UNIVERSITY
OF NATAL
CASS
DURBAN

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE RURAL AFRICAN EMPLOYEE

Lawrence Schlemmer

Centre for Applied Social Sciences
University of Natal
King George V Avenue
Durban
South Africa

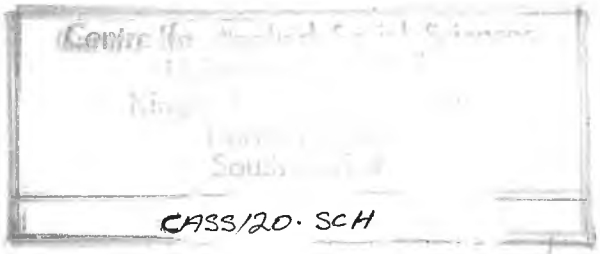
DOCUMENT AND MEMORANDUM SERIES

Centre for Applied Social Sciences
Sentrum vir Toegepaste Maatskaplike Wetenskappe

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL
DURBAN

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE RURAL AFRICAN EMPLOYEE

Lawrence Schlemmer


CASS/20. SCH

Centre for Applied Social Sciences
University of Natal
Durban

Paper delivered at the Personnel Conference
for the Timber Industry, held in the National
Parks Board Building, Pietermaritzburg,
7th-8th November 1978.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE RURAL AFRICAN EMPLOYEE

Centre for Applied Social Sciences
University of Natal
King George V Ave
Durban 4001
South Africa
CASS/20. SCH

Lawrence Schlemmer

Centre for Applied Social Sciences
University of Natal
Durban

Paper delivered at the Personnel Conference for the Timber Industry, held in the National Parks Board Building, Pietermaritzburg, 7th-8th November 1978.

I. There is no 'typical' Rural African Employee.

A recent research project completed in our Centre (Allen, 1978) suggests that rural African employees who travel to their homes in 'tribal' areas roughly once per month are less likely to resign or leave their employment than those who travel either daily or annually. This is a small point not immediately relevant to the topic under discussion but it illustrates the fact that one cannot generalise very easily about rural workers. Their situations as regards home, work and the relationship between the two are frequently very complex and can vary a great deal.

There are African rural workers whose homes are hundreds of kilometres from their work, there are those who have established second homes close to work and there are the lucky ones whose homes are virtually on the border of white agricultural employment areas. Some leave their wives behind at distant homesteads, others have wives with them living in company or farm married quarters or as tenants in African areas close to work. Just as these factors can vary so can many others.

Many people, without stopping to think, regard 'migrant labourers' (osscillating contract workers) as one large undifferentiated category of people. This view is not only faulty but dangerously oversimple. Choosing only a few key characteristics of migrant workers one may identify at least the following broad categories of migrants. These categories are presented as 'typical' groups for purposes of description, but in reality they are merely points on a continuum along which migrant labourers can be placed.

a) One can think of what one may term the 'classic' migrant - a man of two separate worlds. A Tsonga man from deep in Mozambique going to work in Johannesburg probably would best typify this person. He comes from an area of fairly abundant land and a productive subsistence economy. He could exist without having cash income if it were not for compulsory taxes. He migrates to work for reasons other than survival. He remains closely identified with his home area, is locked into a network of relationships and obligations which make his home area the dominant location of his needs and aspirations. At the place of work he tends to mix largely with colleagues from his own community. The world of work is ancilliary to his real world. He goes there for a particular target - the earning of additional income in

the form of cash to be used for specific purposes. Custom and kin protect his domestic interests while he is away. Johannesburg is important only as a place of work. (Migrants from the Eastern Transvaal actually used to call Johannesburg 'Berekeng', a corruption of the Afrikaans work werk (work).)

He can clearly distinguish between home and the world of work - to him they are completely separate. He would have little notion that the 'core' area of the Witwatersrand, say, is through his labour and that of his colleagues steadily extracting a surplus from Mozambique and that the two areas are therefore integral parts of an interacting political-economic system. His perception is that of the 'dual' culture and economy of town and tribal area. He has no ambivalence and his morale can be high despite long absences from home.

Many people who use migrant labour still tend to think that all or most migrants are of this 'classical' type. He is, however, a vanishing category, certainly as far as migrants from within South Africa are concerned.

b) More frequently, a migrant worker may be a man who has a family, land, cattle and social obligations in a tribal area, but he has achieved some school education, and/or may be a Christian, and may have come under the influence of urban consumerism. He actually needs cash wages because he desires and is expected to acquire some 'modern' goods like furniture, a radio, farming implements, clothing, money for school fees for his children or for health care, canned or processed foods, etc., etc. He would see such goods as essential to the quality of his life. He is more critically dependent on his wage income as a migrant than the classical migrant. Features in his world of work become much more salient than with our first type. He may exhibit ambivalence about lifestyle and life goals. If he is a more active type of person, concerned with improving his status or quality of life he could become discontented with his working conditions and circumstances of living. Most migrant workers today fit into this broad category.

c) A third broad class of migrant workers are those whose identification with rural areas is weak or has been undermined by various types of social, ecological and demographic changes. This group, as yet, is small in terms of relative numbers but its circumstances constitute a serious and growing problem for industry and the government.

These are people who have very little or no land actually allocated

to them under the tribal land tenure system, and typically they would have very few cattle. Increasingly they are tenants in rural areas, paying some form of rent to live on someone else's land or depending on their kinsmen giving them a place to erect a hut or house. They probably are people who have some education and consumer aspirations, as in our second group, but the salient feature in their lives is that there are factors external to themselves beginning to push them away from their identification with the rural community. They are beginning to 'dispose' of much of their rural culture. They are also almost totally dependent on wage labour. It is among this group that we find almost complete ambivalence about rural vs. urban lifestyle choices. Their circumstances can produce critical levels of discontent, and very poor morale. They live in severe social dislocation.

d) The final category of migrant workers are not really 'migrants' at all. This is also a small category in relative terms but represents a very problematic variation on the circumstances described under c) above. These are people who, either through critical land shortage, through labour-tenant removals or other types of resettlement, have been 'pushed' out of the rural environment. They have been tending to move into high-density peri-urban 'squatter' areas near cities or other places of work. They account for a meaningful proportion of people in areas like Crossroads near Cape Town, Winterveld and Hammanskraal near Pretoria, and the semi-circle of 'squatter areas' around Durban-Pinetown. They may still have considerable social links with rural areas of origin and may be by no means completely Western in outlook, but their commitment is to the urban or industrial society, on the edge of which they live. They are essentially commuters. In terms of South African Influx-Control regulations they may still be contract or 'migrant' labourers, but in reality they are newly urbanising people of a type who, throughout the Third World, are moving to informal settlements on the edges of cities and other areas of employment.

II. The Rural Labour Supply under Transformation.

South Africa's economic utilisation of rural African labour at basis assumes the existence of 'classical' migrants described under a) above. It has assumed that the major costs of housing, the domestic economy, of social services and amenities and of social security would be borne by the migrant's own community. For the central urban economy it has meant the benefit of access to very large reserves of labour without the burden of taxation required to maintain the social and economic infrastructure from which that labour has been drawn.

These root conditions of South Africa's economic development are no longer tenable. If one looks at a typical homeland development plan, that of KwaZulu (Thorrington-Smith, Rosenberg and McCrystal, 1978) one notes that the intention is to peg the rural population at present levels or ideally, to decrease the rural population in the interests of homeland agricultural development. These plans are understandable and inevitable. The long-run outcome, however, is likely to compound the existing problem of high density on the land, leading to an even stronger 'push' out of rural areas. Even if the push factors are not sufficiently strong to actually eject people from rural areas, they are certainly going to weaken morale and cause a sense of dislocation. There will no longer be that 'sheet anchor' of rural security that Mayer (1961) talks about.

It seems incumbent on employers these days, therefore, to investigate the circumstances of their workers from rural areas; to discover whether or not their circumstances are likely to be causing demoralisation and ambivalence. Employers can no longer automatically assume that the rural employee's own community is providing him with the social security and social resources that any group of employees need. Companies and the agricultural industry must start taking an interest in, if not responsibility for the social environment of their employees. In urban areas, an employer is able to assume that he fulfils his responsibility through paying taxes, some of which are funnelled into black housing, community services, education and the like. In rural employment situations, the State has largely absolved itself of responsibility for these things.

An employer can perhaps rightfully assume that it is not his responsibility to be concerned about the social infrastructure of his employees - many would argue that the only task and responsibility of free enterprise is to make profits and expand, for the ultimate greater good of all. In South Africa, however, this assumption is problematic. More often than not an employer is drawing labour from across the border of a semi-autonomous or independent 'homeland', and these areas simply do not have the financial resources to provide the infrastructure of services which a modern employment situation demands. Pointing to the responsibility of the State is simply not going to help. The employer is likely to face mounting problems in his black labour force unless he takes at least some responsibility for community development in the areas from which he draws his labour.

III. The Challenge for the Forestry Industry and Agriculture.

The varieties of rural employees in the forestry and agricultural industries is even greater than those described in the general picture sketched in Section I. In addition, to the types of migrants outlined, one finds remnants of the labour-tenant system throughout these industries.

Labour-tenants may be original communities on whose old tribal land forestry development has occurred. They represent in a sense a 'colonised' community, whose political order has been taken over completely by white management. Needless to say they are completely dependent communities. The quality of their lives and communities are almost completely determined by company policy. Depending on their conditions, they can represent an extreme consequence of dependency - apathy, lethargy and demoralisation.

Tenant labourers may not be original communities, but they may represent people without roots; with no real home at all. They too may suffer from apathy and demoralisation, but the more active among them will try to escape to circumstances in which they can either put down roots and build security for the future or find opportunities for occupational mobility in industrial areas. The phenomenon of farm labour leaving for the homelands from which it seeks recruitment as contract workers to the cities is by now well-known.

Apart from tenant labourers, however, the forestry and agricultural industries have the full range of circumstances among their employees - single-quarter men who live varying distances away, married-quarters employees who may or may not have homes in homelands, daily or less frequent commuters from across homeland boundaries who might be living in their own homes or might be living as tenants on the land of others close to work, etc., etc.

Agriculture and forestry are not high-wage industries and it is impossible to assume that African employees can use their own resources to up-grade their environments. Only the few 'classical' migrants are likely to have resources and may live in reasonably satisfactory rural environments which meet their needs and expectations.

It follows on from comments made earlier that if these industries are concerned with the productivity, morale and longer-term stability of their black employees, an input into community development for the employees is required. It was noted right at the outset that the community circumstances of workers affect their job-commitment. In our research in the

forestry industry we have acquired abundant evidence of the fact that at present the more intelligent, more active and potentially productive employee tends to use the industry as a bridge to employment which he considers more suitable. The longer-term consequences of this drain of talent out of the industry could only be avoided with skilled community development programmes which will add to the quality of employees' lives, hence offering some of those who might otherwise move away some incentive to stay.

IV. Some Basic Guidelines for Community Development.

It is not the intention here to set out any detail what a Community Development programme should be. Other contributors will be addressing themselves to this topic. Flowing out of what has already been said regarding the needs for Community Development, however, it would be appropriate to outline briefly some very basic guidelines for Community Development for employees in rural industry.

It is easiest to start with things to avoid:

a) housing or Community Development programmes should not bluntly attempt to stabilize a workforce by using benefits as 'traps'. For example, some employers provide good housing for employees only for as long as they stay employed for the company. While this is quite understandable in view of the expenditure, these schemes only work well over a long period if other job benefits stay in step with the community benefits.

b) the provision of community benefits should, therefore, not be an attempt to compensate for weaknesses in personnel policy, because one may run the risk of creating conflict and demotivation among workers. The kind of conflict created has even been known to extend to industrial sabotage on rare occasions.

c) it follows from points a) and b) above that the form of Community Development which is most likely to improve morale among employees is that entered into by an association of companies or employers. What one envisages in this regard is the creation of a 'pool' of employees in improved community circumstances, from which labour can be drawn by different companies and which, therefore, does not tie an employee to one employer. This would also make contributing companies feel less-inclined to want to protect their investments by making participation in the project conditional upon employment in the company.

d) Community Development of the type being discussed should offer certain benefits to those who have been deprived, through land density or location, of certain highly valued rural-agricultural opportunities. Our observations have been that large proportions of rural employees would like some communal grazing (albeit limited), land for vegetable gardens and sufficient flexibility in housing to expand homesteads to accommodate members of extended families. It would help little to force people with a rural community orientation into a modern suburban mould.

e) on the other hand, a critical challenge for rural industry is how to retain the services of better-educated, younger and more energetic employees. This group requires an emphasis on recreation, on the opportunity for self-improvement through adult education and on the opportunity to display signs of rising status and achievement in the form of improved housing and consumption (the latter requires the development of commercial facilities).

These brief points illustrate in very broad outline the type of Community Development programme which would be a vital adjunct to any programme of upgrading the skills and technology in rural industry.

REFERENCES:

Allen, R.D.J. Ambivalence and Commitment in Work: Labour Turnover and the Stability of African Employees in a Transvaal Border Industry. Centre for Applied Social Sciences, University of Natal, Durban. 1978.

Mayer, P. Townsmen or Tribesmen. Oxford University Press, Cape Town. 1961.

Thorrington-Smith, Rosenberg and McCrystal. Towards a Plan for KwaZulu. KwaZulu Government. 1978.

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/

Institute of Development Studies