

# PRESSURES AND TENSIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELECTED AFRICAN IR SYSTEMS

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to explore and analyse the development of African industrial relations systems within the context of colonization, liberation and, in recent years, structural adjustment and globalisation, not with a view to providing answers or predictions, but rather to engender further debate and an interrogation of the status quo; this particularly in the light of the African Renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

## METHODOLOGY

As Bean (1994:3) states, systems theory, though broadly applied in the study of any country's industrial relations, is not in itself sufficient to explain the pattern of relations which have developed in so-called Third World countries. The approach will therefore be analytical on a macro-level, rather than descriptive, and will be broadly based on Poole's four guiding principles for the analysis of industrial relations phenomena, namely "(1) a focus upon environmental influences emanating from societal structures and processes (2) a multi-disciplinary perspective, so as to incorporate economic, political and socio-cultural factors, (3) emphasis upon explanatory variables rather than descriptive categories and (4) the importance of utilizing a historical as well as a contemporary dimension." (Bean, 1994 : 4)

## BACKGROUND

Relative to the European countries, industrialization in Africa occurred only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century or, in certain cases, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Collective labour relations and the institutions devised to stabilize relationships did not, therefore, arise from the dissatisfaction of a class conscious, wage-earning peasantry, but were superimposed by a colonial or, in the case of South Africa and the then Rhodesias, a colonial/settler, elite.

Thus the first industrial relations institutions and practices in Africa were virtual replicas, with slight variations, of those prevalent in particularly France and Britain at the time. These institutions owed their origin to classical liberalism, as evidenced by their embracement of the traditional pluralist approach to the conduct of the labour relationship, and, in their essence, ran counter to traditional African value systems which "...stressed the moral virtues of (relative) economic equality and the obligation to redistribute surpluses" (Kennedy, 1988 :5)

Furthermore, African industrial relations were geared towards the minority of the African population engaged in wage labour and in South Africa initially excluded even those. This has led Cooper (1996 : 6) to state that neither the South African pattern nor the French and British one "... was the natural unfolding of social forces." Yet the patterns established have, except for brief post-colonial interludes, broadly persevered and are accepted without much questioning by the parties involved.

In Zambia and other central African countries, liberation came fairly soon after industrialization and was owed, in many instances, to mobilization through the trade union movement. During the colonial period there had, according to Kennedy, (1988:1) been “no real development of African entrepreneurship”. He goes on to state that : “It seemed almost axiomatic, therefore, that state regulation and extensive public enterprise, alongside a greater or lesser contribution from foreign capital, would shoulder the main burdens of economic management.” (ibid: 2) The African post-colonial governments maintained, according to Bean, (1994: 218) that “industrial relations had a direct bearing on the developmental process” and consequently either demanded ‘responsible’ co-operation from trade unions or curtailed their activities. Once again, there was no natural evolution of institutions but a super-imposition of structures and practices; in this instance by political will and choice.

In South Africa the struggle for liberation extended over a period of almost 80 years, during which time industrialization progressed and trade unions developed a strong economic base. This, and the depth of democratization, may account for the different route adopted after the 1994 elections.

The degree of democratization, having as concomitant the need to balance the interests of labour and capital, is indeed an important variable in the development of any system. In Zambia, following the ascent to power of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy in 1991, (Bendix: 736) efforts were directed towards a more corporalist approach. However, as in the rest of Africa, demands for structural adjustment and, more recently, the impact of globalisation, have seen a reversion to the pluralist mode and to what could be termed macho-management or even neo-colonialism.

## CONCLUSION

The vastness of the African continent and the dearth of specific studies and information, has necessitated a broad-stroked approach. However, the evidence points to the absence of industrial relations systems which are indigenous to the African continent and to African culture; alternatively it is postulated that African systems have developed in a fragmented and non-evolutionary manner and without consideration of the non wage-earning sector of the population which in many countries still constitutes the majority. It could be argued that, with the globalisation of business and economies, these are peripheral considerations. However, if the New Partnership for Africa’s Development is, as stated. “A call to the rest of the world to partner Africa in her own development on the basis of her own agenda and programme of action,” (Figaji 2002: 5) then it is, perhaps, time for African states to reassess also the accepted norms and practices for the conduct of the labour relationship and to establish our own, uniquely African, system of industrial relations.

## REFERENCES

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