

WORKING NOTES

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FACTS AND ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

UNEMPLOYMENT AS A LIFESTYLE!

The recent trend in registered unemployment in Ireland which has reached record levels has at last prompted a recognition that such levels of unemployment constitute at least "a problem". Though there is this recognition there are still many who believe that being unemployed is not such a serious problem for those individuals, families and communities affected by it and that unemployment as a lifestyle is acceptable. Such notions are informed by a belief that welfare provision is adequate, and/or that the unemployed are workshy and no longer identify with a work ethic.

Notions such as these largely fall into the category of myths. This arises because the available evidence indicates that unemployment is a primary cause of poverty and that the unemployed are only too willing to take up employment but there is not enough employment available. In addition much of the available employment offers too low a wage to meet individual family circumstances. This situation is compounded by the present relationship between the Tax/PRSI and welfare systems. The employment that is offered also requires skill/education levels that many unemployed people do not have. In particular long periods of unemployment are unacceptable as a lifestyle since they generate serious social, financial and psychological problems for individuals and families.

The existence of such problems are highlighted by a recent report entitled "Life on the Dole". This report was based on interviews with 176 long-term unemployed individuals signing on at the Tallaght Labour Exchange.

The research sought to establish the views of those interviewed on a variety of issues relating

to their experience of unemployment.

When asked what was the most difficult aspect of being unemployed, three replies dominated. These were:

- ☐ Boredom,
- ☐ Financial hardship
- ☐ Poor mental health.

A full understanding of why these factors dominate the lives of the unemployed can not be achieved unless one examines the important role employment plays in our economic and social system. This article is a brief attempt to examine this relationship.

WORK AND EMPLOYMENT

Without the concept of work, in the form of employment, which is generally perceived as being a useful and positive activity there would be no unemployment, which in comparison is viewed as being a negative phenomenon. As long as there has been employment there has been unemployment.

Unemployment only has meaning where work relationships are based largely on the concept of employment and work has come to mean paid employment. Two main elements dominate our idea of employment. (1) It usually equates work with employment and (2), it maintains that work involves making a career or following a vocation. Employment provides a structure to daily life. It provides people with social contact outside of the family. Through employment individuals also receive an earned independent income. In short, employment provides a role, a feeling of identity and status as a consequence employment plays an important part in the way people describe

themselves, their plans and family life. In many other types of societies work takes on other forms. For example in a society with a subsistence economy, people work for their own basic survival. Whereas in an economy based on slave labour, slaves are obliged to labour for life and cannot "lose their jobs" much as they might wish to do so.

In our society employment and work has become a single term in that work is valued most if it is carried out through employment in the formal economy. In fact within our society there are many activities which are work, and which contribute to the maintenance and development of our society but are not valued to the same extent because these activities are not employment. For example, housework, unpaid voluntary and community work.

With employment playing such an important role individuals develop a value system which has the need to be in employment as a central feature. This happens because society advocates employment as a meaningful and self-fulfilling activity. Success at employment is a central part of a meaningful life.

With employment playing such an important role not alone in the economic and social system of society but as a means of giving people a sense of worth, denial of access to employment can affect both the identity and self-concept of the person. As a result being unemployed generates feelings of dependency, of financial, personal and social insecurity. Unemployment can also lead to serious psychological problems brought on by the lack of a structured daily life, a feeling of increased social isolation and financial difficulties due to a dependency on an inadequate welfare system.

The loss of self-esteem, the feeling of depression and of insecurity which develop in a period of unemployment arise because society strongly relates employment with success and when a person is unable to obtain employment there is a strong sense of personal failure.

Being without employment creates a sense of social isolation and creates a notion that the unemployed are excluded from normal society. This is highlighted by the "Life on the Dole" research when one of those interviewed stated "I don't know anyone who has a job in my area or even a car. We are not even working class."

HOW AN UNDERSTANDING CAN HELP

How does understanding the important role employment plays in our lives help towards easing the problem of unemployment?

It can help in a number of ways.

Firstly: it can increase an understanding of the personal and social cost a loss of employment can cause to the unemployed, and take these into account when developing policy intended to address the problem.

Secondly: it can help dispel the negative myths and often stereotyped views people have of the unemployed because with employment playing a central role in a person's set of values: people do want to take up employment and that people do not choose to be unemployed.

Thirdly: a realization that work is not just employment may help if activities that are work but not employment could be transformed into employment or given a status and financial reward similar to employment. Such measures could form part of any economic and social policies aimed at addressing the various dimension of unemployment.

The third point would require reform of the welfare and taxation system but most important a re-think on what activities constitute work and what employment. It would also require a transfer of resources in order to give such activities a financial and social status.

CONCLUSION

We as a nation are very good at producing reports. We recently had the Culliton report on industrial policy, the National Economic and Social Council produced a report, entitled "Strategies for the '90s." These in a broad sense attempted to address our failure to provide employment for our citizens. While these reports are important and useful they have all tended to focus on the problems from an economic perspective only.

The Life on the Dole report, while recognising that effective economic policies are required to address the problem, also stated that unemployment has a social and psychological aspect which also needs to be addressed. This arises because as highlighted in this article, employment is not just an economic activity since employment has a social dimension and

therefore can not be seen as only an economic problem. As a result Life on the Dole states that an economic response alone without a full and clear understanding of the social, community and personal consequence of such a response is not an adequate framework in which to address the problem.

Because of the social importance of employment in the allocation of rewards policies which tend to focus only on the economic aspect of the problem push the social consequences of unemployment experienced by communities and individuals into the background in addressing unemployment. A framework which has only a narrow economic dimension has the potential to generate future problems of a social and personal nature.

In conclusion as long as employment is the primary means through which we as a society allocate social status and financial rewards we have no choice but to ensure that actions are taken to prevent a large number of individuals and community been excluded from participating fully in our society simply because they can not access employment.



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND ACCESS TO SKILL TRAINING

Generally, in Ireland, we have tended to separate the education and training needs of individuals and have failed to recognise the important relationship between education and training. Even within educational policies, adult education, an important factor in terms of the needs of the unemployed, has never received the recognition or the resources it deserves. This is highlighted by the fact that less than 1% of educational expenditure is directed toward supporting adult education.

Given the high levels of unemployment there is a need to address how education levels relate to skill training provision. The examination of this relationship is necessary because often many unemployed individuals have both a low level of skills and educational attainment.

Within the labour market, educational qualifications have come to play an important role in determining access to both employment and training. Many skill training courses, both in the private and State sector have formal minimum entry requirements at Leaving Certificate level. Such entry standards are a major barrier to many older unemployed people who wish to access skills training.

With educational levels being used as an entry standard to many training provisions, entry to such provision for those unemployed who have a low formal education attainment is closed. Since they cannot access the training in the skills they need to compete for the employment that is available, their prospects of ever accessing employment is very small.

National data show that in comparison to those in employment and those who have been unemployed for less than one year the long-term unemployed have lower levels of educational qualifications. This is highlighted by an examination of data from the Labour Force Survey which indicates that 53% of the long-term

unemployed have no second level qualifications and that 86% had left school without a leaving Certificate.

The "Life on the Dole" research found that only 11% of the men interviewed in Tallaght had completed the Leaving Certificate. The level of educational disadvantages increases with age. For example, nationally it is estimated that 82% of the unemployed aged between 45-64 have no second level qualification. This compares with only 30% of those under 25.

Given such high numbers a number of issues need to be addressed in order to assist the unemployed overcome the formal educational barrier to skill training.

Firstly, greater linkages between second chance educational provision for the long-term unemployed such as the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS) and State and private sectors skill training needs to be developed. This would necessitate, for example, greater co-operation between the VECs who operate the VTOS and FAS who provide much of the States training. Even with a good linkage programme a possible drawback for the individual is the length of time such a process would take. Given the financial, social and personal circumstances of many unemployed people, they may not be in a position to commit themselves to a three year full-time process (two years VTOS, one year skill training) which has no guarantee of employment and which, at present, offers little in the way of financial rewards.

Secondly, measures could be developed which would help overcome the formal entry requirement without the need to obtain a formal Leaving Cert. For example, the development of a system for older unemployed people which would recognise and certify their work experience.

Such a system, would benefit the unemployed who would have undertaken some form of an apprenticeship or who may have worked in a skilled job but without obtaining formal training. There is no reason why there should not be a mature entry mechanism for skill training as is found in many Third level courses.

Because of the relationship between formal education and access to skill training, there is a need to develop policies which assist those unemployed who have low levels of formal education to access skill training. Failure to assist the unemployed overcome the formal educational barriers could have long-term consequences. Principal among these will be that any employment that is available will be permanently confined to low skilled, low paid and insecure opportunities.

At a broader level, if issues of equity are to be taken seriously then the relationship between educational attainment and access to skill training needs to be addressed so that people who are severely disadvantaged in the labour market can have opportunity of entry to high quality employment related skill training.

Appointment of New Director

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice has a new Director. He is Bill Tonor S.J. who comes to the Centre from the National College of Industrial Relations.

Frank Samon has moved on. The Centre wishes to thank Frank for his hard work and to wish him every success in his new role.