

**African Unions Under Structural Adjustment Programs**  
**Les syndicats africains et les programmes d'ajustement structurel**  
**Los sindicatos africanos bajo los programas de ajuste estructural**

Bassirou Tidjani

Volume 53, numéro 2, printemps 1998

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005306ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/005306ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Tidjani, B. (1998). African Unions Under Structural Adjustment Programs.  
*Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 53(2), 278–299.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/005306ar>

# *African Unions Under Structural Adjustment Programs*

BASSIROU TIDJANI

Faculté des sciences économiques et de gestion, Institut supérieur de gestion,  
Université Cheikh Diop, Dakar, Sénégal.

*In most African countries, structural adjustment programs constituted the context of industrial relations conflicts during the 1980s because they had a negative effect on social and working conditions. This study discusses African labour's responses to its deteriorating conditions, and to states' attempts to limit labour's demands. It concludes that structural adjustment programs were implemented in all African countries despite labour's resistance. The degree of implementation depended on governments' repressive capabilities, workers' traditions of striving for independent organizations, and on unions' perceptions of the issue and their responsibilities under prolonged economic crises.*

Since the 1970s, African countries have experienced deep and prolonged economic crises. Indeed, economic and social performances in Sub-Saharan Africa have been worse than in Northern Africa. This explains why the Sub-Saharan region became a subject of particular interest in the studies and activities of international financial institutions. In almost all countries located in this region, the conditions for sustained economic growth and improvements in rural economies expected from the implementation of austerity policies and structural adjustment programs could not be created. Instead, these policies and programs have accentuated the deterioration of labour's social and working conditions through layoffs, retrenchments, dislocations, different forms of workplace flexibility, rigidities in external labour markets, wage cuts, and declining purchasing power.

This paper is based on our own observation of Senegalese unions under conditions of economic crises, as well as on research conducted mainly by African scholars during the 1980s and 1990s. It provides an

overview of African labour's responses to its deteriorating conditions, the channels used to express its demands, and what these responses have meant for labour participation in policy making and for industrial order during the past years.<sup>1</sup> It also suggests some elements for the construction of a framework for the study of African industrial relations during periods of economic crisis.

The emphasis is on Sub-Saharan Africa, although a point is made on Northern African countries. The South African case is excluded because of its particular characteristics at two levels. First, while in the other countries studied, the economic crisis forced labour to be more concerned with the defence of its social and economic conditions, in South Africa workers and their unions were involved simultaneously in political, economic, and social bargaining for the reform of the Apartheid system. Second, this made the intervention of financial institutions more openly political than in the other countries studied.

#### *THE CONTEXT: STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS*

Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) implemented in Sub-Saharan African countries since the early 1980s can be defined as the set of "conditionalities" which systematically accompanied agreements between international funding institutions and African governments for the provision by the former of resources aiming at eliminating growing internal and external financial disequilibria in order to create the context for sustained economic growth. Thus, structural adjustment programs have intermediary objectives the achievement of which was expected to lead to economic recovery.

In a nutshell, these objectives have included: the reduction of inflation; a significant improvement in the balance of payments; and the introduction of economic programs radically oriented toward supply-management policies. The conditionalities which have accompanied these objectives are imposed by funding institutions, and have included several elements. African countries have been required to:

- eliminate state-induced market distortions through the privatization of African economies and the denationalization of key state-owned companies;

---

1. The concept of labour used in this research includes people working in industries and services, and excludes agriculture.

- reduce and rationalize government expenses and strictly control recruitment in the public sector. These measures were aimed at reducing inflation (by compressing demand) and budget deficits. In many African countries, state employees represented less than one percent of the working population. However, their remuneration accounted for more than 50 percent of state revenue;
- devalue their currencies in order to allow business and industry to increase their exports, and to be more competitive in their own national markets which have traditionally been very open to industrialized countries' exports. From the viewpoint of international funding agencies, export-oriented policies have an advantage. They increase the availability of foreign currencies necessary for the acquisition of equipment and intermediary goods indispensable to African business and industry. However, so far, many African governments (especially those depending on the Franc monetary zone) have been reluctant to adopt a monetary policy based on devaluation.<sup>2</sup>

International institutions' analyses and remedies resulted from a neo-classical paradigm based on evidence of the failure of state-directed economic policies implemented in most African countries since the wave of independence of the 1960s. The argument goes as follows.

Due to governments' bureaucratic political control over African economies, the latter were slow to respond to changes in the world economic situation during the 1970s. The inflation that resulted from the oil crises reduced the activities of business and industry in industrialized countries, and their demand for products (essentially raw materials) coming from African countries. The quasi-incompressibility of many imports from industrialized countries (e.g., equipment) led to a deterioration of the terms of exchange and the balance of payments of African economies.

Despite changes in the world economy, African governments initiated ambitious but uncoordinated and poorly planned investment programs which dramatically increased public expenses. During the same period, little was done to support private sector investments, traditionally more profitable than public ones. Indeed, this large-scale investment policy (accompanied in many cases by an increase in state employees' revenues) was encouraged by the rise of export prices of third world coun-

---

2. At the time of this research, this was the attitude of African countries belonging to the Franc Zone. African unions were also engaged in a radical battle against the devaluation. This paper was completed when, on January 12th 1994, African governments finally sided with international funding agencies in support of devaluation, and thus against unions' agenda.

tries' raw materials. However, the gains obtained from higher prices of products such as coffee, cacao, cotton, and tea, could never compensate for the losses which resulted from the reduced quantity of goods exported and the deterioration of the terms of exchange.

Repeated budget deficits forced African states to introduce bureaucratic measures to respond to deteriorating economic conditions. These measures included, among others, administrative control over imported goods, currency protection measures through the defence of unrealistic parity rates given African declining economies, and demand management policies in order to increase states' revenues. The adverse effects of these measures were immediate. Restrictions on imported intermediary goods on which many industries depended led to a slowdown in economic activities and non-competitive patterns of industrialization because firms were forced to rely on overprotected (although inefficient) local producers. The incapacity of the latter to become effective import-substitution firms led to the redeployment of the unregulated informal sector in many countries.

By the end of the 1970s, African countries had an average annual rate of inflation of more than 20 percent; from 1974 to 1979, the balance of payment deficit grew from \$4 billion to \$10 billion (Zulu and Nsouli 1984). African governments were not entirely responsible for this situation. In effect, these policies (especially public investments) could not have been implemented without the financial support of international funding agencies.

By the end of the 1980s, the total external debt of African countries represented 99 percent of their GNP (OIT 1991). The limits of funding agencies' support came quickly. During the 1980s, by the time African countries became heavy borrowers like their South American counterparts, interest rates had risen so high that they were forced to accept structural adjustment loans and various stand-by arrangements (Mkandawire 1988).

The conclusions of the diagnosis of international funding institutions were that viable developmental policies required decontrol, the liberalization of trade regimes, and an outward-looking frame of incentives (Mkandawire 1988). The conditionalities contained in SAPs were expected to accomplish this. By the end of the 1980s, the failure of African countries to successfully implement SAPs was apparent. This was so despite earlier arguments that countries which most closely followed international funding agencies' recommendations (especially export-oriented policies) were doing better than those which did not (Belassa 1984).

In all SAPs, economic issues were first. The social aspects of the crises were almost entirely ignored. The logic of SAPs was that social improvements were to come with economic recovery, the former being perceived as a by-product of the latter. It was not until the late 1980s that international agencies began to discuss the social dimensions of adjustment plans (Serageldin and Noël 1990). The policy recommended was to stimulate autonomous initiatives among populations. One of the building blocks of this policy was to “encourage deprived citizens to participate in social and economic activities through community projects and other programs which would give them more control over their own destiny” (Serageldin and Noël 1990: 18). According to an ILO report, “neglect of the social consequences of SAPs, especially on employment and wages, was often a cause of failure of adjustment processes” (1991: viii). The report found that some of the central characteristics of African labour markets during the 1980s were the stagnation or decrease of salaried employment, the spread of illegal employment, youth unemployment, and growing dependence of African economies on informal and rural labour markets.

Due to high inflation rates, the growth of per capita income became negative under SAPs. From the early 1980s to the end of the decade, the ratio between the annual income of an African citizen and an OECD citizen fell from 1/19 to 1/30. Most social indicators (e.g., access to primary school, life expectancy, access to health services and food) fell below the level of those exhibited by other developing countries (i.e., Latin America, Asia).

Labour was hit in the workplace. During the 1980s, urban unemployment rates reached an average of 20 percent compared to an average of 10 percent during the 1970s; in some countries it went beyond 20 percent (e.g., Botswana, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania). According to the ILO’s report, unemployment rates were lower for people with no form of education and for those with university education.

With the occurrence of massive layoffs in labour markets, especially in the public sector, a relative stabilization of wages was expected. It did not happen. Between 1980 and 1986, real wages fell by an average of 30 percent. The decrease was faster for wages than it was for total per capita income. This explained why workers relied more and more on the non-wage part of their income to survive. Two factors contributed to falling wages: inflationist pressures already discussed, and the reduction of nominal wages in violation of the ILO standards signed by many African states. The hardest hit were again public sector employees: this was a conditionality of SAPs.

The state being the largest employer in all African countries, measures taken in the public sector, namely, privatization, state disengagement, layoffs, and wage cuts, were the most important causes of workers' difficulties both in their households and workplaces. These measures led to a fall in overall consumer demand and to series of plant closings in the private sector which was supposed to be the locomotive of economic recovery. Thus, the neoclassical paradigm advocated by international funding agency failed both economically and socially. The privatization of a significant part of the public sector did not stimulate initiative among local entrepreneurs, nor did it attract foreign investment.

The failure of structural adjustment programs was due to their content as discussed so far. However, it was also due to the fact that the changes in economic policy imposed by international financial institutions were not accompanied by significant reforms of economic and social institutions, and by changes in government coalitions which had no coherent framework for economic and social development. A country like Ghana (and perhaps Mali in the near future) has been an exception to the rule. Thus, the nature of political leadership did matter because it determined the capabilities of African governments to negotiate the implementation of financial agencies' conditionalities based on their framework for economic development.

So, as a general rule, in Sub-Saharan Africa, financial institutions advocated the end of the entrepreneurial state, but avoided directly influencing political change in respect of state internal procedures.<sup>3</sup> The most they did was to strongly suggest democracy (i.e., the recognition of opposition parties) in countries where it did not exist. In fact, financial institutions sided with governments when these latter were pressured by unions and political parties. Thus, their attitude led to programs for economic changes that were detrimental to labour, but supportive of the political status quo. This explains why unions' grievances were often directed against coalitions formed by African governments and international funding agencies.

Although unions did not win the battle against structural adjustment programs, it is fair to say that their various responses prevented the stabilization of a social and political order facilitating the implementation of these programs, as we seek to show in the remainder of the article.

---

3. Interview with World Bank representatives in Dakar, Senegal (1993).

---

*THE ISSUE: CREATING A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY*

---

During the past 15 to 20 years, structural adjustment programs introduced by African governments and international funding agencies have been at the origin of most industrial relations conflicts. Germane to these programs has been the need to create the social and political conditions (i.e., social order) guaranteeing the renewal of international financial support for the restructuring of African economies. Fundamentally, these conditions have included the creation of policy mixes where community groups, solidarity associations in and out of the workplace, markets, and states are the main institutional actors, with particular functions formally or informally assigned by governments.

First, community groups and solidarity associations are expected to become substitutes for the welfare state and for trade unions through voluntary participation and the “spontaneous solidarity” of their members, but with no systematically and formally recognized role in policy making at the national or firm levels. Open access to the informal sector for secondary jobs certainly explains why wage cuts did not provoke in many countries the expected workers’ resistance during the 1980s (OIT 1991; Lachaud 1989). According to the abovementioned ILO report, during the 1990s, the large majority of jobs created (93 percent) is likely to come from the informal sector. Despite its growing importance, the informal sector remains “unregulated,” and its survival depends to a large extent on the willingness of the state to accept or suppress it (for a discussion on this issue and some case studies, see Olowu 1990; Bratton 1990; van de Walle 1990; Berry 1990).

The rise in workplaces of solidarity associations supported by employers against unions, and based on ethnicity, religion, or geographical origins has essentially responded to immediate social and material needs which constitute workers’ main preoccupation today (e.g., housing, loans, provision of foodstuff). So, although workers have by and large remained members of traditional unions, they rely much less on them for the defence of their interests in the workplace. The framework of this approach based on community groups and solidarity associations is provided by the World Bank which, in its famous report on sustained economic growth in Africa, stated that “african traditions of solidarity can be extremely useful for the mobilization of populations at the community level” (Banque mondiale 1989: 39).

Second, through the privatization of an important part of the public sector, and “dispersed competition,” the market has been assigned the challenging functions of generating the mechanisms leading to sustained



economic development. Paradoxically, employers' associations where they exist, have been excluded from the making of economic policies.

Finally, states have given up a significant part of the economic functions that they have never successfully fulfilled, but have retained most of their coercive capabilities (some being transferred to communities) which aim at ensuring the strength of the social order needed for the implementation of SAPs. International funding agencies supported this strategy.

A social order based on community groups, solidarity associations, markets, and states has several implications for labour's demands and organizations. The importance of labour's demands under structural adjustment programs resides less in the novelty of these demands than in the threat they constitute to the climate of industrial peace indispensable to the implementation of these programs. There are two ways of guaranteeing industrial peace under SAPs. The first consists of using the coercive capabilities of the state (in alliance with employers whenever possible) to repress any attempt made by labour to develop autonomous organizations or associations acting as "private interest governments." This strategy may discipline labour, but it is costly to both the state and employers because it leads to a social order permanently under the threat of labour's counter-offensive.

The second way consists of allowing the formation of autonomous labour organizations and of promoting the creation of concertation mechanisms for policy making between the state, these organizations, and other interest groups (especially employers' associations). This second strategy increases the chances of compromise thanks to internal bargaining in labour organizations and employer associations prior to tripartite concertation with the state. Moreover, by allowing autonomous unions to exist, and to speak on behalf of their constituencies, the state automatically transfers to them some of its coercive prerogatives which, if exercised, might negatively affect its legitimacy. Most African states have so far chosen the first (repressive) pattern. They have either repressed unions, or promoted a social and political order based on the selective exclusion of autonomous labour organizations from policy making. Although this exclusion strategy existed before, in the context of structural adjustment plans it became a central industrial relations issue. African unions' demands for inclusion in the development and implementation of economic and social policies had a strong "legal" basis. In effect, Consultation Recommendation 1968 (113) of the ILO's tripartism policy states that consultation and cooperation between employers' associations, unions, and governments should be promoted on all subjects of mutual interest. These subjects include the elaboration and

implementation of economic and social policies (for a good discussion, see Tajman 1993, on the Ghanaian case). So, demands for “national concertation” on SAPs were explicit in the agendas of almost all African unions.

In the African context, autonomous unions are distinguished from unions integrated in or affiliated to ruling parties. The former operate exclusively in defence of workers’ interests. The latter continuously try to find a compromise between the defence of workers’ interests and the support of government social and economic policies.

Streeck and Schmitter (1985: 124) defined orders based on private interest governments (“corporative-associative order”) as those where “the key actors are organizations defined by their common purpose of defending and promoting functionally-defined interests, i.e. class, sectoral and professional associations. The central principle is that of concertation, or negotiation within and among a limited and fixed set of interest organizations that mutually recognize each other’s status and entitlements and that are capable of reaching and implementing relatively stable compromises (*pacts*) in the pursuit of their interests.” In fact, the contingent and strategic interdependence between the interests of different collectivities almost forces them to look for stable pacts.

By excluding employers’ associations and autonomous unions from policy making, African states have opposed the creation of a corporative-associative order. The selective exclusion of autonomous labour organizations from policy making is related to two factors. First, only autonomous unions can operate as private interest governments. Second, as such, they constitute the only potential threat to the industrial order required for the implementation of African governments’ economic programs. In effect, community and solidarity groups, by being largely excluded from economic decisions, do not constitute such a threat.

In fact, as mentioned earlier, they assume some of the costs of economic recovery which would have otherwise been the responsibility of the state and employers. When, due to their expansion, they begin to constitute a threat to adjustment programs and to state authority, they can be relatively easily suppressed or weakened, given their informal status. In contrast, labour organizations’ economic demands in periods of recession are likely to automatically affect the interests of other “collectivities.”

The satisfaction of these demands may, among other things, increase labour costs and reduce firms’ profits. Moreover, as argued by the “urban bias” thesis supported by international funding organizations, the satisfaction of urban workers’ demands leads to an unequal distribution of

resources against rural masses who have been traditionally less organized than the former (for a good discussion, see Adesina 1992).

The social order promoted by African governments and international funding agencies represents the framework within which unions have developed their demands, the channels to be used for their expression, and a perception of their responsibilities during periods of economic crises. The next section shows how unions in various countries have dealt with the issue.

### *AFRICAN LABOUR ORGANIZATIONS' STRATEGIES UNDER STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT*

---

There is little disagreement among researchers on how the implementation of structural adjustment programs in Africa has affected the social and working conditions of labour (Sachikonye 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Duruflé 1988; Rose 1985; Africa Development 1985; Egwu 1991; Simutanyi 1991; Herbst 1991; Barongo 1986; ILO 1987). There is also no disagreement on the fact that these programs have been to a large extent implemented despite workers' resistance, although not easily. However, there are divergences among studies on the strategies developed or to be developed by workers to respond to the negative effects of SAPs on their working and social conditions. Various studies discussed hereafter also show that, from one country to another, workers have been more or less successful in adjusting their forms of organization to the new situation.

Despite the specifics of national experiences, research on African unions under structural adjustment programs has essentially followed two patterns. Most research, whether liberal, reformist, or Marxist has used a framework determined by the logic of capital. Based on this framework, workers are considered as the victims of economic and social difficulties. Thus, the rhythms and forms of their responses are adjusted to the deterioration of their conditions.

The second group of research does not ignore the relationship between workers' responses and the consequences of SAPs on their social and working conditions. However, it suggests a shift in the perspective of analysis from the logic of capital to the logic of workers (Cleaver 1989). Within this second group, some see a continuity between "the nationalist, developmental, and welfarist visions of the independence movement" and analyse labour's resistance to or offensive against SAPs (Sachikonye 1991a: 38).

The divergences between the two strands of research may be related to choices in their unit of analysis. The first group (capital's logic) offers a

synthesis based as much as possible on evidence from country studies, while the second uses a more global, unspecific, and ideological approach which provides little evidence on the existence of a logic of labour (as an alternative to capital's logic) which can be used as an analytical point of departure.

The 1987 ILO workshop, an illustration of the first group of research, found that on average, the reaction of workers to economic recessions have been "cautious, at times cooperative, and at the most defensive," although demonstrations and strikes seemed to come back to the scene during the second half of the 1980s (ILO 1987: 13). Isamah (1991) reached a similar conclusion in his comparative study on "Labour responses to structural adjustment in Nigeria and Zambia." Generalizing to Sub-Saharan Africa, he argues that labour's responses have tended to be "largely instinctive, defensive, and acquiescent."

Looking mostly at English-speaking African countries, Fashoyin and Damachi (1987: 151) found that government and employers' unilateral approaches have put so much pressures on labour that "the strike, the most effective weapon has become a suicidal [one]" causing damages to workers. This argument is supported by studies on the dissolution of the Nigerian Labour Congress by the Nigerian government (Olukoshi and Aremu 1988).

In countries where the economic situation reached near chaos, unions became irrelevant to workers. Analysing the effects of the crisis on workers in Uganda, Barongo (1986) showed how declining membership, plant and unit-level bargaining, and labour's individual initiatives, led to unions' near-disintegration and loss of credibility among employers. In Guinea (French-speaking Africa), where unions were totally integrated into the state apparatus from 1958 to 1984, the emergence of autonomous unions with an independent agenda was quite impossible (Diallo et al. 1992). The particularly steep decline in the economic situation did not favour such an agenda in Guinea.

The attitude of Sub-Saharan unions can be extended to Northern African unions, although economic performances were on the average better in Northern Africa. Tunisian unions played an important role in the 1940s and 1960s struggles for independence (but within the framework designed by the ruling party) and in the struggle for democracy in the late 1970s. The 1978 clash between Tunisian workers and the state led to more union autonomy, but organized labour failed to set an independent agenda, and adopted a "participationist" stand under SAPs.

According to Chikki (1990), before adjustment programs, workers in Algeria had experienced a social order where the state satisfied social

demands, restricted public freedoms, and coopted union leaders. Under SAPs, workers distanced themselves from traditional unions and the state, and relied on solidarity groups which were in many cases detached from the work process. Thus, they failed to build autonomous unions, capable to act as "private interest governments."

Zambia is probably the only case where labour actions combined with popular discontent forced the government to break away for some time from international funding agencies and their conditionalities (Iwuji 1987). However, even in the Zambian case, Simutanyi (1991) argues that trade unions' actions were in general ineffective, and that the 1980s food riots resulted more from spontaneous popular initiatives than from an organized labour's agenda.

According to this body of research (capital's logic), in the near future labour's institutional responses will not take the form of autonomous organizations able to challenge the industrial relations order imposed by employers, the state, and international funding agencies. Production and economic recovery being first on the agenda of governments, and the relationship of power being in their favour, the only alternative left to labour is to participate in the establishment of a peaceful industrial environment by restraining its demands, to substitute plant-level for national- and sectoral-level strategies, and to reorient the function of its organizations from distribution issues to production issues.

The second body of research argues that capital has not had the initiative. Cleaver argues that the debt crisis and the economic recessions have been "a crisis of capitalist power brought on and perpetuated by the ability of workers in various parts of the world to undermine capitalist planning and accumulation" (1989: 19). To make his point, Cleaver discusses how the confrontations between labour and capital in various industrialized and non-industrialized countries can be related to key moments in the evolution of the debt crisis and recessions. However, there is no evidence in Cleaver's argument that labour's actions were the causes (i.e., labour's logic) rather than the consequences (i.e., capital's logic) of the economic and financial environment.

Senegal is probably the country case that best fits the thesis of this second strand of research. The Senegalese labour movement has long struggled for organizational and political independence. In contrast to many other African countries, Senegalese unions have been among the least integrated into ruling parties. This explains why the 1980s saw both a struggle of traditional unions' members for more independence vis-à-vis the government and the ruling party, and the spread of autonomous unions essentially preoccupied by their members' interests (Tidjani

1993). Nevertheless, so far, SAPs have been implemented. In fact, the Senegalese case is also consistent with capital-logic research because, in a number of cases, workers have developed community and solidarity groups to satisfy their social needs instead of relying on unions (Ndiaye 1992). Both types of research discussed above present some problems. The first group overestimates both employers' and the state's willingness to reach "durable pacts" on policy making with labour. The dissolution of the Labour Congress in Nigeria where Fashoyin and Damachi (1987) saw possibilities for industrial peace showed that the state had set the limits of labour resistance to the implementation of SAPs. Moreover, the fact that this dissolution occurred because of an NLC campaign against the SAP suggests that labour had not lost all its political capabilities (see Egwu 1991; and Olukoshi et Aremu 1988 on the NLC's activities; see also Bangura 1988, on the Nigerian auto industry). The second group of research overestimates labour's abilities to take the initiative despite evidence showing the contrary in a number of countries.

These problems derive from the fact that both bodies of research have put too much emphasis on the most obvious of labour actions, namely, strikes, work stoppages, rallies, campaigns, pamphlets, to cite but a few. For the first group, this overemphasis has led to an underestimation of labour's "hidden forms of resistance" in the workplace. Cohen (1987) explains that during periods when the state exercises its coercive power against labour, strike activity become less important than "less spectacular, silent, and often unorganized" resistance in order to understand workers' responses.

In the second group of research, this overemphasis has led to an overestimation of labour's strike activities, which in fact decreased during the 1980s (ILO 1987). As of now, no national labour movement has succeeded in preventing the implementation of SAPs over a long period of time. Nevertheless, this implementation has been made difficult by the fact that in almost all cases it did not result from a consensus between unions, employers, and the state. Consequently, SAPs have lacked continuity and stability in their implementation. Although more country case studies are needed, the following proposition can be made at this point: given governments' and employers' offensive against labour for the implementation of SAPs across all countries, the degree of success of African workers' resistance to SAPs has depended both on the organizational traditions of labour movements and on their present political capabilities.

Taking the two ends of a spectrum, it can be argued that in countries where labour had no strong traditions of striving for independent organizations, their present capabilities to build autonomous unions in order to resist SAPs were likely to be weak. The National Confederation of Guinean

Workers, restructured after the death of Sekou Touré (the president of the country from 1958 to 1984), and characterized by Diallo et al. (1992) as a union participating in national economic development fell under this first pattern.

On the other and, in countries where labour had strong traditions of independent organizations despite state repression, workers combined demands for changes in the strategies of traditional unions (for example, the end of the integration or affiliation of workers' organizations in government and ruling party structures, and more union internal democracy), and the construction of alternative forms of worker representation (e.g., autonomous unions) in sectors where the relationship of power allowed for it. However, the creation of new and autonomous labour organizations posed one problem. It led to competitive unionism and fragmented collective bargaining.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the absence of centralizing and encompassing labour organizations (i.e., one voice for the large majority of workers) made difficult the stabilization of labour relations systems by reducing the possibilities for economic and social policies based on "stable pacts" between the state, employers, and labour. This, in addition to African governments' opposition to labour organizations acting as private interest governments, limited the chances of labour participation in policy making. Senegal fell under this second pattern.

However, the forms of labour's responses to the negative consequences of SAPs on workers' social and working conditions did not only depend on their organizational traditions and present political capabilities. It also depended on how labour perceived its role and responsibilities in periods of prolonged economic crises. For all African unions, this was a new issue.

In the face of very complex situations created by these crises, African workers and their unions have had to make complex strategic choices. The latter have not been as easy and clear-cut as in newly industrialized countries (NICs) where Petras and Engbarth saw the "emergence of a new generation of workers located within the new productive facilities and their deepening perception of the basic issue as one of exploitation and

---

4. Senegal was a typical case in point. In August 1993, the government introduced an austerity plan (*Le plan d'urgence*), as an element of its SAP. At its inception, workers' resistance to the austerity plan was organized in a unifying ad hoc committee (*Inter-syndicale*), combining traditional and autonomous unions. However, this unity fell apart after only three weeks of negotiations between the government and the *Inter-syndicale*. This break led to competitive collective bargaining (the government negotiated with traditional and autonomous unions separately) at the expense of workers' interests. The struggle against the austerity plan was lost. Up to now, this unity has not been rebuilt despite claims of their willingness to do so made by all unions.

not development" (1988: 95). A similar dichotomy (exploitation vs. development) and its generalization to all workers can be made in the case of African countries, but it runs the risk of oversimplification. Four perceptions seem to have prevailed in the African labour movement during the past 15 to 20 years.

There was the perception that the basic issue is a combination of issues of exploitation and development. The core elements of this perception are the following: African economic recovery is a priority; labour must play its role in this recovery; nevertheless, unions must try to keep intact their political capacities to grieve in defence of their member's interests. This has been the orientation, for example, adopted by the National Confederation of Guinean Workers. At its 1985 congress, the union defined its orientation as one of "responsible participation, partnership seeking dialogue and collaboration" based on workers' contribution to economic development, the promotion of a cooperative movement to improve workers' conditions, and the pursuit of grievance activities (Diallo et al. 1992).

The National Confederation of Senegalese Workers (CNTS), a traditional union which in the early 1980s faced members' demands for improvements in the defence of their interests, has developed a similar orientation. There is no question that attempts to both defend workers' interests and participate in the implementation of government policies constitute a difficult political exercise on the part of unions. It also makes difficult the definition of a clear orientation, and contains risks of conflicts between unions' directions and their bases.

Some unions had the perception that, according to the period, the basic issue may shift from development to exploitation, and vice versa. This is the case of the Nigerian Labour Congress. During the 1970s and the 1980s, the NLC shifted from radical demands focused on the improvement of workers' conditions (1979-1982) to compromise and concessions, provoking criticisms from member unions (Van Hear 1988).

A third perception was that the relationship of power was so much on the side of employers and the state that popular unrest would entail large costs that labour could not assume. Under such conditions, what Herbst (1991) called a "politics of acquiescence" in the case of Ghanaian unions, may be considered by labour organization as the best choice for the retention of remaining constituencies, and the protection of what SAPs have not yet taken away from workers.

Finally, there was the perception that the basic issue was one of exploitation. Organized labour being largely excluded from the final decision-making process in policy making, its most important responsibility is



to defend the interests of its constituencies, regardless of national economic situations. In this case, unions act as uncompromising interest organizations.

Autonomous unions in Senegal constituted a case in point. However, in a situation where, for many people, economic crises seem to call for the unity of all national forces, this perception of the basic issue can lead to criticisms from union members and the public. This occurs especially in cases of decisions to launch strike movements which may affect the entire population negatively, and further deterioration of the national economy (e.g., hospital, university professor, or electricity and water company strikes).

To identify positive effects of SAPs on African labour unions' struggles for improvement of their social and working conditions, one should look at the fact that SAPs, by imposing similar conditionalities on African countries, have created the bases for the homogenization of workers' grievances and for coordinated agendas, although such possibilities remain to be exploited by labour organizations. In other words, the traditional distinction made between organized labour in French- and English-speaking countries tends to be irrelevant to an analysis of organized labour's reactions to SAPs.

Previous studies on the emergence of unions and regulated industrial relations systems in Africa showed that the liberal orientation of British colonization allowed for the early recognition of workers' rights through industrial relations laws and regulations without the need for radical political struggles, as happened in French colonies (Amadi 1977-78; Damachi and Seibel 1975; Dewitte 1981; Martens 1983; Mulot 1979; Yusufu 1981; Tidjani 1987-88). These studies also demonstrated that in addition to the total control exercised by France over its colonies, the greater politicization of "French-speaking unions" was also a consequence of their links and relative subordination to ideologically oriented unions in the *metro-pole*.

There is no doubt that, since independence, the importance of the different orientation of French and British colonizations in explaining variations in industrial relations systems in Africa has decreased as compared to national (or regional) realities. However, during the past 15 to 20 years, national realities became more and more alike given the generalization of economic crises and SAPs which made economic and social grievances a top priority in all African unions' agendas. Furthermore, liberalism is no longer the exclusivity of former British colonies. For instance, a comparison between Nigeria and Senegal during the past years shows that, contrary to their Nigerian counterparts, Senegalese

unions did not have to initiate radical struggles for their recognition as social partners entitled to discuss and question the implementation of SAPs. One of the main reasons for this difference is that, in Senegal, the recognition of opposition parties and autonomous unions, despite attempts to repress the latter, has been a reality since the second half of the 1970s. Thus, differences between the two countries resided more in the current nature of political regimes than in their colonial origins.

### *CONCLUSION*

---

During the past 15 to 20 years, most African countries have been subjected to structural adjustment programs. These programs aim at creating the conditions for sustained economic growth and improvements in rural economies. Among these conditions was the creation of a peaceful industrial environment where community groups, solidarity associations, markets, and states were to be the main actors.

The implementation of these programs has led to the deterioration of workers' social and working conditions. In most countries, governments and employers have used their coercive power to limit union's attempts to protect their members' interests. African states and international funding agencies viewed labour organizations as one of the most important threats to economic recovery and growth.

African unions' responses varied from acquiescence to resistance. Depending on their organizational traditions, their present political capabilities, and their perception of unions' role and responsibilities under economic crises, workers used various strategies to channel their demands. These strategies included the transformation of traditional unions often integrated into or affiliated to ruling parties, the creation or reinforcement of participative unions, or the construction of autonomous labour organizations. Although it may be too early to draw a conclusion, especially in countries where autonomous unions emerged, it appears that so far no African labour movement has successfully opposed the implementation of structural adjustment programs.

The limitations of this study are embedded in its objectives. An overview can only identify trends and underline broad similarities and contrasts. The reason why this overview essentially dealt with macro-level trends is related to the fact that most research on African unions and structural adjustment programs do not include firm-level empirical analyses.

This is an important problem because the fact that almost no African country has yet experienced signs of economic growth and improve-

ments in rural economies, despite the fact that governments have apparently succeeded in imposing SAPs, may suggest the following argument: the implementation and the success of structural adjustment programs reside as much in the political capabilities of African states and international funding agencies to impose them on labour as on the capacity of individual employers to introduce in their firms the elements of management contained in these programs. These elements include employment flexibilities now formally allowed (or about to be allowed) by many national labour legislation, the reduction or elimination of workers' advantages, and the redesign of occupational categories.

Thus, research on African unions under structural adjustment programs ought to include firm-level or sectoral empirical analyses. In effect, national level unions' acquiescence or resistance is not always replicated at the firm or sectoral level especially under economic crises and at a time when African states are more and more giving up their centralized industrializing functions and stimulating the privatization of economies. Under such conditions, the individual firm, instead of (or as well as) the national economy, tends to constitute one of the most important units of analysis.

## ■ REFERENCES

- ADESINA, Jimi. 1992. "Labour Movements and Policy making in Africa." Working Paper 1/1992, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- AMADI, L. O. 1977-78. "Political Integration in Nigeria, 1939-45: The Role of Economic Development During the Second World War." *TransAfrican Journal of History*, No. 6/7, 142-153.
- AFRIQUE ET DÉVELOPPEMENT/AFRICA DEVELOPMENT. 1985. *Crisis and Adjustment*. Vol. X, No. 1/2, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- BANGURA, Yusuf. 1988. "Travail, crise industrielle et lutte pour la démocratie populaire au Nigéria: cas des travailleurs des usines de montage de véhicules." *Les mouvements sociaux, mutations sociales et luttes pour la démocratie en Afrique*. Conférence 1-3 Juin, Harare, Zimbabwe: CODESRIA.
- BANQUE MONDIALE. 1989. *L'Afrique Subsaharienne. De la crise à une croissance durable. Étude prospective à long terme*. Washington D.C.
- BARONGO, Yolamu C. 1986. "Economic Crisis in Uganda: Its Impact on the Working Class, 1972-1982." *The Social Impact and Responses to the Economic Crisis in Africa*. Conference, July 21-23, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- BELASSA, Bela. 1984. "Chocs extérieurs et solutions politiques adoptées en Afrique au Sud du Sahara, 1973-1978." *Finances et Développement*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 10-13.

- BERRY, Sara. 1990. "De Facto Democratization? Some Reflections on Rural Development in Africa." *African Governance in the 1990s: Objectives, Resources and Constraints*. The Second Annual Seminar of the African Governance Program, March 23-25, Working paper series, Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 119-125.
- BRATTON, Michael. 1990. "Enabling the Voluntary Sector in Africa: The Policy Context." *African Governance in the 1990s: Objectives, Resources and Constraints*. The Second Annual Seminar of the African Governance Program, March 23-25, Working paper series, Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 104-113.
- CHIKKI, Said. 1990. "The Working Class, the Social Nexus and Democracy in Algeria." *Social Movements, Social Transformation and the Struggle for Democracy in Africa*. Seminar, 21-23 Mai, Tunis: CODESRIA.
- CLEAVER, Harry. 1989. "Close the IMF, Abolish Debt and End Development: A Class Analysis of the International Debt Crisis." *Capital and Class*, No. 39, Winter, 17-50.
- COHEN, Robin. 1987. "Les formes cachées de la résistance et de la conscience ouvrières." *Classes ouvrières d'Afrique noire*. M. Agier, J. Copans and A. Morice, eds. Paris: Éditions Khartala/Éditions de l'Orstom, 112-136.
- DAMACHI, U. G., and H. D. SEIBEL. 1973. *Social Changes and Economic Development in Nigeria*. New York: Praeger.
- DEWITTE, P. 1981. "La C.G.T. et les syndicats d'Afrique occidentale française, 1945-1957." *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 117, 3-32.
- DIALLO, Mid, Maurice DOPAVOGUI, and Gérard KESTER. 1992. *Guinée: pour un nouveau syndicalisme en Afrique*. Paris: L'Harmattan et P.A.D.E.P.
- DURUFLÉ, Gilles. 1988. *L'ajustement structurel en Afrique (Sénégal, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar)*. Paris: Édition Khartala.
- EGWU, Samuel G. 1991. "State, Social Control and Adjustment in Nigeria: Case of Resistance and Accommodation." *The Politics of Structural Adjustment*. Conference, September 9-12, Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.
- FASHOYIN, Tayo, and Ukandi G. DAMACHI. 1987. "Industrial Relations for African Economic Recovery." *The Role of the African Labour Force in Recessed Economies*. ILO: Geneva, 143-164.
- HERBST, Jeffrey. 1991. "Labor in Ghana Under Structural Adjustment: The Politics of Acquiescence." *The Politics of Structural Adjustment*. Conference, September 9-12, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- INTERNATIONAL LABOR OFFICE (ILO). 1987. "The Role of the African Labour Force in Recessed Economies." Report of the ARLAC-JASPA Workshop, Harare, Zimbabwe, 15-27 June.
- ISAMAH, Austin. 1991. *Labour Response to Structural Adjustment in Nigeria and Zambia*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

- IWUJI, E.C. 1987. "Impact of the Recession on Industrial Relations in Africa." *The Role of the African Labour Force in Recessed Economies*. ILO: Geneva, 122-142.
- LACHAUD, Jean-Pierre. 1989. *Le désengagement de l'État et les ajustements sur le marché du travail en Afrique francophone*. Genève: Institut international d'études sociales.
- MARTENS, Georges. 1983. "Révolution ou participation: syndicats et partis politiques au Sénégal." *Le Mois en Afrique*, No. 205/206, 72-113.
- MKANDAWIRE, Thandika. 1988. "The Road to Crisis, Adjustment and De-Industrialization: The African Case." *Africa Development-Afrique et Développement*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, 5-31.
- MULOT, F. 1979. "Syndicalisme et politique au Sénégal, 1968/69-1976." *Revue française d'études politiques africaines*, No. 158, 63-90.
- NDIAYE, M. I. Alfred. 1992. "Crise économique prolongée et formes de réponses des travailleurs: étude de la résistance du salarié sénégalais." Ph.D. thesis, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar.
- OLOWU, Dele. 1990. "Local Institutions in Africa: Lessons of Success." *African Governance in the 1990s: Objectives, Resources and Constraints*. The Second Annual Seminar of the African Governance Program, March 23-25, Working paper series, Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 99-103.
- OLUKOSHI, A. O., and I. AREMU. 1988. "Structural Adjustment and Labour Subordination in Nigeria: The Dissolution of Nigeria Labour Congress Re-visited." *Review of African Political Economy*, 99-111.
- ORGANISATION INTERNATIONALE DU TRAVAIL (OIT). 1991. *Rapport sur l'emploi en Afrique*. Addis Abéba: Programme des emplois et des compétences techniques pour l'Afrique.
- PETRAS, James, and Denis ENGBARTH. 1988. "Third World Industrialization and Trade Union Struggles." *Trade Unions and the New Industrialization of the Third World*. R. Southall, ed. London: Zed Books, 81-111.
- ROSE, Tore. 1985. *Crisis and Recovery in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Paris: OECD, Development Center Seminars.
- SACHIKONYE, Lloyd. 1991a. "Structural Adjustment and the Working Class in Southern Africa." *Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 37-38.
- SACHIKONYE, Lloyd. 1991b. "The Environment Crisis and Emerging Social Movements." *Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 33-34.
- SACHIKONYE, Lloyd. 1992. "About Adjustment, Social Movements and Development Discourse." *Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly*, Vol. 5, No. 10, 35-37.

- SERAGELDIN, Ismail, and Michel NOËL. 1990. "S'occuper des dimensions sociales de l'ajustement en Afrique." *Finances et Développement*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 18-27.
- SIMUTANYI, Néo R. 1991. "Labour and Structural Adjustment in Zambia." *The Politics of Structural Adjustment*. Conference, September 9-12, Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.
- STREECK, Wolfgang, and Philippe C. SCHMITTER. 1985. "Community, Market, State -- and Associations? The Prospective Contribution of Interest Governance to Social Order." *European Sociological Review*, Vol. I, No. 2, 119-137.
- TAJGMAN, David. 1993. "Structural Adjustment and International Labour Standards: A Case Study of Ghana." Occasional Paper 4, BIT: Interdepartmental Project on Structural Adjustment.
- TIDJANI, Bassirou. 1987-88. "Relations industrielles au Nigéria et au Sénégal: une analyse comparée." *Annales 1987-88*, Laboratoire de gestion et cultures de Nice, France, 1-22.
- TIDJANI, Bassirou. 1993. "Les syndicats sénégalais et la crise économique." Paper presented at the Summer University of A.J/PADS, August, Dakar, Sénégal.
- VAN HEAR, Nicholas. 1988. "Recession, Retrenchment and Military Rule: Nigerian Labour in the 1980s." *Trade Unions and the New Industrialization of the Third World*. R. Southhall, ed. London: Zed Books, 144-163.
- VAN DE WALLE, Nicolas. 1990. "Innovation in African Governance: Some Thoughts on Empowering the Countryside." *African Governance in the 1990s: Objectives, Resources and Constraints*. The Second Annual Seminar of the African Governance Program, March 23-25, Working paper series, Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 114-118.
- YUSUFU, T. M. 1981. *The Dynamics of Industrial Relations: The Nigerian Experience*. Ibadan: University Press Limited.
- ZULU, Justin B., and Nsouli M. SALEH. 1984. "Les programmes d'ajustement en Afrique." *Finances et Développement*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 5-9.

---

## RÉSUMÉ

---

### Les syndicats africains et les programmes d'ajustement structurel

Tout en s'intéressant aux problèmes que connaissent les syndicats africains eu égard aux programmes d'ajustement structurel (PAS), la présente recherche fournit des éléments pour l'élaboration d'un cadre

d'étude des mouvements ouvriers africains en période de crise économique.

Nous pouvons définir ces PAS, implantés dans la plupart des pays africains depuis le début des années 80, comme l'ensemble des conditions accompagnant systématiquement les accords entre les institutions internationales de financement et les gouvernements africains. Ces programmes prévoient la disponibilité de ressources visant à éliminer les déséquilibres financiers internes et externes croissants, afin de créer un contexte de croissance économique soutenue.

L'analyse et les solutions des institutions internationales de financement découlent d'un paradigme néoclassique basé sur la preuve de la faillite des politiques économiques dirigées de la plupart des états africains depuis leur indépendance des années 60. Leur diagnostic était que des politiques de développement viables exigeaient la suppression des contrôles gouvernementaux, la libéralisation du commerce et un cadre d'incitations externes.

À la fin des années 80, la faillite de l'implantation des PAS par les pays africains était apparente. Dans tous ces PAS, les questions économiques étaient prioritaires. On ignore presque les problèmes sociaux générés par la crise. En somme, le paradigme néoclassique prôné par les agences de financement internationales a failli, tant économiquement que socialement.

Les PAS ont été à l'origine de la plupart des conflits industriels. Ces programmes visaient la création de conditions sociales et politiques garantissant le renouvellement du soutien financier international aux économies africaines en voie de restructuration. Fondamentalement, ces conditions prévoyaient l'exclusion des syndicats et la création d'un ensemble de politiques selon lesquelles groupes communautaires, associations internes et externes aux lieux de travail, marché et états devenaient les acteurs institutionnels principaux.

En dépit des spécificités nationales, la recherche sur les syndicats africains soumis aux PAS a suivi deux paradigmes. Premièrement, la recherche, qu'elle soit libérale, réformiste ou marxiste, a surtout utilisé un cadre déterminé par la logique du capital. Le second paradigme, quant à lui, suggère un déplacement dans la perspective d'analyse de la logique du capital vers une logique des travailleurs.

D'après le groupe dit de logique du capital, les réactions des travailleurs aux récessions économiques ont été, en moyenne, prudentes, quelques fois coopératives et, au plus, défensives, même si démonstrations et grèves semblent refaire surface dans la seconde moitié des années 80. Ainsi, dans un proche avenir, les réponses institutionnelles syn-

dicales ne prendront certainement pas la forme d'organisations autonomes capables de défier l'ordre des relations industrielles imposé par les employeurs, l'État et les agences de financement internationales.

Le second groupe de recherche, dit de logique des travailleurs, prétend que le capital n'a pas eu l'initiative. Il affirme que la crise budgétaire et les récessions économiques ont été une crise du pouvoir capitaliste causée et perpétuée par l'habileté des travailleurs à réagir dans différentes parties du monde.

Ces deux groupes de recherche présentent des lacunes. Le premier surestime la volonté des employeurs et de l'État à rechercher des pactes durables pour la définition de politiques avec les syndicats. Le second surestime les capacités des syndicats à prendre l'initiative, malgré la preuve du contraire.

Nos observations et analyses d'autres recherches nous mènent aux propositions suivantes. Dans les pays où les syndicats de travailleurs n'ont pas une grande expérience de lutte pour leur indépendance organisationnelle, leurs moyens actuels pour construire des syndicats autonomes afin de résister aux PAS sont probablement faibles. Au contraire, dans les pays où les syndicats ont une forte tradition de luttes pour leur indépendance malgré la répression de l'État, les travailleurs vont combiner des demandes de changement des stratégies adoptées par les syndicats traditionnels, avec l'élaboration d'autres formes de représentation des travailleurs dans les secteurs où les relations de pouvoir le permettent (ex., syndicats autonomes).

Cependant, les réactions des travailleurs aux effets négatifs des PAS sur leurs conditions de travail et conditions sociales dépendent aussi de la façon dont ils perçoivent leur rôle et leurs responsabilités en période de crise économique prolongée. Nous avons identifié quatre perceptions. D'abord, la perception selon laquelle la question de base est une combinaison de problèmes d'exploitation et de développement. Ensuite, la perception selon laquelle, selon la période, la question fondamentale peut passer d'un problème de développement à un problème d'exploitation et vice-versa. Puis, la perception d'après laquelle les relations de pouvoir favorisent tellement l'employeur et l'État que l'agitation populaire entraînerait des coûts que le mouvement syndical ne peut pas assumer. Enfin, la perception selon laquelle le problème de fond est l'exploitation des travailleurs.

En conclusion, nous pouvons dire que, au cours de ces dernières années, la plupart des pays africains ont connu des PAS dont l'implantation a causé la détérioration des conditions de travail et des conditions sociales des travailleurs. Dans la plupart des pays, les gouvernements et



les employeurs ont utilisé leurs pouvoirs coercitifs pour limiter les tentatives syndicales de protéger les intérêts de leurs membres. La réponse des syndicats africains est allée de l'acquiescement à la résistance. Jusqu'à maintenant, aucun mouvement syndical africain ne s'est opposé avec succès à l'implantation des programmes d'ajustement structurel.

### **RESÚMEN**

---

#### **Los sindicatos africanos bajo los programas de ajuste estructural**

En la gran mayoría de los países africanos, los programas de ajuste estructural establecieron las relaciones industriales de la década de los años ochenta, porque afectaron de manera negativa las condiciones sociales y de trabajo de la masa salarial. Este estudio discute las respuestas de la clase laboral africana al deterioro de sus condiciones de vida, y a los intentos de el estado de limitar sus demandas. Concluye que los programas de ajuste estructural se implementaron en toda África en contra de la oposición de la fuerza laboral. El nivel de la implementación depende directamente de la capacidad del gobierno de reprimir las tradiciones laborales de búsqueda de sindicatos independientes y en las percepciones de los sindicatos de la problemática y de su responsabilidad bajo condiciones de crisis económica.