

Labour Administration, Economic Development and Democratic Participation in Africa

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ABSTRACT The development question is still a major issue in contemporary Africa. The fact that there has not been any qualitative change in the lives of the vast majority of the people has made many interested observers to wonder if the various countries have adopted the right development strategy. It is against this background that this paper examined the role of the labour administration system in facilitating the development process. It was observed that in spite of the centrality of the employment relationship and the actors therein to the generation of national wealth necessary for ensuring development, labour administrators are not accorded a pride of place in the scheme of things. The paper then argued that there is no way Africa can make progress if those with the right expertise and who are key to the development process are excluded. It is then concluded that if Africa is to make progress, the development process must be people-centred and this is only possible if a broad spectrum of the African society, including the system of labour administration, is involved in formulating the content and direction of development and this in itself is in the spirit of democratic participation.

INTRODUCTION

A broad coalition of groups in the different countries; professional politicians, organized labour, peasants, students and women, waged the struggle for political independence in Africa. This broad involvement was hinged on the premise and hope that independent nationhood would redress the inadequacies and shortcomings of the colonial project and ensure for the African people life more abundant, especially as they would have the opportunity of expressing themselves as free citizens thereby realizing their full potentials as human beings. Unfortunately, the expectations remained largely unfulfilled decades after, because the dividends of independence have been cornered by a few who constitute the indigenous elite that equally took over the privileges (often undeserved) hitherto enjoyed by the erstwhile colonial masters. The indigenous elite equally continued the politics of exclusion that fails to reckon with popular aspirations and inputs as crucial elements in genuine development efforts.

Since the attainment of political independence most of the approaches to development have not benefited the vast majority of the African people. Rather, it is only the parasitic few in government, their foreign mentors and collaborators as well as the local comprador elements that have benefited from the scheme of

things. The situation could not have been otherwise given that these development schemes were foisted on seemingly hapless governments by the international development and finance institutions to suit their own interests. Allied to this is that the dominant approach to development has been the "top-down" approach which has refused to factor in the common good into the development equation. The situation today is such that in spite of the rich resource base of Africa, most Africans live below the poverty line, making them susceptible to hunger and disease. The various National Poverty Reduction Programmes being packaged by various African governments at the instance of the World Bank (just like the various structural adjust programmes of the 1980s and 1990s) is an open admission of the crisis proportion which the incidence of poverty has assumed in the continent.

The frustrations engendered by 'failed development' in Africa has led to renewed calls for the involvement of a broad spectrum of African societies in determining both the content and focus of development policies not just as passive elements but as active stakeholders. In actual fact, the main thrust of discourse on development is on the relationship between democracy and development, the argument being that democracy is a pre-condition for development (see Hyden, 1997; Onimode, 1997). It would appear as if people are moving away from the

premise that the state is a rational instrument of controlling and promoting change to that of disillusionment, questioning, as it were, the ability of the state to deliver on its responsibilities to the citizenry (Hyden, 1997).

Production of goods and services, which is central to the development process, largely takes place within a formalized employment relationship. This relationship is structured and mediated by a number of structures, institutions and legislation, all of which are located within the framework of the labour administration system. Article 1 of the ILO Convention 150 defines labour administration as “public administration activities in the field of national labour policy (incorporating labour, employment and vocational training) while the 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 form of decentralized administration and any institutional framework for the coordination of activities of such bodies and for consultation with and participation by employers’ and workers’ organizations (see ILO, 1978 for details). Implied in this conception of labour administration is the need for the social partners to make inputs into national labour policy and given the centrality of the employment relationship to national development efforts, this (social partners’ input) should also extend to all other aspects of macro development policies that affect it. This is because the quality and effectiveness of development policies are partly a function of the level of involvement of the stakeholders and intended beneficiaries.

It is against the above background that this paper examines the interaction and interface of labour administration and economic development and the need to for the democratic participation of all stakeholders in the development process. This involvement should start within the employment relationship but must extend beyond the factory gates. It is the contention of this paper that this is both desirable and practicable.

LABOUR ADMINISTRATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT

It should be stated right away that work, its organisation and management as well as the

interaction among those involved in the world of work are of crucial importance to the development process and the survival of the society. The demands of society for various goods and services can only be met through the productive activities of those engaged in work. It then becomes necessary to protect workers from extreme abuse and establish the framework as well as the ground-norm for the interaction of the actors involved in the work arena. The various international labour standards and national legislation across countries address these needs. Laws for social protection of employees developed in the second half of the 19th century against the background of the excessive exploitation of workers and international control bodies were established to ensure compliance with the new laws. It is the essential duty of labour administration to enforce labour legislation and to offer solutions to the various and complex problems the world of work faces.

From the earliest beginning labour administration had a dual responsibility; social and economic (Marimbert, 1997). This trend has continued till the present times such that national labour policies are generally part of the overall social and economic development policies. Regularly, labour policies cover issues such as full employment, training, welfare of the work force, prices and incomes, terms and conditions of employment, occupational safety and health, social security, workers’, living conditions and development of social institutions. Undoubtedly, the manner in which the issues are handled will go a long way in determining the direction of national development.

It is recognized today that labour administration has a role to play in sustainable human development. A number of developments have helped in this regard. These include the growth of trade unions as “a countervailing power to industrialization and capital”, the awakened social consciousness of the world after the traumatic experiences of the two world wars and establishment of international cooperation in the form of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Michael Walin, quoted in ILO, 1982). The major objectives of the ILO are to promote social justice, equality and non-discrimination in the world of work. These are considered essential ingredients to ensure the goals of development. To add that an efficient labour administration system is essential in order to ensure the attainment of the

objectives of the ILO, is saying the obvious. It is just enough to add that these goals are also in consonance with the imperative of national development anywhere in the world, particularly the developing countries of Africa.

The emergence of labour administration in African countries and the tasks imposed on them were dictated by the needs of the colonial enterprise. Unlike what obtained in post-industrial revolution Europe where what amounts to labour administration developed to protect workers from extreme abuse and exploitation, the situation in colonial Africa was different. Africans were forced into wage employment against their own wishes in order to serve the interests of colonialism. Against this background, the labour administration systems were not worker-friendly. Rather they operated mainly as coercive forces in the service of colonial subjugation.

In post-colonial Africa this image has taken so long to change largely because the process of reforming the corpus of labour legislation and policies inherited at independence has been very slow. For example, in Nigeria it took exactly 30 years before some token amendments were effected in the Factories Act and Workmen's Compensation Act. While they were enacted by the colonial government in 1957, they were only reviewed in 1987. Yet these are enactments that have serious implications for the welfare and well being of workers. The image and effectiveness of African labour administration systems have not been helped by the low priority accorded their operations as reflected in paltry budgetary allocations. This much was admitted by Mwashimba(1999) and Richtofen(1999). Mwashimba insists, "It is known that Labour Ministries all over the world, in the majority of cases in developing countries, are allocated very little money. The Labour Ministry's share of the national budget was below 1%"(p.31). In some countries the situation is such that when public servants are posted to the Ministry of Labour, such postings are regarded as punitive!

However, in spite of these, it is important to note that various labour administration systems in Africa have been able to address some of the problems besetting the employment relationship and which threaten national development by endangering the production process. This is to the extent that the systems have earned the respect of the other two social partners, namely

labour and private employers. What is lacking and which should be addressed is the failure of labour administrators themselves to assert their relevance as facilitators of any process of genuine national development. This demands that they play a more pro-active role in the process. The interaction of labour administrators with the major actors in the economic sphere puts them in a vantage position to do this. This is particularly so in an era that poses a lot of challenges, not only for labour administration alone but for the entire development process.

There are a lot of complex problems besetting the world of work in the wake of rapid "globalization" of the new world economy. The process of globalization is accompanied by restrictions and inequalities, which, in turn, have created tensions and upheavals which threaten industrial peace and harmony. There are genuine fears that the fundamental rights of workers may be compromised in a bid to attract foreign investment while companies from the developed countries are likely to transfer production technologies and machineries that endanger both the health and safety of workers. The erosion of workers' rights was witnessed in the export processing zones (see Adewumi, 1997) as well as under the various adjustments regimes in Africa.

An examination of some of the functions of modern labour administration will show that labour administration, properly utilized is a veritable tool for development. Article 2(a-b) of ILO Convention 150 provide that the competent bodies within the labour administration system should:

a) participate in the preparation, administration, coordination, checking and review of national laws and regulations,

b) study and keep under review the situation of employed, unemployed and underemployed persons, taking into account national laws and regulations and national practice concerning conditions of work and working life and terms of employment, draw attention to defects and abuses in such conditions and terms and submit proposals on means to overcome them (ILO, 1978).

It can be said that the above underscores the need for clear, stable and acceptable rules to streamline and regulate individual and collective relations at work. Considering these would certainly help in attracting the much sought after

foreign and domestic investors. In addition, by devising effective and efficient protective measures for workers and dispute settlement machineries, labour administration can help reduce disputes, thus avoiding unnecessary losses occasioned by work stoppages thereby promoting productivity (ILO, 1999). If we also take into account that the system is expected to identify and implement vocational training tools to acquire necessary skill needed for economic and social participation, the importance of labour administration in the scheme of things becomes clearer.

From another perspective entirely, the interaction and closeness of labour administrators to labour and business make them aware of developments in, and needs of, the world of work. This should help them in making vital inputs into national development policies, especially alternatives that will make the difference to the lives of the people and the country. This is particularly so at a time of economic reforms that have been foisted on many countries, reforms which have so far failed to create the advertised positive impact. Some of the components of the reform packages such as trade liberalization have thrown many African workers out of employment in the same dialectical process in which workers in the advanced countries whose goods flood African economies are kept on their jobs. Given the implications of some of these policies on employment creation (a major function of labour administration) and the overall health of the economy, labour administrators, based on their own professional knowledge should advise on, and be involved in designing, policy options.

The point in issue here is that labour administrators should not just be consigned to the role of managing the social consequences of economic policy options. Rather they should be active participants in the process of formulating economic development policies. The fact that the outcome of the interactions of the actors involved in the system is central to the development process makes this imperative. In order to do this, officials of the labour administration systems must develop the capacity to analyse, forecast and evaluate developments within the economy and polity. A well thought out programme of training and development would help in this regard.

DEVELOPMENT, DEMOCRACY AND POPULAR PARTICIPATION

The debate on the relationship between development and democracy is not really new. It is just that it has regained some momentum, especially in Africa, in the last decade. This has been triggered, in part, by the failure of the various programmes of structural adjustment to effect the advertised turn-around in the plight of African economies. According to Williams (1994), "The inability of governments to secure their fiscal bases and to satisfy the various constituents undermined their legitimacy and led to the emergence of popular movements demanding democratic reforms (ROAPE, 60:214). Essentially what is being witnessed is the reactivation of civil society to ensure responsive and responsible governance, which is necessary if people are to benefit from development efforts. After all, development is about, and for people. Even the World Bank has joined the advocacy for popular participation in development (see the World Development Report for 1997 for details of the World Bank position). The support of the World Bank for what has been labeled "the bottom-up" approach to development may appear to be a clever way of distancing itself from the problems created by its various economic reform packages imposed on developing countries.

The development debacle or what has been described as the crisis of underdevelopment in Africa today is largely due to the shortcomings of the dominant strategies of industrialization and development adopted since the attainment of independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This has been aggravated by large scale corruption, gross mismanagement and lack of transparency and accountability on the part of those in position of public trust (see Frimpong and Jacques, 1999). The insistence on popular participation in the national development process is hinged on the premise that development wisdom does not reside in one place alone. Hyden (1997) puts it quite eloquently in the following words:

"From both a leftist and rightist perspective, the state was viewed as an instrument of exploitation, pre-empting popular or individual initiative. As the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, analysts now maintain that development wisdom is lodged not in government bureaucracies but in local

communities and institutions” (in Burbidge, 1997: 18).

It is further argued that active citizen participation is needed for the organization and functioning of development activities while communication of information and ideas is needed to encourage participation and to guard against abuses of state power (Hyden, 1997). The abuse of state power has resulted in a situation in which policies are designed to suit the interests of the ruling elite and not the entire nation.

The paradox of the African situation is that African governments subscribe to many international instruments and have even come up with their own declarations on the desirability of popular participation in development. These include the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 21:1), African Declaration on Cooperation, Development and Economic Independence (adopted by a Conference of Heads of States and Government in 1973), The African Charter on the Rights of Man and People’s Rights (adopted in June 1981 by the OAU Summit Meeting), the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the African Charter on Popular Participation in Development (adopted in Arusha, Tanzania in 1990). However, in spite of all these beautiful declarations, there is not much on ground to suggest that African governments are willing to allow for popular participation in government, nay the entire development process. When organizations insist on making inputs into policies, they are often accused of trying to bring the government down or of not having the mandate to have a say in government affairs. What is difficult to understand is why governments who claim to be democratic would find it difficult to accommodate dissenting and divergent views in the management of common affairs?

At a symposium organized by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS) in 1982, there was a consensus of opinion that:

“Democratisation should be extended to all national development sectors and considered both as a process and as a situation. Considered as a process, democratization of development takes the form of measures, structures and policies which partners in development design and implement jointly so as to build up a new economic, social and cultural society as part of a new world order. Considered as a situation, democratization of national development would

...politically (lead to) a release of the creative forces of human resources and a new organization of the citizens conducive to effective participation by them, in the definition of their destiny and that of their country; economically, organisation of the means and relations of production so that vital forces of the African countries shall contribute to the true economic change needed to ensure the well-being of the local, sub-regional and regional population” (OAU/IILS, 1982:4).

If this was a consensus reached by a forum organized jointly by the OAU as far back as 1982, the only explanation for the politics of exclusion is the lack of political will on the part of managers of state affairs to give effect to the ideals they claim to believe in. Herein lies the challenge to the civil society (which includes some of the actors in the work arena), which has been described as the political side of society outside the state structure and which “connects individual citizens with the public realm and the state” (Hyden, 1997: 18).

The view of democracy and development that emerges from the 1982 OAU/IILS symposium referred to earlier is that they are multidimensional and the realization of the ideals contained in them should involve all. As such it is totally unacceptable to define democracy only in terms of the ritual of periodic election. In any case, when people are elected into public offices, they are elected to carry out the wishes of the electors and they should be ready to receive and accommodate inputs, solicited and unsolicited, through various platforms available to the people. It is, therefore, up to the civil society to make governments live up to their responsibilities and the various declarations made in respect of allowing for popular participation in development.

Along this line, the civil society only needs to re-discover itself and put to good use its immense potentialities. The civil society has always been there. According to Atkisson (1997):

“Civil society, in the form of self-organised groups of people committed to the betterment of human life, existed long before corporations, governments or market economies emerged... Civil society exists wherever human beings gather together to achieve a common purpose, outside the boundaries of government or the market economy” (Burbidge, 1997: 28).

There is the need for civil society to contest the democratic space with operators of state

apparatus. In playing an active and productive role in the development process, existing platforms and structures can be put to profitable use. These include the numerous cultural associations, community-based associations and organizations (CBOs and CBAs), cooperative and mutual aid societies, artisanal groups as well as professional associations. Since these associations have a certain level of organization, they only need to take on issues of governance as 'additional' responsibilities at no extra cost to the organization. During regular meetings development issues of interest to members should be discussed and positions taken on them as prelude to public advocacy and campaigns. The platform provided could also be used for advocacy on issues of public interest.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to ask where the labour administration system comes in, in all these. The centrality of the employment relationship, which is coordinated by the system of labour administration, to the development process was earlier stressed. Given that a number of macro-development policy issues affect the operations of the actors involved in the work arena, any attempt at democratizing the development process must address employment relations and reckon with those involved. The concept of social partnership must be truly brought into play in the world of work and the actors must be given a role along with other stakeholders in society. The need to democratize both the employment relationship and the development process has been stressed elsewhere (Adewumi, 1992, 1995 and 1998). Suffice it to say again that the actors involved have a stake in the development of society and there is no justification for their continued exclusion. The demands and challenges of present times impose great responsibilities on labour administration systems. These are much more than the traditional policing function to ensure compliance with labour laws. There is the need to do more, especially in a rapidly changing economic order in which developing countries are becoming increasingly disadvantaged. Labour administration systems must constantly keep track of the economic and social actors so that they may gauge all the necessary factors for the development, implementation and the enforcement of national labour policy responsive to development aspirations of the generality of the people.

CONCLUSION

The failure of policies and the imperative of people-centred development demand the democratization of both work relations and political relations in the society. If development is really about people, then people must, as of right, have inputs into both the process and content of national development. And since democracy is about popular participation and representation, this should cover both the political and economic dimensions. The involvement of people in all sphere of a democratic society should be regarded as the basic minimum condition to ensure for the African people a decent and humane existence. Within this context, no group should arrogate to itself the sole prerogative to manage and govern others without their critical inputs and active involvement in the process. The labour administration systems in which all the actors are recognized as equal partners should be part of this process.

The failure of previous development options to benefit all segments of society makes it imperative for us to seriously consider alternative development paradigms that put people, and not markets, at the center of development. All available structures should be used to effect this. Given current developments all over the world, Africa cannot afford not to bring every segment of society on board of the boat of development. The unending conflicts in the continent are partly the result of the failure of those in power to accommodate the interests of all.

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