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VILLAGE POLYTECHNIC LEAVERS: THE MASENO STORY

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Purpose

This paper reports descriptive findings from an investigation of the whereabouts, activities and outlook of leavers from Maseno Village Polytechnic. The assumption guiding investigation was the view that the achievements and satisfaction of leavers provide a useful test of the contribution of VPs to solving problems of youth employment, and the best guide to future planning. The paper attempts to evaluate the achievements and views of leavers in light of some of the basic objectives of the Village Polytechnic Programme. An attempt is also made to relate the training and experience received at the VP to the subsequent occupational history of leavers. The findings are specific to Maseno but are used to illuminate issues of more general importance for youth training in the Village Polytechnic Programme.¹

Data

The bulk of the information has been provided by leavers themselves in responding to a questionnaire in a combination of postal and interview contact. Because of the logistical difficulty of finding leavers it has not been possible to contact all those who have attended Maseno VP since 1969, but approximately 70% of a list of known leavers supplied by the Manager of Maseno has been contacted. As this percentage represents only those whom it was possible to find in the available time it is not a random sample, and there remains the possibility that significant and systematic characteristics distinguish those whom it was not possible to find. Nevertheless the assumption is made that respondents constitute a generalizable sample. Information obtained from leavers included home and family background data but concentrated on the formal and informal employment activities of trainees since leaving Maseno, and included information on problems encountered by leavers and their retrospective views on the utility of their training.

The Objectives of the Village Polytechnic Programme

The meaning of the findings which are reported lies in their relationship to the stated objectives of the VP Programme. These are summarized in a recent handbook produced by the Youth Development Division of the Ministry of Cooperatives and Social Services as follows

A VP is a low cost training centre in a rural area. It aims at giving primary school leavers from that area skills, understanding and values which will make them able to look for money making opportunities where they live, and to contribute to rural development by building up the economic strength of their own community

The Occupations of Leavers

VP leavers are engaged in a wide range of occupational activities of varying degrees of formality. Out of the total sample 77% report that at some time since leaving they have been engaged in money earning activity and 69% are so occupied at the moment. Wages being received by individuals range from shs 50 per month to shs 450 in one case with the median wage around shs 130 per month. It is instructive to categorize leavers according to whether or not they are mainly working for an employer or are engaged in individual or collective self employment. Table 1 shows the pattern of employment according to these criteria:

Table 1

PRESENT OCCUPATION OF MASENO LEAVERS

	Male	Female	Total
Wage employment using skill acquired at the VP	16	7	23 (31%)
Relatively full time unpaid farming or 'at home'	9	8	17 (23%)
Farming plus intermittent contracts	10	3	13 (18%)
Self employment using skill	9	2	11 (15%)
Wage employment not using skill	8	2	10 (13%)
	<u>52</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>74 (100%)</u>

The most important general finding is that 64% of all leavers are known to be making use in either full or part time activity, of the skill which they acquired in the course of their VP training.

The largest single group of leavers is that occupied in a type of wage employment which makes use of an acquired skill. Most in this group are engaged in either carpentry or construction work or a combination of the two. The VP is performing here as a vocational training centre, but is not contributing to excessive migration as most of those in this category are working within a ten mile radius of Maseno. A second rather small category of wage employment comprises those who are not making use of their skill. Those in this group are usually either labourers or domestic servants.

Self employment describes 33% of the leavers although this term covers different degrees of regularity of employment ranging from the well organized building groups who receive successive contracts to those who intersperse regular farming work with intermittent use of their acquired skill as demand arises and energy inspires. It will be noted that the group in relatively full-time self employment is relatively small in relation to the original notion that the major contribution of the VPs would be to stimulate self employment. This fact draws attention to the important point that individual self employment, which involves the identification of existing needs and the creation of new ones, is an extraordinarily difficult role requiring exceptional qualities of imagination, initiative and energy.

One of the most significant implications of table 1 concerns the difficulties experienced by female leavers. Of the leavers contacted one third were females. Of this group only 39% had been able to secure a money earning opportunity since leaving Maseno, although all but one of this group were still in that position at the time of the survey. In terms of their specialization typists were most successful at getting employment and those whose main course was domestic science or leather work were least successful. Although the numbers discussed here are very small it is clear that the VP has a very poor record in contributing to improved opportunities for female trainees.

Of those who were receiving no money for work at the time of the investigation the majority were girls and almost all are engaged in virtually full time farm work. Although the VP experience has not contributed substantially to their work, as Maseno has not provided intensive agricultural training, they can not be dismissed as 'failures'. As table 2 shows a sizeable proportion of all leavers spend some time each month in farm work:

Table 2
DAYS OF FARM WORK DONE IN PREVIOUS MONTH

None	53%
1 - 7 days	16
8 - 20 days	14
21 or more days	17
	<hr/>
	100% (73)

Maseno VP has not been in existence long enough for conclusive occupational trends to be perceptible. Nevertheless there are a number of cases of individuals who, having gained experience in wage employment, have of choice or necessity moved to self employment. The growth of informal patterns in which farming is interspersed with wage or self employment as opportunity arises seems a likely future trend and further underscores the importance of not evaluating VP achievement solely in terms of the size of wages earned by their leavers. At the same time the population pressure on land around Maseno presents a warning signal, in that farming in this area can not for much longer be regarded as a realistic alternative of part time activity for all VP leavers. Considering the fathers of Maseno leavers and dividing the number of acres owned by the number of their sons we arrive at a mean acreage of less than one. The seriousness of this situation was confirmed in the pattern of responses to the question: 'How much land do you expect to receive or do you have now?' 62% of leavers expect to receive less than two acres and 38% less than one.

The most pertinent question in all this is whether the VP training has been the determining factor in the acquisition of employment. Two facts provide indirect evidence. In the first place most trainees believe that they would not have obtained whatever work they did without the benefit of the VP training. Secondly the fact that by the time they came to the village polytechnic most trainees had spent considerable time in a fruitless search for work, implies a perceived utility for the VP. Unfortunately available data do not permit a more conclusive answer. Primary school leavers who did not attend a village polytechnic or any further training, are the relevant comparison group. The information on primary leavers obtained by Mood and Brownstein is not strictly comparable with these data. They both started with Standard VII cohorts and in the subsequent years which they were able to examine their progress they found that the phenomenon of interest was that of repeating and further training rather than employment.²

The Search for Work

It is important for planning in VPs to have information illustrating the means through which work can be obtained, and in particular on the actual or potential role of the VP itself in this process. The experience of Maseno leavers throws some light on this question:

Of those who found remunerative work outside or in addition to farming 50% did so in less than six months after leaving the VP and a further 20% in less than a year.

Finding work proved to be easiest for masons and carpenters who also tend to be the most highly paid groups of leavers. Possession of the relevant Grade Test pass is strongly associated with both ease of obtaining work and size of wages. Those who did not complete their course and girls had greatest difficulty in finding work.

Those who obtained wage employment outside farming usually did so by the familiar and laborious method of personally seeking out possible employers. Equally familiar is the evident tendency for success in obtaining such work to be related to the receipt of direct assistance. The three most mentioned sources of support were friends, relatives and the VP Manager, in that order. Those in self employment either struck out on their own or joined with friends. The significant role of friends as links between the VP and available occupations points to the importance of making use of and deliberately expanding networks of relationships within the community.

Follow up by the VP

A particular focus of enquiry concerned the need and potential for a more direct role by the VP in the provision of and search for employment. Leavers were asked directly about the extent and type of assistance which they had received from the VP since leaving. A relatively small proportion (31%) received some kind of assistance which was usually help in obtaining contracts, the provision of tools or letters of recommendation. However the remaining majority of leavers felt that they had received no help. This is probably a misleadingly high response as for example no leaver spontaneously referred to refresher course which have been a significant feature of Maseno's continuing contact with its leavers. Nevertheless the figure does reflect an underlying reality of the Maseno situation. In commenting about their experience since leaving Maseno leavers constantly refer to the need for more active pursuit of opportunities by the VP itself. It should be pointed out there that I am not here singling out Maseno for criticism, as in fact Maseno has been more active than most VPs in its follow up of leavers, but am making a point of general reference.

Difficulties faced by leavers

Table 3
DIFFICULTIES FACED BY LEAVERS

	% of total difficulties mentioned
Lack of tools	20%
Lack of loans for intial working capital	22
Lack of assistance in finding occupations	20
Need for lodging while looking for work	12
Lack of trade test or recognized qualification or certificate	16
Other (discrimination, lack of experience)	3
No difficulties	7
	<hr/> 100% (74)

When asked directly about difficulties which they have faced since leaving Maseno leavers again cite the need for more substantial and direct assistance by the VP in their search for employment. However as the table shows the most frequently mentioned difficulty was the lack of access to loans for intial working capital. Another strongly felt difficulty was the lack of tools. This is a familar plea at VPs and a number of leavers from Maseno have in fact been provided with tools at the moment of their departure. It is not clear that the provision of tools alone makes the difference between being able to pursue work or not. Table 4 shows the pattern of responses to a question which asked whether respondents needed tools and if so how they had obtained them. While there were 22% who said that they needed tools and were unable to obtain them 48% needed them but managed to obtain them, and in a sizeable number of cases they were obtained on the pledge of profits from the product or service for which they were needed.

Table 4
% OF LEAVERS REQUIRING TOOLS

Not needed	30%
Needed but not obtained	22%
Obtained from the sale of product or service	18
Obtained from the VP	16
Obtained from family or friend	14
	<hr/> 100% (74)

It is my feeling that the provision of tools probably does make a significant contribution to a leaver's initial self confidence and achievement. Given the scarcity of available resources the idea which has been used of providing tools from a tool fund, made up of matching contributions from the individual and the VP itself, seems a good one. At the same time the awarding of tools needs to be governed by strict criteria of performance, perhaps being provided after the acquisition of work or during a VP contract, or made available to work groups rather than individuals.

A third difficulty voiced by leavers was the need for more advanced training and better teaching if they were to be competitive in the search for jobs. As table 3 shows this complaint was mentioned by a mere 16% of leavers and it is not widely shared among those who completed the course. Some of those who mention it seem to be inspired by a mild discontent with their instructors. More commonly however their concept of advanced training and better qualifications seems to reflect a lingering conventional nostalgia for the type of certification provided by the formal school system in a situation where amount of schooling is highly correlated with financial reward. As the VP Programme is in part at least an attempt to break out of this constricting relationship this complaint should probably not be given too much credence. However the question of what is the appropriate level at which to pitch training is important from another angle. The danger with excessive concern for high quality in training is that it leads to the creation of products which may be too expensive for the local community and perhaps more important to standards and conditions of workmanship which can only be satisfied in towns. The need is clearly for flexibility so that trainees can be guided by local demand but at the same time can begin to educate that demand in the direction of improved standards. On the basis of evidence provided by leavers it does seem that training at Maseno exhibits an appropriate flexibility.

One hears much in Kenya about the exercise of discrimination or nepotism by employers in the awarding of work, but this does not seem to have been a major problem for Maseno leavers. With this issue in mind leavers were asked what they considered to be the best ways of proceeding to look for work. It is interesting and encouraging to note that 62% of leavers gave responses which indicated a faith in merit and initiative as the prerequisites for a job while only 24% think it is necessary to rely largely on contacts with friends.

Table 5

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO GO ABOUT LOOKING FOR WORK?

Merit, initiative, qualifications	62%
Non merit factors	24
Combination of merit and non merit factors	14
	<hr/>
	100%

In the following sections we move from the direct experience of individuals to more indirect indicators of the ways in which the VP is fulfilling its objectives.

Service to the Community

The essence of the VP ideal is that the VP exists for the service, education and enrichment of the community immediately surrounding it. Two indicators of the strength of the relationship with the community are firstly whether the trainees are recruited from the surrounding area and more important whether their subsequent work takes place in that approximate area. Maseno fully meets the first criterion as all but a small proportion (77%) of its leavers have their homes in locations which are within acceptable walking distance of the VP. With regard to the second criterion it can be argued that wage employment outside the locality results in remittances to it and hence enrichment. It is inevitable that a proportion of leavers will end up working at some distance from the VP but if a majority do so then the VP is not closely integrated with its community in the way which was intended.

Table 6

OCCUPATIONAL LOCATION OF MASENO LEAVERS

Within 10 miles radius of VP (includes those in home farming)	67%
In Kakamega or Kisumu	9%
Outside Kakamega and Kisumu Districts	24%
	<hr/>
	100% (74)

As table 6 shows the majority of leavers from Maseno have remained in their rural locality. Given the proximity of Kisumu and Kakamega it is perhaps surprising that a larger proportion are not working in these towns although this very proximity creates opportunities in the Maseno locality. 24% of leavers are located outside Kisumu and Kakamega Districts, most of these being in Nakuru and Nairobi, with two individuals in Mombasa and two in Uganda. It seems reasonable to conclude on the basis of the foregoing

evidence that Maseno VP is serving its local community in line with the best intentions of the VP movement. Beyond this there is some evidence to suggest that the effect of the VP experience is to incline trainees towards seeking employment within their local area rather than outside it. This is suggested by comparing where trainees looked for work prior to joining the VP and where they looked after leaving it. Of those who did not immediately join the VP after leaving Standard VII 52% looked for work beyond Kisumu and Kakamega before coming to the VP whereas only 33% of leavers did so after the VP course. The evidence here, admittedly associational, points to the continuing need for emphasis at that VP to achieve recognition by trainees that their training is intended for local application.

Recruitment: Meeting needs

An additional important criterion for assessing VPs is whether their clients are the appropriate group in terms of need. The intended target group for VPs are Standard VII leavers for whom no further formal schooling is possible. Maseno is undoubtedly serving this group as every leaver contacted had reached Standard VII while only one had had further formal schooling. It is less easy to draw precise conclusions about the extent to which the VP benefits those whose economic need is greatest. Opinion on this issue is governed by views on the appropriate level of fees which a VP should charge. It can be argued that any imposition of fees inevitably has a selective and exclusive consequence. At the same time it seems that the complete absence of fees can lead to an unproductive sense of dependency among individual trainees and probably diminishes the collective sense of community involvement in the VP. Our data bearing on this question are interesting but not conclusive. Of the rather high 44% percentage of the sample who did not complete their course at Maseno 66% claimed lack of fees as the reason for their premature departure. The first figure reflects a disconcertingly high proportion of drop outs. There is an admirable attempt within the VP Programme to get away from the conventional idea that training is measured by chronological time periods rather than demonstrated expertise, and to diffuse the view that the optimum length of a given course depends on the type of skill to be mastered. Nevertheless it seems likely that for the types of training provided at Maseno, completion of the course should be regarded as a minimum condition for the achievement of necessary competence. The evidence is clear on this score. Those who complete their course are more likely to obtain and keep wage earning employment than those who do not. All those who completed their course have been able to secure a money earning opportunity at some point since leaving Maseno whereas only half of those who did not complete have been able to do so. Whereas 70% of completers were in a money earning situation at the time of the survey only 37% of non-completers were.

		Completed course	Did not complete course
Money Earning Situation:	Yes	70%	37%
	No	30%	63%
		100% (42)	100% (32)

This brings us back to the dilemmas regarding fees and selection. If as seems likely those who do not complete their course make little contribution either to themselves or to their community care should be taken to minimize the number of those who do not complete their course. This could be done by a graduated fee structure in which fees are progressively reduced as an individual's course proceeds or alternatively by more careful selection. The decision on the level of fees needs to strike an appropriate balance between maximum equity in the provision of opportunity and maximum efficiency in the use of training resources. At Maseno a drop out rate of 44% suggests perhaps that there is room for improvement in the application of these criteria.

Community Education³

All those concerned with VPs emphasize the critical importance of the symbiotic relationship between the VP and its surrounding community. It is pertinent to ask whether Maseno VP is regarded as a significant and integral part of its community. One admittedly inadequate indicator of this is whether Standard VII leavers actually aspire to join the VP on leaving school or whether they tend to regard it as a place of last resort. Our evidence lends some support to the later interpretation. 63% of leavers waited more than nine months after leaving primary school before joining the VP. As most of this group spent this time in a search for work outside the district it does seem that the VP has not up to now become extensively regarded as a natural sequel to primary school. In one sense a sizeable time lag is disconcerting for the organizers of VPs but in another sense it may be a source of strength. The positive aspect is that clients who have already experienced the frustration of seeking wage employment in the modern sector, armed with nothing but a primary leaving certificate, are perhaps likely to see the virtues of practical local training and to seek it with commitment.

While it can be argued that Maseno VP has yet to become a fully integrated widely renowned component of the local community the process of community education is undoubtedly under way. The need for community education regarding the purposes and principles of the VP Programme is crucial and probably the most influential source of this education is the outlook and achievements of trainees themselves. Whether trainees view their experience as a positive or negative one is important for the diffusion of support for the programme. There is little doubt that by and large Maseno leavers look back on their VP experience positively. 75% report that they gained "a lot" rather than "little" from their training at the VP, and in most cases went on to say that without it they would have been unable to perform productive tasks or earn any money. This positive feeling was confirmed in responses to a question asking them why they went to a VP rather than a Harambee Secondary School. 71% in their responses mentioned factors positively favouring the VP, such as a desire to obtain practical training, while the remainder suggested negatively that their only reason for attending the VP was insufficient fees for the Harambee secondary alternative.

One other prominent attitude of VP leavers is worthy of comment. For comparison purposes with other work being done at IDS leavers were asked about the most desirable size of family in Kenya and also how many children they themselves wanted. The mean suggested family size of 4.5 for Kenya and 4.2 for themselves fall below the national mean. More significantly the vast majority of responses included the clearly stated justification that a smaller size of family was necessary because of pressures on the land and the need to provide a minimum living standard for one's children.

Conclusions

In the preceding pages an attempt has been made to evaluate Maseno VP by considering the achievements and views of its leavers in relation to some of the basic objectives of the VP movement.

1. In terms of most of these objectives Maseno is a relatively successful programme:

A majority of its leavers are at present occupied in productive and remunerative work of some sort.

Most leavers are satisfied with the type of training which they have received and feel it has enabled them to do useful work.

Maseno recruits its trainees from the surrounding community and they tend to remain within that community on completion of their training.

2. It is my conclusion that part of Maseno's achievement can be related to the extent to which the VP has been able to make itself a recognized part of the surrounding community although this process has by no means gone as far as it could do.

The demonstrated utility to many leavers of personal contacts in finding employment draws attention to the crucial importance of involving the community in the VPs activities to the maximum extent that is possible. The prerequisite for this involvement is the education of the community in the purposes of the programme and particularly in the mutual benefits which can be gained from a vigorous VP. Because training does not provide jobs work has to be sought and opportunities created. The most promising sources of such opportunities are members of the surrounding community. In the process of drawing these members into a network of involvement with VP leavers, the VP itself--i.e. trainees, instructors, management committee and leavers--has a vital role to play in furthering community contacts.

3. The most disconcerting aspect of the Maseno programme is the large number of trainees who did not complete their course. In some cases trainees left for further training or because an immediate work opportunity opened up. The subsequent occupational history of such leavers suggests that they sacrificed long term benefits for short term gain. Most drop outs claim to have left because they could not afford the required fees. Incomplete training is a waste of scarce resources. Two ways for minimizing such waste seem possible:

a) The first concerns the manipulation of fees. One possibility is a graduated fee structure with a high initial sum followed by a progressively reduced subsequent payments. A strategy with a similar effect of discouraging recruits who will be unable to continue to pay is the practice of changing caution money. As well as their impact on recruitment such methods have the advantage of making available to the VP a small capital fund which can be put to use.

b) Although fees are often cited as the reason for leaving the VP it seems that lack of aptitude and motivation are at least as important. If this is so the introduction of some kind of aptitude test may be useful. For the long term viability of VPs direct measures of the aptitude and inclination of recruits are likely to be more effective than the indirect indicators of willingness to pay the required fees.

4. It is clear from the evidence of Maseno that the VP is not meeting the requirements of females. A significantly lower proportion of females than males from Maseno have been able to obtain training which could be translated into monetary rewards. This raises questions concerning the appropriateness of the training and the extent of the opportunities for girls and whether perhaps polytechnic training for females should be conceived as an independent enterprise. In an age of women's liberation, in East Africa as elsewhere, there clearly remains an important task to be done in identifying the unique opportunities towards which the training of females can be geared.

5. The most important conclusions of this small study are suggestions concerning how VPs can be assisted to evaluate their own performance. In the first place it is essential that VPs do engage in a constant process of self evaluation in order to determine the extent to which objectives are being met and how the programme can be modified to better achieve those objectives. The problem of course is that VPs have no easy single criterion—such as for example performance in EACE for secondary school students. A variety of criteria accordingly have to be used in order to gauge the performance of a VP, but the most important ones relate to what happens to leavers. The need is for the VP to build a regular—perhaps annual—self evaluation procedure into its operating structure. With the assistance perhaps of current trainees the objective would be to answer such questions as: What are leavers doing?, Has their training assisted them to do this? How could training be improved to equip future leavers to perform better and to create new opportunities? It is not possible even if desirable to keep in touch with all leavers but it is possible to keep in contact with many and to use their experience as a guide.

6. Further research

- a) There are two major ways by which VP training can be related to occupational opportunities. One is to use the experience of past leavers for deciding what types of training should be provided in the future. This is the rationale for this and any tracer study. The second is to attempt direct assessment of present and future opportunities by detailed market, and money use surveys. The time seems ripe for this later type of study, tied to a specific VP area, which could make a significant contribution to the role of VP training in expanding opportunities in rural areas.
- b) The demonstrated importance of community education and of an individual's kinship network in the search for employment suggests the importance for VP planning of studies, such as that of Joyce Mook, which attempts to chart the detailed internal dynamics of a circumscribed community. It is difficult to plan training programmes intended for community implementation without taking into account in a systematic way the subtleties of the social context which will impinge upon it.
- c) On a broader scale assessment of the specific village polytechnic programme requires 'output' comparison of the products of village polytechnics with those of other types of training programme and with primary school leavers who have had no institutional training at all.
- d) Such a large scale study, while important, is probably premature at this early stage of VP development. The village polytechnic programme remains an act of faith. The most immediately useful type of research is internal evaluation comparing different projects within the movement in terms of what seems to 'work' or not 'work' in specified conditions.

FOOTNOTES

1. This and related work has benefitted from the contributions of Jairo Alela, Robin Ford, Martin Godfrey, Tony Masalo and Edward Wanjale.
2. See L. Brownstein, Education and Rural Development: A Study of Primary School Graduates in Kenya, (New York: Praeger, 1972) and J. Mook, 'Pragmatism and the Primary School: the Case of a Non Rural Village', (University of Nairobi Institute for Development Studies, Discussion Paper No. 135, 1972)
3. For related ideas on this topic see D. Court, 'Dilemmas of Development: the Village Polytechnic as a Shadow System of Education in Kenya', (University of Nairobi, Institute for Development Studies Discussion Paper No. 156 1972)