1984. Other examples are Benin where the guaranteed minimum agricultural wage was 82 CFA francs an hour in December 1985 and Kenya where the 1982 Ordinance respecting the fixing of agricultural wages was amended in 1985 to bring the minimum daily wage of an unskilled agricultural worker up to 13.20 shillings.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from minimum wages, there are two main ways of fixing wages for plantation workers. The payment of time rates (the wage paid depending on the number of hours and days worked) was originally the method least used in plantations and was reserved for highly skilled workers and for those performing tasks and occupying posts in which it was technically difficult to evaluate the workers' output. However, with the expansion of mechanisation and the appearance of new types of skills (machine operators, maintenance personnel, etc.) this system has been applied over the past 20 years to a growing number of plantation workers. The payment of piece rates, or payment by results, was the commonest system used on plantations since it enabled the employer to gear pay to individual output without obliging him to pay a minimum wage during the slack season. Although this system in its original form is still widely used in many countries, particularly to pay seasonal workers hired for the harvest, it has gradually given way to more refined methods of calculating remuneration. As a result of trade union pressure and the adoption of legislation fixing a minimum agricultural wage, there has been a growth of pay systems combining a minimum time wage varying according to the job to be done (and fixed by the hour, week or even month) with wage supplements calculated on the basis of output. This trend may be illustrated by the case of South India where plantation workers receive a daily basic wage supplemented by a daily allowance, both of which vary according to the type of plantation and the state in which it is located. In December 1984 the basic daily wage in the state of Kerala was 9.15 rupees<sup>21</sup> for an unskilled adult working on the rubber plantations and 7.60 rupees for workers on tea, coffee and cardamom plantations. The daily allowance was 7.92 rupees on the rubber plantations and 7.04 rupees on the others. In addition to these two elements, which constitute a sort of guaranteed minimum wage, workers doing certain jobs are entitled to a wage differential (a daily differential of 1.15 rupees is paid, for example, to workers engaged in such activities as pruning or spraying chemical products) as well as to incentive payments. The latter are calculated on the basis of an average daily output (in Kerala, for example, 12 kilograms a day for tea-pickers), with the

worker receiving an incentive payment (of 0.18 rupee) for each kilogram he picks over the average. The same type of incentive is applied for harvesting coffee, cardamom or latex.<sup>22</sup>

To sum up, it can be said that the expansion of legislation governing the minimum wage has made it possible to protect plantation workers from a number of abuses and has encouraged the development of remuneration systems combining time and piece rates. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the gap between minimum agricultural and non-agricultural wages is still considerable and has even widened over the years in a number of countries. In addition, and still far too often, the pay of a sizeable number of plantation workers is strictly geared to the minimum wage, which is generally only a subsistence wage.

## Living conditions on plantations

Owners and managers of plantations realised very early on that they would have to provide their workforce with accommodation and certain social benefits, since the geographical isolation of the plantations meant that the workers had to live on them together with their families. Thus, even at the time of forced labour, planters had to supply accommodation, medical care and food, if only to keep their workers alive. With time, the concept of "decent living conditions" gradually developed and became an element of personnel policy designed to attract and keep a workforce whose output was bound to be improved by the existence of better living and working conditions. Other factors also played a part in the efforts made to improve the conditions of plantation workers; these included increased participation by trade unions and the public authorities in the industrial relations system as well as international action, for example by the ILO.

## Housing

In every economic activity the performance, health and general quality of life of a worker depend to a large extent on his housing conditions. In plantations the link is all the stronger in that generally the workplace and the place of residence are the same.

The labour legislation of an increasing number of countries places a legal obligation on employers to provide housing for plantation workers, and also establishes directives and minimum standards to be met when constructing such housing.<sup>16</sup> In Africa this legal obligation exists, for example, in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria and the United Republic of Tanzania, but it is often only applicable for permanent workers recruited outside the plantation locality; furthermore, the quality of the housing provided varies considerably from one country to another or one plantation to another. Whereas, for example, in Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire the workers' houses on the large rubber or

oil-palm plantations have running water and sanitary installations, are permanent structures and offer satisfactory conditions of hygiene, the houses on some plantations in the United Republic of Tanzania no longer meet the minimum standards established by law. In Latin America and the Caribbean, where legal provisions fixing minimum standards are fairly widespread, the housing conditions of permanent workers, although not ideal, may nevertheless be regarded as satisfactory with the exception of a few isolated cases. Much more worrying, on the other hand, is the position of seasonal workers who make up the bulk of the workforce on numerous plantations and who often have to share cramped quarters without adequate sanitary installations and are sometimes even housed in sheds normally used for storing equipment or crops.<sup>23</sup> The commission of inquiry sent by the ILO in 1983 to the Dominican Republic noted the inadequacy of the housing, sanitary installations and general health and hygiene facilities provided for the Haitian seasonal workers hired for the sugar-cane harvest.

In Asia there are fewer countries in which the employers are legally bound to provide housing for their workers. In Bangladesh, where the tea plantations are obliged to do so under the 1962 Ordinance respecting work on tea plantations, some employers, particularly those lacking the necessary funds, have sometimes circumvented the legislation by merely providing the workers with a plot of land and leaving it up to them to build their house out of materials available on the spot. Recently, however, efforts have been made to replace old houses (constructed out of local materials such as bamboo) gradually with brick buildings. In India the obligation to house the workers has existed for a fairly long time since it is laid down in the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 and the building standards to be complied with are established by each state government in consultation with workers' and employers' organisations. These standards contain specifications for floor area, layout, ventilation and sanitary installations. Some planters had difficulties in meeting these requirements and from 1970 on the Central Government provided financial assistance for building programmes and the improvement of old housing that did not meet the new standards. While the housing situation has been greatly improved much remains to be done. A study carried out in 1984 by the Indian Ministry of Labour on working and living conditions on the plantations of South India denounced these deficiencies; in particular, some housing construction and renovation programmes had not been completed within the specified time owing to lack of funds and as a result a number of houses did not fully measure up to the prescribed standards.<sup>24</sup> In Sri Lanka, where the legislation requires employers to provide housing, the accommodation situation is still precarious and on many plantations the workers are still lodged in hutments built in the last century. In most of the other Asian countries in which plantations play an important economic role, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, the employers by tradition also provide housing for the plantation workers although they are not required to do so by law. In some countries,

like the Philippines, there is also strong trade union pressure to include housing in the collective bargaining agenda. In Malaysia the Ministry of Labour report on plantation manpower carried out in 1981 and 1982 found that the owners of plantations have significantly improved the benefits offered in order to retain workers who were becoming scarce. Between 1972 and 1982 the number of houses built on plantations had increased by 72 per cent and many old buildings had been reconstructed. In 1980 free housing was provided to workers on 69 per cent of the rubber plantations, 70 per cent of the oil-palm plantations, 83 per cent of the coconut plantations and 95 per cent of the tea plantations; in almost all cases, the dwellings had running water and electricity (with the exception of tea plantations where only one in two had electricity).<sup>25</sup>

These few examples testify to the efforts made in recent years to improve the housing conditions of plantation workers but they also show that there is still much to be put right. Moreover, a person is only provided with housing if he is employed on the plantation and he generally forfeits his entitlement when he ceases to work. Accordingly, some governments (for example in Malaysia) have made an effort to enable plantation workers to become house-owners by constructing subsidised housing for them. In other countries, such as Cuba, plantation workers can continue to occupy their dwelling even after they have stopped working. Such practices are not general, however, and many plantation workers still have major difficulties in finding accommodation when they retire.

Consequently, the matter of housing in the broad sense of the term should remain high on the list of priorities in the social development programmes for plantations, especially since there is such a close relationship between housing conditions and the workers' health.

### **Health and medical care**

While some diseases encountered on plantations are related to the environment and affect the rural population as a whole in tropical areas, a number of diseases of the respiratory or digestive organs are directly linked to housing conditions and their incidence could be reduced if stricter standards were adopted regarding ventilation and supply of drinking water. Other diseases or injuries caused by the systematic use of toxic products such as fertilisers and pesticides are also more widespread on plantations than in the traditional rural areas. Here, too, it would be possible to reduce considerably the hazards associated with the use of these products by giving the people concerned fuller information about the dangers and adopting stricter standards regarding their importation, identification and utilisation, which some countries have already started to do.<sup>26</sup> In most countries it is the employers who have traditionally been responsible for organising and providing free medical care to plantation workers, and this is still the case today. However, the employers' responsibility, which was originally limited

to occupational injuries and diseases incurred by their workforce, has often been extended to the workers' family and to injuries and diseases not directly linked to their work. Legal provisions have also been adopted to specify the nature of the medical services to be provided. Depending on the country, the state of the medical infrastructure and the distance of the plantation from medical centres and hospitals, the employers' obligations range from the provision merely of a first-aid kit to the construction of bush hospitals capable of performing complex medical operations (as in India), though the commonest obligation is to build a dispensary. While the diversity of existing situations makes it difficult to give a general idea of the services offered, it can be said that the medical facilities existing on plantations, although they have been considerably improved, still leave much to be desired. In many countries the health personnel employed on plantations are too few in number and often lack adequate training. Very few dispensaries have a resident doctor; more often than not a doctor employed by a plantation pays a weekly visit and does the rounds of several plantations. In addition – but this is a general characteristic of developing countries – there is often a shortage of medicines, and folk remedies are frequently relied on. So while plantation workers may be better off than other categories of the rural population as regards medical protection, if only because it is provided free, the fact remains that health care is still unsatisfactory for most plantation workers.

### Other social services

A discussion of workers' living conditions would not be complete without a mention of the other social services provided by employers, sometimes with the financial assistance of the public authorities and the support of the trade unions; the provision of these services is dictated mainly by the isolation of the plantations. It was a tradition, for example, to set up schools and crèches on the plantation for the workers' children. Although "plantation schools" providing primary education still exist in many countries, they often suffer from a shortage of teaching staff and a high rate of absenteeism, particularly during the harvest when all available hands are needed. At the same time, they are gradually being replaced by ordinary schools built by governments anxious to reduce the illiteracy rate. The availability of crèches on plantations is, on the other hand, gaining in importance since more and more women are entering the paid workforce. In this field, too, improvements have been made but often there is simply not enough money to meet the need. Only the largest and best organised plantations have hygienic, properly equipped crèches staffed by sufficient numbers of trained personnel. Some crèches provide food (milk, cereals) and clothing to the children in their care.

The question of food supplies for plantation workers and their families is a crucial problem to which employers, governments, trade unions and international institutions have tried to find solutions. On several occasions

the ILO's Committee on Work on Plantations has recommended that workers should be allowed plots of land on which to grow food crops for self-consumption. Many countries have in fact adopted legal provisions requiring planters to make land available to permanent workers for their use, and as a result individual plots have frequently been granted or collective land has been made available for growing subsistence crops. At the same time, with the encouragement of the trade unions and the employers and occasionally with international assistance, co-operatives for the production and sale of basic commodities have been set up to offer workers quality products at prices lower than those charged by private businesses operating on plantations – prices that are often high because they have a monopoly. The practice whereby employers on many plantations, particularly in Africa and some Asian countries, distributed full daily food rations has gradually been abandoned and replaced by more selective distribution of basic commodities; in some cases, international bodies (such as the World Food Programme) provide extra rations, especially within the framework of national programmes for the development of plantations.

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The foregoing analysis has shown that the profound changes that have taken place in the ownership and production structures of plantations have led to no great improvement in the situation of plantation workers. Admittedly, their social protection has been improved in some respects and they still enjoy some advantages over other agricultural workers. These advantages (housing, free medical care) arise from the particular conditions in which they carry out their work; and the full range is available only to permanent workers, who account for a decreasing proportion of total employment on plantations. In many respects the living conditions of plantation workers remain precarious, the gap between their wages and those paid to workers in industry or the tertiary sector is widening, and the difficulties encountered in many countries in recruiting people to work on plantations are but the outward sign of a general feeling of discontent.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The idea and examples presented in this article are developed in a forthcoming ILO publication by the author and Jürgen von Muralt: *Plantations and plantation workers*.

<sup>2</sup> For Sri Lanka, see J.-P. Sajhau: "The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations: The case of Sri Lanka", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in Asian countries* (Geneva, ILO, 1985; mimeographed Sectoral Activities Programme (SAP) working paper 2.1/WP.2); for the United Republic of Tanzania, see L. A. Msambichaka and M. S. D. Bagachwa: "The impact of structural changes in plantations: The case of Tanzania", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in African countries* (Geneva, ILO, 1986; mimeographed SAP working paper 2.2/WP.3).

<sup>3</sup> See various issues of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong) and in particular the following articles: "Plantation giants eye new conquests" (26 Dec. 1980), "The reluctant bride - Malaysian company Pegi hots up its wooing of the British rubber company Dunlop Holdings" (28 Apr. 1983), "The No. 1 planter" (7 June 1984), and "Jewel in a new setting" (24 Oct. 1985). See also A. Navamukundan: "Structural change in the Malaysian plantation sector", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in Asian countries*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> S. Zorn: "TNC-Government relations in agriculture", in *CTC Reporter* (New York), Autumn 1985.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the KTDA, see G. Lamb and L. Muller: *Control, accountability and incentives in a successful development institution: The Kenya Tea Development Authority* (Washington, DC, 1982), World Bank Staff Papers No. 550.

<sup>6</sup> "ACP-CEE Convention - Lomé III", in *The Courier Africa-Caribbean-Pacific - European Community* (Brussels), Jan.-Feb. 1985, special issue.

<sup>7</sup> R. Sukarja: "The impact of structural changes in plantations in Indonesia", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in Asian countries*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> T. Kouadio: "Conséquences socio-économiques des changements dans les plantations: Le cas de la Côte d'Ivoire", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in African countries*, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> "Mauritius: Diversification, but sugar still predominates", in *The Courier Africa-Caribbean-Pacific - European Community*, Sept.-Oct. 1982, pp. 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Navamukundan, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> A.-R. F. Ali Taha: *Employment problems in Kenyan plantations* (Addis Ababa, ILO, JASPA Working Paper, 1975); and J. Lugogo: "The impact of structural changes in Kenya's plantation sector", in *The socio-economic implications of structural changes in plantations in African countries*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Msambichaka and Bagachwa, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Contribution to the final report of the WFP/FAO/ILO/UNCHS interim evaluation-cum-appraisal mission to Mozambique, 19 June to 6 July 1984, prepared by D. Belau, ILO Office, Lusaka; mimeographed.

<sup>14</sup> S. Guha and A. Konye: *An emergency employment programme for sugar workers* (Manila, ILO, 1985), report of an ILO advisory mission to the Philippines, mimeographed.

<sup>15</sup> ILO: "Report of the Commission of Inquiry appointed under article 26 of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation to examine the observance of certain international labour Conventions by the Dominican Republic and Haiti with respect to the employment of Haitian workers on the sugar plantations of the Dominican Republic", in *Official Bulletin* (Geneva), Vol. LXVI, 1983, Series B, Special Supplement.

<sup>16</sup> Much of the information on legislation contained in this section is derived from replies by governments of member States to a questionnaire drawn up by the ILO as part of the preparatory work for the Eighth Session of the Committee on Work on Plantations (Geneva, December 1982). The data on minimum wages were obtained during recent missions to the countries concerned.

<sup>17</sup> On 1 January 1986, the official exchange rate was 5.46 Jamaican dollars to 1 US dollar.

<sup>18</sup> On 1 January 1986, the official exchange rate was 383 CFA francs to 1 US dollar.

<sup>19</sup> On 1 January 1986, the official exchange rate was 41.20 meticals to 1 US dollar.

<sup>20</sup> On 1 January 1986, the official exchange rate was 16.30 Kenyan shillings to 1 US dollar.

<sup>21</sup> On 1 January 1986, the official exchange rate was 12 Indian rupees to 1 US dollar.

<sup>22</sup> Data supplied by the United Planters' Association of Southern India (Coonoor, India).

<sup>23</sup> J. C. Neffa: *El trabajo temporario en el sector agropecuario de América Latina* (Geneva, ILO, 1985; mimeographed).

<sup>24</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation: *Study of the working and living conditions of plantation labour in South India (Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu)* (New Delhi, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Malaysia, Ministry of Labour: *Labour and manpower report 1981-82* (Kuala Lumpur, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> On this question see D. Bull: *A growing problem: Pesticides and the Third World poor* (Oxford, OXFAM, 1982).