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Trade Unions and Sustainable Democracy in Africa

Edited by

Gérard Kester

Ousmane Oumarou Sidibé



TRADE UNIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA



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Edited by

GÉRARD KESTER and
OUSMANE OUMAROU SIDIBÉ

Translated by Michael Cunningham

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Foreword

Yet another book on democratisation in Africa. Yes, but this one is different. Different because the great debate on democratisation rarely gives credit of any sort to the trade union movement. And that is quite wrong, because trade unions in many countries have played crucial roles in the establishment of political democracy. One of the biggest challenges facing the future of Africa is how to maintain, consolidate and deepen democracy - in other words, how to establish Africa in a framework of genuine sustainable democracy. However, that is only feasible if the effect that democracy has on development is positive and visible. If standards of living continue to fall, and if the gap between rich and poor continues to get wider, it will become almost impossible to take democracy forward. Even with periodic elections - whether they are above board or not - democracy will not lay any sustainable foundation in society unless citizens control their future through significant participation in decisions both at work and at national level. Formal democracy that keeps citizens, particularly workers, outside the decision-making process is unacceptable to the trade union movement. The role that unions have played in the democratisation process means that civil society as a whole, and the trade union movement in particular, have acquired new responsibilities. The big question is how to establish participative democracy, first by constructing concertation mechanisms that take account of the sensibilities of all social groups, and then by applying them in all areas of society including the economic sector. In such a scenario, trade unions self-evidently have a key role to play.

APADEP, the African Workers' Participation Development Programme, is a cooperative university-trade union project that aims to strengthen participation. How trade unions can involve themselves in development, and contribute to the survival of democracy, has been a key issue for APADEP; as many as 20 researchers have been working on it since 1993.

It has been an uphill struggle. Data and documentation are in very short supply, and even when it comes down to basic facts like trade union membership figures, the information is far from reliable. We hesitated about undertaking the study in the first place, and hesitated even further about publishing it; however, in the end, we realised how critical the challenge was, and decided to go ahead. In our view, it is vital for the trade union

dimension to be added to the democratisation' debate; we trust that this study, albeit incomplete, will open the door to new research fields.

The book is in two parts. Part I consists of an overview of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) based on selected documentation. We stress that the analyses cannot be extrapolated to incorporate the whole of SSA Africa. We only seek to ask general questions, and acknowledge that they need to be analysed in the present-day context of each country. That is why Part II is given over to an analysis of the specific situations obtaining in ten African countries in different geographical and language areas. Each case study provides its own democratisation scenario.

The authors, all of whom work closely with APADEP, have drawn on their personal experience and have been guided by a simple, yet flexible, theme: trends in the last few decades in their countries, with the accent on transition over the last five years. They have analysed the process of democratisation and developments in trade unionism and in the field of participation, and all within a context of socio-economic development. We also encouraged them to focus on factors relating to the specificities of their chosen country, after making allowances for the paucity of information available. The authors come from a variety of backgrounds; they include economists, sociologists, psychologists, lawyers and trade unionists. This has ensured a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating a wide range of perspectives on the process of democratisation. Most of them were able to meet on two occasions - once at Mopti (Mali) in 1993, and later in Bobo Dioulasso (Burkina Faso) in 1995 - to exchange draft chapters.

This book does not set out to provide answers, let alone prescriptions. Instead, it opens a dialogue with the trade union movement and its social partners including civil society, political leaders and the scientific community. We expect it will be controversial, and that is hardly surprising. For one thing, our stock of data is not complete; for another, the authors themselves are partners - some of them are even players - in the democratisation process. Opinions and expectations are not always shared. That is the very essence of democracy; it is also the basis of our desire to stimulate serious discussion on the future of trade unionism, participation and democracy in Africa.

The Hague/Bamako, January 1997

Gérard Kester and Ousmane Oumarou Sidibé

‘I watched and learned a lot from the tribal meetings ... all Thembus were free to come - and a great many did, on horseback or by foot ... Everyone who wanted to speak did so. *It was democracy in its purest form.* There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens ... at first, I was astonished by the vehemence - and candour - with which people criticized the regent. He was not above criticism - in fact, he was often the principal target of it ... the meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement to disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was not to be crushed by a majority ... If no agreement could be reached, another meeting would be held.’

NELSON MANDELA, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994:24-25)



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Part I

Trade Unions, Democracy and Development

Sub-Saharan Africa is made up of a large number of countries. They each have their own history, culture, society and economy. In trade union terms, they each have their own separate issues - but there are common issues as well.

Part I of this book opens up a general discussion on the trade union movement and democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa. This discussion takes its inspiration from research conducted in ten African countries set out in Part II, and from general literature on the subject.

What role has the trade union movement played in the establishment of political democracy? Surely a bigger role than one has been led to believe. And what influence has it had on the structural adjustment of the African economy? Probably less than one would have liked.

The fourth and last chapter in Part I examines the potential role that African trade unions have in making democracy sustainable. It is a provocative chapter because the trade union movement has reached its meeting-place with history just as it is having to cope with some serious problems of its own. If trade unions are unable to democratise the economy, can democracy itself survive?



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1 Trade Unions, It's Your Turn!

GÉRARD KESTER AND OUSMANE OUMAROU SIDIBÉ

Africa had been preparing the ground for major change for many years when structural adjustment and its stablemate, neo-liberalism, came onto the scene in the early 1980s. They have dominated the continent's economic and social development ever since. Economic reform may have been long overdue, but these two have made their combined presence felt with quite unmistakable force. Suffering has increased and the debts have piled up, and privileges have continued to be showered on a tiny élite who seize the property of the State claiming that they can manage it better themselves. Open protest has been relatively muted, but this has been mainly due to the tanks that dictators have sent onto the streets: the people's sense of injustice has certainly been deep-seated enough. Finally, the end of the Cold War gave neo-liberalism the extra boost it needed, and provided a justification for unrestrained capitalism.

Hopes soared once again when 'democracy' became the new principle underpinning the organisation of change, and most of the people who poured onto the streets to call for democracy did so because they were weary of bad management, nepotism, embezzlement of public funds and a failure to observe human rights. This intensification of popular pressure indicated that people no longer had confidence in the State. Demonstrations, too, revealed that people were aware of the issues, and were keen to demonstrate their ability to do whatever was necessary to survive, to make their voices heard, and to be involved in decision-making - even if there were others who found it discomfiting (Sidibé et al, 1994: 83).

Democracy in Africa: a brief history

It is not our intention here to recount the great debate that has surrounded democracy; there is an abundant literature on the subject of democratisation in Africa, and it is to this that the reader should refer (see Bibliography). Instead, we shall confine ourselves to some comments that are particularly relevant to this study.

Africa has a long and varied history of democracy. Indeed, we have preceded this chapter with a quotation of Nelson Mandela that expresses the best in a wholly African tradition, even though it cannot be applied to

the entire continent. In some pre-colonial African States such as the Ghana, Mali and Songhai Empires, people exercised their sovereignty through representatives appointed according to strictly enforced rules. Even sovereigns themselves were assisted by assemblies designated in accordance with well-tryed mechanisms. At the level of more scattered units such as villages, direct democracy was also exercised through the *arbre à palabre*, or 'palaver tree', a form of open, undiluted democracy still to be found in francophone Africa.

It would be a mistake to paint too romantic a picture of participative democracy in pre-colonial Africa. The substantial literature on the subject boasts a wide variety of viewpoints ranging from the positive to the cynical (see Buijtenhuis et al, 1993). There is also an impressive range of African political systems, but there is no hiding the fact that nearly all of them excluded women and slaves from their decision-making structures (Codesria, 1992: 15-16).

The confiscation of freedoms

The one-party interlude - in which one man, as Head of State, wielded total power by combining the Presidency of both the government and the single party - is not a throwback to pre-colonial days. On the contrary, it is in many ways a consequence of the hiatus filled by colonisation. Indeed, the first three decades of independence in African countries were marked by a shameful lack of democracy and the confiscation of freedoms.

During this period, trade unions - usually single organisations covering an entire country - were centralised, they had to pledge their allegiance to the single party and operated as an instrument for keeping workers in check. Young people and women were similarly organised into monolithic organisations similarly attached to the party. Even in countries like Côte-d'Ivoire which openly took their inspiration from economic liberalism, economies were planned and extensively nationalised.

As a result, a deep chasm opened up between the people and their leaders, the latter revealing themselves incapable of comprehending the problems of the former, let alone find solution to them.

Military régimes were also unable to fulfill promises that they would inject a note of morality into public life and the management of public affairs; in the end, they exhausted the good will of their people, whose hopes had evaporated as a result of corruption, nepotism and the confiscation of freedoms. A deepening of the economic crisis also caused this general discontent with ruling political régimes to crystallise.

From the 1980s onwards, African governments were forced to agree Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) with international funders. The

social consequences of these programmes were dramatic and governments gradually lost control; in particular, SAPs undermined the social bases that governments had in the towns and cities. Factors that combined to swell the numbers of the excluded in urban areas included early retirement schemes in the public sector, massive lay-off programmes in public enterprises and a shortage of jobs for many young graduates. This expanding army of excluded found new hope in an opposition organised within political associations that were mostly illegal, but which were beginning to demonstrate increasing support for urban revolt.

The turning point

The growing discontent orchestrated by well-structured organisations fed into the movement then promoting democratisation, but we should not underestimate the impact of events taking place in eastern countries, or of positions adopted by external partners; all of these factors acted as catalysts for democratisation. For example, in 'From Crisis to Sustainable Development' (1989), the World Bank stated that political legitimacy and consensus were essential conditions for sustainable development in Africa; the Bretton Woods Institutions, too, were convinced that democracy provided an environment favourable to economic development, and Mauritius and Botswana were held up as examples for other African countries to follow. Then, in 1990, at the La Baule Summit, the French President, François Mitterrand, announced his intention of linking development aid to democratisation in African countries; finally, in 1991, the idea was adopted by USAID after the US Congress directed that progress towards democracy should be taken into account when granting aid.

Many African countries, to a greater or lesser extent - and with varying degrees of fortune - committed themselves to a process of democratisation. However, it all happened in a climate marked by a radicalisation of internal demands and external pressure for more democracy and freedoms, and these pressures were given an extra impetus by the end of the Cold War.

Some countries, including Benin, Zambia, Malawi, the Central African Republic, Congo and South Africa, achieved peaceful transformation, while others underwent more violent change. An example of the latter was Mali where democratic transition was only achieved in the wake of several insurrections and a military coup d'état.

For many countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Togo and Cameroon, the democratic opening was largely controlled after elections led to the re-installation of groups that had previously held power; these elections were often notable for their lack of transparency. Some countries, like Zaïre and Chad, are still engaged in transitions that never reach a

conclusion, or else they have totally rejected a real democratic opening (Nigeria, Sudan and, to a lesser extent, Kenya). Others are in a state of civil war and are still searching for peace (Angola, Somalia and Liberia) or are attempting to consolidate it (Mozambique). Finally, we must not forget Rwanda and Burundi where the democratising process has caused a major ethnic conflict leading to genocide in Rwanda, and making the whole issue of democratisation much more complex.

Anger

The type of democracy that Africans have chosen is close to the European model, that is to say it is a political system that allows the people to elect their leaders freely and ensures a separation of powers and executive control. A system of this sort also incorporates respect for individual and collective freedoms, and the existence of counter-powers such as a free press and a strong civil society.

In a brilliant exposition, Mafeje has developed the idea that Africa has borrowed the vocabulary of democracy from Europe, with the caveat that these words only become functional if they are structured by a common grammar (Mafeje, 1995). It was, in his view, 'folly' to try and transplant elaborate democratic systems developed across 200 years of history in a specific historical climate. The debate on democratisation in Africa has, in many places, given a new dimension to Afro-pessimism. Intermediary assessments of democratisation are often negative (see Lemarchand's summary, 1992), and indicate big differences between African countries.

In his summaries of progress on democratisation in 15 francophone countries, Monga uses a large number of criteria to measure the democratic 'design' and, above all, the implementation of the concept of democracy; his conclusion is that the prospects in most countries are gloomy (Monga, 1995: 63 ff). The fragility of democracy is all the more striking if one recalls the fact that, only months before the military coup d'état in Niamey, Monga's 'democratic classification' had Niger in second place, and only just behind Benin.

More interestingly and more hopefully, however, the advent of democracy has opened the floodgates to a tidal wave of ideas, proposals, theories and actions. Democracy has come under the close scrutiny of the intellectual world, of women, of politicians and the public at large; all acknowledge that its present form is only a beginning, and that democracy needs to be adapted to African realities.

'For Africans,' writes Monga in his captivating '*Anthropologie de la colère*' (Anthropology of Anger), 'it is all about reappropriating words that have been confiscated for too long by the official institutions of power'

(Monga, 1994: 99). 'How can we manage the collective anger and, behind the façade of an informal civil society, prevent it from degenerating into some sort of anarchistic cacophony? How can we restore the credibility of the State by simultaneously bolstering the structures of "private" society?' (ibid: 117). The challenge is to develop a form of democracy that meets African needs in an African context, and which varies from one country to the next. The thirst for democracy must be translated into an appropriate form; the vocabulary is in need of a grammar. Democracy is not simply System X or System Y; it is a dynamic phenomenon ('A developmental concept', Sklar, 1987). African countries have not yet rooted themselves irreversibly in democracy. The nascent movement is undermined by too many factors; one of them is the need simply to survive in a harsh economic climate. To achieve that alone, enormous sacrifices will have to be made.

Democracy and development

Democracy has made huge strides in Africa during the last five years, but sadly the concluding years of the 20th century have also been marked by a persistent decline in African people's living conditions. The coincidence of these two facts has revived the debate on the nature of the relationship between democracy and development. However, the debate is now even more critical as this catastrophic fall in living conditions in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) simply cannot be tolerated; a still burgeoning democracy still needs urgent support. Many commentators have remarked that any debate on democracy that excludes economic issues completely misses the point. As Newbury has pointed out:

'... rural dwellers in Africa and the urban underclasses want more than social peace, due process in the judicial system and political accountability. They hope for justice, as well as legal order; they want improved opportunities to feed their families and educate their children, as well as the opportunity to vote for one or another elite. Authoritarian regimes are being rejected because for the most part they have failed to meet these needs; democratic regimes will be judged (in the popular mind) on their ability to respond to such concerns.' (Newbury, 1994: 2)

Before we move on to the question of whether development is a necessary condition for democracy, or whether democracy should precede development, let us first be clear about what we mean by development. In our view, all development must be sustainable development; in other words, it must lead to an improvement in the physical and moral well-being of the

population who, in addition to preserving the environment, must participate both in the production and distribution of the profits of that production, and in the transparent management of the State and the rule of law.

This definition implies a distinction between economic growth and development, and these days we use Human Development Indicators as well as per capita GDP to describe a country's level of development; these usefully illustrate the limitations of economic growth as a criterion for identifying the well-being of a country's inhabitants. Otherwise, even if the country enjoys a high rate of economic growth, it cannot achieve development without equitable distribution of this addition wealth - an improvement in the well-being of the people, and a structural change in production. Growth rates say nothing about the level of a population's well-being: for example, is the emphasis on investment or on consumption - and, if the former, where is the money being invested? An eloquent example is provided by the former USSR where the level of the population's well-being fell away just as the country was enjoying a relatively high rate of growth based largely on priority investments in arms.

Clearly, we cannot talk of development in Zaïre if the price of copper continues to rise and the national wealth continues to grow, but without any perceptible effects on the living conditions of the majority of Zaïrians. If there is to be development, people must participate in production. In practice, a population that lives solely on foreign exploitation of its natural resources cannot claim to be developing; it is over-dependent on the foreigner and not in control of its own destiny. As Ki-Zerbo puts it so well, a people is not developed, it develops itself (Ki-Zerbo, 1992). When 'they develop us', we play a passive role; we are unable to participate in drawing up the country's overall directions and priorities, and we have to endure the sectoral allocation of resources as defined by the people who are doing the developing.

Self-development

Self-development, as distinct from development carried out by someone else, implies that one is also a player in the development process oneself, a participant in drawing up the country's overall directions and priorities and in managing the State. Development in its broadest sense, therefore, needs democracy; it cannot be restricted to the notion of growth, because growth does not necessarily place constraints on rulers.

If development means a flourishing of the human condition, there can be no question that democracy is essential to development. Ten years ago, Anyang'Nyong'o argued that the absence of democracy was the main reason for the absence of development in Africa (Anyang'Nyong'o, 1987). Nowadays, this idea arouses controversy, although it is more likely to be

defended than opposed (Buijtenhuis et al, 1993). More recently, Anyang'Nyong'o has replied that democracy is worth defending in Africa on the grounds that the cause is philosophical and moral in the first instance; only later does it become political and economic 1995: 38). Writing in the same spirit as Ki-Zerbo, Alain Touraine adds that, in his view, 'development is not the cause but the result of democracy' (Touraine, 1994: 222).

Democracy allows each person to feel involved and his/her views taken into account, and thus allows each person to give of his/her best; democracy will therefore make it possible to mobilise the resources a country needs for its development. Structural economic reforms will also be more sustainable and more relevant if they flow from a democratic process involving concertation with the organisations of civil society (Torres, 1995: 53). Democracy is essential if a country desires sustainable development.

The example of the countries of south-east Asia proves there is nothing coincidental about calamities such as poverty, under-nourishment, malnutrition and high rates of infant mortality; it also shows that they can be resolved by the right policies. However, as our definition of development suggests, these economic policies assume that there is consultation and concertation with the populations concerned, and this method of political management has not been applied to the SAPs that have dominated economic policies in Africa since the early 1980s. We shall examine SAP policies in detail in Chapter 3.

Democratic participation¹

Participation is not easy to define as it affects all dimensions of society: economic, political, social and cultural. In labour relations, the notion of 'workers' participation' normally refers to the taking of decisions; this phenomenon needs to be defined within a dynamic perspective. Workers' participation is a process that involves the gradual transformation of labour relations and, through the accumulation and institutionalisation of participative practices, workers acquire an independent, significant and effective influence over decision-taking at various levels of company management and/or policy. This influence may, through trade unions, extend to all decision-taking levels outside the enterprise as well (Kester, 1995: 61).

The notion of participation most frequently refers to the sharing of power, but it can also be understood in a broader sense, that is to say sharing in the distribution of profits and work (economic democracy), and sharing in production (a better use of human resources). The concept of 'people's participation' is the most far-reaching and refers to the sharing of power, profits, employment and production.

After achieving independence, many Third World countries adopted participation policies partly as an integral part of their development strategy for creating a new political, economic and social order, and partly as a measure to accompany nationalisation. Various forms of participation and self-management have been influenced by European theory and practice; these have sought to set up democratic institutions and practices in the process of socio-economic development, and to instigate a rapid move towards self-determination and self-sufficiency.

In this context, we recall the Chilean experience in which Allende introduced co-determination and self-management into nationalised industries (Raptis, 1974; Espinosa & Zimbalist, 1978), the transition to self-management in State-owned concerns in Peru (Lowenthal, 1975; Stephens, 1980) literally introduced by people 'in uniform' (Meister, 1981), workers' committees in the Sri Lankan public sector (Abeyasekera, 1977), the Ecevit plan in Turkey which transformed the entire public sector into one self-managed by workers (Uca, 1983), and other experiments in Asia and Latin America (Spiirianni, 1987; Prasnikar, 1991; Bayat, 1991).

Participation confiscated as well

There have been experiments of this sort in Africa, too. The 'humanist philosophy' of Zambia's President Kaunda involved transition from one society in which capitalist enterprises were in the hands of the few towards another society characterised by human dignity and social justice, and the ultimate objective of workers managing enterprises themselves (Fincham & Zulu, 1980). Similarly, human-centred development was key to the approach to development adopted in Tanzania; this involved the introduction of various forms of workers' participation (Mihyo, 1983). Self-management was official policy in Algeria in the first few years of independence (Clegg, 1971), and Egypt introduced major, formal structures of workers' participation at middle and senior management levels in public enterprises (El-Sayed, 1978). Charismatic African leaders such as Nasser, Nyerere and Kaunda all played leading roles in introducing and implementing policies of this type.

The fate of these régimes after independence is well documented. Power achieved through democratic means initially corrupted the leaders; later on, utopia became a slogan, the slogan converted into dogma, dogma grew into repression, and repression turned into dictatorship or even tyranny. Participation reflected this course of events and ended up the loser: it had originally been a source of economic and social liberation; as time passed, it fell prey to manipulation and exploitation.

'Responsible participation' became the key slogan in numerous francophone countries, and even trade unions gave the policy their support

in many places including Togo (Barnabo, 1981; see also Nadedjo Bigou-Laré's chapter on Togo in this book), Senegal (Fall, 1987) and Mali (Dicko, Sidibé & Touré, 1985). It sought to co-opt civil society, in particular the trade unions, with a view to procuring their backing for objectives already determined by the single party or the military régime. In other words, it was a purely manipulative policy, and participation was confiscated.

The explanation for the failure of experiments in participation and self-management does not lie in any inherent weakness of the idea, but rather in the fact that the conditions for the development of participation were simply not there. Participation itself did not fail; what failed was the way it was implemented. Predictably, of course, conservative forces developed their own counter-strategies, but the talks that prepared the ground for participation simply did not provide the necessary support (e.g. there was a crucial shortage of training) and politicians and trade union leaders opted instead for rhetoric (Stephens, 1980; Kester, 1992: 237 ff).

The participation controversy

The African economy 'broke down' (Giri, 1986). However, to be fair, SAPs were not introduced for the pleasure of 'restructuring' but out of necessity; they were intended to put an end to bad management of the economy. A change in economic policy was clearly called for, but what was utterly unacceptable was the way in which new economic policies, and SAPs in particular, were decided on and enforced (see Chapter 3). The broad aims of the new economic policy are contraction of the public sector, privatisation, the introduction of market forces into the economy, and a reduced role for the State in general; trade unionism or participation do not get a mention. This prompts the notion that these two ideas are associated with bad management. In fact, it is not an unreasonable conclusion as governments no longer support the kind of participation they themselves introduced; these governments also pass new labour law to attract local or foreign private investors, thereby guaranteeing them 'carte blanche' in running their enterprises. Democracy is now restricted to multi-annual elections, and the economy is in the hands of the bosses. Trade unionism is also seen as a form of harassment, and participation as an error for which previous governments are to blame.

This trend is not confined to Africa. In Europe, workers' participation was a dynamic phenomenon back in the 1960s and 1970s; at the time, it was welcomed by the trade union movement, and was often backed up by legislation. However, even in Europe, the new neo-liberal tendency has prevented further evolution of participation in decision-making. It has been replaced by a series of employer initiatives designed to develop organisational and financial participation (they are later seen for what they

are - anti-union strategies) and block interference in management prerogatives (Pinaud, 1995: 33-48).

Surprisingly, when the winds of change swept over Africa, workers' participation was not jettisoned together with the old leaders, ideologies and systems. It was quite a different matter in eastern Europe where 'participation' had become a dirty word in political debate. The African Charter of Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (Arusha, 1991) was adopted at a conference of heads of government and national and international NGOs; it rehabilitated the values and objectives of participation, but did not formulate any practical policy and strategy to go with it. For a short while, the Arusha Declaration breathed new life into participation rhetoric, but it all came to nothing. Today, the political debate, like the trade union debate, on participation in Africa is almost non-existent.

Nonetheless, as we shall see in Chapter 4, interest in participation has not faded among workers and rank-and-file trade union activists. APADEP studies confirm that most worker representatives have a need - not to say a thirst - for participation. And it is not simply a thirst to express ideas, criticise and share; worker and trade union representatives are also eager to contribute to workplace productivity and efficiency.

This book sets out to revive that debate. Responsible participation must be replaced by a kind of democratic participation that has new aims, values and objectives. A democratic form of workers' participation must create the conditions for a new type of economic and social justice, and that in turn will constitute the necessary foundation for any real democracy.

Democracy, participation and development

Participation is a key player in the struggle for democracy. The position put forward by Pateman (1970) - a classic that no political scientist has called into question - defends the idea that, in daily life, and particularly at the workplace, participation is a necessary condition for the sustainability and deepening of political democracy and the development of a democratic culture. This view has recently been restated by Touraine (1994) and Dahrendorf (1996). Moreover, by applying it specifically to labour relations, Albert has been able to argue that industrialised countries with the best combined economic and social records have a co-determination structure. They are the countries of so-called 'Rhineland' capitalism: Germany, Benelux and the Scandinavian countries (Albert, 1991).

Several African analysts are thinking along the same lines. Monga, for instance, believes that social groups, including trade unions, 'are moved by a thirst to express themselves, to participate, and to be represented in

the places that matter ... the main issue is enlarging the scope of popular participation' (Monga, 1994: 106 & 126). Ake claims that the basic problem facing government is the absence of participation, and 'only participation can ensure deep democracy' (Ake, 1995: 89). And according to Ayesha Imam, democracy needs to be defined in relation to the day-to-day lives of all citizens, and must include the right for all to take part in decisions that are important for them (Imam, 1991: 5).

Underlying this book is an assumption that democracy can only survive if it is participative, and that participative democracy is a necessary condition for development; as we demonstrate in Chapter 4, this position is currently shared by the World Bank, UNDP, OECD and others. In an African context, it is extremely important to know which ideas South Africans developed when they were preparing for political democracy; it was, after all, one of the most remarkable achievements of the 20th century. As the Reconstruction and Development Programme states, 'Democracy is not confined to periodic elections, but is an active process enabling everyone to contribute to reconstruction and development' (§ 1.3.7, 9) and 'The Government's central goal ... is to ... democratise the economy and empower the historically oppressed, particularly the workers and their organisations, by encouraging broader participation in decisions about the economy in both the private and public sector' (§ 3.2.1 20). We deal with South African matters in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Being able to cast one's vote is not the same thing as democracy. If we define the word more broadly, democracy becomes a political phenomenon, a phenomenon with economic, social and cultural dimensions, and these dimensions form part of the broader concept of 'participative democracy'. Participation is the cement between general elections and grass roots democracy; it is also a necessary complement of political democracy because it enables people to express themselves without interruption, and participate in decisions on the allocation and distribution of wealth. The Arusha Declaration also subscribed to this broader vision of democracy.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also sees participation as a fundamental right, and views the right to freedom of expression and the right to vote as components of human integrity and dignity.

African trade unionism

African trade unions played an important part in the struggle for independence in African countries, and collaborated closely with African political parties. In doing so, they imagined that independence would guarantee enhanced freedom for trade union action, and that it would promote development and,

by the same token, better living and working conditions for their members. That was why they evinced so much interest in, and devoted so much of their time to, participation in the economic and social development of young African countries. However, once independence was won, political leaders started to distrust trade unions which, in their view, were beginning to put in too many claims. And when drawing up and implementing economic and social development programmes, African governments, both civil and military, did not give unions enough scope for independent, democratic participation. When they did agree to let them take part, it was within the framework of a pseudo-policy of 'responsible participation' which relegated unions to the status of government poodle, or mouthpiece for passing on instructions to the workforce. Unions accepting this role did so to avoid isolation, banning or brutal repression; if nothing else, they did so just to survive. They then hoped to find room for manoeuvre that would give them a minimum of autonomy and credibility with workers.

As a result, thanks to the resilience one might expect from the trade union movement, and with support from international trade union organisations, African unions were able to maintain a degree of independence, although it varied from country to country. This autonomy was extremely limited, not to say non-existent, in Communist régimes (e.g. Guinea under Sékou-Touré) and openly dictatorial countries such as Togo; it was average in many other countries (e.g. Mali, Senegal and Nigeria) and substantial in a small number including Burkina Faso and Zambia. However, there were no instances of governments silencing trade unions altogether or controlling all structures - which is what they would like to have done. True, high-level union committees were controlled by governments to a greater or lesser extent, but intermediary structures, and particularly the grass roots, frequently had more autonomy.

Trade union democracy was often stronger among the rank and file than at the top, the upper échelons having long been notable for 'pre-fabricated' committees influenced, or even imposed, by the State. Unsurprisingly, there has been fierce pressure from the branches since the early 1980s to challenge the relations between trade union centres and governments, on the grounds that they did not operate on behalf of workers. Excessive organisational and operational dependence on the State angered workers as they saw their living standards plummet and their jobs come under threat, notwithstanding union claims that they were party to the decision-making. In fact, when we talk of trade unions being bought off by the government of the day, what we are often referring to are the actions of local and national leaders. It is easy to forget that unions are criss-crossed by numerous internal forces and currents that do not share the same view of union policy. Furthermore, governments sometimes attack currents that

are hostile to a union line on positions already adopted by the party; they then promote trends that enable them to take over the leadership of the union through rigged elections.

Trade unions and democratisation

If trade unions have made a stronger commitment to the process of democratisation than other social forces, this is because they are a unique component of civil society and are well equipped for the task. They are important players because of their position in the economy, and their views cannot be ignored by the State; as they have demonstrated during the democratisation process, unions can paralyse a large section of the economy by calling strikes in strategic sectors such as energy, transport or telecommunications. Moreover, thanks to the international protection that they enjoy, unions are part of an international solidarity chain; other social groups do not have access to anything comparable. Moreover, protests from international centres and ILO condemnations are feared by all governments, and have often helped to get trade unionists out of prison, or preserve a minimum of trade union freedoms under dictatorships.

Trade unions also developed a culture which, during the colonial period, fostered solidarity, combated economic and social injustice, and promoted human rights. Although they did not always have the necessary independence or strength to defend these values effectively, at least they consistently incorporated them into everything they said.

Today, when governments have turned their backs on participation, and are instead promoting economic liberalism and a reduction in the role of the State, trade unions have to take a new stand. If participation is seen as a way of guaranteeing social cohesion and harmonious development within a negotiated framework, and aimed at avoiding social devastation, nobody is better placed than trade unions to promote it. After all, on a continent such as Africa where so much profound change is taking place, who else can produce democracy in an insecure economic and social climate when political parties think of nothing but the conquest of power? Who else can propose a vision or model of society that has a reasonable chance of being accepted by the various social forces?

These days, it is no longer enough for trade unions to fire off salvoes of protests about SAPs. They need to develop alternative proposals through a new social pact negotiated by all social players including political parties, governments and employers; such a pact might take the form of a charter for managing the great problems of the nation, thus providing the foundation of sustainable democracy. Democratic participation, which trade unions appear to have abandoned, could be the instrument for such a policy.

One big question remains: are trade unions capable of meeting this challenge?

Trade unions in a process of change - not of erosion

A recent, ambitious study of the current situation of Third World unionism concludes that it is undergoing a process of erosion, and is even close to 'almost total elimination as a significant social institution' (Thomas, 1995: 3). In the view of Thomas and his fellow writers, the unions were particularly strong in Africa in the years that followed independence, and secured major economic benefits for their members by remaining in legitimate contact with the grass roots (ibid: 15); the book is implying that the trade union movement has now lost its economic, social and political power (ibid: 235).

This is based on a serious, and widely shared, misconception. It is also regrettable that a study claiming to use a rigorous scientific method (ibid: 20) should neither define the notion of erosion nor look at criteria for assessing the nature and degree of the alleged erosion. The three criteria implicit in the study - loss of trade union influence, loss of legitimacy and loss of members - are all invalid. It is true that membership has declined, but this needs to be examined with care. In most countries, members used to be automatically recruited under the 'check-off' system, and this gave a false impression of the true figures: 'Unions were widely seen as recruitment offices set up by the single parties in power' (Monga, 1994, 102). As time passed, Structural Adjustment Programmes led to numerous retrenchment measures and contributed to a further reduction in trade union membership.

There is certainly erosion if we look no further than the statistics of dues-paying members, but who exactly are we talking about? Nominal, symbolic members, or people who have freely chosen to join the union? Events of the last few years have shown conclusively that unions have spent far too long organising the formal sector (i.e. the public sector) to the exclusion of all else.

They are now paying the price for such neglect, but this particular cloud may have a silver lining. As unions are now experiencing a shortfall in contributions (in many countries, State subsidies are still linked to union docility going back to the time of the single party), they are obliged to take more interest in new areas of recruitment and, as we learn from a study of Zimbabwe in the same book as Thomas's article, the type and range of trade union membership is already expanding. For example, the ZCTU (Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions) has not only been able to reorganise itself, attract new categories of worker and develop alliances with other unions in civil society; it has also impacted on the process of democratisation, particularly in non-urban areas (Schiphorst, 1995, 229). Moreover, over

the last few years, a great deal of effort has gone into making trade union activity appealing to women, encouraging them to join, and generally turning trade unionism into a battle zone for women's issues. Nearly all African countries now run projects that involve women. Is this erosion, or a candid acknowledgement of current reality?

Nor is it true to say that trade unions have lost their legitimacy vis-à-vis their members and workers in general; on the contrary, their legitimacy has broadened. At one time, unions in most African countries were largely integrated into the single political party, their leaders were appointed rather than elected, and trade union training consisted of dogmatism and indoctrination in equal measure. This was 'State trade unionism' rather than any form of member-led trade unionism. However, over the last five years, as Chapters 8, 11, 13 and 14 show, divorce from the single party or the government has opened up a new space for democratisation. There is an increasingly audible call for bottom-up democratic control, and trade union legitimacy and strength have grown as a result; inevitably, it has also led to multi-trade unionism, which in turn poses the question of union unity, or at least unity of action. Trade unions have moved away from an uneasy situation where they enjoyed pseudo-importance, and into a new situation where they have wrenched, or otherwise obtained, independence from political parties and governments. After decades of choosing their leaders by appointment, designation or acclamation, they are well down the road to democratisation.

To what extent have trade unions lost their influence? As we have seen, trade union structures were largely plundered by single political parties and military régimes, and unions themselves were often unable to negotiate on behalf of workers: new working conditions were announced by the political leaders, and all trade union leaders could do was applaud. Unions were neither autonomous nor democratic, let alone free. One only has to read the section on Mozambique (Chapter 11) to see what the situation was like in certain African countries only recently; the authors even wonder whether it was possible to speak of trade unionism at all in Mozambique. More generally, Chapter 3 shows that trade union influence over SAPs was almost non-existent during the 1980s, although this has begun to change over the last few years. Clearly, trade unions have come out of their corner fighting!

When people say that trade unions have almost been eliminated, they are referring to some point in the distant past and not to the last few years. In fact, for some time now, there has been no trade union erosion; in fact, unions are actually going through a period of far-reaching change. They underwent a process of fundamental transformation which weakened them, above all materially, when 'check-off' was abolished and subsidies

suspended or withdrawn. That was a serious body-blow to the trade union movement, but it is not the same thing as erosion. Unions are now experiencing change; they are reorganising and taking fresh bearings. As we can see from the descriptions in this book of the situation in ten African countries, trade unions are coming to grips with problems. There is no question of them throwing in the towel.

Trade unions and their appointment with history

Other analyses, including the work of Akwetey (1994), do not share this pessimism over the future of trade unions. Akwetey's analysis shows that unions constitute the largest force in civil society, and have major responsibility for the defence of democracy. We return to Akwetey's theories in Chapter 2. In her account of South Africa, Torres describes unions as 'schools for democracy'; here, leadership training and the knowledge and experiences acquired in the course of trade union work are key to obtaining a general democratic competence and to nurturing democratic values. She also says that, as workers gain a measure of control over their workplaces, they want to have more say in the decisions that determine their lives outside work (Torres, 1995).

The main objective of this book is to examine how trade unions can help to make democracy in Africa sustainable. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis: that trade unions are among the best placed to promote the effective and significant participation of workers at the workplace and in the economy, and that they thereby contribute substantially to the establishment of political democracy. When one-party or no-party States collapse - when the dictators have fled, leaving the single party dissolved and the army discredited - trade unions are the only force left standing. For all its organisational and financial shortcomings, the trade union movement constitutes a major interest group with structures scattered throughout the country; it is also typically non-ethnic in its composition. Zambia and Mali have emerged as the best known examples of trade unions to have successfully intervened in the establishment of a political democracy. However, by fighting for both trade union and human rights, unions have played a much bigger part in the process of democratisation in many other African countries. Their actions have added much substance to the defence of democracy.

However, trade unions are essentially facing the long-term challenge of how to make democracy sustainable once it has been established. The argument underpinning this study is that democracy constitutes a necessary condition for development, but that it is not enough on its own; complementary conditions are citizens' participation through civil society

and workers' participation through trade unions. Unions can play a vital role in the establishment and perpetuation of democracy, particularly in economic and social matters. They are the agents of participative democracy.

The first part of this book is followed by three further chapters dealing with the African situation overall, and it then passes on to specific analyses of the situation in ten African countries. Chapter 2 describes and analyses the role that unions are playing in the transition to political democracy. It poses the question: What impact have unions had on the establishment on political democracy? It then asks the same question in reverse: What impact has the new political situation had on trade unions? Chapter 2 includes a broad range of examples.

Chapter 3 contains an examination of the contribution that democracy has made to economic development, and SAPs in particular. Trade unions speak eloquently in national and international settings when protesting against economic policy, and above all against the social consequences of structural adjustment. However, words are not enough. We need to know what practical steps trade unions are taking to have a decisive influence on the formulation and execution of economic policy.

If trade unions really wish to exert greater control over the economy, one possible answer is through participative democracy. Chapter 4 looks at the necessary conditions for the effective and significant participation of workers, and the role that unions can play in this participation.

Note

- 1 Some of the arguments used in this section appear in already published material (Kester, 1992).



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2 Trade Unions and the Process of Democratisation

OUSMANE OUMAROU SIDIBÉ AND BRIGITTE VENTURI

For many years now, a substantial literature has been given over to the theme of democratisation in Africa, but closer examination reveals a major lacuna relating to the role played by certain social players, and trade unions in particular (Buijtenhuis et al, 1995). This shortcoming has not come about by chance; indeed, the opprobrium customarily reserved for trade unions has ensured that their role in the process of democratisation is regularly disregarded. What has happened is that, over the last few decades, unions have been censured either for being the subjects of authoritarian governments or else for defending only the corporatist interests of a 'working class élite' - otherwise known as the 'labour aristocracy' (Konings, 1993) - and to the detriment of other sectors of the population, notably rural dwellers.

They have also been criticised for not carrying out certain tasks allocated to them, including duties that governments have imposed relating to their participation in the development of the nation. This negative appraisal has cast the role of trade unions in civil society in an unfavourable light, and has obstructed consideration of changes they are currently carrying out and of their potential for change. The role of civil society in general has frequently been neglected in studies of players involved in African democratisation (Buijtenhuis et al, 1995), and any consideration of the trade union contribution has been totally ignored.

However, we are now seeing a trend towards a rehabilitation of the role that African society has played in recent events concerning democratisation. It is now acknowledged that certain social groups played decisive roles in the struggle for democracy; they include students (frequently in the vanguard of democratic action), political associations and underground political parties, youth groups, human rights associations, the Church, women (who have spontaneously come onto the streets in the wake of violent repressions whose casualties have included family members), professional bodies (such as lawyers' associations) - and, of course, trade unions.

In this chapter, we assess action that the trade union movement has undertaken in the democratisation process. We do not simply study the role that trade unions have played in pro-democracy movements in different SSA countries; we also examine exactly what it was that predisposed them

to play such a role in the first place, and the means that they employed. In particular, we look at their current strengths and weaknesses to illuminate the role they are currently playing in the establishment of true sustainable democracy in Africa.

It is a difficult subject, if only because of the paucity of available information, and the empirical nature of what little documentation exists. However, we have endeavoured to highlight what has happened, and hope to throw new light on trade union activity in SSA Africa.

Why have trade unions often been key players in the democratisation process?

The trade union movement's commitment to democracy over the last few years has not been evenly spread across the whole continent of Africa; the impact has also varied substantially from one country to the next. However, an impressive number of trade unions in many countries have been actively involved.

This activity has not come out of nothing. The potential was always there, and in some countries it has flourished thanks to a favourable political climate and circumstances. We shall now attempt to understand the factors that positively determined the role of the trade unions in certain countries during the process of democratisation.

In addition to the democratic principles that underpin trade unionism - their implementation often leaves much to be desired, but let us leave that to one side for the moment - there are three major factors which, in our view, explain the commitment of African unions to the struggle for democracy: long experience of struggle, a massive potential for organisation and action, and the expectation that democratisation will have a positive outcome for workers and unions.

The African trade union movement developed slowly as a result of hostile colonial legislation and a numerically small proletariat. For example, the right to organise was not recognised in Ghana and Nigeria until 1941; elsewhere, in West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, the Popular Front granted the right to organise in 1936. The establishment of real unions was also impeded by numerous obstacles that were placed in the way of freedom of association; these included an obligation to be literate to set up a union, and discrimination between French citizens in the Senegal's Four Communes and the indigenous population. In fact, the trade union movement did not properly come of age until the Code du travail des Territoires d'outre-mer (Overseas Territories Labour Code) was drawn up in 1952. In Belgian territories, the right to organise had not been recognised until 1946.

Obstacles robustly countered

Trade unions ran into numerous difficulties almost as soon as they were set up. For a long time, their financial base and ability to mobilise workers were undermined by low membership; this reflected not only under-industrialisation and sluggish economic performance, but also a fear of management reprisals. Furthermore, the lack of training of union officers among miners and skilled and unskilled manual workers proved a handicap in the context of drawing up basic union policy; this was particularly significant at a time when French unions were exporting their ideological feuds to Africa, and to francophone Africa in particular.

Despite these drawbacks, the combativeness of African unions never faltered. Given their numerical weakness, they concentrated their efforts on key workplaces, and were responsible for a number of major actions including indefinite General Strikes in Nigeria in 1945 and the Gold Coast (later Ghana) in 1950, and the Dakar-Niger railway workers' strike of 1947.

Throughout these now legendary strikes, African workers demonstrated a capacity for tenacity and solidarity that took their colonial masters by surprise. Indeed, it was in the course of these strikes that African nationalism was developed, and trusting relationships were forged between union and political leaders brought together by a common struggle for political independence. To take just one example, at the 1957 Congress of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA - African Democratic Assembly) held in Bamako, the delegate of the *Union Générale des Travailleurs Africains* (UGTA - General Union of African Workers), Alioune Cissé, looked forward to the day when an alliance of all democratic forces would rid the continent of colonial rule; it was this that African nationalists and trade unionists saw as the root-cause of all their misfortunes. The harsh punishments that trade unionists were forced to endure (e.g. arbitrary relocations, imprisonment and torture) only stiffened their resolve to challenge both their colonial rulers and, after independence, authoritarian African governments.

A combination of allegiance and resistance

The way that trade unions were inextricably bound to single political parties through a process of incorporation is just one aspect of African trade union history. The long union struggle for emancipation is another.

Firstly, we need to remember that governments in some countries never succeeded in incorporating the unions; a typical example is Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta. This country has known nothing but trade union pluralism, and over the years the unions have been responsible for toppling a number of governments through strikes and popular demonstrations; these

slowly weakened the governments in question, and prepared the ground for military coups d'état. The chapter on Burkina Faso in Part II shows how, after a period of marked hostility between unions and government following independence, the trade union movement was successful in developing unity of action and in creating the conditions for the fall of the first two Republics in 1966 and 1974. A General Strike in 1975 calling for a pluralist democracy led to the adoption of a multi-party Constitution and pluralist elections. In fact, the Burkina Faso trade union movement frequently made a name for itself by rounding on the government of the day in the defence of democracy and human rights.

Individual unions were frequently divided on ideological grounds, but they managed to broker agreements in the struggle for democracy, and sometimes even constructed approaches which, in more recent years, have proved useful in the campaign to democratise the whole country. In the Sudan, as a later chapter on this country shows, trade unions have often been involved in bringing the government down, and in the Congo, too, the most important changes since independence have been instigated by the unions (Tedga, 1991: 85). Unions in other countries have attempted to a greater or lesser extent to establish an identity and articulate their autonomy from government. For instance, as the chapter on Mali describes, the Union Nationale des Travailleurs Maliens (UNTM - National Union of Malian Workers) was one of the most important organisations to condemn the military coup d'état of 1968; as a result, the centre was closed down and many of its leaders were thrown into prison. However, even though it could rely on its 'responsible participation' policy, the single party founded by General Moussa Traoré, the Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM - Democratic Union of Malian People) never succeeded in fully incorporating the UNTM. UNTM members who did not hold mainstream opinions consistently opposed the military régime and called for a democratic opening. For example, after the referendum on the 2 June 1974 Constitution, which also established the UDPM as the single Constitutional party of government, trade unionists denounced it as an 'electoral farce'; they were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in the Malian desert for their pains. Nonetheless, the UNTM continued to be feared by government, and this partly explains its role in the struggle for democracy and the demise of the single party in March 1991.

Unions did not take things for granted

South Africa is, of course, the most celebrated and most striking example of trade union resistance to a hostile government. Ghana is equally fascinating, and the chapter devoted to that country details the relations