Myths of productivity in international labour standard trainings by the ILO

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Measuring economic growth

This paper assesses how the category of productivity is used in the context of development in Sub-Sahara Africa by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO was founded in 1919. In light of very recent bloody revolutions, improving working conditions was seen as the major factor for social peace. The ILO based labour standards on the latest economic knowledge, which grew by that time in volume and importance (Speich 2011; Godarzani-Bakhtiari 2019), and implemented labour statistics as models for international comparison. In the 1940s, the ILO changed the paradigm for measuring economic growth from production to productivity (ILO 1951). Until today, labour productivity is one of the ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market. It is expressed in the simple formula "output : labour input = productivity." One advantage of the new paradigm was that it included working time and thus allowed for a different idea of the standard of living, as it now focused more on the benefits for the individual worker than on the broader national economy.

Although they also advanced to measuring productivity of sectors, branches or plants, they did not compare different branches or sectors. What appears taken for granted today was absurd back then: 'of course,' e.g. agriculture and industries were incomparable.

Widening the scope: from measurement to programmes

In the 1980s, the ILO expanded the use of the category of productivity. While until then, productivity had only been used as a category of measurement and comparison, it now became a practical claim. The ILO launched projects, programmes and trainings on raising productivity especially in micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In the ILO publications, this is ascribed to a neoliberal change, in which former allegedly autonomous national economies now were measured against their ability for global competition (Mwamadzingo 2015a; Wignaraja 2002). Also, sectors & branches now were compared and regarded as competitors in order to argue for industrialization (Luebker 2014).

In light of the ILOs mission of "promoting social justice and internationally

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recognized human and labour rights,"[2] it is not self-evident, why productivity should be of any concern for the ILO. However, when we take a look at the training programmes directed at raising productivity such as "WISE - Higher productivity and a better place to work"[3] (1988), "People and productivity" in the SEED-programme[4] (2000), "Productivity improvement and the role of trade unions" (2015), to name but a few examples, productivity is far more than – and sometimes anything but – a measurement unit or a practical claim. Instead, productivity appears as a rationalized myth. The term rationalized myth here refers to a narrative that encapsulates and discloses a "transcendental concept" (Meyer et al. 1987) such as justice, progress or equality in a digestible and understandable form. A myth appears as a description of who we are and where we stand, while simultaneously it calls to action.

In the training programmes starting with a pilot project in the Philippines, we can see how the myth has developed over time. In the 1988 WISE manual, the concept of productivity is hardly introduced, yet consistently applied to structuring the workshop and the workday. Through every step of the manual, suggestions meet both targets, the increase of productivity and labour standards. In the SEED programme, productivity is thoroughly introduced and differentiated into a 'good' long term productivity raise that is in accordance with labour standards on the one hand, and exploitative modes which are characterized as poor short term raises on the other. Thus in the SEED programme it becomes evident how labour standards and productivity are beginning to merge.

The SEED programme has a second explicit target: improving access to the market. Here productivity is seen as only one aspect of a bigger goal: "Sales generation and work-floor productivity can be treated as two parts of a large concept called 'competitiveness' or 'business performance'" (Vandenberg 2004, 16). While Vandenberg subsumes productivity and market access under a third concept, a different interpretation of productivity sets in, according to which productivity includes the relation to the market:

> Whereas traditionally, productivity is viewed mainly as an efficiency concept (...), productivity is now viewed increasingly as an efficiency and effectiveness concept, effectiveness being how the enterprise meets the dynamic needs and expectations of customers. (Tolentino 2002, iii)

The scope of productivity has been further widened over the years. In the 2015 manual for African trade unions a close connection between productivity and inclusion and sustainability is drawn (Mwamadzingo, Chinguwo 2015, 42). Productivity is here even introduced along with a new transcendental concept: "Freedom and productivity become the twin objectives of human development marked by progressive liberation of people"

2 http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/lang--en/index.htm
3 WISE stands for Work Improvements in Small Enterprises
4 SEED stands for Sustainable Employment and Economic Development.

(Mwamadzingo 2015b, 34). The quotation from a speech by an African ILO official shows clearly that the understanding that Labour Productivity enhancement would lead to overall progress is successfully established: "Improving productivity is not an end in itself, but a means to improving workers' lives, enterprises' sustainability, social cohesion and economic development. Continued improvement of productivity is also a condition for competitiveness and economic growth" (Chuma-Mkandawire 2014, 1).

The widened scope of the concept can be clearly seen in the manual for "WISE-R" which is an enhanced and updated version of the WISE-training that began in 2009 and focused especially on Sub-Sahara Africa. Unlike in WISE, a whole module now introduces the category of productivity, pursuing the question of how to measure and enhance it (in the 'good' way). At the same time, labour standards are only very loosely coupled to productivity in WISE-R or even decoupled from them: Labour standards and productivity are dealt with in different sections, yet it suggests they go hand in hand. It is thus through this myth that the trainings can convey a different message above and beyond competition and fitness to the market. By including productivity into labour standards, and labour standards into productivity, the myth changes the narratives of achievement, economy and progress to a morally and rationally legitimated discourse. Ideas such as the 'invisible hand' (self-regulation of the market), exploitation of cheap labour or the incompatibility of family duties with employment are pushed back and substituted through a proclaimed win-win-situation, e.g. in announcing "(t)he advantages of breast-feeding for your business" (Wise-R 2009). The new mythical narrative thereby offers new definitions for business success, entrepreneurial achievements and thus for the question who is and will be a successful entrepreneur.

Conclusion

The myth of productivity as a depiction of progress has become an unquestioned assumption in the ILO over a few decades, and it is instructive that it should be so powerfully repeated especially for African contexts. In this myth, productivity works as a specific narrative that connects economic growth with labour standards and thereby depicts and produces a particular meaning of development, i.e. it suggests that economic growth and social progress are not only compatible, but even identical.

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