

## Unpaid salaries in Africa: An explosive issue

*There is a link between wage arrears in Africa and structural adjustment programmes promoted there by international financial institutions. But government policies are also partly to be blamed for the problem.*

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In August 2002, when employees of the Bangui local council decided to hold an eight-day all-out strike, their discontentment peaked – and with good reason, for most of the 400 council employees in the Central African Republic's capital have not been paid for the last 42 months. Aware of the administration's financial situation, they are prepared to accept seven months of back pay. Anything would be a help, as the situation is now desperate. "For the last four years, nothing has been done to ease the staff's suffering. Many of my colleagues have died in poverty, while others, because they had no money, have seen their wives or husbands and children die before their very eyes," one trade union official lamented.

The case of the local government employees in Bangui is no isolated case in French-speaking Africa (see also the article by André Linard on page 17). For nearly two decades now, the non-payment of salaries has become a widespread problem throughout Africa, particularly in public and semi-public administrations.

Is this mere coincidence? In the early 1980s, Mali started the trend of late payment of African civil servants' salaries when it embarked on a structural adjustment course designed to cure the country's

ailing finances. At that time, thousands of Malian civil servants were laid off. And not only were there redundancies, but also delayed payments for those who remained in work. Unpaid wages and "rationalization" were no doubt familiar ploys to a trade union movement that was the leading pro-democracy force and that, in 1991, brought General Moussa Traoré's regime to an end.

In the 1990s the "wage arrears club" gained new members in the Central African Republic, Chad and Niger. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar and Togo were also quick to jump on this shameful bandwagon, extending the delays in payment to 42 months. In Niger, another country in the throes of structural adjustment, the number of strikes in protest at wage arrears grew virtually throughout the decade. To wipe the slate clean, the Government went as far as issuing bonds to civil servants. But the whole operation was a failure, leaving loan sharks and speculators the main winners. It was not until 1999 that social dialogue produced an agreement that finally offered a way out.

From strikes to "ghost towns" and from demonstrations to stormy negotiations, the thorny question of the non-payment of salaries in many French-speaking

African countries has remained a source of social instability. Here and there, protests have already cut short the terms of several governments which have turned a deaf ear to the calls for talks.

Today though, calm would appear to have been restored. Various draft agreements are being finalized, and in some countries social pacts between employers and trade unions have been concluded. However, unless steps are taken to consolidate such social consultation, unless the commitments that have been made are actually respected, and unless measures liable to boost economic economy are implemented, this slight improvement could be short-lived – all the more so since the phenomenon of wage arrears is now also hitting private-sector workers, who had previously remained unaffected.

Now is surely the right time to attack the roots of the problem. Admittedly, governments are not entirely wrong to point out the poor economic situation, as Carlos Pinto Pereira, Guinea Bissau's Minister of Public Administration and Labour, did last April. Last May, the Guinea Bissau Government began paying the arrears it owed its teachers and medical staff by giving them two of the four months they had demanded. "The fact that other arrears have not been paid is not a sign of the government's lack of goodwill, but is due to a very difficult financial situation," said Pinto Pereira. And while the adjustment programmes implemented in Guinea Bissau would appear to have curbed inflation, the current government debt is estimated at 743.1 billion CFA francs (more than US\$1 billion), which is equivalent to five times the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Meanwhile, a country like Cameroon is 5.8 billion euros in debt. In total, West Africa "owes" international lenders almost US\$70 billion, or nine-tenths the region's average GDP.

It seems that no wage negotiations at all can take place without governments deeming it necessary to consult the Bretton Woods institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Indeed, things have now

reached the point where the advice issued by these institutions seems more like orders. What other interpretation is there for the remarks made last May by Burundi's Minister for National Education when he threatened to discipline teachers striking for a pay increase by reiterating that "Burundi is hardly likely to increase salaries at a time when the IMF is calling on our country to slash its budget by 3.5 billion Burundi francs (US\$4 million)".

It is also important to point out the fact that since the 1980s workers have not only suffered the delayed payment of their wages, but also a significant decrease in their purchasing power. For instance, a secondary-school teacher in Burundi with a university degree earns less than US\$50 a month, "an amount which is just enough to pay the rent, and even then only for a home in a run-down area of the capital", one trade unionist explained.

In Côte d'Ivoire, salary levels for public servants have been frozen since 1980, and the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 did nothing to improve the situation in the region. With regard to Cameroon, a report by the French Senate noted that in the wake of devaluation "Cameroon did pull off the required changes, but only at the expense of budget cuts in the civil service, a classic result of IMF intervention". The Senate report, which talks of "the incoherent policy of the International Monetary Fund, fortunately tempered by the World Bank", also notes that "far from decreasing in scope, inequalities have actually grown". In Cameroon, pay rises introduced in 2000 for civil servants were at best a "symbolic" gesture.

In Niger, the country's four trade union organizations joined together during the 1 May 2002 holiday to denounce the "ill-conceived" privatization of public utilities. They called for a social plan to tackle "galloping" inflation, a "decline" in purchasing power and "rocketing" prices for bare necessities. The same demands and unity of purpose are evident in relation to structural adjustment programmes in Burkina Faso. Last May, all the trade union organizations – right across the board – called for

strike action. Their banners read: "Power to the social plan. The Government must withdraw from the welfare sectors. Poverty has spread and will continue to do so, affecting more than half of Burkina Faso's population. In the space of just one decade, life expectancy has dropped from 52 to 46 years!"

In July 2002, the minimum wage in Burkina Faso was 25,000 CFA francs (roughly US\$38 per month). More than 45 per cent of the country's 11 million inhabitants live below the poverty line (on less than US\$109 per year). In August 2002, officials at the national telecommunications agency even refused to carry out the instructions issued by the responsible minister by not implementing the price increases planned for certain types of communication. In Togo, a senior manager can earn up to 230,000 CFA francs per month, or barely US\$12 a day, which is classed as a "very high salary". Yet as one non-governmental organization (NGO) pointed out, for most workers in French-speaking Africa, a pair of glasses costs several months' wages. The African Civil Services Observatory (OFPA) based in Cotonou, Benin, recently confirmed that morale was extremely low. According to the OFPA, an economic upturn is impossible without a healthy administration, yet African civil servants will remain unmotivated unless they have decent working conditions.

However, a word of caution: however dramatic a situation, it can hide another even more distressing one. One recent study on four French-speaking African countries (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Togo) published by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) concludes that there is "extensive evidence of discrimination against women in these countries". According to the ICFTU, the differences that continue to exist between men and women in the areas of employment and wage levels "indicate that the elimination of discrimination will require governments to implement much more pro-active, positive action programmes".

No one denies either the difficult economic situation facing African countries or

the problems that young democracies have inherited against their will (in the form of colossal debts accumulated by former dictatorial regimes, pressure from their financial backers and adjustment plans that lack an accompanying social element). But the fact remains that local trade union organizations are increasingly being led to denounce not only the priority given to repayments and servicing their debts, but also the poor management of finances and public property which is also a drain on the respective countries' meagre financial resources.

Last year at a meeting in Nyanga, Zimbabwe, representatives of the NGO Transparency International from 11 African countries reiterated that over several decades almost US\$40 billion had been corruptly and illegally appropriated from the poorest countries on the planet, most of them in Africa, and stashed away abroad by politicians, military personnel, businessmen and other leading members of society. The repatriation of these funds would certainly provide the region with just the shot in the arm it needs.

But more should also be done to change bad habits, particularly among certain political leaders who still confuse public funds with the resources of their own political groups. "Corruption is an evil, a hindrance to the development of Côte d'Ivoire," said senior civil servant, Gnamien Konan, the managing director of the country's customs administration, speaking recently in Abidjan. "Corruption has permeated the whole of society, spread throughout the administration and struck at the heart of the forces of law and order which are supposed to be setting an example," he said in a furious attack on his country's politicians. In September 2001, most managers of public companies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were dismissed for having shamelessly dipped into their companies' funds.

At the beginning of 2002, nine magistrates were arrested in Benin, accused of accepting bribes totalling 1 billion CFA francs (US\$1.4 million). In all, 29 magistrates in Benin were charged with embezzlement between 1996 and 2000.

In Cameroon, a census of civil servants carried out in September 2000 revealed the presence (or rather absence!) of 15,000 “phantom” civil servants out of the registered total of 135,000. Their salaries were no doubt paid to those responsible for the scam.

Apart from Botswana (6.4 out of 10), no African country included in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published in August 2002 scored more than five points out of a possible ten. Two countries, Cameroon and Madagascar, even bring up the rear of the group of “less transparent” countries.

Looking at the situation objectively, Africa is not alone: according to Transparency International, of the 102 countries surveyed, almost 80 failed the integrity test.

In this respect, NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, could be good news. “NEPAD has set out some bold aims, which I applaud,” said Transparency International’s chairperson, Peter Eigen, at the beginning of September 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. “Just as international institutions and donor bodies must now insist on transparency and good governance, politicians need to rise to the challenge at national level. The new CPI makes

it clear that an enormous task lies ahead of them,” stressed Mr Eigen.

Perhaps it would have been more reassuring if NEPAD’s concept had also included civil society and trade union organizations. Concerns about this omission were raised by African trade unions meeting in Durban at the end of July under the auspices of the ICFTU and the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). Meeting in Turin, representatives in Africa of the ILO Bureau for Workers’ Activities also brought up this trade union issue. The recent proposal by South African President Thabo Mbeki to include tripartite consultations in NEPAD and to create an institutional mechanism for consultation with social partners is likely to ease the legitimate fears of trade unions and, above all, should make the NEPAD process more effective than it would otherwise have been in tackling major economic and social issues.

In the meantime, trade union organizations should become more involved and do more to find solutions to the problems facing millions of underpaid or unpaid African workers. Governments and employers will have to seize the opportunities presented to them by social dialogue to deal with an issue which is not just burning but also explosive.