

Editorial Introduction¹

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Historically, plantations can be traced back to the Portuguese Canary Islands in the 15th century. Only later, in the 16th and 17th centuries, were they set up in the New World [Wolf 1982]. Here they produced mainly sugar and cotton for the European market and were based on the use of African slave labour. Subsequently and despite the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century, they spread under the aegis of an expanding western imperialism into parts of Africa, Asia and Oceania. A wider range of food, beverages and other industrial staples were cultivated for the consumer markets and factories of the West.

To this day, plantations remain an important form of agricultural production in many parts of the world. However, fundamental changes in global economics and politics within the last few decades have substantially redefined the relationship between developed and less developed countries on the one hand and between capital and labour on the other. This has profound implications for the future development of plantations.

Plantations are no longer necessarily the obvious choice for Third World governments and transnational corporations (TNCs) seeking to improve or exploit a national economy.

Governments, in particular, are confronted by a series of difficult choices:

- Do they nationalise, encourage direct foreign investment or promote more local investment? Or do they combine one or more of these options?
- Do they consolidate the plantation sector alongside or at the expense of smallholder agriculture? Or vice-versa?
- Do they support TNCs who seek to move out of plantation production into other forms of production such as contract farming?
- Do they back the unions or the employers in industrial disputes?
- Do they give top priority to plantations as foreign exchange earners in view of long-term downward trends in the world prices of many plantation commodities, deteriorating balance of payment crises and IMF demands for 'structural adjustments'? Or do

they diversify production on plantations and concentrate more on problems of population growth, land shortage and unemployment in the surrounding rural areas?

— Do they risk antagonising the rural population who live outside plantations by trying to solve ongoing problems of citizenship, disenfranchisement and non-enfranchisement among migrant or 'alien' plantation workers?

— Do they emphasise profitability at all costs? Or do they concede to workers' demands for minimum levels of basic needs provision?

People in Plantations

The literature on plantations derives from different disciplines: agronomy, economics, history, political science, sociology and social/cultural anthropology. Nonetheless, there are recurring themes and interests which can be identified though these do not necessarily fit neatly into any one disciplinary field. For example: the debate over the 'progressive' or 'underdeveloping' impact of plantation systems on the national economy; historical discussion of slave- and indenture-based plantations; technical and agronomic concerns with improving the cultivation and processing of different plantation crops; economic analyses of commodities and commodity markets; problem-oriented studies of plantations which seek to improve various aspects of plantation production and life; and research into the complex relationship between labour and capital (work-force and management) within plantation systems.

Where do we, in this *Bulletin* stand in relation to this literature? Underlying our varied interests and experience, we are all concerned with the working and living conditions of people 'on' and 'off' plantations.² Although we recognise the value of other analyses which seek to understand the whys and wherefores of plantation production from different perspectives, we

² The terms 'on' and 'off', 'inside' and 'outside' are used throughout this *Bulletin*. Groups directly dependent on plantations for their livelihood live 'on' or 'inside' plantations; smallholders, rural workers and rural unemployed live 'outside' or 'off' plantations but their livelihoods may well be affected indirectly by them. Smallholders and rural workers engaged on contract farming schemes set up by TNCs are also, for convenience sake, referred to as living 'off' or 'outside' plantations.

¹ The contributions of other members of the plantation cluster: Susanna Davies, Colin Kirk, Richard Laing and Sulo Nair, are gratefully acknowledged.

are keen to restore the focus on people — people whose needs, rights and aspirations are as *much* legitimate goals of government and development policy as the economic goals of increased efficiency, output and profit.

The relative lack of research on people in plantations reflects a tendency for both government and donor agencies to marginalise plantation workers. Despite the major contribution made by plantation production to foreign exchange earnings, governments all too frequently disregard them because they are politically weak. Donor agencies, for their part, often do not understand the kinds of intervention appropriate to development on plantations. This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* is intended to deepen our awareness of the constraints on and opportunities for programmes designed by and for people on plantations.

The articles are written by academics and practitioners. They were presented initially at an IDS workshop (26-27 September, 1986) organised by the IDS Plantations Cluster who met regularly throughout 1986 to explore their common interest in plantations. They deal with a range of issues including health, housing and education on plantations, management attitudes towards welfare and provision of basic needs, the role of unions and participatory forms of development, rural-plantation sector linkages, and alternative forms of agricultural production such as smallholding and contract farming. They draw on experience in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Zimbabwe, India, Malaysia, Fiji, the West Indies, Tanzania and the Philippines; and embrace academic backgrounds in economics, political science, history, social psychology, social anthropology, medicine and law.

Basic Needs

The basic needs debate of the 1970s alerted policy makers and development planners to the importance of satisfying people's fundamental requirements for living in development strategies (see *IDS Bulletin* vol 9, no 4: 'Down to Basics: reflections on the basic needs debate'). Two issues were dominant: were growth and equity objectives compatible? And, how central should a basic needs approach be to overall economic and social strategy?

However by the end of the decade, basic needs thinking had become a largely technical and apolitical exercise in listing needs which had somehow to be identified, targeted and costed. The list was long and included health, water, shelter, food, education, work, income, clean air and political participation. The involvement of people in defining their own needs and how best to meet them was sometimes included, but more often not.

In an attempt to take forward the discussion of basic needs, an ILO Mission to Nigeria in 1979, headed by the late Dudley Seers, suggested that some needs were

more fundamental than others to the development process; and that 'health', broadly defined, was the most important of all. It was taken to mean more than mere freedom from disease, and incorporated both general physical well-being and mental health. Health was defined:

in the positive sense of maintaining throughout life a state of vigorous activity, work and self-defence, rather than just freedom from disease. It includes mental health, which is also used in the positive sense of the ability to predict and provide solutions to problems raised by the struggle for survival, e.g., producing enough food (or earning enough income) [Seers 1981:742].

Healthy minds in healthy bodies thus became the ultimate goal of basic needs strategies.

Means or Ends?

In this *Bulletin*, we take up this concern with the quality of life. We refer to basic needs on and off plantations in an essentially descriptive way to locate major problems faced by plantation workers and other rural groups. The general welfare and well-being of these people should be seen as an end itself and not simply as a means to further ends — whether profit and sustained economic production or the livelihood of others who benefit in some form from their exploitation. Like Chambers [1986], we stress that the priorities of the poor should be taken as the starting and ending point for development thinking; and that these priorities should encompass not only the short term satisfaction of basic needs like food, shelter and health, but long term security against sickness, early death and *becoming poorer*.

This approach, which Chambers labels 'livelihood thinking', turns dominant thinking about development upside down. People's needs and livelihoods are no longer seen primarily as means to the greater end of economic production and growth. Rather, economic production and growth are valued for their possible contribution to the satisfaction of people's needs.

In fact, people represent *both* means *and* ends. Furthermore, basic needs are circular in cause and effect. 'Healthy minds in healthy bodies' are in themselves means to other ends. Optimistically, this has encouraging implications for development thinking. Achievements may accumulate and generate an upward spiral of economic and social improvement — 'a possibility that casts considerable doubt on the alleged conflict between social priorities and economic growth' [Seers 1981:742].

Understanding Plantations

The problem of defining the term 'plantation' is clearly recognised in the literature.³ It is difficult to disentangle the degree of change and continuity found

within different plantation systems and to generalise across time and space. In our understanding of plantations, we emphasise three particular features which are characteristic of all plantations: first, their metropolitan bias and market orientation; second, their labour-management relationships; and third, their 'totality' as an economic and social institution. We also identify a number of important changes which we discuss in the following section. Our main concern is to outline the significance of such change and continuity for the provision of basic needs on and off plantations.

Metropolitan Bias and Market Orientation

Plantations are mostly located in ex-colonial, developing countries in tropical or semi-tropical climatic zones. They employ wage labour of varying types and produce one or two major crops for sale. These are usually destined for an export market controlled by metropolitan interests and include perennial non-basic foods or beverages like tea, coffee, pineapples, bananas, sugar and coconuts, or primary industrial commodities such as rubber, sisal and jute. They also include other 'traditional' and 'modern' plantation crops, for example, cinchona, indigo, pyrethrum and flowers, which similarly require labour inputs for most, if not all, of the year. Additionally, plantations often contain factories where preliminary processing of the crop is carried out prior to export.

Estate production aims to make profits through sale of the crop(s) on the market. Since Independence and the nationalisation of some plantation industries, the redistribution of these profits between North and South, companies and governments, workers and consumers has become more complicated. Indeed, there are an increasing number of non-profitable plantations whose continued existence is due to 'political' rather than 'economic' reasons.

Labour Management Relationships

Estate production depends on labour intensive methods of production. One can generally characterise plantations of whatever size or ownership as socio-economic enterprises in which supervision and control of a large and relatively undifferentiated workforce has yet to be replaced by less labour intensive technology or production methods. Securing work from the labour-force is absolutely central to a plantation's continuing output and profits and, in many ways, the primary task of estate management. Furthermore, in most instances the relationship between management and labour is still underpinned by inequalities, constraints and restrictions. These

seriously qualify the rhetoric of a free labour market and perpetuate the use of 'unfree' or 'semi-free' labour long after the demise of slavery and the indenture system.

Total Institutions

Plantation managers, staff and workforce live and work in the same place, day in day out, year after year [Jain 1970; Beckford 1972]. Yet although changing attitudes and expectations have eroded the paternalistic, coercive and introverted nature of most estate relationships in the past, estate populations are still often heavily dependent on the plantations for their entire livelihood. Spheres of work and non-work overlap and the estate itself functions to some extent both as a production unit and as a largely self-contained community. This is particularly true where estates are geographically remote or where the workforce is socially and culturally isolated.

Profits versus People?

These three enduring characteristics affect the provision of basic needs for people on plantations in two ways. First, estate profits are realised through particular sorts of investment, financial strategies, cultivation regimes, labour policies and management styles — in short, organisational forms, structures and practices whose cumulative effect is *to enforce as much work as possible from a substantial, largely unskilled and undifferentiated workforce at minimum cost*. Minimum costs extend beyond the payment of wages and include the provision of health, housing and education and the maintenance of settled labour conditions. Up to a certain point, estate management is concerned more with the investment of capital in acquiring, retaining and controlling labour than in improving the techniques and methods of production. Management is always seeking to raise output and minimise the costs of production — to which labour charges contribute significantly. Yet, it must make some provision for the welfare of the workforce if it is to satisfy its persisting need for cheap, and preferably amenable, labour.

Second, the all-pervasive impact of the plantation on people's lives raises special difficulties for conventional basic needs intervention strategies. Housing, health, schooling, water, food and gardens are to varying degrees controlled by the owners of the plantation, who can be governments, individuals or companies. Where management is enlightened and efficient, this may well result in adequate welfare provision. But where management is not, they will ignore labour welfare and in most cases effectively prevent outside agencies (including labour unions) from operating on 'their' terrain — if need be, invoking trespass and property laws.

The problem, however, goes deeper. Enlightened

³ Analytically, a plantation or estate must be clearly distinguished from a plantation industry, plantation system, plantation sector and plantation economy. Due to lack of space, we are unable to offer a full definition of plantations in this *Bulletin* or discuss how they relate to these other terms.

management is still to some degree paternalistic and hostile towards certain kinds of initiative taken by or on behalf of workers. Workers, for their part, are often psychologically dependent on the estate to provide much of their livelihood, alienated from control of their own lives and unfamiliar with the prospect of taking a more active role. In other words, the introduction of participatory development programmes requires a change both in management style and workers' attitudes. Management often shows little awareness of the needs and aspirations of labour; but labour has yet to understand fully the significance of its own active participation in decisions affecting the provision of welfare.

Changing Plantations

In the first article in this *Bulletin*, von Müralt and Sajhau identify 'structural changes' which have transformed the 'typical' foreign-owned plantation of 20 years ago. Some of these have direct implications for the provision of basic needs in plantations: new ownership structures; growing government intervention in the control, regulation and stimulation of plantations; and greater integration of smallholders into the plantation system. We would add two more — the development of closer links between plantations and the surrounding local economy; and a changing configuration of political forces acting on plantations.

New Ownership Structures and Growing Government Intervention

TNCs now control the capitalist world market and trade in plantation products. They also control much of the necessary processing, though they have tended to disinvest in the production of plantation crops *per se*. As a result, there is greater vertical integration from production to retail, continuing imperfect competition in the world market and higher levels of concentration in ownership. Plantations themselves, which were formerly mostly foreign owned, have been increasingly taken over by nationals through public and/or private agencies. TNCs like Booker Agricultural Limited now often manage, but do not own, plantations.

What implications do these changes in ownership have for basic needs provision? In her article, Little notes how nationalisation of the tea (and rubber) estates in Sri Lanka in the mid 1970s led to the integration of estate schools into the national education system, but did not necessarily improve the quality of education on offer to estate children. Moody-Stuart, speaking in a personal capacity on behalf of TNC management, confirms that whereas 50 years ago most expatriate British companies felt that their sole obligation was to their shareholders (which did not automatically make them 'bad' employers), they now accept their interconnected obligations towards their host country

and workforce. 'Enlightened' management sees the provision of some basic needs as an exercise in self-interest, though where morally and practically possible, it prefers to withdraw from intervening in people's lives.

The shift in the locus of decision-making and planning and in the size of the unit of profit brought about by changing ownership structures has advantages and disadvantages. It curtails the role of individual managers and mitigates the direct link on a given estate between its annual rate of loss or profit and basic needs provision. Profitable estates can be used to subsidise less profitable ones or those running at a loss. And, in some countries, nationalisation has been accompanied by national-level requests for external aid for welfare programmes for the plantation sector as a whole rather than for individual profitable plantations. Yet, it is always difficult to generalise about conditions on different estates (which may be very dissimilar) and higher levels of budgetary control and planning can lead to a disregard for the circumstances and needs of people on specific plantations.

As regards the role of government, in many countries these have a long record of intervention in the control and regulation of welfare provision which pre-dates Independence. Colonial governments began the process of developing statutory frameworks for working and living conditions on and off plantations, as Little and Kemp show in the case of education and unions in Sri Lanka. In their discussion of health and housing, Laing and Piggot demonstrate that the gap between theory and practice can be as wide today as ever. But they also describe programmes of health and welfare development in Sri Lanka, India and Zimbabwe which are effective. Laing and Piggot urge appropriate forms of intervention, emphasising preventive health services and the improvement of the 'plantation environment', to tackle the poor living conditions which give rise to disease and ill-health.

However, although national governments may now be in a position to increase their share of profit, for example, through taxation or direct control of production, it does not follow that the plantation workers, whose labour remains one of the original sources of that profit, will benefit directly through higher wages or better welfare provision. Plantation proceeds not only provide much-needed foreign exchange earning: they can be used to subsidise other sectors of the national economy and the improved welfare of other groups in society.

In their articles, Kirk and Davies imply that overstretched government responsibility for plantation workers, smallholders and other urban and rural groups may, in the context of world recession, mounting debt problems, balance of payments crises and falling commodity prices, result in severe conflict

for scarce resources. This will restrict further their room for manoeuvre. Even where plantation industries continue to make reasonable profits, impoverishment of the national economy intensifies existing constraints which operate to the detriment of plantation workers.

Development of Closer Links between Plantations and Rural Economy

There have always been instances of independent smallholders operating alongside or in competition with plantations, for example, peasant coffee farmers in Sri Lanka in the 19th century. Recently, however, as von Muralt and Sajhau point out, there have been attempts to integrate the two sectors more closely, with or without government support. One of the most well-known schemes of this kind is the Kenya Tea Development Authority, created in 1964 and supported by, among others, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, the World Bank, OPEC and the European Community [Ellman 1986; Swainson 1986].

There are at least three types of smallholder outgrower schemes. In the first, smallholders receive technical support from a central enterprise or an agency specially created for the purpose such as the Kenya Tea Development Authority. In the second, large plantations with or without government support provide financial, technological or training assistance to smallholders. In India, the United Planters' Association of Southern India (UPASI) has since 1970 undertaken a joint programme with the Indian Tea Board to provide financial, technical and training assistance to small growers. In the third, a central crop processing unit and core estate (the 'nucleus estate') are set up and production extended by contracting smallholders in surrounding areas to supply the central unit. Examples of this type include the Mumias Sugar Company in Kenya and the rubber and oil palm ventures in the Ivory Coast.

Kirk's article in this *Bulletin* examines how TNCs, in the face of growing problems with land and labour, have been withdrawing from direct production on large plantations and instead linking up with small farmers who supply produce under contract. With reference to the 'contract farming' of Virginia tobacco in Sri Lanka, he examines the implications of this trend for the satisfaction of basic needs. Does management in such contract farming schemes bear any responsibility for meeting the basic needs of outgrowers whose produce they purchase? Noting that management prefers to pass on this responsibility to governments or smallholders themselves, Kirk argues that contract farming can only contribute to satisfying basic needs if the incomes and employment it generates can be distributed with a measure of equality; and that this is only likely if outgrowers,

supported by the State, can effectively participate in the running of such schemes.

Davies, in her article, looks at the links more generally between plantations and the surrounding rural economy and insists that these be carefully considered. With reference to Kenya, she argues that in a rural economy where land and employment opportunities are scarce, the rural landless may well meet their basic needs more readily on rather than off the plantation. But she warns that a situation of surplus labour may lead to declining basic needs on plantations, given the decreased pressure on plantation management to attract labour — a development also noted in Laing and Piggot's paper on health and housing. If so, attention must be paid to the basic needs of the rural poorest from whom plantations draw their labour.

This raises the question of comparison. Laing and Piggot show that health indicators among plantation workers are usually far below those of the rural population. But Davies asks whether the situation of plantation workers is necessarily worse than that of the rural poorest. The comparison, though, may be invidious. Plantation workers in full employment should not be compared too lightly with landless and underemployed sections of the rural population.

Changing Political Forces

Since Independence and the end of colonialism, there have been major changes in the political context in which plantation industries operate. Before Independence, plantation interests could rely on the consistent, if at times exasperated, support of colonial governments. The latter were, as a rule, prepared to back plantation industries on the grounds that they were 'progressive' forces in the colony and generated revenue.

Today, however, the relationships between independent Third World governments, TNCs, international agencies like the World Bank and IMF, aid donors, local political parties and business interests, and trade unions have become infinitely more complex and the implications of these for the satisfaction of the basic needs of people in plantations even more so. Papers in this *Bulletin* highlight some of these different political relationships.

Kemp's article examines the role of trade unions in the Sri Lankan tea industry where there has been a long-established and increasingly powerful labour movement since the 1930s. He looks first at the union record of achievement; and then at the possible roles they have in representing their members' interests. To date, the unions have given low priority to health, housing and education. Yet, potentially they have a vital part to play as catalysts and agents of change on plantations.

In her paper on education and change in plantations, again in Sri Lanka, Little identifies political forces for

change in education in plantations. The current ethnic violence in Sri Lanka between the majority Sinhalese and the minority (Ceylon) Tamils has, paradoxically, placed the plantation (Indian) Tamils in an unusually strong political position. Though ethnically similar, Indian Tamils and Ceylon Tamils have separate economic, political and cultural identities. By and large, the Indian Tamils are not centrally involved in the struggle for Eelam, the separate state demanded by the Ceylon Tamil liberation fighters. But the government is well aware of the economic importance of the contribution of plantation workers and of the devastating political effect on the country as a whole were the ethnic identities of India and Ceylon Tamils to be united. This has led to a number of political concessions and a willingness to respond to plantation workers' demands on a range of basic needs, including education.

Moody-Stuart, as noted earlier, points out that expatriate management today has three interlocking obligations: to the Company, the workforce and the host country. Putting forward the Company view, he argues that the weak link in the chain is the workforce. Plantation workers can wring improvements in basic needs provision from unwilling management only when unions are strong or where there is close government/union cooperation. Workers' strikes, riots or resignations can be effective in an essentially negative sense. But the principal victims of such actions are, he feels, usually the workers themselves.

A rather different response by TNCs is presented in Kirk's paper. Contract farming, whereby smallholders are contracted to supply produce to a central processing and marketing agency, has become an attractive option for many TNCs. Opting out of land and production, they also tend to opt out of providing welfare. In such a situation the political strength of farmers and their families becomes crucial in their relations with Government and Company over issues of fair prices, income, employment, housing, health and education.

Towards the Future

The articles in this *Bulletin* draw on a wide diversity of experience and approach. Nonetheless they share a number of common aims for the future of basic needs provision in plantations. We assume that plantations as a form of agricultural production will survive into the 21st century. But we strongly believe that levels of basic needs provision and the mechanisms for achieving them must change.

Our starting point is that people in plantations can and should be seen as ends in themselves. They should not be viewed simply as means to further ends of economic production and growth. We also believe that profits and people are not intrinsically incompatible. Healthy workers are more productive workers; and whilst

educated workers may be more demanding, they have more to offer, particularly when involved in decisions about production and welfare.

The need for government, unions and management consciously to create mechanisms for participatory decision-making is a necessary condition for the sustainable long-term development of people and production. Furthermore, since the labour force on estates comprises male and female workers it should be emphasised that by people we refer to men and women. Indeed in arriving at effective strategies for the satisfaction of basic needs, we would argue that the views and decisions of women are probably more important than those of men.

Decisions about basic needs provision are always part of wider social and political processes. The identification and fulfilment of basic needs in and around plantations takes place within an economic, social and political context which goes far beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation. But it cannot be reduced to a quantitative and technical exercise of international standard-setting, planning and costing. Such exercises may be useful in generating information for international discussion, but the satisfaction of people's needs in specific plantations will depend ultimately on the complex interplay of local, national and international considerations and forces.

Realistic changes on and off plantations will only come about through a process of accommodation involving management, government, unions, aid agencies, voluntary organisations and workers. Provision of basic needs must be sited firmly within its political context; money is not always the main obstacle to effective development. This often fails through lack of sufficient political will and organisation.

In the past, people inside plantations have provided the means to the ends of people outside plantations. In the future, if effective development is to take place and assuming plantations do survive, people outside plantations will have to complement the means to the ends of people inside.

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