

YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT

It is a well documented fact that 20-25 per cent of the total labour force is unemployed or under-employed in the developing countries. It is also recognised that on average more than 50 per cent of the total unemployed belong to the younger age groups. Furthermore predictions indicate that the situation will not improve unless special efforts are made to solve unemployment among the young.

But this is not as straightforward as it sounds. A number of factors contribute to the problem:

Population has increased more rapidly than total wage employment; growth in industrial and manufacturing output has not resulted in proportionate growth and employment opportunities; rural-urban migration has led to the exodus of rural youth to urban centres - a situation which contributes largely to heavy urban unemployment; the education system has generally failed to meet manpower requirements; a range of socio-cultural factors have inculcated inappropriate values in terms of aspirations and expectations of job-seeking youth.

All these factors serve to illustrate that youth unemployment cannot be considered in isolation, but must be tackled within the overall context of economic and social development.

The point is further emphasised by looking at the young population most likely to experience unemployment - the millions of rural youth who have never had the opportunity to be economically productive, many of whom subsequently become urban migrants; the large number of school leavers and graduates who have been victims of an education which has proved irrelevant to the needs of society, and have first-hand experience of the so-called "mismatch between educational qualifications and job requirements";

and the population of young women and girls who face various kinds of discrimination in employment.

The young unemployed are not a uniform group, but they do share a common problem. They are all deprived of the chance to participate in the development process.

Clearly taking all these factors into account employment problems of young people require both short and long-term action. Suggested policies have included:

Intensifying family planning programmes; creating employment in various sectors of the economy particularly by encouraging investment in labour-intensive sectors; establishment of effective national employment services, including vocational guidance; educational policies to guarantee an education more suitable for job requirements; and integrated rural development schemes.

It is generally agreed that policies such as these will lead to the creation of additional employment opportunities in the modern sector, in the services sector and in the rural/agricultural sector.

An examination of the problem of youth unemployment under particular circumstances provides further insights. For instance, unemployment amongst young people in the Commonwealth Caribbean is especially serious and is getting worse.

According to the census in 1960, unemployment was running at 10 per cent of the labour force in Trinidad and Tobago, and 9 per cent in Jamaica. Ten years later, these figures had risen dramatically, to 23 per cent and 22 per cent respectively. But within these high rates unemployment was unevenly divided, and worst hit were the young. Although unemployment is difficult to measure, as many as half of all those under 25 years of age in the Caribbean might presently be out of work, and looking for it.

These young job-seekers, it appears, are primarily those with considerable education. They are also migrants from country areas; and they are dependants and first-time job-seekers, not house-owners or the family's sole wage earners.

In other words, the problem of unemployment amongst young people in the Caribbean is not entirely the problem of "basic needs". It affects those young people who move to the cities looking for work and fail to find it, rather than older people who are living and working at subsistence wages in the country.

There is some evidence to suggest that because of particular local circumstances young people might be more choosy about work in the Caribbean than in other countries of the Commonwealth. Iain Guest examines the problem and some solutions proposed to resolve it in the following report:

Work for Those Who Want It

Sugar is the most important industry on the island of Barbados (population 236,000 people). In 1974 it brought Barbados 45 per cent of all export earnings, and in 1975 considerably more owing to the high price of sugar (up to £600 a ton on the world market).

In addition, sugar provides work. Out of a total workforce of 89,800 in 1971, 6,187 were employed cutting and heading sugar cane on the large estates (not counting the 19,000 small-holders who worked their own estates, most on less than 10 acres). But of these, 6,187 only 154 were under 30, while 3,080 were over the age of 51. Young people just weren't interested, it seems.

It might be argued that this is because there is no future in this field. Jobs in the sugar industry are decreasing owing to increased mechanisation. The number of mechanical cane cutters (each capable of doing the work of 25 men) employed in Barbados doubled to 40 last year. Yet there were still more jobs available in the Barbados sugar industry than there were people willing to take them. In one year recently people came from the neighbouring (and poorer) island of St. Vincent to Barbados - to cut sugar cane during the six month reaping season. In the same period 700 Barbadians went north to the United States of

America and spent six months cutting sugar there! They included two young men, Artegh Gilkes, 28, and Alfred Stewart, 27, who each earned \$2,000 - \$3,000 for their work.

Why did they go when there were jobs for them at home? Alfred Stewart is frank about it. "I like money", he says, "and I like what money can buy in North America". Pay rises in June of last year brought plantation wages in Barbados up to \$11.60 for women and \$14 for men (a day). Experienced cutters, say plantation workers, can earn up to \$90 a week (approximately £19). And this is comparatively high for the rural sector in a Third World country. But the work is hard, the hours are long, and the sun is hot; and \$38 US a week does not compare with \$3,000 US for six months' work.

No Encouragement

Other Caribbean countries have had similar problems. What can be done? Many would like to see changes in education systems which, in the words of William Demas, President of the Caribbean Development Bank "generate the wrong values and attitudes towards different types of work". Demas argues for less of what he calls a "divorce" between work and school and more emphasis on vocational courses in schools.

Others see the problem as being how to persuade young people to remain in country areas instead of moving to cities and adding to the number of unemployed. Lewis Campbell, Head of the CDB's Rural Development Division thinks the first priority is a massive raising of wage levels in the country areas.

But more and more are coming to see land reforms as the answer. Says Frederick Smith, the Minister of Education for Barbados, "Suppose I work on a plantation for you for 40 years and at the end of that period I still have my little 10' by 9' board and shingle house on your plantation which you can ask me to leave. Here is a young boy who has gone to school; his father is in the sugar industry for 40 years and has nothing to show for it. How can this encourage him to work in sugar?"

Regional Co-operation

Within the Caribbean as a whole, the actual rate of

unemployment is, perhaps surprisingly, higher among the more developed nations than it is in less developed nations like Dominica, Montserrat, and St. Kitts-Nevis - namely about 14.3 per cent as compared to 6.7 per cent. And yet, at the same time the less developed islands like St. Vincent are falling further behind countries like Barbados. This leads to the conclusion that "Remedies to the employment problems of young people need to be viewed in the wider context of the reduction of poverty and inequality."

This was the message which emerged from the Symposium on Employment Strategies and Programmes held in the Caribbean, organised by the Commonwealth Youth Programme last October, at which Alister McIntyre the influential Head of CARICOM, the Caribbean Common Market, projected a regional labour force of between 1.5 and 1.9 million in 1980. This sets as a target the creation of half a million jobs - a daunting prospect.

Only through regional co-operation, argues **Alister McIntyre** will the jobs be created and the inequalities ironed out - just as land reform measures seem an essential prerequisite of eliminating inequalities within countries.

But others are less sanguine, concluding that full employment is simply not achievable in the Caribbean during the foreseeable future.

"It may be worthwhile to give serious consideration to ways of distributing incomes equitably without so total a reliance on employment. This would mean that given a national income, the incomes of persons who cannot get employment, or who cannot take employment because they are too old or too ill, should be assured by other means", Thus speaks Jack Harewood of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of West Indies, Trinidad.

In these days of concern about employment - and the emotive terminology used about 'spongers' and 'lay-about', it will take a lot of persuasion to get across such a revolutionary idea. But one thing everyone in the Caribbean seems agreed about - the problem of unemployment amongst young people calls for some very new initiatives.