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INDEPENDENCE, LABOUR AND THE FUTURE IN WESTERN SAMOA MYTHS AND REALITIES

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'The myth that there is no unemployment in Western Samoa is one of the most dangerous contentions to be entertained'.

Western Samoa's labour and employment situation is one surrounded with myths of paradisaical peace. The absence of trade unions save for the Public Service Association suggests that workers and employers work happily together in great harmony. Except for the PSA strike in 1981, there have been virtually no major labour disputes. It can easily be assumed that the lot of the Samoan worker is a happy one. Should anyone be dismissed from his or her job, he or she most probably deserved it.

In the area of industrial safety, there is a popular belief that occupational hazards are part of the work situation and therefore have to be tolerated. The risk of losing one's fingers in the cutting and chopping of copra in plantation work, or being killed by a falling tree in the logging operations are integral features of these different vocations that one must accept. After all, accidents are accidents and one should not be held responsible for them.

A widely accepted part of our labour myths is the belief that there is no unemployment. School leavers who fail to find employment in the monetized sector are assumed to be quickly absorbed into the extended family and work in the subsistence sector and thus happily engaged in some form of economic activity. The abundance of uncultivated land is often said to bespeak the fact that there is much unutilized potential for development and employment in the land. How can there be unemployment?

These are myths that make one wonder why we have a labour department. The reality is quite another story.

The facts

Increasing out-migration, youth unemployment, and stagnating agricultural production over the past several years suggest that all is not well in this seeming paradise.

In the early sixties the country's population totalled 114,000 with less than half (40 per cent) being classified as economically active, constituting the country's workforce. Of this workforce 80 per cent worked in the primary sector or agriculture, with 23 per cent in paid employment. The rest worked as non-paid family workers or were self-employed on a subsistence basis.

At the time, the annual rate of increase in population was one of the highest in the world at 3.4 per cent, which was expected to take the population of the country to almost 185,000 by the beginning of 1976.

Five years ago, however, the annual rate of increase of the population declined dramatically to 0.6 per cent with the total population increasing by only 2000 on average per year over twenty years. In 1976, the total population was 152,000, some 32,000 short of the projections made in the early sixties by the New Zealand Government Statistician. By 1981 the population had increased to approximately 156,000 with 27 per cent categorized as being economically active or in the workforce and slightly more than 12 per cent in paid employment. In other words, while the population had increased by approximately 37 per cent over the twenty years since independence, the workforce had diminished by almost 13 per cent as a proportion of the population, and the total of those in paid employment had decreased by approximately 11 per cent.

The workforce and migration

The most important factor influencing the decline in the annual rate of growth of population is migration. Free migration to New Zealand before and immediately after independence resulted in some 10,500 people leaving the country during the ten-year period 1957-66. This represented 8 per cent of the population. This trend continued into the 1970s and the peak period of migration between Samoa and

New Zealand was generally seen as the ten years, 1971-81. A slight hiccup in immigration relations between Samoa and New Zealand developed in 1975 when the latter took the view that immigration into the country was becoming an impediment to economic development and a burden on social services. The controversial 'over-stayers' issue threatened to affect continued access by Samoans to New Zealand. Despite this minor conflict, high out-migration continued from the country, so that in 1981 there were 42,400 Samoans in New Zealand compared to only 6500 twenty years earlier. In terms of total migration, more people left the country than entered for a total net out-migration of 5000 in 1984 alone.

Today, the effects of high out-migration on the country's workforce are becoming more and more evident, particularly in the rural areas. Within the last two years, a commercial plantation in Savai'i requested permission to import plantation workers with little or no skill from overseas because of the serious shortage of manpower in the country willing to undertake that type of work. There is no evidence of labour shortage in the Apia urban area but the persistent and significant component of foreign workers in Apia suggests that there is still a serious shortage of skilled manpower, particularly in senior positions most vital in the development planning of the country.

Unemployment

Acceptance of unemployment not only ignores the plight of its victims but also suffocates both social and economic development directly rooted in the ability of people to make a living, to survive, and to be productive. The problem of unemployment has increased dramatically since independence because of a continuing drift away from the strictly subsistence way of living towards more reliance or semi-reliance on money wages.

Statistically, the census figures

for 1971, 1976 and 1981 showed unemployment numbers to be 8, 88 and 109. And while the accuracy of these figures is highly debatable, they nevertheless reflect a growing increase in the number of those who considered themselves to be unemployed and having no source of income at the time of the census. For the 1976-81 period this number indicated an increase of about 24 per cent. Each year a total of approximately 3000 young people are estimated to leave school. Of this number, however, only 1000 are known to find work or go on to further training or higher education. The remaining 66 per cent are either employed in subsistence work or join the league of the unemployed or underemployed.

Employment and development

The general assumption has been that employment tends to be an 'effect' more than a 'cause' of development, and it generally improves with economic prosperity. Since independence, labour and employment, as a component of development, has more or less been left to run its own course. After twenty-five years of independence, the country still has no manpower plan to assist it in the utilization and development of its manpower resource. The development of training institutes to help upgrade the skills of the country's workforce continues to be extremely slow. Despite continued emphasis on agriculture as the backbone of the country's economy, nothing is being done to curb the shift of workers away from the agricultural and primary sector through out-migration and diversification. High out-migration continues to deprive the rural area of much needed

manpower and it will be difficult to expect agricultural production to remain at its present levels under these circumstances. At present, development is being heavily subsidized by foreign aid. Remittances from overseas have helped to complement family incomes in most local households so that a reasonable standard of living is maintained. Reliance on external subsidies, however, not only tends to perpetuate the belief that the grass is much greener on the other side and therefore encourages out-migration; it also 'dulls the edge of husbandry' for those remaining in the country, resulting in the stagnation and decline in production as seen in recent years.

The future

A forecast for the future of employment is not bright. Labour shortages in the rural areas will worsen and will have serious implications on agricultural development. Unemployment in the urban area will also continue to increase and its adverse effects will most probably be reflected in corresponding increases in juvenile crime, affecting urban residents.

Some of these problems can be alleviated or minimized if we take stock now of our manpower resource and seriously plan its development in line with our general economic development objectives. The archaic assumption that employment will generally improve with the economy should not be seriously entertained. Otherwise in our preoccupation with balancing the books we could well wake up too late to find ourselves deprived of one of our most important assets: our manpower resource.