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*Industrial relations under various administrations in Nigeria:  
a political-temporal analysis of trade disputes, work stoppages  
and human work-day losses (1970–2004)*

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Stosunki pomiędzy pracodawcami a pracownikami pod różnymi rządami w Nigerii: polityczna  
długookresowa analiza sporów handlowych, przestojów w pracy i straty dni roboczych

**Key words:** trade disputes, Nigeria, work stoppages, dictatorship, work-losses

**Słowa kluczowe:** spory handlowe, Nigeria, przestoje w pracy, dyktatura, straty dni roboczych

## Background

With a rapidly growing population of over 140 million people in 2006, and over 161 million in 2011, Nigeria had about 20% of the total population (World Bank, 2009) of sub-Saharan Africa in 2005 (Business Day, 2011, Makama, 2011, WRI, UNDP, UNEP, and World Bank, 2005: 177). Nigeria, with the land area of 923,768 sq. km, has been considered one of the largest countries in Africa. However, Nigeria's total gross domestic product (GDP) in the early 2000s was a distant 12<sup>th</sup> in the region (sub-Saharan Africa): at barely, US\$ 254, it was lower than those of several Sub-Saharan African Countries which has the disproportionably largest number of the least developed countries (LDCs) in the world.

The nation's international poverty rate, based on a 1997 survey, showed that 70.2% (i.e. about 98.3 million) and 90.8% (or 127 million) of Nigerians lived on less than US\$ 1/day and US\$ 2/day respectively (WRI et al., 2005: 189). This was rather paradoxical

because Nigeria's possession of 4,635 million metric tons to oil equivalent of natural gas in 2003 enabled it to gain the reputation of being sub-Saharan African's leading exporter of the hydrocarbonic energy commodities; oil and gas, thereby earning considerable revenues. Therefore, the tragedy and paradox in the gross poverty that afflict Nigeria become obvious under the context of the abundance of natural and human resources that ought to have constituted huge potentials for economic growth and development. Moreover, Nigeria is also well endowed with a multiplicity of minerals including coal, uranium, gold and so forth.

The monstrosity, criticality and enormity of the problem of poverty in Nigeria compelled its government functionaries to acknowledge this quagmire as the greatest challenge of development. While these government *status quo* beneficiaries acknowledge the debacle and describe it as pronounced, prolonged debilitating and beckon for programmes designed to empower the poor and promise Federal Government assistance to state and communities to initiate programmes for resolving the problem perpetration of the highest level of corruption by the elite in government, business and military and low productivity in the formal sector have been deliberately downplayed.

### **1. Ignorance of industrial disputes and breakdown**

The measurement of productivity change, especially productivity improvement or increase, has been ignored, underplayed in Nigeria over the years. This manifests in the poor attention that issues in the nexus of productivity improvement received by researchers and scholars who work in the fields of development. Therefore, the industrial relations generally and their particular aspects such as: trade disputes, the losses of human work-days arising from such bad (or productivity reducing) phenomena as work stoppages and related events have remained largely unknown, not well understood and consequently poorly integrated into development policy. Nigeria's governments during the fourth Republic (1999 to the present) have been apathetic to productivity improvement. The Obasanjo administration of eight long years neither created jobs in the formal sector nor supported the informal sector and businesses to create jobs. Former president Obasanjo ignored the enormous population of unemployed and underemployed Nigerians of over 17.5 million in 1991, which increased substantially afterwards due to the general dwindling of political fortunes and the economy thereafter (Ingwe, 2008).

Productivity improvement generally and the resolution of industrial disputes through the introduction of new special policy action was not one of the central features of the Yar'Adua Presidency's Seven-point Agenda. The President's Seven-point Agenda featured: Energy and Security (as critical infrastructure that deserves to be delivered); wealth creation through diversification of production and human capital development concentrating on the provision of education and health care services. Others are: land reform mass transit (development of roads, railways and waterways) and the resolution of the intransigent crisis in the Niger Delta via the holistic development of the region

(Kpakol, 2008). How frequently have industrial disputes occurred in Nigeria in the past half century? How frequently have work in Nigeria's formal economic sector stopped over the years? To what extent have Nigeria's formal sector workers been involved in trade disputes leading to work stoppages? What is the magnitude of human work-day losses arising from work stoppages in Nigeria's formal sector?

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the improvement of industrial relations by extension of productivity increase in Nigeria's formal work sector. The specific objectives are: to show the frequency of occurrence of trade disputes in Nigeria's formal sector within the past 34 years; to describe the frequency of work stoppages in Nigeria's formal work sector in the past 34 years; to show the degree of involvement of Nigeria's formal sector workers in industrial actions during the period; and to describe the consequences of formal sector industrial disputes, specifically human work-day losses in the past 34 years.

This paper is novel and breaks new grounds by undertaking, not only an extensive temporal analysis of the trend in industrial disputes, breaks-down but also relating the foregoing events to the various political regimes in place during which the events occurred in Nigeria. The rest of this paper in sections is as follows: section two presents a conceptual framework drawn from review of relevant literature. Section three describes methods used, including data, data sources, variables, and technique(s) of analysing the data. Section four shows the findings, interpretation of the information produced while section five discusses the findings of the study, concludes the paper and recommends policy aimed at improving industrial relations in Nigeria.

## **2. Relating industrial conflicts to productivity, and productivity change in Nigeria**

The inevitability of industrial conflicts (disagreements between employee(s) and employers in the industry (centres of production of goods and services) is well documented (e.g. Fajana, 2000: 222). Although industrial conflict is frequently and simply used in connotation with strikes, the most glaring and important manifestation of industrial conflict, they are only a fraction of a wider expression of industrial conflict (Fajana 2000 citing Nicholson 1980: 20). Conflict situations in industry are wide, variable and encompass all scenarios betraying characteristics of breakdown inharmonious relationship between various distinctive communities involved in the industry. Put differently, industrial conflict describes the variable failure by different parties in the industry to agree on how relationships, interests, resources are to be managed, shared, created and so forth. Since different parties have varying interests and goals, differences among them are conveyed and managed in a wide variety of ways that colour industrial conflict in equally variable ways. Therefore, the definition of industrial conflict was expanded to cover".

"The total range of behavior and attitudes that express opposition and divergent orientations between individual owners and managers on the one hand and working people and their organizations on the other" (Kornhavser, Dubin and Ross, 1954: 13).

Productivity has been perceived as the measure of relationship between the quantity of goods and services produced (i.e. production) and the quantity of resources expended or invested in the production process (Adamu, 1991). Others view productivity as a measure of the efficiency in combination and use of resources to achieve specific and desirable results (Sofoluwe, 2000); it has also been regarded as measure of what is obtained in return or as the output which was invested or given out (Hills, 1982; Akangbou, 1985 and Bain, 1985). The quantity and quality of results achieved are taken into cognizance in the measurement of productivity (Durosaro and Akinsolu, 2007: 443–454).

### 3. Productivity change and related issues in Nigeria

Although productivity measurement and change in Nigeria is yet to receive the attention they deserve in the development literature, some contributions are emerging. Recently, Ingwe et al. reported on the low productivity in Nigeria's agricultural sector. The *per capita* food production indices (1999–2001) of Nigeria between 1999 and 2001 were: 62.4 and 97 in 1983 and 2003 respectively. This dismal performance that was lower than those in several sub-Saharan African Countries was linked to the rather low intensity of agricultural inputs (7.1 kg/ha of fertilizer in 2001; barely 1.0 tractor/1,000 ha – representing one of the lowest degrees of agricultural mechanization in sub-Saharan Africa in 2001 and also 179 cubic metres per hectare (m/ha) of water withdrawals in 2000). The resulting food production deficit warranted the receipt of food aid to the tune of 13,000 metric tons of cereals in 2002 (UNDP, UNEP, World Bank and WRI, 2005: 221), Ingwe et al., 2008. Ingwe et al. suggested that declining productivity in agriculture might have led to significant shifts in occupational choices of Nigerians because only 44.98% of the total employed Nigerian workforce was engaged in agriculture and related work in 1991 (census) compared to the engagement of about 70% of the workforce (population) in the sector previously (1963 census) (Ingwe, 2008).

The effect of industrial action and cessation of work on productivity in Nigeria's higher education sector was reported by Durosaro and Akinsolu, 2007. They lamented the situation whereby incessant strikes (industrial actions) initiated by workers and students unions' reduced productivity in Nigeria's higher education and advised that the unions should devise non-work stoppage strategies for creating harmonious industrial relations as a means of improving productivity in the Nigerian higher education Sub-sector. They draw attention of government's and education funding organizations to the rather parlous state of Nigeria's infrastructure (electricity supply, classrooms and residential buildings) and equipment – especially the perpetuation of the "walk and talk" culture in Nigeria as aspects of deficits that beckon for resolution as a means of increasing productivity in the sub-sector (Durosaro and Akinsolu, 2007: 443–454).

#### **4. Value and philosophical basis of the analysis of productivity and industrial relations**

The article is founded on the value in development studies that the sustenance of a degree of productivity that is capable of supplying the required goods and services for the population of a given place is necessary for the maintenance of social order, peace and progress or socio-economic development of the area. While some scholars have pursued this line of scholarship from the perspective of general urbanism or the city as the engine of economic growth and development (e.g. Mabogunje, 1974).

This paper approaches the pursuit of development from the perspective of industrial relations as a productivity improvement requirement within the region – i.e. including the city and its hinterlands. That is improved productivity specially and related issues such as the degree of (un)employment are requirements for achieving social order (the manner in which human community, functioning in a harmonious way that perpetuates and promotes the survival and satisfaction of the society's aspirations and the control of individual as well as group conduct (Frank, 1960: 549). Another basis of the paper is its subscription to the perception of social order as dynamic process or condition which changes over time in response to the dynamic transformation of societies and also the inherent existence of either implicitly or explicitly articulated normative order that always underlies the dynamism of society and the resulting state of social order (Mabogunje, 1974: 4). The dynamism of social order maps closely with history or the temporal approach to explanation. Therefore, the dynamism of industrial relations and its determinants (disputes, work stoppage, the proportion of workers aggrieved and involved and its consequences) are phenomena that change over time thereby beckoning for temporal analytical methods. This subscription to the temporal analytic approach is of course founded on empathy with the victims of the debilitation who suffer consequences of low productivity and the associated value of recognizing these as deserving development planning and management attention (Harvey, 1969: 4).

#### **5. Methods and data**

The temporal approach, as described above, was adopted in this study. Temporal explanation has been defined as a 'casual-chain' explanation that covers a long period of time. It involves the tracing of the origin and development of a set of circumstances or phenomena over time through the expression of process laws. The association of this (temporal) mode of explanation with deterministic and historicist philosophies has been described as unnecessary. Rather, it has been suggested that it offers but one dimension for the comprehension of geographic distributions and by extension of social and development phenomena (Harvey, 1969: 80–81). The method was applied to analyze historical data over 34 years, concentrating on industrial relations, specifically the frequency of trade disputes, work stoppages and the degree of involvement of workers (number), and the resulting loss in human work-days.

Data required are available from Nigeria's official agencies: Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity, which reports to them (data) to other agencies with mandates for public dissemination or publication: the Central Bank of Nigeria (Nigeria's apex bankers' bank or regulator of banks) (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2005). The National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, also plays this role based on its efforts to fulfil objective of formulating and monitoring government policies on employment; labour and human resource development undertakes regular publication (twice a year) of data on 'industrial disputes, industrial accidents, wages and hours of work, collective agreements, and social security statistics' in the Bulletin of Labour Statistics (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2006; Nigeria/NBS, 2007). .

## 6. Analytical procedure

We integrated political circumstances (type of leadership, whether military dictatorship, interim national government, or democratic government into the analysis as a way of elucidating on the extent to which this political circumstances might account for industrial relations; whether harmonious or otherwise. Therefore, this added to the quantitative data on the variables (of industrial relations obtained from Nigeria's Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity).

The analysis of the period described as democratic government in Nigeria excluded General Ibrahim Babangida's contrived "Third Republic". This paper refutes the classification of the regime as a democratic Republic because it did not qualify for such a classification being as it was contrived and designed to fail by Babangida's violent dictatorship that terrorized Nigerians. This study excluded other military dictatorships in Nigeria which began in 1966.

## 7. Findings: frequency of trade disputes

The lowest frequency of trade disputes (16) was recorded in 1998, on the eve of the rebirth of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999. While the highest frequency of trade disputes (775) occurred in 1975. The range of the frequency of trade disputes was 759. The least frequency of work stoppages (11) occurred in 1998 (i.e. corresponding to the least frequency of trade disputes as shown above) while the highest frequency of work stoppages (755) was recorded in 1979. This represented, as work stoppage, the range of 744. The proportion of workers involved in industrial action ranged from the least (9,494 workers in 1998 to the highest proportion of 2,874,721 workers) in 1982, representing the range of 2,865,227 workers. Human work-days losses during the study period ranged from the highest (9,652,400 days) in 1982, to the lowest (27,072 days), in 1970, (i.e. the range of 9,625,328 human work-days). An analysis of the influence of political regime type on industrial relations showed that contrary to claims by successive

military dictatorships that there were 'better managers of people and resources', their regimes were constantly associated with the highest frequency of trade disputes. It was in 1975, the year that General Murtala Muhammad's military junta ousted the nine-year (1969–1975) General Yakubu Gowon dictatorship that 775 trade disputes occurred. Generally, all the military dictatorships witnessed the highest frequencies of trade disputes compared to the Second and Fourth Republics (the latter is ongoing and was counted as at 2005) which altogether witnessed only a total of 1,641 trade disputes (27.3% of the total of 5 992) trade disputes. While military dictatorships witnessed a total of 435 (representing about 73% of the total trade disputes (5,992).

The entire democracy period including the second and fourth Republics in Nigeria recorded a total of 2,013 (41.1%) of work stoppages while the entire military dictatorship witnessed 2,878 (or 59% approximately) of work stoppages. The total work stoppages during the 34 years studied was 4,891.

The total number of workers involved in trade disputes during Nigeria's democratic periods (Second and Fourth Republics) was 5,808,092 workers (i.e. 55.5%) of the total.

During the era of dictatorship, 4,653,708 (or 44.5%) workers were involved in trade disputes, that is, out of a total of 10,461,800 workers involved in trade disputes and work stoppages during the 34 years analyzed.

The human work-days loss during the entire democratic government in Nigeria so far (during the period studied) was 42,120,928 days (or 71.13%) of the total.

The period of military dictatorship within the years analyzed was associated with the loss of 59,219,972 days during the 34 years' period studied.

## 8. Discussion

The study was limited to data covering the formal sector of Nigeria's economy. It has been suggested that Nigeria's informal sector is both vast and resilient and contributes immensely to the total economic output of the country despite the huge obstacles that the public sector and its stringent regulators place on it. Therefore, it is likely that industrial actions and work stoppages by formal sector workers responsible for offering/delivery essential services like energy (oil, diesel, kerosene and so forth) inflicts a chain of (re)actions that negatively affects the informal sector, thereby debilitating the entire economic output.

The data's failure to precisely show details of the duration of industrial actions, time (days and dates) of occurrence of work stoppages and so forth posed challenges for interpretation and analysis. This was most serious when analysis pertained to the years during which two regimes (i.e. with different rules) reigned. It was most difficult to properly apportion specific industrial actions to a particular regime.

Extant industrial relations literature reveals that the occurrence of 775 trade disputes in 1975 – the year that the military junta of Generals Murtala Muhammad and Olusegun Obasanjo ousted General Yakubu Gowon's nine-year (1969–1975) dictatorship – could



be attributed to labour unions' kicking against the promulgation by the dictatorship of one of Nigeria's most debilitating policies that have underdeveloped industrial relations in the country's history (Nigeria, 1975, Fashoyin, 1992 [2005]). The disproportionately larger share of industrial actions during military rule in Nigeria seems to confirm the frequent claims that the worst democratic government is better than the most benevolent military dictatorship. Despots have been reported to decree proscriptions of workers unions, thereby worsening relationships between employees and employers – a typical characteristic of undemocratic rule. The General Obasanjo's second rulership in the Fourth Republic sustained the military legacy from 1999 to 2004. This was manifested in the swelling of the number of disputes and number of workers involved in work stoppages very substantially over and above what they were during military dictatorship.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis has shown that Nigeria has experienced a rather high incidence of industrial relations breakdown during the past 34 years studied. A disproportionately large share of work stoppages, trade disputes and loss of human work-days occurred during the days of military dictatorship in the country.

Good governance practice is urgently required to found more harmonious relationships between employees and employers in Nigeria. The experience, competence and potential of civil society in leveraging the implementation of good governance in the industry to cause productivity improvement is especially recommended for this purpose. Further research is required to inform on the way industrial relations problems have affected specific sectors of industry such as energy and health care, among others.

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Table 1. Trade disputes, work stoppages, workers involved and human work-day losses in Nigeria.  
Data analysis techniques include both quantitative and qualitative factors'

	Year	No. of trade disputes	Work stoppages (frequency) No = 1,859	Workers involved No = 77,0432+	Human work-day lost No = 4,274,538
Gen. Yakubu Gowon's Junta	1970	165	44	14,784	27,072
	1971	296	165	77,104	208,114
	1972	196	64	52,748	145,125
	1973	173	60	33,963	115,371
	1974	338	129	62,565	144,881
	1975	775	346	107,489	435,493
Generals M. Muhammad/ Olu Obansanjo Junta	1976	230	125	52,242	148,141
	1977	172	93	59,270	136,349
	1978	142	78	105,252	875,137
	1979	155	755	204,742	2,038,855
	1980	355	265	221,088	2,350,998
Alhaji Shehu Shagari's 2nd Republic	1981	258	234	323,700	2,218,223
	1982	341	253	2,874,721	9,652,400
	1983	184 = 1,138	131 = 883	629,177	404,822
	1984	100	49	42,046	301,809
Generals Buhari/ Idiagbon Junta	1985	77	40	19,907	118,693
	1986	87	53	157,165	461,345
I. Babangida's dictatorship	1987	65	38	57,097	142,506
	1988	156	124	157,342	230,613
	1989	144	80	254,540	579,968
	1990	174	102	460,471	1,339,105
	1991	204	117	238,324	2,257,382
	1992	221	124	880,224	966,611
Interim National Government led by Ernest Shonekans	1993	160	90	1,541,146	6,192,167

Late Gen. Sani Abacha's brutish misrule	1994	199	110	193,944	234,307,748
	1995	46	26	19,826	2,269,037
	1996	29	24	19,826	94,664
	1997	31	31	59,897	359,801
	1998	16	11	9,494	47,631
Gen. Abdul Abubakar 29th May, 1999 (4th Republic): Dictators' contrived return of Gen. O. Obasanjo to power	1999	52	27	173,858	3,158,087
	2000	49	47	344,722	6,287,733
	2001	51	37	259,290	4,722,910
	2002	50	42	302,006	5,505,322
	2003	149	669	162,199	4,518,321
	2004	152	308	517,331	3,302,112
	2005				
		Total (Military) = 4,351	Military = 2,878 (59%) Democratic = 2,013 (41.1%) Grand Total = 4,891 (100%)	Military = 653,708 (44.5%) Democratic = 5,808,092(55.5%) Grand Total = 10,461,800 (100%)	Military dictatorship = 17,099,044

Source: Authors' computation from data published by Central Bank of Nigeria 2005:293; and collected by Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity, Lagos/Abuja.

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## Abstract

Although famous for being sub-Saharan Africa’s and Africa’s most populous, one of the largest, and second largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has for decades been confronted with the paradox of presenting gross poverty afflicting a disproportionably large proportion of its population (70.2%–90.8%) recently. While the recurrent mantra has been that the monstrous poverty should be confronted with drastic measures before it engulfs the country, these so-called drastic measures including their theoretical and academic unraveling are yet to be adequately undertaken. The factors responsible for the escalation of poverty such as low productivity, poor industrial relations, and worldwide leadership in perpetration of corruption, among others have been largely ignored, underplayed and misunderstood. This paper examines the dismal state of industrial relations in Nigeria. The method of temporal analysis was employed to show the historical exhibition of “trade disputes, work stoppages”, workers involvement in trade disputes and loss of human work-days over a 34 year period (1970–2004). The findings were that: the highest number of workers involvement in industrial action in Nigeria was 2,874,721 people in 1982 while

the lowest was 9,494 in 1998. Human work-day losses were high in 1982 (9,652,400 days) and least (27,072 days) in 1970. The highest number of work stoppages (755) occurred in 1979 while the least (11) occurred in 1998. The era of military dictatorship witnessing higher work stoppages occurred. It is argued that the Obasanjo dictatorship attitude spilled over into the Fourth Republic (1999–2007) when a large proportion of work stoppages occurred. The implication of this finding for policy is that the need to build democratic attitude institutions and processes for strengthening harmonious industrial relations is urgent and imperative in Nigeria.

#### **Stosunki pomiędzy pracodawcami a pracownikami pod różnymi rządami w Nigerii: polityczna długookresowa analiza sporów handlowych, przestojów w pracy i straty dni roboczych**

Mimo że Nigeria ma największą wśród afrykańskich krajów subsaharyjskich liczbę ludności i jest drugą pod względem wielkości gospodarką w Afryce subsaharyjskiej, to przez dziesiątki lat doświadczała potwornej biedy, w ostatnim okresie dotyczącej nieproporcjonalnie ogromnej części jej ludności (70,2–90,8%). Chociaż jak mantra wracało twierdzenie, że należy przedsięwziąć drastyczne środki, zanim straszliwe ubóstwo ogarnie cały kraj, to jednak postulowane działania, oparte na rozwiązaniach teoretycznych i naukowych, wciąż okazują się niewystarczające.

Czynniki powodujące eskalację ubóstwa, takie jak niska wydajność, złe stosunki pomiędzy pracodawcami a pracownikami i korupcja – jedna z największych na świecie – są ignorowane, bagatelizowane i pojmowane niewłaściwie. W niniejszej pracy zbadano fatalne relacje między pracodawcami a pracownikami w Nigerii. Zastosowano metodę długookresowej analizy w celu ukazania z perspektywy historycznej „handlowych dysput, przestojów w pracy”, zaangażowania pracowników w spory handlowe oraz straty dni roboczych na przestrzeni 34 lat (1970–2004). Ustalono, że największa liczba pracowników zaangażowanych w akcje pracownicze w Nigerii wyniosła 2 874 721 – w 1982 r., zaś najniższa – 9 494 – w 1998 r. Znaczne straty dni roboczych miały miejsce w 1982 r. (9 652 400 dni), zaś najniższe (27 072 dni) w 1970 r. Największą liczbę przestojów w pracy (755) odnotowano w 1979 r., zaś najniższą (11) w 1998 r. Przestoje w pracy miały miejsce, gdy rozpoczęła się era dyktatury wojskowej. Dyktatura Obasanjo miała pośredni wpływ na Czwartą Republikę, kiedy to wystąpiła ogromna część przestojów. W związku z tym rząd powinien jak najszybciej stworzyć instytucje demokratyczne i przeprowadzić procesy mające na celu umocnienie harmonijnych stosunków między pracodawcami a pracownikami.

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