There is evidently a great deal of dissatisfaction about how the educational system performs the function of preparing learners for gainful employment. The dissatisfaction has intensified due to a number of highly visible and widespread phenomena: too many learners wanting to enter the next higher stage of formal education instead of entering the world of work; too many learners expecting the kind of employment (and related rewards and status) that does not exist; too many learners not finding employment in which their skills are used; and too many learners not finding any gainful employment at all.

These are manifestations of the so-called problem of the school-leavers and of the educated unemployed. The more serious problem, of course, is that large numbers of adolescents and adults—a large majority in the poorest countries—are employed or are entering the world of work at a very low level of productivity and at a poverty-level income (if they do not find themselves actually unemployed) and do not go through any organized educational process that might have had some effect on their productivity and earning.¹

The general situation

It may be useful to remind ourselves of the general situation of the countries under consideration. The poorest of the less-developed countries do not form a homogeneous category and any generalization about a group of countries can be dangerous. It is, however, possible to talk about some common natural and historical handicaps which in varying degrees have affected the development process of these countries.²

These countries generally have poor natural endowments possessing arid land (with a few exceptions such as Bangladesh), little mineral


² For one possible typology of underdevelopment, see Tibor Mende, 'Aid in its Context', Prospects, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1974, p. 198. Most, but not all, of the poorest countries would probably fit into Mende's first group—Editor's note.
resources and limited energy sources. The absolute density of population may not be very high in the inhospitable ecology of some of these countries, but usually it is high enough in relation to the usable land; and world-wide progress in controlling epidemics and famines has resulted in a high population growth rate. The national economies lack dynamism and are characterized by a dualism with a small and slowly-growing modern sector and a large subsistence sector, a part of which even falls outside the bounds of monetary transactions. There is also a small 'informal sector'—an unrecognized half-way house between the rural subsistence sector and the modern urban sector, providing a low-productivity, low-income sustenance to those who have drifted from the rural areas but have failed to be absorbed in the modern sector.1

The socio-economic structure is generally marked by serious inequity and rigid stratification resulting in the concentration of power in an elite and insufficient attention to the needs of the masses and to the development of rural areas. The physical infrastructure of development such as transportation and communication facilities, irrigation works and electricity plants is grossly inadequate. Similarly, the institutional infrastructure such as the administrative machinery and financial and credit institutions is weak and lacks a sufficient number of competent personnel. All of these together constitute a severe syndrome of underdevelopment which afflicts the poorest nations in varying intensity.

The state of underdevelopment of the poorest nations means that the formal educational system has not spread widely and even primary education is completed by a small minority of the children, particularly in the rural areas—where the proportion of completers in the primary age-group is typically below a quarter of the total.2 Moreover, there is no hope of making any kind of formal education widely available to the population in the foreseeable future.3 It follows, therefore, that whatever is done to improve and expand formal schools, including the introduction of work-oriented studies, and however successful this effort is, it will bypass the majority of the people who need help most in preparing for earning a living.

Underdevelopment of the poorest countries means that the small, modern, cash-economy sector employs a small fraction of the labour force, generally less than 20 per cent of the total, and the rate of new job creation in this sector is low (even if labour-intensive technologies are encouraged, because of the absolute smallness of this sector). The overwhelming majority of those entering the working age is and will have to be, for the foreseeable future, absorbed in farming and other rural occupations. Therefore, however efficient and effective are the modern sector-oriented skill programmes, they cannot, by themselves, make a big dent on the employment problem.

Underdevelopment in the poorest countries also means that the rural economy is characterized by a vicious cycle of low demand, low productivity and low income and is under a continuous siege by an ever-growing army of working-age population who has nowhere else

---

2. Estimates in 1970 for percentage of children in primary age-group enrolled in schools for some African countries are: Gambia, 30; Liberia, 36; Nigeria, 31; Sierra Leone, 36; Ethiopia, 15; Malawi, 39; Uganda, 43; Tanzania, 33; Somalia, 9 (Unesco Regional Office for Education in Africa, Selected Statistical Data on 35 Countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, Dakar, 1972). Obviously, the rate of completion after dropout would be considerably lower. Moreover, the enrolment ratio statistics are usually inflated. See discussion in Philip H. Coombs, Roy Prosser and Manzoor Ahmed, New Paths to Learning for Rural Children and Youth, p. 27-9, New York, International Council for Educational Development, 1973.
3. For instance the Uganda Plan III document states: "If... the population growth rate continues its present gradual acceleration, universal primary education will not become a reality until decades after the end of the present century, unless a disproportionately large amount of the country's resources are devoted to the expansion of primary education."—Uganda Third Five-Year Development Plan, p. 328.