



AHRC-DFG Collaborative Research Project

# Where have all the Workers Gone?

## Labor and Work in Ghana, 1951-2010

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### Project Overview

This project for the first time systematically combines economic and social history perspectives on the post-colonial era in Africa; a period of labor history so far lacking long-term studies. Taking the example of Ghana, it tries out a distinctive blend of approaches, combining the systematic use of both qualitative and quantitative sources, addressing recent debates both in labor and economic history, and combining a range of local studies with a national overview.

The title is a collaborative research venture between Researchers based at the University of Cambridge in the UK, Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany and in Ghana, the Universities of Ghana and Cape Coast. Part of the project are two PhD candidates and a Post-Doctoral Fellow. As Anglo-German but also African, the project is jointly shaped by the Arts & Humanities Council (AHRC) of the United Kingdom and the German Research Foundation (DFG).

The project is developing a national overview but focuses in detail on three areas – the capital city Accra; a cocoa-growing area recently affected by small-scale gold mining; and a rice-growing area in the northern savanna region – selected to represent different aspects of the experience of labour. Research questions under investigation include the changing size and composition of the workforce, the changing structure of forms of occupations and employment, the real earnings of labour, trade union struggles, labour market integration, the structure of informal work and entrepreneurship, migrant flows and regional inequality, and the relation between poverty, precariousness and work.

Stand-outs from the period we have been researching include:

- (a) We broadly confirm that the direction of change in labor relations from the decolonisation decade to Ghana's entry into its 'oil age' is that the growth of regular wage employment has been outpaced by the growth of precarious jobs, and that unemployment, especially among youth, has remained a major issue despite the doubling of real GDP per head from the start of economic liberalization in 1983 to the start of oil exports in 2010.
- (b) At the same time, there has been a transformation of the range of types of employment and of the nature of work because of urbanisation. The urban share of the population tripled, to 50%, between 1950 and 2010. Agriculture has shrunk as a share of employment, while services have grown fast, reaching 43% in 2010. Though manufacturing has stagnated, there has been a growth in professional, technical, IT and financial services. Wage labor as a share of the economically active population reached 20.8% in 1970 and did not regain that level by 2010!
- (c) Ideas that the long-term direction of change was towards either factory employment, or on the other hand towards a stagnating agricultural economy, are equally wide of the mark.

Initially proposed by two principal investigators, Professor Gareth Austin (University of Cambridge) and Professor Andreas Eckert (Humboldt University Berlin), the Berlin side of the project is currently led by Dr Lamine Doumbia (Humboldt University Berlin) since October 2024. It involves two senior participants from Ghanaian universities, Professor Akua O. Britwum (University of Cape Coast) and Dr Nana Yaw Boampong Spong (University of Ghana). Dr Spong is the main host of the Concluding Conference. Vital parts are also played in the project by Felix Yao Amenorhu and Hedvig Lagercrantz, who are both working for their doctorates at the Humboldt University Berlin, Lena Gentejohann, our student assistant at Humboldt University Berlin and by Dr Igor Martins, who worked for the project in Cambridge as a postdoctoral research associate, and is now based at Lund University in Sweden. Important insights that we already gained in the project include e.g. importance of wage labor, female participation in labour market)

### Final conference

The three-day academic conference, held at the University of Ghana from March 25–27, brought together scholars to explore historical and contemporary dynamics of labor, employment, and economic transformation in Ghana and beyond. We are delighted to highlight the participation of practitioners, from agriculture and the trade unions. In addition to the keynote and roundtable discussions, the core of the program consisted of chapter presentations that served as the foundation for a forthcoming publication. These contributions addressed a wide range of themes, including youth employment, informality, academic labor history, and gendered labor transitions, and labor and work as embedded in peoples' lifeworlds (land use, access and tenure).

Participants and practitioners also engaged with methodological and empirical challenges.

Besides the collective volume, there will be additional articles in scholarly journals by individual project members as well as the PhD dissertations (that eventually will be published as monographs).

