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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA
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THE REGIONAL SEMINAR
ON
"EMPLOYMENT IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN"

Prepared
by
Jean Casimir



The Regional Seminar
on
"Employment in the Commonwealth Caribbean"
(Jamaica - 11 to 13 September 1975)

The Regional Seminar on Employment in the Commonwealth Caribbean, held in Kingston, Jamaica, from 11 to 13 September 1975, was the outcome of a resolution taken at the third Pre-ILO Conference in St. Lucia (1974) by the different Ministers of Labour of the area. It was agreed that "in view of the urgent need to promote public understanding of the possibilities of promoting and developing higher levels of employment in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Community Secretariat should seek the International Labour Organization's assistance in holding a Regional Seminar on employment and manpower development". (Letter from V. Tokman, PREALC, 15 August 1975).

The meeting was attended by Senior Officers attached to Ministries of Labour, Planning, Social Affairs, Youth and Community Development, of the various territories. It is to be noted that delegates from Surinam, Netherlands Antilles and Haiti were also invited, as well as observers from International Agencies working in the area.

The Seminar helped PREALC (Regional Employment Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean) to make itself known and to establish contact with the eventual beneficiaries of its activities in the region.

Papers and discussions in the Seminar can be divided into three groups:

- a) Appraisal and measurement of employment and under-employment;
- b) policy measures to maximize employment; and
- c) technical assistance and regional strategy.

Appraisal and measurement of employment

Due to the composition of the audience, challenging statements and new developments in this field did not receive the interest they deserved. Civil servants were rather interested in concrete steps to

tackle a supposedly already understood and evaluated problem. As a matter of fact, progress in appraisal and measurement were in line with basic assumptions within the framework of traditional human resources theories (or lack of it).

As usual, demand for the labour force was the forgotten dimension. Basic concepts for the study of the supply situation were scrutinized and data from different censuses and territories were compared. A call for systematic and periodic surveys was formulated and minimum information for manpower planning presented in the form of recommendations, later on adopted by the delegations.

Minimum information for manpower planning should include - it seems - data on: (a) the adult population; (b) the labour force; (c) the working population; (d) the unemployed; (e) present vacancies by industry and special skills required, if any, to fill them; (f) short-term and long-term plans for expansion by industry; and (g) persons undergoing training at home and abroad, type of training, etc.

To these ideas presented by Norma Abdulah (UWI) in her paper "Statistical Information for Employment Policies in the Commonwealth Caribbean", are to be added some proposals embodied in the PREALC report on "Foreign Aid, Technology and Employment in the Commonwealth Caribbean". These aimed at underlining the equal importance of unemployment and under-employment. In so doing, they pin-pointed the role of the "informal sector", and applied to the region a useful distinction between primary (heads of household) and secondary labour force.

Distinction between primary and secondary labour force is in fact the only technical novelty proposed in the analysis of human resources. (En passant, I wonder why the words "human resources" were never heard during the seminar). This distinction seems of the utmost importance for the diagnosis of poverty and the vicious circles that tend to strengthen abject poverty, and through this bias it may help to introduce correctives in certain employment policy measures. In so far

as manpower planning in the Caribbean is concerned, one does not see how measurement of the size of the weakest stratum in the labour force (those who have no bargaining power) could help in an effort to diminish unemployment and poverty. For PREALC this seems to be a matter of course.

Policy measures

A rather tedious exercise was undertaken by the delegates, as they were asked to summarize policy measures enacted in their respective territories. A long list was drawn up and the most recurrent items as well as new devices were included in the final recommendations. One might quote as examples: guaranteed minimum wages, worker participation in enterprise, productive employment opportunities for women, and the like.

Technical Assistance and Regional Strategy

Half of PREALC's paper is devoted to the analysis of technical assistance from UN family organizations and of the role of other foreign financial agencies. From discussions following the presentation, it seems correct to infer that irrespective of the appropriateness of PREALC's reflections, they were bypassed, since the delegations were trying to make an inventory of local resources and were prepared to look at the external support only as secondary resources. In fact probably PREALC's intentions did not depart from that; but lengthy statements on the role of all organizations oriented discussions to the verge of embarrassing situations.

CARICOM's report, prepared by A.S. Boissiero, focuses mainly regional strategies. Its recommendations deriving from an overall analysis of causes of unemployment in the region looked more consistent and were in most cases accepted as those of the Seminar. Among those recommendations, one reads: a) production of goods and services with high local content; b) expansion of market for local goods through appropriate income distribution policies;

c) research and development in indigenous technologies; d) development of schools directly related to manpower requirements; e) production of hand tools for agriculture and industry; and, f) composition of capital inflows favourable to loans related to direct investment.

Some Comments

Papers produced at the Seminar and the discussions they raised were by all means very important as a briefing to ECLA-POS's social development unit. The seminar was a sort of snapshot on the "state of the art". One had on one side some scholars and some technical assistance personnel, and on the other high and medium level decision-makers. The latter do not seem to be very satisfied by the former's proposals, but they did not raise any questions that would push the intellectuals and "experts" out of their basic premises. What a delegate called the underlying philosophy of development looked fairly agreed upon, but no strategy seems effective enough, except the one which will tackle "all the complex aspects" of the problem and which is still to be formulated.

It seems useful to codify some of the basic agreements between scholars and civil servants at this seminar:

- 1) It is taken for granted that there is an equation between employment and wealth. Only two persons stated briefly that the point was not labour, but income. This remark was bypassed, since everybody seems to believe that the more one works, the richer one will be. It would have been improper to ask: what is labour for in the West Indies context?
- 2) From this agreed point on, very relevant academic and administrative skills are invested in measuring those who are and who are not working. Number of employed or unemployed, inclusion or exclusion in the economically active population of those "willing and available to work", right down to the diagnosis of those who cannot afford to be unemployed (PREALC's report p. 5) become themes of "scientific" exercises. Since the axiom is "he who

works will earn", from this description, one jumps to "planning" in response to the commitment to full employment. Somebody should dare to raise the question: how does labour create wealth in the Caribbean? What is the mechanism which links working to having?

- 3) Full employment being the ultimate goal, the study of the supply of labour becomes amazingly the only relevant chapter of human resources development. Among the 7 items considered by N. Abdulah as "basic minimum for the planning of employment strategy" only one deals with purchase of labour. It does not seem necessary to find out what relation vocational training, population control, lengthening the period of schooling bear to full employment or simply to employment. It is admitted that he who is trained will find a job, so money spent by the state is in the benefit of the would-be employees. Yet before embarking on recommendations, one feels inclined to ask: What is the rate of absorption of skilled manpower? To what extent the shortage is an obstacle to development? To what extent and how is it actually overcome? What are the alternative social and financial costs of workable solutions? ... In a word, what are the characteristics and mechanisms of the demand for skilled and unskilled labour force?
- 4) The purchase side of labour markets is not studied as such, in view of serious methodological difficulties (no censuses, high costs of specific surveys ...). But one wonders if it is not in view of some mental block: how can one speak of purchase, when the labour force is defined as an aggregate of human beings? Nevertheless, are human beings the only unit of data for the study of the labour force? Obviously one would never question the demographic censuses; but should economic censuses have a demographic bias? It seems that everybody knows what is sold and bought on the labour market. Is it jobs, or occupations?

Demand for the labour force, if ever mentioned, is seen as a matter of requirements. Requirements must be met. No question seems pertinent here either: the educational system must be modified to comply with the demand of development... since what is to be purchased, must be supplied. But how the requirements come into existence?

Requirement is a matter of technology. Therefore decisions on labour or capital-intensive technology are the clue to expand the demand for the labour force, bearing in mind that key-sectors must be internationally competitive. It is recommended to stimulate the creation of indigenous technology. Actually it is held as self-evident that the bridge separating technological progress and absorption (purchase) of technology in the productive system is easy to cross. The meaning of obsolescence and its bearing on vocational training are not a relevant issue for happy planners.

In any case, assuming an easy absorption of new indigenous technology, before engaging sums in this venture, wouldn't it be wise to clarify the actual purchase of labour force in such activities that presently are using labour-intensive technology? And the prospects!

Moreover, is it obvious that the whole (or the main part of) labour force fits either in the supply or in the demand side of the labour market? Or do we take for reality the clever assumption that the employer demands his own labour force, when he is self-employed? What is self-employment (here in the Caribbean)?

- 5) Finally, unlike other branches of knowledge, few references (actually none) are made to research by those who have challenging standpoints. It seems to be a matter of having "good" definitions, (premises being agreed upon, no theoretical justification is needed for the definitions) in order to classify supply and to proceed to its allocation. Field studies on the rural Caribbean - and they are numerous - are never quoted. It is taken for granted that West Indians have a principal occupation, like anybody else in the world (!) and from this point on, statistics are compiled and strategies formulated.

Studies dealing precisely with how concretely people work here are disregarded. One has to ask: how can a scholar speak of labour in Jamaica, without challenging L. Comitas' concept of occupational multiplicity (1964), not to speak of labour in areas of Barbados (Chalky Mount) where "close to 70% of the labourers are also

engaged in small-scale farming, 63 per cent of them renting their 'working lands' from the plantations for which they work" (1965).

Indeed, one wonders what is employment? Or what does employment become when human resources analysts approach it? In 1956, M.G. Smith, wrote A Report on Labour Supply in Rural Jamaica (Kingston, Jamaica: Government Printer where it can be read:

"Farming is an occupation which is rarely carried out independently of other pursuits. Pure wage work is also relatively rare. The typical employment status and occupational combination for Jamaican-small-farming populations involve own-account farming and ad hoc wage work" (p.5).

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