

**Simplified measurement of underemployment:
Results of a labour force sample survey in Namibia**

by
Wolf Scott ¹

According to current definitions and conventional usage a country's population is divided into the economically active (or the labour force) and the rest, the economically active being further divided into the employed and unemployed.

That in many countries reality is more complex has been appreciated at least since Gunnar Myrdal's critique of employment data (in the *Asian Drama* and *Against the Stream* in the 1960s). The complexity is fully reflected in the work of the International Labour Office. In a recently issued manual (R.Hussmanns, F.Mehran and V.Verma, *Surveys of Economically Active Population: Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment*, Geneva 1990) for example, alternative possibilities are discussed, including the division of the employed according to whether they are fully employed or underemployed to varying degrees. But because underemployment is difficult to measure by conventional means, this very useful sub-division is not usually reflected in published data.

Data from a labour force sample survey carried out in August 1991 in Namibia by the author on behalf of ILO is used here to show the crucial importance of distinguishing underemployment from full employment, as well as the difficulties of measuring it precisely. Proposals are made for an approximate solution of the problem.

Namibia's Economic Structure

The employment figures can be no less complex than the real life situation. Conventional concepts of unemployment based on industrial societies fail to apply in Namibia (as in many other countries). The Namibian labour market is characterized less by a dichotomy of employment/unemployment than by a continuum whereby at one extreme people are fully employed, mainly in Government and the small formal sector, while at the other extreme they have no employment or source of earned income at all. In between, however, lies the vast mass of the population, the underemployed, who eke out, as best they can, a pittance from small plots of land, livestock and the occasional sale of beer or foodstuff. Namibia is fairly typical in this respect of many African countries south of the Sahara, and more broadly of developing countries generally. The lessons from Namibia probably have fairly wide application.

The 1991 Labour Force Sample Survey

A labour force sample survey was carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Manpower Development on a nation-wide basis during August 1991 (the first ever national sample survey in Namibia, which became independent in 1990). The purpose of the survey was to obtain data on the proportions of employed, underemployed and unemployed in Namibia according to their socio-economic characteristics, such as sex, age, region, formal and informal education. This information was required for effective manpower planning as part of a comprehensive labour market information system which the Government was about to set up with international assistance.

^{1/} Consultant at the time of the survey to the International Labour Office. ILO is however in no way responsible for the views expressed here, which are solely those of the author.

The following results were obtained using the internationally accepted definitions of employment and unemployment, particularly the stipulation that the 'employed' comprise all those exercising a gainful activity during a given reference period, however short the duration of the activity.^{2/} Persons in regular employment are included, but also those casually employed, for example in subsistence farming, occasional sales of beer or food, as well as unpaid family members participating in these activities.

Although many of the respondents, both men and women, described themselves as unemployed and declared themselves as available for work if it were offered (the additional criterion, actively seeking work, was discarded as irrelevant in the rural areas of Namibia) they were nonetheless classified as employed for purposes of the survey if, as mentioned, they had occasional gainful employment as wage or salary earner within the reference period, farmed land and/or owned livestock, or had an income from a business activity. This included a very large proportion of the respondents since subsistence farming is the principal activity, particularly in the densely settled northern areas of the country.

Table 1: Distribution of the Economically Active in Namibia by Employment/Unemployment

	per cent	
	men	women
Employed	86	80
Unemployed	14	20
Total economically active	100	100

As noted, relatively few of those classified as employed in subsistence farming or with small businesses described themselves as such. Working a few hours per week on their small plots, guarding goats, or selling the occasional pot of beer is not considered by them as employment, particularly as the earnings, in cash or kind, are minimal. Whatever the international definitions, it would be politically unwise to describe them as employed without further qualification. An attempt was made therefore to distinguish between the fully employed and the underemployed, as indeed is recommended in the above-mentioned ILO manual.

The problem in Namibia, as elsewhere, is how to measure underemployment. The criterion recommended by ILO to measure 'visible' underemployment is time spent in gainful activity (the number of hours as compared with a standard period of full employment). Criteria such as income earned from the activity, or the extent education or skills are underutilized, are proposed to measure 'invisible' underemployment. However, it is recognised in the manual that measurement of invisible underemployment in surveys is rarely feasible.

In Namibia, neither visible nor invisible underemployment could readily be measured in the context of a sample survey (as distinct perhaps from an in-depth enquiry). There are several difficulties:

1. Farm activities are highly seasonal. The time spent in work is much greater during some seasons than others. During August (the winter season in Namibia) for example, when the survey took place, there was very little work. Retrospective questioning gives unreliable results. Few of those questioned knew how much time they had spent on farm activities six months earlier. An alternative procedure, which is to capture all the seasonal activities by spreading the survey over a full calendar year, was not feasible in Namibia.

2. The difficulty of dividing time between farm and personal activity is illustrated by the

^{2/} According to the 1982 international definition, all persons are considered as employed who spent at least one hour in gainful activity during a specified reference period. In actual practice, the minimum varies in different countries.

principal activity during the survey period (August). Water was in very short supply in Ovambo and many of the men were absent from the farms searching for and fetching water. The water is for personal use as well as livestock, and it is not possible to divide the work in fetching it meaningfully between the two functions, as would be required for precise measurement.

3. Time spent in 'gainful' pastoral activities is always difficult to assess. A woman might be watching goats, feeding her child, weaving a basket, and talking to her neighbours, all at the same time.

4. Income from subsistence farming is mainly in kind and varies over the seasons. The result of questioning, involving conversion of quantities (which the respondents rarely knew or admitted to knowing) into values (at shifting prices), was quite unsatisfactory.

5. An attempt was made to assess time spent or income earned by reference to land owned or farmed, and possession of livestock. The problems are that:

- Subsistence farm land is owned for the most part on a communal basis. Grazing is on such communal land. Small plots are individually farmed, but their size is a matter of conjecture rather than known fact. Virtually none of the respondents, in the pilot stage of the survey, knew the size of their plots.

- The amount of livestock owned by a household, which is the most important contributor to livelihood in the northern territories, might have been used as an indicator of the extent of employment, but it is a well-guarded secret, unlikely to be divulged to strangers. Many of the figures given during the survey were thought to be false.

In general, while it is not impossible to obtain accurate information on the way time is distributed (by means of time-budgets, for example) or of income earned, conventional sample surveys, where interviewers spend relatively little time in any one locality or household and are rarely well acquainted with conditions in a given village, are not the best vehicle for such data collection. Small, intensive, in-depth probes combined with observation would be required for reasonably accurate measures of underemployment. The results would not necessarily be representative, however.

Meanwhile, figures such as those in Table 1 remain the most typical product of census or survey activities, but in Namibia at least, they would be of little use for labour market analysis in the absence of further detail. Some other solution is therefore required.

The solution in Namibia was to use description as an approximation to measurement.

Table 2: Distribution of the Labour Force in Namibia according to whether workers are fully employed, underemployed and unemployed

	per cent	
	men	women
In regular employment	52	30
Underemployed	34	50
of which: - in casual paid employment	(7)	(7)
- with land/livestock	(24)	(36)
- with small business	(3)*	(7)*
Unemployed	14	20
Total	100	100

* Approximate figure.

The category of unemployed has not changed, but those classified in Table 1 as employed are now divided into four separate and, in the Namibian context, well recognised, categories.

The first contains the fully or regularly employed, the others various types of underemployment:

- ii. Those in casual paid employment, mainly persons in the larger towns who pick up occasional jobs, such as loading trucks or in construction;
- iii. With land and/or livestock and residing in their homesteads;^{3/}
- iv. Owners of small, informal business activities, in the case of Namibia mainly making and selling beer, cakes and similar foodstuffs.

The additional information required for this classification from the questionnaire is not complex. In the case of Namibia, a distinction was made from the start for each person aged 15 or over,^{4/} according to whether they were in regular gainful employment, in casual gainful employment, or unemployed in the sense of not exercising a profession but wanting one.

Persons in each category were then questioned separately. There was ample provision however for the capture of minor activities such as the production and sale of food and drink, basket work, or similar, irrespective of whether these had been mentioned earlier, to allow for reclassification, as appropriate. In addition, all respondents were asked in respect of their households whether they farmed land and/or owned livestock.

The final classification was made on the basis of all this information during coding. As noted earlier, the respondent's own assessment was not necessarily accepted. The majority of persons in subsistence farming described themselves as unemployed, and similarly those with minor business activities. During coding, on the other hand, they were reclassified as underemployed. It is significant that none of the respondents in subsistence farming in the northern areas described himself or herself as in regular employment or gave their occupation as farmer, even though a few admitted to owning fairly large herds of livestock. It is on these grounds that the decision was taken to classify all the subsistence farmers as underemployed (rather than as unemployed, which in most cases was their own assessment, or in regular employment). There is no doubt an element of error here, but it is considerably smaller than the error of classifying all subsistence farmers as employed, together with teachers, nurses or others regularly employed or, for that matter, of classifying them as unemployed, even though a majority described themselves as such.^{5/}

^{3/} Persons with land/livestock who had left their homes to look for work, for example in Windhoek, were considered, in the absence of other activity, as unemployed.

^{4/} The survey was restricted to persons aged 15 or over. Although the employment of children is a well recognised phenomenon in Namibia, it raises issues beyond the immediate concern of the labour market analysis.

^{5/} A further complication concerned women on subsistence farms. Most of them described themselves as unemployed, but were included in Table 2 as underemployed on the basis that they perform occasional tasks on their farm. A small number of women, however, described themselves as home makers. It might be argued that such a description is arbitrary, and that in fact they are no different from the other women in subsistence farming. Most of them are likely to engage in occasional farm chores, and on this criterion they should also be classified as underemployed. The effect on the figures of changing the classification from home maker to underemployed would be to further decrease the proportion of women in regular employment (from 30 to 26 per cent), and in unemployment (from 20 to 17 per cent) and add to the proportion in underemployment (from 50 to 57 per cent). However, since it is not quite clear whether all the women involved really wanted employment, they were classified as economically inactive and omitted from Table 2.

Evidently, the figures can be broken down further for analysis by occupation, age, education, region within Namibia, and similar. For example, the proportion of the fully unemployed, as defined here, is virtually nil in the northern areas (Ovambo, Kavango, Caprivi, Kaoko) because most households there have some land and/or livestock, even though these secure only the most meagre of sustenance. In the southern areas on the other hand, unemployment was around 40 per cent for men and 50 per cent for women. Because of commercial farming, access to land for farming or grazing is severely restricted for the majority of the population in the south.

Discussion

The information on underemployment in Table 2 falls short of what is ideally required. Virtually nothing is known from the figures about the degree of underemployment of each of the three categories, for example, how much time women spend on farm activities (in ILO terms, it provides the number of persons underemployed, but not the quantum of underemployment). On the other hand, the figures are for use mainly in national labour market analysis. The analysts in the Ministry of Labour and Manpower Development know the general situation in subsistence farming, particularly the fact that the volume of work is small, and that the majority in this category of underemployed would be available for other types of employment. What they did not know before the survey was the number or proportion involved, and this is a useful outcome of the survey.

The figures in Table 2 thus describe the real life situation in Namibia better than those of Table 1, and as possible, it is figures of the type of Table 2 that might be considered for dissemination in international, as well as national, publications. They would also have direct application to policy. Assuming it were the Government's long-term policy to provide jobs for all those less than fully employed, it would be figures of the type of Table 2 that would be scrutinized rather than the single unemployment figure of Table 1 - a difference of 34 per cent of the labour force in the case of men, and 50 per cent of women. Most of those classified as underemployed in subsistence farming would want jobs, but it might not be the Government's policy to denude the countryside altogether of agricultural labour. Similarly, if all those in casual urban employment, who also consider themselves as unemployed, were provided with regular jobs, provision would have to be made to meet the demand for casual labour.

From the perspective of social policy (provision of benefits, for example) it might help to grade the various types of unemployed and underemployed according to the urgency of their needs. Those fully unemployed, with no land, livestock or business are clearly most in need; possibly those with casual paid employment would be next, followed perhaps by those with some land and/or livestock. The point here is not to decide here on a hierarchy of deprivation, but to suggest that policy would be greatly facilitated by the provision of reasonably detailed figures, beyond a single dichotomy into employed and unemployed.

From the perspective of the international organisations the problem has been to get matching data of this type for a large number of countries with varying conditions. Two questions might be asked: (a) what priority should be given to international comparability at the cost of valid national data; and (b) need there be a conflict between national and international requirements, or could methods such as those used in Namibia be generalized to provide internationally comparable, as well as national, data?

Comparability is essential for cross-national analysis, where the purpose is for example to place a country's development into an international perspective. In general, however, most governments would take the view that national applications should have priority over such comparisons, the requirements of international organizations notwithstanding.^{6/}

^{6/} Begging the question, for the moment, whether a figure such as the 87 per cent employment rate for men in Namibia, which conceals massive underemployment, can really be meaningfully compared with a similar figure in a fully developed country.

Conflict between objectives is not inevitable. There is no reason why figures of the type included in Table 2 should not be used in internationally comparable tabulations, at least on a regional basis. They are the kind of data that many countries in Africa south of the Sahara could provide, in addition to Namibia. Neither the information itself or the method of classification are complex.



