

Casual Labour in a Nigerian Urban Center

Florence Olanrewaju Aladekomo

*Centre For Industrial Research And Development (CIRD) Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

E-mail: faladeko@oauife.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT Rapid population growth and rural-urban migration in Less Developed Countries (LDCs) have combined to result in serious unemployment problems in urban centers. The formal sector is not growing fast enough to absorb the labour force. The informal sector, which would have absorbed the excess, is incapacitated because of inadequate governmental policy framework, which has thwarted its growth and expansion. The end result is a pool of the unemployed who gather daily at urban road junctions for daily paid casual jobs. Unfortunately, this group seems to have been neglected not only by policy makers but also by researchers. The Sabo road junction in Ile-Ife town in Oshun state where about 150-200 casual labourers gather every morning has been looked into closely in this work in an attempt to bridge this knowledge gap on issues of unemployment, and rural-urban migration in Nigeria. The investigation covered the group's socio-economic background, immigration status, and attitude to self-employment and the kind of assistance they require from the Government. Interviews were conducted for fifty members of the group, two landlords in the neighborhood and two local government officials. The findings revealed that many of the group were educated, highly skilled and very vocal. The wasting away of knowledge and skill by the roadside should be regarded as a colossal national ailment which deserves the attention of policy makers. There is need to put in place a policy whereby this neglected grass root sector can be harnessed into the main stream of national development through job creation and /or self-employment orientation.

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the oil-boom in the early 80s and the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) introduced by the government led to the shrinkage of employment opportunities. Factories were downsized, mass retrenchment followed and a glut of unemployed but skilled people particularly in urban centers ensued. Rural-urban migration for improved economic conditions has been given as the reason for the rapid population and hence labour force growth in cities (Ogunrinola, 1991). According to the Nigeria Population Studies Report of 1983, 59% of the growth rate of population in Lagos between 1960 and 1975 was due to net migration while the rest was due to natural increase. This is a common phenomenon in all Nigerian cities. Todaro (1989), maintains that between 20-70% of urban labour force in developing countries are engaged in the informal sector. The inability of the already saturated urban informal sector to absorb the retrenched staff aggravated the unemployment problem in Nigerian cities. One of the outcomes of the development is the early morning gathering of the unemployed around major urban road junctions. Sabo junction in Ile-Ife typifies this new phenomenon.

According to history, the Sabo junction in Ile-Ife (one of the major urban centres in Oshun

state) was first located by a handful of freelance bricklayers in the 1970s. They came to the junction early in the morning to be picked up by government workers in the Public Works Department (PWD) of the Ministry of Works or by building contractors for bricklaying, digging, gutter clearing decking and other jobs on site. According to information gathered from the old landlords in the vicinity, the people were very few to start with, later on unskilled and illiterate labourers joined. These ones followed the bricklayers to the site to carry sand, blocks and water. Skilled labour who needed money to buy instruments and machinery to start on their own and semi skilled labour who needed money to complete their apprenticeship also joined. As time went on, unemployed but educated youth mainly, primary school leavers and later secondary school leavers joined as the problem of unemployment increased. The oil-boom of the late 70s and early 80s encouraged this phenomenon by bringing in its wake a lot of construction works. However by the mid-80s, the oil boom had dovetailed into mass unemployment. The unemployed products of higher institutions (many of which were established during the oil boom) swelled the number while the continued rural-urban migration worsened matters in the cities. It is this mix bag of the educated, uneducated, skilled, semiskilled and

unskilled labour that crowds the road junctions every morning for pick-up daily jobs.

THE NIGERIAN URBAN LABOUR MARKET

Over the years, the growth in job openings in both the formal and informal sectors in the urban centers had lagged behind the growth of labour force. It is evident that the urban-based large-scale formal sector enterprises cannot generate enough jobs for present and future job seekers, Callaway (1964). Unfortunately the informal sector which would have absorbed the surplus labour is not growing fast enough. The potentials of the urban informal sectors in some African cities, for employment generation have been confirmed by various works and reports, Callaway (1964, and 1973) for Nigeria, ILO (1972), Weeks (1975), Guisinger and Irfin (1980) for Kenya, and Sethuraman (1977) for Ghana. Some researchers have also been quite vocal on the problems of operators in the sector, Gerry (1978), Moser (1978), Davies (1979), and Schmitz (1982). However the general consensus is that adequate and properly focused governmental policies to harness these potentials have been consistently lacking in these countries. The result is a large pool of urban unemployed who have resigned themselves to open unemployment situation because they can not raise the necessary capital to become self-employed. This group largely constitutes the 'Early Morning Casual Labour Market' a phenomenon, which has characterized almost all urban centers road junctions in Nigeria today. The group spans through a long age spread, consisting the young, middle aged and the fairly old. It also cuts across gender. They arrive at the road junction as early as 6.00a.m. in the morning carrying their baskets or bowls, cutlass, shovel and digger, to be picked up by contractors/builders for the day's job of bricklaying, weeding, clearing and digging. In the early years of the phenomenon, majority of the casual labourers were artisans, mainly bricklayers and some uneducated and unskilled persons who follow them to the site to carry sand, blocks, water etc. With the abrupt end of the oil boom in the mid 80s, the mass retrenchment, and the oil -boom generated population explosion gave rise to a large pool of the unemployed but educated youth who had no choice but to join this group. The daily congregation of a group of frustrated educated and vocal youth at the urban centre road junction is a sign of national ailment

and policy derailment. It does not only constitute an economic loss to a nation but also a serious threat to social and political peace. Youth unemployment in itself is problematic because of its economic and social implications. With properly focused applied research and adequate policy measures, the group can be reorganized and their skills harnessed and integrated into the economic development framework. The present disorganized way in which they hang around and roam around the major road junctions has serious disadvantages and negative policy implications. The heavy human traffic for instance constitutes a menace to vehicular movements and compromises the safety of other road users. Also, as a result of the disorganization, at a given time a considerable number of them rush on potential hirer of labour and offer services for which they know they lack expertise. The intending hirer has no means of checking until the job (e.g. brick-laying, painting, cleaning) has been poorly performed. All the above have policy implications, which need to be addressed. Based on the problems discussed above, this paper is designed to:

- Examine the nature and content of the casual labour market in terms of their educational background, qualifications, skill, immigration status, and socio-economic background.
- Investigate the social problem(s) if any, which the group creates by their location.
- Determine to what extent they can be assisted in their job seeking efforts in an organized and orderly way.
- Assess the extent to which they can be made to contribute positively to economic development, through job creation, self - employment orientation, and start-up capital.
- Make policy recommendations on the basis of the findings

STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

Ile-Ife with a population of 408,284 people (1991 Census) is one of the major towns in Oshun State in the South West of Nigeria. It is about forty kilometers away from Oshogbo the state capital. The town is believed to be the home of Oduduwa, ancestor of the Yorubas one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. History has it that from this town many Obas of Yoruba land who are descendants of Oduduwa left for their settlements. It is important to note that these settlements cut across state boundaries, Oyo,

Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, Lagos, Kwara, Edo States, and even as far as the Republic of Benin. Ile-Ife remains the cultural centre of the Yoruba tribe.

In the centre of Ile-Ife town is the Afin (Palace) of the Oni who is the traditional head of the town and Chairman of the Yoruba Council of 'Obas' (Kings).

There are two major Federal government institutions in the town. The first is Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) with a student population of about 27,000 and a staff population of about 5,000. The University occupies 11681 hectares of land. The second is the OAU Teaching Hospital with a bed space of 570 and a staff population of 2970. Aside these two institutions there are about 77 secondary schools and about 160 primary schools in the town. Many Osun State government ministries also have offices in Ile-Ife namely: Ministries of Works and Housing, Property Development, Inland Revenue and Education. All these have combined to make Ile-Ife a big urban centre in Oshun State.

The Sabo junction where the research was carried out is the intercept of the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Road coming from the Obafemi Awolowo University's second gate, leading to the King's Palace, and the Federal Government Trunk A road coming from Ibadan Oyo State Capital leading to Akure (Ondo State Capital).

Exploratory research method was used being a new phenomenon about which very little is known. Descriptive and qualitative approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the group. The socio-economic interacting system of factors, which combined, to result in the existence of the casual labour and which determined the location was investigated. Fifty - (50) members were interviewed and a focus group discussion was held with three of their leaders. Two of the neighborhood landlords and two government officials were interviewed.

All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Frequency tables were generated from the responses to the questionnaires. Data were then aggregated for the purpose of analysis and reporting. A descriptive statement from the interview was used to substantiate the findings.

FINDINGS

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Casual Workers

Age: The respondents, fifty in number, consists

mainly of people in their productive age, the mean age class being 30-44 years (84%) This shows that the people are mainly in their prime age i.e. the productive age economically. According to Todaro (1989), the active labour force in any nation is constituted by people between age 15-64 years. Older people as well as children are often referred to as economic 'dependency burden' in the sense that they are non-productive members of society.

Religion: Their religion was mainly Christianity (84%), which is the predominant religion in southern Nigeria. Surprisingly even though Ile-Ife, is believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba's and the citadel of traditional religion, none of those interviewed claimed to be an idol worshipper. It was however not possible to administer the questionnaire amongst the Hausa casual labourers at the junction due to language problem. If this was done the ratio of Muslim/Christian would have been different since the Hausas are predominantly Muslim.

Sex: The respondents were predominantly male (76% male and 24% female).

Marital Status and Family: 57% were married while 43% were single. Some of the single men were in their late thirties and early forties and when asked why they were not yet married they attributed the reason to their economic condition. It was also observed that among the married men the average number of wife was one. 28% had two wives, and 14% had three wives. Some of the polygamists explained that they had to take on another wife when the first one died or left. The frequency of the number of children showed that about 70% had fewer than four children each. This is probably a pointer to a drift from the traditional system of large family size resulting from acquisition of wives and children. This can perhaps be attributable to economic reasons or the success of various family planning programmes, which has been gaining ground in the nation within the last 10-15 years. To support this position, further analysis of the findings revealed that while the numbers of the respondent's children average about two, the number of brothers and sisters they have average between four and five. Also, while the number of wives of the respondents averaged one, the number of wives of their parents averaged three. There is no doubt therefore that family size is decreasing over the years.

It was also discovered from the responses

that even though this category of people face open unemployment, yet some of them have dependants; parents, junior brothers and sisters. This is not surprising. According to Todaro (1989) as a result of high birth rate, children under fifteen years make up over 40% of the total population in LDC. Also because of improved medical facilities within the recent past, life expectation has increased in LDC. As a result, this group of children and older people which he referred to as 'economic dependency burden' in the sense that they are non productive members of society represents about half the population of LDC whereas they constitute only about a third of developed country's population. A combination of open unemployment, which this group faces, and the economic dependency burden, spells abject poverty not only for them but also their dependants. This probably explains why they come to the road junction in tattered clothes looking very malnourished.

Education: About 83% had formal education, of this 75% had full primary education and of this a third had full secondary education. Many of this educated group displayed a lot of intelligence and were very eloquent and articulate in answering the questions. Their frustration and anxieties were however palpable. Some of them spoke fluent English. It would be recalled that according to the history of Sabo junction casual labour, the earliest set consists of bricklayers, who were later joined by unskilled and illiterate labour. More and more school leavers continued to join this group. The problem facing the local governments, the states and the nation now is how to cope with increasingly vocal, educated, but unemployed youth.

Skill: The group consists of various skill categories. Bricklaying, driving, carpentry, mechanic, barbing, electrician, panel beating and tailoring. At least 74% of the respondents have learnt one trade or the other. Some of them however complained that they were unable to complete their apprenticeship due to lack of funds.

Other Socio-economic Factors: Many of the women have serious economic and emotional problems. Many are widowed or divorced with all of them facing a situation of abject poverty as revealed in the economic data below. The combination of these factors seems to encourage loose sexual relationship. There were reports of common cases when a bricklayer would pay the

normal daily wage of N300 to a woman labourer and would carry her to his house for household chores, cooking, laundry and free intimacy. Findings revealed that some Bricklayers have free sexual relationship with their labour of the opposite sex when they take them out for job on building sites. Such relationships also develop often among the men and women labourers. There are cases of intermarriage.

Immigration Status: 42% of the respondents were immigrants from neighboring towns and states, Oyo Oshun, Ekiti, except four who came from far away states Kwara, Kogi, and Edo states. This confirms findings that the supply of labour to the urban labour market derives mainly from the surrounding areas both far and near. Ogunrinola (1991) Various economic models have been used to explain rural-urban migration ranging from 'structural change model' to 'probability migration model' to 'dualism model'. The 'structural change' model, states that as economic development progresses; the decreasing share of agriculture in the Gross Domestic Produce induces labour transfer to the expanding urban industrial sector. The 'probability migration model' views rural-urban migration as a process of inter-regional or intersectoral movement for information gathering and job search in order to maximize lifetime stream of earnings. Dualism model attributes migration to the disproportionate development attention given to urban centers vis-a-vis rural areas by various governments from pre-colonial period with its consequential push and pull effect on rural population Okowa(1987) Migration has also been attributed to the rural-urban wage differential, Fapounda(1985). The key issue in these models is migration for improved economic condition in the area of destination. This sounds rational and logical. However, the validity of most of these theories have been called to serious question by the fact that the rural-urban migration has continued, even when the urban sector has been converted to a plethora of the unemployed as well as the mass of the underemployed. Perhaps the explanation is in the 'dualism' model of development pattern whereby urban centers have a disproportionately large share of development, which creates a pull effect on rural dwellers. This is because even though the rate of growth of urban wage employment remains relatively low and has been out stripped by the rapid rate of growth of labour force, the surplus labor remains

content to stay on in cities while the rural areas are experiencing labour shortage.

Economic background: Almost all of them came from very poor background. Poverty was the main reason given for inability to further their education or complete apprenticeship.

Economic-Status: The average earning per day was N300 (about two dollars) for labour and N700 (five dollars) for skilled artisan. The irregularity of the earning was a major issue. Many complained that sometimes for three weeks, no one would pick them up. About 56% never had regular paid employment; the remaining 44% once had but got retrenched.

Attitude to Self-employment: About 97% would like to go into self-employment and all of them preferred to go to their abandoned profession/skill if given adequate start-up capital. 37% of the respondents have been fully involved in self-employment at one time or the other before, the main reason for quitting being inadequate finance. The only respondent who wanted to go to paid employment was the one who had the highest qualification.

Knowledge of Government Assistance: 81% of respondents replied that they were not aware of any program by the government to assist the unemployed. The 19% who confirmed having heard about two of such programs namely the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and the Poverty Alleviation Program complained about the ineffectiveness. They stated that some officials came to obtain their names and asked them to report in their office in Oshogbo some time ago and nothing came out of it despite their repeated visits to the office. This is a rather poor assessment of the performance of NDE which was set up in 1986, by the Federal government. One of the objectives was to solve the problem of youth unemployment. The NDE was to collaborate with informal sector master craftsmen in the skill development of the individual who would then be assisted to be self-employed or take up paid employment.

The idea of a job centre was strange to all except one of the respondents who claimed that he heard about one in Lagos in the 1960s.

Kind of Assistance Required from the Government

71% responded that government should give financial assistance for self-employment, 13%

responded that government should create jobs for the unemployed, while 13% stated that government should do both. The Federal government in 1989 and 1990 respectively launched the People's Bank (now defunct) and the Community Banks. While the Community Banks were established to bridge the gap in the credit needs of the rural population, the People's bank were set up to meet the credit needs of micro enterprises who do not normally qualify for the credit requirement of the regular banking system. It would appear from the findings of the research project that the impact of the two institutions was not adequately felt.

Leadership and Conflict Resolution

Interviews were held with their leaders and also with some neighbors, whose shops were close to the gathering centre to obtain additional historical and sociological information. As stated earlier the Sabo road junction was originally a point of meeting for Bricklayers. The Bricklayers still have an association and a leader who is generally recognized as the leader of the whole group of casual labour. The leader is called an "Are". The appointment is on the basis of length of service and the "Are" must be a native of Ife, while a non- native is appointed as the Deputy.

From the information gathered, the group operates peacefully and conflict is not a common phenomenon. The main source of conflict is when someone comes and wants to pick up a number of casual labourers. He/she looks at their faces and picks the number required. Naturally every one will want to offer him/her self and they tend to surround the person. After selection, he would ask them to stay together and wait while he goes to bring transport to convey them to the site. Before arriving, other casual labourers would have rushed to join the ones selected and conflict often arises thereby. According to the Acting 'Are' who was interviewed, if the casual labourers fail to resolve such conflicts amongst themselves and chaos arises, the 'Are' will intervene. He will disband the group and not allow any of them to go. The potential employer will now be asked to pick some other labourers.

Security-Robbery and Kidnapping

Apparently, robbery at the road junction is very rare. Contrary to the investigator's view that

car snatching and robbery would be rampant, it was discovered, surprisingly that such occurrence was almost nil. Perhaps this can be explained to be due to the fact there are always about 200 able bodied people at the junction for most of the day. This makes an attack very risky for any gang of robbers as they can be easily overpowered and mercilessly dealt with. The neighboring landlords confirmed that no case of rioting or armed robbery at the location was ever reported. However, cases of house breaking and robbery in Ile-Ife and environs are common and this is generally believed not to be unconnected with increasing youth unemployment in the area. On the contrary the casual labourers are the ones really exposed to risk because of the informal arrangement whereby they can follow anyone who comes along to pick them.

The deputy 'Are' informed the investigator that there had been cases of attempted kidnapping in the past. A case was reported of a woman who came in a Peugeot station wagon and said she wanted someone to clear the surrounding of her house for her. One of them (name withheld) followed and to his surprise the driver took them outside Ife through Osu, Ilesha to Ondo to one lonely house. He believed she used diabolic means on him because he was just watching and could not put up any resistance. The woman kept promising that she would assist him out of his financial problem and that she would want him to pretend as if he was her first born. He was later left in the house alone for over one hour with the keys. He started opening all the rooms out of sheer inquisitiveness to see what was there. According to him in one of the wardrobes, he discovered a bodiless human head-carrying calabash. He ran out of the building at that point and saw a man some houses away who warned him that he may be kidnapped and that he should run for dear life. The man then showed him how to get out of the area. On another occasion, a man came and took two labourers (women) away to an isolated uncompleted building. He asked them to wait for him. After leaving, some strange people were coming to greet them. The two women became suspicious and ran away.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The urban road junction casual labour problem is a fall out of the problem of rural-urban migration. About 42% of the respondents were

immigrants. In fact if the Hausa population were taken into consideration, the percentage would be as high as 80% since the population of Hausa (from northern states) casual labour is as high as that of the population of the Yoruba's (from southwest states).

The casual labourers were there by force and not by choice. The group formed a large proportion of the urban poor, which can be confirmed by the socio-economic status of the labourers. Their historical, sociological and economic background, looks and appearance depict a condition of abject poverty.

The casual labourers constitute a waste of human resources and this is confirmed by the educational status and skill acquisition status. 83% had formal education, of this 75% had full primary education and a third had full secondary education. Besides not less than 74% had learnt one trade or the other.

The existence of the group and location could not said to be a social menace in terms of robbery at the location. However the group constitutes early morning traffic obstruction, which the road traffic policemen always try to control. That aside, the people were found to be relatively peaceful and law abiding. No case of rioting or armed robbery by the group was ever reported. Even when conflicts arose as a result of rushing to would be employers, a peaceful way of resolving such conflict was already in place.

There is the possibility of integration of these casual labourers into the main stream of economic development with properly focused and adequate policy measures. Apart from the basic academic and skill level of the group which was far beyond expectation, they all showed keen interest and willingness to be rehabilitated by government through job creation or self-employment.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The neglect of the urban centre unemployment problem by the government is obvious. This neglect was not due to lack of national policy but largely as a result of non-implementation of the provision in Development plans. For example the Development plan of 1981-85, contained specific provisions for solving school leavers' unemployment problem. Subsequent Development plans were equally eloquent on the issue. There is need for the

government to pay more attention to policy implementation so that the goods can be delivered to the grass root.

- Road junction casual labour group probably represents the poorest of the urban poor. They face a situation of abject poverty in the midst of a seemingly affluent urban society. Government should address this dichotomy urgently.
- The caliber of the unemployed youth, their educational levels, and professional skills should give the planners special concern as this represents a monumental waste of human resources. These skills and talents should not be allowed to rust away by the roadside. There is need for further skill development as well as need for job creation to absorb the skill. Alternatively they should be motivated and facilitated to be self-employed. Provision of micro-finance for business start-up is crucial here.
- Organized labour market i.e. job centers should be provided where the unemployed can go and register and where the potential employers of labour can go for recruitment. This way, orderliness will be introduced into labour recruitment.
- There is need for government to give adequate policy support to the urban informal sector to enable it tap the employment potentials of the sector to the fullest.
- Finally there is need for the various organs of the government with responsibility for grass root development, youth employment and self-employment schemes, to make their impact felt more effectively in both the urban and rural area

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