

EMPLOYMENT IN SIERRA LEONE

Summary of a Talk by Momodu Koroma at OWL AGM 17th June 1983, Leamington Spa Library

In Sierra Leone the problem is not so much unemployment, as the creation of the right kinds of employment. There is very little between the two extremes of job opportunities and even these are riddled with problems. On one hand is the rural population largely self-employed in subsistence agriculture - an occupation which doesn't create any commercial opportunities for the country as a whole. Many of the children who in the past provided a significant amount of the labour force, now go to school, and so productivity has fallen. Once they have attended school, even if only class 1, the children don't wish to return to agriculture, as it has a very low status in the community and they feel that education has prepared them for something better. Combined with this is the lure of supposedly quick and easy money to be made in diamond-mining. The drift of people to the mines is most acute in the north, where some villages are totally deserted, even though there are very few diamonds to be found,

At the other extreme from subsistence farming is a career in the civil service, education and the government. This is more like employment structures in Great Britain, not surprisingly since the system was inherited from the colonial rulers. It was based on the British Grammar School education, very academic, leading to university, and quite inappropriate for Sierra Leone. The post-independence government has simply built on top of the structure, both in education and the civil service.

There are now some technical and vocational colleges such as at Njala University, which has courses in agricultural engineering and rural extension work. However, when the students are qualified they don't want to work in rural areas and would rather have offices in Freetown, on a par with the rest of the civil service.

There is very little training in any other field. Construction, for example, is a very low priority. Some skills may be taught to a minority through apprenticeship, but not formally. Driving is one of the most popular jobs, for which people are often not properly trained. Many licenses are given out, but there are few vehicles so the aspiring driver may end up as a boy who gets passengers for other drivers. Teaching is a popular career, especially for graduates who cannot find jobs in their chosen subject. They will become the top level in the education system. There are not enough graduate teachers to man every school and there are many teachers comfortably employed in secondary schools with only 'A' level qualifications. People with 'O' levels can teach at primary level or (occasionally secondary). Their lack of teaching skills added to an inappropriate curriculum produces poor results and so perpetuates the vicious circle. Teachers are another group who prefer not to work in rural area and the best will often be in the city. Many parents send their children to the city to get a 'good education' which leads to overcrowded classrooms and a bad education again.

The civil service is a particularly unproductive area of employment. It exists to support the political party and has no introspective function - no experts to review its structures. Consequently many people are grossly underemployed and do nothing but get paid. Outside Freetown the system breaks down totally. Everything is still based in Freetown, however inconvenient, and urban drift has led to overcrowding and pressure on friends and relatives to support the unemployed. Momodu did not offer any solutions but pointed out that the problems arose from attitudes created historically - inherited from and instilled by the colonial period.

In this context, he went on to make some points about the OWL link, which he claimed was one forum for discussing change and promoting action. Aid is an inevitable part of the link, as Sierra Leone is at a disadvantage, but understanding and sympathy make it an alternative to sheer charity which can mean just getting rid of surplus without

knowing where its going.

From his experience, Momadu felt that people in OWL were advanced in their understanding of community linking, but that we should discuss more the ideas which are on paper.

He also wondered how far the link would change our own society, and where it would go in the future.

A lively discussion followed. Many people stressed the diversity that should and does exist within the link: of interests (health, education), of experience ( in Do and Leamington Spa there is a broad cultural background with a wide variety of individuals with different ideas about their country), and of aims for OWL - from redistribution

of resources to education. Dots most important gift to Warwick District is a perspective a focus from which to look at our own society.

John Holliday drew the meeting to a close, thanked Momodu and everyone else.