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Apprenticeship Systems and the Creation of Employment Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the difficulties of extending literacy training, adult education and vocational training to out-of-work youth within the context of Malawi. The central argument of this paper is that unless the mass of illiterate and semi-literate youths are given practical skills to enable them to earn a livelihood, their employment and earning prospects are bleak. Without gainful employment these out-of-school youths will be unable to escape the poverty trap. An apprenticeship scheme, linked to the functional literacy programme is advocated as a means for skills training. Under the scheme a learner would be attached to an experienced artisan or craftsman to learn a trade or craft by direct observation and practice.

Introduction

The first school in Malawi was established by Presbyterian missionaries from Scotland in 1875. All missionary groups who came after them such as the Universities Mission to Central Africa (Anglican), White Fathers (Catholic) and Seventh Day Adventists also established their own schools. Apart from teaching reading, writing and arithmetic the schools were used as vehicles for evangelisation. Muslims had their own schools which emphasised Koran reading and recitals. Muslim children were prevented from attending church-run schools lest they be converted to Christianity. Beginning 1908 the churches received some financial assistance from the colonial government to help them run the schools but this was far from adequate (Pretorius, 1971:73). Government did not take part in the direct provision of education until the 1950s when it established a secondary school and a few primary schools. Formal education remained the domain of the Christian churches till 1962.

On August 15, 1961 the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) won the first general elections which paved the way to self-government. In order to ensure greater access to formal education, rationalise the curriculum, and ensure uniformity in the quality of teachers, government took over control of education from the churches.

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District Councils were henceforth to serve as local education authorities. Religious affiliation ceased to be a condition for admission to education institutions. The government hoped that the latter move would encourage Muslim parents in such districts as Mangochi, Machinga, Salima and Nkhota Kota, hitherto reluctant to send their children to church schools, to begin doing so. At the same time local communities were encouraged to build their own schools since government's own resources were inadequate to build enough schools to absorb the ever-increasing numbers of school-age children. Community-built schools would ensure the availability of school education to a larger number of school-age children than before when these had to be built by the churches from their limited resources.

In spite of the primary school building boom since 1962 the literacy rate in the country remains low. At the time of independence in 1964 only an estimated 10% of the population was literate. This rose to 12% in 1966, and to 23% in 1977 (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:186). It is estimated that between 1966 and 1980 an average 95,000 new illiterates were added to the population every year because school-age children did not enrol in school, or those who did enrol dropped out of school before Standard 5 when the Malawian child is supposed to acquire basic literacy (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:186). In 1987 the literacy rate stood at 42% (Malawi Government, 1991:10). Although this was an improvement on the previous rates the rate of improvement is very slow. Given the fact that the country's population is growing at the rate of 3.2% annually and primary education was not free until October 1994 when school fees were abolished, the number of illiterates added to the population is not likely to have decreased. A 1990 survey indicated that over 50% of the estimated 2.6 million 6-17-year olds in the country were either school drop-outs or never attended school (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1993:127). Lack of formal education is a barrier to formal employment and wage-earning.

Employment and Income Opportunities

Malawi is a predominantly rural country. According to the 1987 population census, out of a population of 7,988,507, 89% live in the rural areas, while 11% live in urban areas (Malawi Government, 1991:7).

The industrial sector is underdeveloped. The few manufacturing industries that exist are heavily dependent on imported raw materials and frequent lack of foreign exchange interrupts production. The agricultural sector is bimodal: on the one hand is the export-oriented estate subsector producing high value crops such as burley and flue-cured tobacco, tea, rubber and sugar for export; and on the other, the smallholder sector producing largely for domestic consumption. The estate subsector, which is labour-intensive, provides seasonal as well as permanent employ-

ment to some Malawians. Although smallholder farmers are predominantly engaged in production of food crops for their own consumption, they may sell part of their food harvest for cash; or grow some cash crops such as cotton, groundnuts and sunflower to earn cash incomes with which to pay for desired goods and services. Although the smallholder sector is characterised by self-employment, the near-landless and smallest smallholders are also suppliers of a considerable amount of labour to larger smallholders and to the estates. Larger smallholders hire *ganyu* labour, especially during peak farming periods for clearing, planting and weeding. Payment may be in cash or kind and wages tend to be low.

The 1987 population census reveals that out of the economically active population aged 10 years and over, only 10 per cent were in wage or salaried employment while 3 per cent were self-employed. The rest engaged in subsistence farming (Malawi Government, 1991:11). The public sector was the major employer of labour in the country, and is likely to remain so for a long time given the slow rate at which the industrial sector is growing. Given the limited employment prospects in the formal sector, increasing scarcity of arable land and expensive farm inputs, self-employment in the informal sector of the country's four major urban areas of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba is becoming an attractive option for young persons with low, and without formal, academic qualifications. Street vending for self or other business owners has over the last few years become a major source of employment for illiterate and semi-literate children and youths.

The Adult and Functional Literacy Programme

A number of factors operating in isolation or in combination ensure that school age children are not enrolled in school, or leave school before they acquire the ability to read and write. The major one of these was identified as school fees, which parents had to pay to enrol their children (see, eg, World Bank, 1990:40). School fees and the added financial burden of buying school uniforms, which, until October 1994, was compulsory, was too much for many rural families whose cash incomes were very low or non-existent. Other factors identified were early marriages for girls among some ethnic groups such as the Yao; inaccessibility of schools due to long distances; the preference for Koranic education in predominantly Muslim areas; the opportunity-cost of child labour to the domestic economy; and the perceived irrelevance of formal education to the process of wealth accumulation, especially in those areas of the country endowed with natural resources such as the lakeshore districts and the agriculturally rich central region.

To combat adult literacy the MCP government in 1962 launched an adult literacy programme as part of community development efforts. Volunteer edu-

cated members of the community taught basic literacy and numeracy to their illiterate fellow citizens.

By 1970 adult literacy activities had spread to all districts in the country. No enrolment statistics are readily available; however, a UNESCO survey carried out in 1979 reported that the number of graduates from the adult literacy programme between 1970 and 1978 number 11,400 (UNICEF/Malawi Government 1991:186). When the period 1962 to 1970 is taken into account the number of graduates should be much higher. However, the curriculum that had been designed for the adult literacy programme emphasised literacy and numeracy *per se* and was not linked to socioeconomic development efforts.

Under the influence of UNESCO the government launched the functional literacy programme in 1986. The functional literacy programme differed from the earlier adult literacy programme in that it sought to establish a direct link between the acquisition of reading, writing and numerical skills and the solution of problems which impeded progress towards a higher standard of living for individuals, families and communities. It also sought to include 15 year-olds who traditionally could not be regarded as adults.

The National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education in the Ministry of Community Services has responsibility for developing the curriculum and producing teaching and learning materials, as well as training personnel (Ministry of Community Services, 1990: unpagged). It receives input from ministries and departments involved in socioeconomic development efforts such as those of health, education, agriculture, and community development.

Local communities are responsible for selecting from within their own community persons to be selected for training as tutors, providing space for classes and generally ensuring the success of the literacy centre. The Ministry of Community Services pays a small honorarium of K15 per month (K1 currently US\$0,06) to the tutors. The smallness of the honorarium is meant to emphasise the government's view that adult literacy teaching is really part of community development in which all reasonable citizens must participate.

Learners are taught to read and write Chichewa, which along with English, is the official language. The emphasis is on delivering usable information simultaneously with the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Learners progress from reading vowels and words to sentences like the following:

"Feteleza amachulukitsa zokolola" (Fertiliser increases yields).

"Tetezani ana kumatenda polandira katemera" (Immunise your children against disease).

(Ministry of Community Services, 1984).

Instructors can use the sentence being learned as a basis for a more detailed discussion of a related subject. Thus the sentence about fertiliser could be used as a basis of a discussion on soil fertility enhancement, timely application of fertiliser; and types of fertiliser, their appropriate uses and appropriate levels of application.

From simple sentences the learners progress to more complex stories about crop production, marketing, immunisation, child care, and nutrition, among other topics (Ministry of Community Services, 1991).

In numeracy simple numerical calculations with a practical relevance are emphasised. An example might be: if one bag of fertiliser costs K65, how much would four bags cost? Or: if a farmer harvests 20 bags of maize and he sells seven of them; how many bags remain? Simple calculations such as these enable the learners to see the direct relevance of numeracy to the problems that they encounter in their daily lives as they strive to achieve a higher standard of living.

Where appropriate supplementary literature is available, the functional literacy programme could supplement the efforts of frontline workers in agriculture, health and community development, who are too few on the ground to effectively provide advice to their clientele. It must be borne in mind, however, that the emphasis on Chichewa in the functional literacy programme discriminates against people in those areas of the country where the language is not widely spoken, for example the northern part of the country bordering Tanzania.

Although the functional literacy programme also caters for out-of-school youths, it has failed to attract and retain youth enrolment. A 1991 survey of non-formal education for out-of-school youths carried out under the auspices of UNICEF in some parts of the country revealed that only 1,2 per cent of the 1,000 male and females aged 15-20 that were interviewed attended a functional literacy centre.

The absence of a literacy centre within walking distance was given by 94,9 per cent of the sample as a reason for not attending (Kishindo, 1991:21). However, it should not be assumed that simply establishing a literacy centre in a village would automatically ensure enrolment by youths. Out of the 28 interviewees (2,8%) who actually had functioning literacy centres in their villages, only six attended; but even these six indicated their dissatisfaction with the programme on the grounds of instructor absenteeism, inadequacy of reading materials, inclusion of young and old in the same class and irrelevance of the curriculum to employment (Kishindo, 1991:24). Out of the sample of 1,000 some 83,2 per cent indicated that they would be interested in some form of education that enabled them to get wage employment or to be self-employed. From the evidence it would appear that out-of-school youths are more concerned with getting jobs to earn a living than the mere acquisition of reading, writing and numerical skills. The emphasis on formal academic qualifications in the formal sector effectively excludes people without

formal education from all but the most menial jobs such as labourers or cleaners. A few out-of-school youths may get occasional employment as labourers, fishermen, domestic servants or child minders in their communities. Some may drift to the towns and cities in the hope of finding employment as domestic servants, gardeners or child minders in the homes of the more affluent Malawians and expatriates; or as street vendors for Asian-owned businesses. It is not uncommon for this kind of worker to be paid lower than the statutory minimum wage because most of them are not aware of the statutory minimum wage legislation, or where to lodge their complaints.

Vocational Training

The existing technical schools demand as a minimum entry qualification a Junior Certificate of Education (obtained after two years of secondary education), while the rural trade schools require at least eight years of primary school education. This effectively excludes all those who never had any formal education or had only a few years of it. However, if poverty is to be alleviated, the youths, who are the next generation of adults should be equipped with the capacity to earn a cash income. This could be done by training them in marketable skills. Since no formal training institutions will admit them, these skills would have to be obtained through a non-formal apprenticeship system linked to the functional literacy programme. An apprentice should be able to read, write and do simple calculations, since many trades and crafts demand these skills if they are going to be carried out properly. A carpenter, for example, needs to be able to record, as well as calculate measurements for precision.

Learners who have successfully acquired reading, writing and numerical skills would as a next stage, be encouraged to become apprentices to local artisans and craftsmen to learn a trade or a craft. The most commonly available artisans and craftsmen in Malawi are blacksmiths, tin smiths, bricklayers, hairdressers, tailors, barbers, shoe repairers, bakers, bicycle mechanics, carpenters, curio carvers, basket and mat weavers. Thus someone interested in learning carpentry, for example, would be attached to a carpenter from whom he would learn the trade till he mastered it. The system of apprenticeship such as the one being proposed here is believed to have played an important role in the emergence and growth of Nigeria's private economy (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974:140).

If this kind of apprenticeship is to benefit the thousands of out-of-school youths it would obviously need proper organisation. The Ministry of Community Services, through its frontline workers, would have to identify the expertise available in the different communities, and the individuals willing to take on apprentices. It

is likely that there would be a preponderance of particular skills in one community: in such a situation apprentices should be free to go where the skills they want are available. An honorarium would need to be paid to the master artisans and craftsmen preferably based on the number of apprentices taken on.

In non-formal apprenticeships one learns a trade by observation and practice (Kayser, 1991:24). To be able to gain the necessary experience and confidence, the apprentice needs a lot of practice. This implies the availability of enough orders for the enterprise to create work for the master artisan and his apprentices. In the rural areas, where people are predominantly dependent on small-scale agriculture for cash incomes, demand for the services of artisans and craftsmen is intermittent, depending upon the agricultural season: thus demand is higher during the marketing season when people have cash from the sale of their farm produce than at any other time. The lack of demand for the services of artisans would deprive the apprentices of continuous practice and so interrupt their progress in acquiring the appropriate skills. To avoid this situation, the government, local governments, or non-governmental organisations interested in grassroots development should set up skills centres in selected villages where out-of-school youths could come to learn the various trades and crafts (cf Kipkorir, 1975:190). The role of the government agency, local government or non-governmental organisation is to ensure that the relevant materials and equipment are available and that training is not interrupted by a drop in demand for services, and to pay honoraria.

The village skills centres are intended to complement the more informal apprenticeship system. Unlike the Kenyan Village Polytechnic concept which has come to rely heavily on formally trained and salaried instructors, and is supervised and directed by a government department (Mawiyo, 1990:331), the village skills centre is intended to centre around the master artisan and craftsman, using unsophisticated machinery and equipment, and imparting skills through non-formal means rather than following a standardised curriculum.

Apprentices who have acquired the relevant skills may opt to work for someone else, or to set up as independent operators. Since most of them are likely to lack the financial resources to set up as independent operators, the financial assistance of small enterprise funding agencies such as the recently established Malawi Rural Finance Company, which does not require collateral, may have to be sought. The new artisans and craftsmen should be free to take their skills wherever (including towns and cities) there is the greatest opportunity of making a reasonable living. In a country where people retain very strong ties with the village even when they are urban-based, the benefits accruing from higher incomes can be expected to trickle down to the rural areas in the form of remittances to family members. It is believed that most of the better houses in Malawian villages belong either to former migrant labourers or relatives of migrants labourers, especially those in South Africa.

Conclusion

Unless out-of-school youths, who will constitute the next generation of adults, can acquire skills that can enable them to earn cash incomes either through wage or self-employment, they cannot expect to escape from poverty and destitution since their lack of formal educational qualifications can only allow them to hold low paying menial jobs, which are not always available. The benefits accruing from increased earnings through wage or self-employment can be expected to trickle down to the village resulting in a higher standard of living for the families of the artisans and craftsmen. It is expected that Department of Community Development officials, politicians, church and influential people in local communities would encourage out-of school youths and adults to enrol in the functional literacy programme, and then go on to learn a trade or a craft. The possibility of economic independence through wage or self employment is likely to be a greater motivating force for participation in non-formal educational programmes than the mere acquisition of the ability to read and write.

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