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THE USE OF LARGE UNSKILLED LABOUR
FORCE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL RESIDENTIAL
PROJECTS IN NIGERIA.

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TO:

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A B S T R A C T

This paper centres its attention on the large use of unskilled labour force for non-traditional residential buildings in particular and for the construction works in Nigeria as a whole.

The writer notes with sadness that a major unemployment of all categories of workers in the construction industry especially the unskilled ones is now on the increase, unlike before when the construction industry used to be the largest industry in the Nation employing an appreciable proportion of the work force. The reason adduced for this is as a result of the non reflection of indigenisation in most of the architectural designs and the non patronization of our indigenous contractors which in turn leads to mass use of mechanical plants and other sophisticated but costly constructional items thereby rendering thousands of able bodied men and women in the construction sites redundant. It is noted further that this ^{ugly} ~~highly~~ development has lead to increase in crime rate in the country and a drastic reduction in construction profits especially when one views the high exchange rate used in procuring these equipment and the overall maintenance costs.

Towards reversing from this ugly practice therefore, the need for the use of unskilled labour force is particularly stressed and useful suggestions towards realizing this goal are discussed in this manner.

The construction industry has been known to be the largest Nigerian industry employing a good proportion of the work force and controlling over 50% of the Nation's gross national product (1). Unfortunately, this giant stride of the construction industry is now gradually becoming a thing of the past as the present economic problems in the country has lasted more than a decade. Within this period, the rulership of the country has changed hands five times, each regime with different strategies of solving the economic problems which arose basically from dwindling oil revenues (2). The irony of these strategies is that more workers have had their employments terminated and embargoes have been placed on employment in both the private and public sectors at different times.

The governments ^{at} various times have unknowingly contributed to this high level of unemployment of both unskilled and semi-skilled workers through the award of most of the construction projects to less capital ones, to the expatriate firms at the expense of our indigenous contractors. Some of the problems attributed to the indigenous firms are:

- i. Lack of adequate experience at senior management level and poor technical manpower.
- ii. Inadequacy of finance for long and short term purposes.
- iii. Very low level productivity (3).

As a result of the so called better organisation, technical knowhow and experience of these expatriate firms, they have claimed dominion of the construction industry and most of the works that

are supposed to be carried out by both unskilled and semi-skilled workers have been completely taken over with the use of mechanical equipment thereby rendering thousands of low cadred people jobless.

The question that needs to be addressed is that at what cost is the use of these sophisticated plants to the overall profits of the firms?. Judging from the cost of importing and maintaining plant items used in construction, one will no doubt see the need for embracing the full utilization of unskilled labour which is less capital intensive in nature. Infact, the current exchange rate has not helped the situation either as a 1996 survey reveals that a D8 Bulldozer which used to cost ₦250,000 in 1979 now cost ₦41 million.

Wahab (1977) even corroborated this in his paper on "improving efficiency in the building sector" with this extract:

"The use of mechanical plant in a country that has abundance of able bodied and underemployed person will have to be carefully planned and compromise is necessary between the level of plant input and manpower" (4).

Towards the upward growth of the construction sector and national economy as a whole therefore, strict attention should be focussed towards the use of unskilled construction workers instead of using mechanical plants which can lead to giant extra savings if properly adopted.

D.O STRUCTURE OF LABOUR FORCE

The labour force can be broadly categorised into two which are
Skilled Labour or Craftsmen
Unskilled labour.

The staff under the skilled labour are of varying abilities ranging from apprentices to trades foremen or supervisors (5). The apprentice can be described as a beginner who is willing and interested in learning a certain trade in the construction industry. The three possible avenues of training this category of people are the school, the workshop and the field. Some of the craftsmen that can be identified with this category are listed below (6):

Carpenters
Joiners
Masons/Bricklayers
Electricians
Plumbers/Drain layer
Mechanics
Painters
Plant operators
Scaffolders
Crane drivers
Steel fixers
Tile setters.

The unskilled labour on the other hand, is a category of workers that require no special skill and it is defined as any way of making a living with little or no degree of security of income

and employment.

They require little or no training to make them perform but it is necessary to make them to be aware that importance is attached to some rules and regulations that relate to their duties especially those that bother on safety regulations.

It must however be mentioned that these categories of labour are responsible to the supervisors on site(s) and most of them get their pays on a daily basis. However, in some organised firms, most of these people get their pay weekly or monthly and they are also entitled to all things which the management and technical personnel are entitled to such as free medical treatment, leave bonus, christmas bonus, etc.

2.1 TRADITIONAL ROLE OF UNSKILLED LABOUR

The unskilled labour has earlier been defined as any way of making a living with little or no degree of security of income and employment. They are able bodied men and women that perform manual duties. Their major asset is strength together with a healthy body and these enable them to perform effectively and excellently well. Ways of making a living are regarded simply as income opportunities and include both working for others and self employment both legal and illegal activities as well as both productive and unproductive activities (2).

Most of the unskilled labour otherwise referred to as casual workers are conspicuously found in agriculture (especially farmlands) small scale industries, petty commerce works, transport industries

and construction sites carrying out useful and productive tasks.

Most of the unskilled labour are paid their wages daily. Some get their pay weekly, monthly or contracted one a fixed term based on negotiation between them and the person(s) hiring them. There is no job security at all for them and in most cases, all the benefits that regular or permanent workers enjoy in their place of work normally elude this category of people. They contribute to the overall reduction in project costs if properly monitored and some incentives introduced as this will eliminate the use of large sophisticated mechanical plants which to me, is very capital intensive.

Another important characteristic of this category of people at times referred to as casual workers, is that they are found in groups at certain known conspicuous places to the construction experts or others who need their services. Their aim is to be picked for the day's ^{job} whenever the need arises. For example, these people could be seen at the junction of Bodija/Awolowo road and Bashorun road (Beside Oluwo Nla Junction) in Ibadan while some are also found in challenge, Molete and other areas in the same Ibadan. In Ilesha, they ^{could} ~~can~~ be found in Aiyeso very close to the prison yard. ^{and at the stadium junction as well} Most of ^{at Round-About area.} them are seen with their tools such as headpans, shovels, diggers, sieves and the likes. Their major aim is to look for a way of surviving and sustaining their family members as they prefer this to stealing and other dirty jobs. The employer normally provides the raw materials and tools/equipment that will be needed in construction works but the possession of these basic tools are a sort of advantage to them (unskilled labour) as they are likely to be chosen based on this.

3.0 EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR UNSKILLED LABOUR FORCE

Despite the fact that most experts have seen no basis for the training and education of unskilled labour, (still want to believe that training is important for them especially in the areas of rules and regulation guiding their duties and safety precautions. Moreover, through the training and education, they can be elevated to the semi-skilled cadre based on their long years of experience.

3.1 EDUCATION

Education can be defined as those activities which aim at developing the knowledge, moral values and understanding required in all walks of life rather than knowledge and skill relating to only a limited field of activity. The purpose of education therefore is to provide the conditions essential for young persons and adults to develop an understanding of the traditions and ideas influencing the society in which they live of their own and other cultures and of the laws of nature and also to acquire linguistic and other skills which are basic to learning, personal development, creativity and communication(7). Infact, education has become the greatest industry in any nation and has continued to play a unique role in our economic development and social transformation process.

One can therefore see from the above definition that education is an important tool in a nation's development and the unskilled labour are not exceptions from the beneficiaries of this. They can receive their education in form of training not in the school or through any written examinations but through workshop and/or field avenues.

3.2 TRAINING

3.2.1 Definition of Training

Training can be said to be the systematic development of the attitude, knowledge and skill behaviour pattern required by an individual in order to perform adequately a given task or job. It can also be expressed as an activity which is concerned with making employees more articulate and efficient in the performance of their current tasks or in preparation for a new type of job, to meet the dynamic needs of the organisation(6). In other words, training is concerned with the development of people and their work performance.

Training can be used to develop mental ability, ^{dexterity} dex-tarity and skills of personnel at all levels. If training is to be effective therefore, it has to be ^{soundly} ~~soundly~~ based and organised in accordance with certain well trained principles. The type and form of training however are functions of the tradition of the organisation and the nature of the activities to be engaged in.

3.2.2 Objective of Training

The typical training programmes are designed to achieve a combination of the following(6).

- i. Increase in productivity - which relates to the output of an individual or a gang of workers such as concreting gang.
- ii. Improvement on quality - this relates to the quality of workmanship of individual workers and the effect of inadequate level of supervision by the line management.
- iii. Achievement of lower unit cost of production - This achievement cuts across a variety of personnel both in services and production

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sectors. Efforts are needed in the production sectors for all the required resources such as labour, management, plant, fund and materials,

- iv. Filling of vacant position/posts - This deals with the whole issue of recruitment which involves identification of needs, advertisement, shortlisting, interviewing and offer of appointments.
- v. Better attitudes through motivation - This has something to do with both formal and informal approaches so as to encourage workers to do their best towards the fulfilment of the corporate objectives of the organisation.

3.2.3 Training Process for Unskilled Labour

The availability of a competent work force will no doubt improve the construction capacities and capabilities of the nation. Trained workforce also enhances the efficiency, timelessness and quality of construction and maintenance works(5).

Towards realising our goals in this regard, the unskilled labour could be trained using two avenues mainly and these are the workshop avenue and field avenue(5).

3.2.3.1 The Workshop Avenue

This avenue is synonymous with the school system. The only difference is that the prospective trainee, unskilled labour in this regard, goes to a workshop rather than going for a formal school. Each trainee progresses according to his/her ability. A trainee is issued a certificate of attendance at the end of the training period as it is being practised by the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and

some of the construction firms.

3.2.3.2 The field Avenue

This avenue operates in a one-off manner(5). In this situation a prospective unskilled labour (trainee) identifies a tradesman and makes himself very close to the person with a view to eventually learn the trade. This is then modified as he learns the job and makes reasonable progress. Unlike the workshop avenue, no certificate is used to the trainee at completing the training. His/her performance in terms of quality of the job and productivity eventually determines his/her engagement as a qualified tradesman.

Apart from these two avenue highlighted above, it is also necessary to let the workers be aware of certain rules and regulations that are guiding their duties such as those relating to site safety requirements and procedure to prevent accidents, care for basic tools and the likes. Training of unskilled labour should include, among other things, the following(8):

- safety consciousness and awareness.
- skill acquisition
- correct operational procedure and activity sampling
- correct operational methods.

4.0 NATURE OF NON-TRADITIONAL AND RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

4.1 Nature of NON-Traditional Projects

Non - Traditional projects emanated from United Kingdom during the period of 1945 to 1955. According to sources, there was a shortage of labour and materials and the house building industry was unable to meet the demand using traditional methods(9). As a result of this,

non-traditional methods were employed on a large scale.

Basically, non-traditional methods included concrete posts and infilling panels, thin concrete slabs supported on light structural steel framing, pre-assembled panels of brickwork, stressed-skin resin-bounded plywood panels, asbestos sheeting in various forms, curtain walling and the like. These were usually produced in a factory and transported to the site, requiring only to be placed and secured in position (9). Cupboard fittings for kitchens, items of joinery and even complete dwellings were also handled in this manner.

This practice was continued until in the 1960's and 1970's when demand again exceeded supply and industrialised as well as system building methods were employed. This situation is not that different from what obtains in Nigeria and it is of the belief that instead of wasting so much money on the importation and maintenance of these mechanical plants, efforts should be geared towards a large scale use of unskilled labour force. Putting in a different form, non-traditional buildings can be said to be an improvement of the traditional method as industrialised and system methods replaced the non-traditional method owing to civilisation and further research works.

4.2 Nature of Residential Projects

Residential Projects are generally dwelling buildings as distinct from commercial and factory buildings.

Residential buildings can be in form of flats (that is, self contained), tenement (face-me-I-face-you), duplexes, detachables and mansion to mention a few. It can also be of bungalows, two, three or four storeys and high-rise in nature depending on the taste and

financial capabilities of the owner.

5.0 THE USE OF UNSKILLED LABOUR FORCE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL
RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

It has been revealed that the reason for the capital intensity ^{outlay} in construction works is not unconnected with the high inputs of plants, steel, concrete and other costly specifications and a continuous use of these resources in large quantities will definitely contravene the background for setting out National housing and construction policies whose objective is focussed on the need for self reliance, inward looking for resources to meeting our needs and exercising the spirit of moderation in our outlooks as well as shunning high sounding optins(2).

If one weighs the large sums of money that are being wasted on foreign exchange for the importation and maintenance of these sophisticated mechanical equipment and other costly plants/materials where ordinarily, a simple and less costly way of executing these jobs exists right on our door steps, one will no doubt see the reason for the use of this category of labour called "unskilled labour".

A survey round the major towns in the country will reveal how thousands of these able bodied men and women are roaming about the streets without any specific job to do and it is of the believe that these people can be more productive at the construction sites and at the same time enable the construction firms to save a lot of hard currency as a result of the alternatives provided for the use of mechanical plants.

Moreover, the present situation whereby most of these plant items and their spare parts are being imported from abroad needs to be seriously addressed. The reason being that while producer countries are becoming richer everyday as a result of the unnecessary ^{ADVANTAGE} patronisation, our own able bodied men and women at home are dying owing largely to mass unemployment whereas, these people can equally and more efficiently perform the job at reduced costs.

For the use of the large unskilled labour force to be effective in the execution of non-traditional residential projects therefore the following should be religiously observed:

- i. The design direction should be reformed to reflect the use of large unskilled labour. A situation whereby the crazy designs of high rise buildings and other complicated residential structures are now the order of the day should be discouraged because by this discouragement, it will reduce drastically the use of mechanical plants and other costly construction items.
- ii. Our own indigenous contractors should be encouraged to execute most of ^{the} ~~the~~ government projects. Infact, the design should reflect our own indigenisation and not any crazy ideas from abroad.
- iii. Citing of non-traditional residential buildings in already congested areas should ^{stopped and instead and instead, efforts should be} be focussed towards undeveloped ~~or~~ ^{yet} - to - be congested areas. Surveys have shown that owing to the limited number of floor areas of these already congested streets/ town, high rise and non-indigenisation designs are normally favoured in such areas as this could be seen in Lagos Island

and Ikoyi areas of Lagos state whereas, there are still more lands in Ibeju, Ikorodu and Ejinrin areas to mention a few.

- iv. There should also be an adaptation or development of small equipment as replacements to these mechanical ones. This is with a view to supplementing the efforts of the unskilled labour force and not to eliminate them from construction works partially or totally.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above discussions therefore that there are a lot of benefits to be derived from the large use of unskilled labour force for our non-traditional residential buildings and other construction works in general. If the architects are mandated through a pronouncement or decree to make their designs to conform with certain indigenised standard, this will drastically reduce the use and importation of mechanical plants in our construction works. As a result of this development, avenue will now be opened for the able bodied men and women called "unskilled labour" to be fully utilised on the sites thereby reducing the level of unemployment and at the same time reducing the degree of crime rate in the country because an idled mind is the devil's workshop, so said an adage. Furthermore, this gesture will definitely lead to improved physical and technical capabilities of these people and the young and aspiring ones among them can go on from there to become proud craftsmen or even trained builders through the different categories of training that are available in the construction industry.