
AGRICULTURE POLICIES IN AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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SUMMARY

The global narrative on access to food, improved agricultural productivity and how to feed the future has captured the attention of many developed and developing economies that are now grappling with the daunting realities of a stressed and precarious food security system. The magnitude of this reality has conjured an emotive script that places a global challenge right at the doorstep of every country on how financial and political resources should be used to provide adequate and nutritious food for future generations. But this concern is neither new nor surprising since there has been a slow progressive movement towards addressing global food insecurity in recent years, especially against the backdrop of mounting natural, political and socio-economic pressures such as political conflict over natural resources, water stresses, global economic downturn and concerns on the ability of developing countries to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

For Africa, agriculture occupies a large part of daily activity and accounts for a significant share of daily expenditure in the purchase of basic foodstuffs. The majority of rural dwellers depend on increasing agricultural productivity to lift them out of rural poverty. Given such a context, the active role that African governments play in allocating resources and developing policy imperatives for the sector may be useful and necessary to build a vibrant and flourishing sector. In the past decade or so, the combined processes of unequal development, emergence of agriculture enclaves, and the role of the state has created a mixed bag on how agriculture development has taken shape on the continent. The aim of this opinion piece is to paint with a broad stroke a picture of how the African state during a course of time has managed to use available political processes and opportune development periods to craft an agriculture development direction that would be largely deemed as developmental. The piece will also highlight how, over time, the characteristics of policy choices, political systems, and heterogeneity of actors involved in agriculture development in Africa help to account for cross-country divergences in the way agricultural policies and development have recently unfolded in the sector.

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History of Agriculture Policies in Africa

While in the 1970s and 1980s there was a move by African states to be biased against direct agricultural support mainly due to economic adjustment and market reform. A key feature of African agricultural policies at that time was that the state was intimately involved in agricultural sector policymaking and strong interventions were the undercurrent of African economic affairs. Most African states were emerging from colonisation and their newly found independence was boosted by a model of development which produced large, powerful and hierarchical bureaucracies which would ideally work for the benefit of ordinary citizens. The bureaucracies would perform and handle multiple government functions and in agriculture this would mean getting involved in direct agricultural production, marketing of produce, and public investment and regulation of agricultural commodities.¹ The underlying assumption was that independence and a bloated bureaucracy would be able to deliver economic development and modern societies to Africans and change in state leadership would ideally result in a change in state ideology.

But, the pervasive economic ideology that created economic and class enclaves in many African societies was soon co-opted into African economics during the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism. The incumbent African political leadership was conditioned to believe that the economic ideology of monopoly and its elaborate institutions were important ingredients for development. The result was the new leadership regime was ready to make critical concessions to colonialists and the settlers in order to accommodate and save their economy and way of doing business. Since most of the African leaders had grown up in farmlands and had been accustomed to the farming life that they were about to inherit such an arrangement would seem easy and logical. Concomitantly, if these settler farms represented the new way of life for many Africans then transferring the farming system intact to new African owners would be deemed as rational interest since agriculture was the linchpin of most African economies. The state apparatus of monopoly that applied during colonialism; the marketing and regulatory boards that underpinned the profitability of farming also lent itself to a comparatively easy process of land transfer.²

Soon after the farm transfers the new African farm owners began to discover the advantages of maintaining the general economic and social fabric of state monopoly and apparatus including bureaucracies which provided them with protected opportunities in the sector. Throwing the economy wide open to competition would, from their perspective, not be sound business practice.³ The state was now seen as an instrument of capital, functioning to help with the prescription of heavy public investment programmes in the sector to boost food production.⁴ However, with time, the settler way of farming that had created a new capitalist African bourgeoisie class was slowly being replaced by various forms of peasant farming due to growing programmes of public land redistribution and expropriation. The bourgeoisie class who had access to capital and political power converged towards urban centres and leveraged their clout to influence government policies in favour of the urban working masses. That meant that economic policies and government expenditures targeted towards agriculture were now skewed towards export crops and subsidised inputs, ultimately leading to the decline in agricultural production and stagnation in the rural peasant farming economy.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was a move by African states to be biased against direct agricultural support mainly due to economic adjustment and market reform process. There is now a movement back towards the agricultural rural economy from multiple actors including the state in an attempt to actively gain and create opportunities for private capital and economic rents.

Over time, as economies around the world opened their markets for global trade and commerce, African economies seeking to gain from this environment focused on farming as the primary means of trade. Since agriculture forms the largest share of economic activity in many African countries, one would assume that there was more to be gained politically and economically by adopting policies that favour the fortunes of farmers. To some extent that has occurred in countries which exhibit a dualistic rural economy with a combination of agriculture and mining activities. South Africa would be a typical example of such a country where large and smallholder farmers coexist, sharing economic and technical resources. But in countries where agriculture is the main economic activity there is a high proclivity of government intervention in both policy and expenditure since large farming estates tend to usurp labour and economic resources from smaller farms which, in most cases, disadvantages rural and smallholder farmer development. Riots in Madagascar in 2009 due to controversy linked with government involvement in the leasing of agricultural land to South Koreans attest to this.

In both the South Africa and the Madagascar instances, while the means to an end may be different, the rationale and aim of the state would be to leverage available policies to cater for issues of national survival, such as politics of redistribution and revenue extraction which impinge on variations of agriculture policymaking. As many African governments struggle with deficit budgets, high inflation rates and balance of trade issues, there is a high likelihood of more state intervention in agriculture policymaking as governments seek to raise their revenue imperative by either attracting foreign direct investment or by implementing trade incentives for tradable agricultural goods.

An impetus for such a outcome is the historical structural adjustment transformation pattern in the African economies that resulted in little or stunted growth. The sweeping reform process initiated by the World Bank in the 1980s on liberalisation and privatisation policies that enforced the withdrawal of the state from agricultural processes and championed the Structural Adjustment Programmes did not materialise into stated objectives. Sadly, the actual outcome was a missed opportunity for agriculture to contribute to the African development agenda. The agricultural labour force was lost to rural-urban migration, rural incomes became stagnant, and urban poverty increased during the structural adjustment periods.⁵ Given the recalcitrant nature of the adjustment programmes, African countries needed to gain lost development ground by using agriculture as a comparative advantage means. Considering that African countries had not used their agricultural edge optimally for development in the last 25 years, conditions for seeking increased public investment and transforming the sector would prove to be strenuous in a flagging public expenditure environment and complex policy conditions.

In the past few years, African agricultural policymaking has been compounded by a number of complex problems that include climate change, declining water and energy factors, governance and decentralisation challenges and rising input prices, which affect all the fundamentals for agricultural development. The African development flavour is pegged on the hope that despite all the complex food and environmental challenges there are unique opportunities. Africa is now viewed as well positioned to garner new investments. This will likely be implemented though a variety of heterogeneous actors that have vested interests in the way farming life and agriculture development occur on the continent.

Reduced Public Expenditure Support

The changing global financing climate also does not offer any signs of relief for a withered African agriculture sector. The overall context of global development support for agriculture has declined in recent years. Despite the noted importance of agriculture as a linchpin for most economies and its vital role in job creation and poverty reduction, development aid to the sector has suffered gross cutbacks. The share of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) shrunk from 17 percent in 1982 to 3.2 percent in 2002⁶ and during the same period overall African public expenditure to critical agricultural programmes such as research and education, service support including extension services, agricultural inputs and infrastructure, were slashed. Most of public agricultural research spending in Sub-Saharan Africa occurred in the 1960s when real spending increased by an annual average of 6.8 percent. Real public agriculture expenditure seems to have declined from 2.0 percent in the 1970s to 0.8 percent in the 2000s.⁷ However, since 2004 the levels of ODA to agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa have been slowly on the rise.

Given the urgency to transform African agriculture the sluggish performance of the sector over the past few decades is also disconcerting. Growth rates in this sector across Sub-Saharan Africa have only increased from about 2.4 percent a year between 1980 and 1989, to 2.7 percent between 1990 and 1999, and 3.3 percent a year since 2000.⁸ Only a handful of countries – Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, and The Gambia – have surpassed the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) threshold of 6 percent agricultural growth in recent years.⁹

In an effort to address a declining expenditure and production scenario in Africa, African Heads of State adopted the Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security in 2003, committing their countries to allocate at least 10% of national budgetary resources to the agricultural sector. This level of investment in agriculture was deemed necessary to support an annual growth rate of 6% set by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) through its CAADP programme on food security and poverty reduction. However, by 2008, only 19 percent of African countries had reached this target. Many countries hardly reached 4 percent of the total national budget and depended on ODA to fund agriculture. In aggregate, African public spending on agriculture accounted for between 5 and 7 percent of the total national budget from 1980 to 2005.¹⁰ The share ranges considerably from country to country. Only a few African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Mali, have managed to surpass the 10 percent threshold of budgetary spending on agriculture in recent years.¹¹ One perspective on how Africa's resource constraints in the agricultural sector can be remedied is by seeking solutions that are able to generate, attract, secure and sustain investments.¹² One of these solutions put forward is the process of land privatisation and marketisation.

African Land: Old and New Dynamics

The lingering sentiments of liberation struggles and political debates on land redistribution have created a unifying bond between many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa which share a common history of colonialism and land dispossession. The euphoria associated with liberation quickly fizzled out and was replaced with realities on how to cater for poor, landless and independent African citizens. The political climate at the time dictated that social and political entitlements for the African citizen had to emanate directly from the newly independent state as it detaches from a class-based and distorted land tenure and governance system. The assumption was that the state would be able to deliver land policies that would be egalitarian in nature and redistribute land resources with a view to reducing inequalities in land ownership that was characteristic of the white highlands of Kenya and Malawi. What was not expected though was the degree of difficulty in reversing mentalities and transaction costs associated with such unconventional land policies. Looking at available options, African states had a political incentive to retain such policies, with new elitist and powerful political classes now owning large parcels of land and also there was no guarantee of political rewards resulting from new land policies. The continuity of the monopolistic land tenure system of controlling access to land and the means of production by the state and a few political elites further cemented the hierarchy of social interactions and systems of authority.¹³ This does not sit well with aspects of newly achieved African democratic values and political responsiveness in land and agrarian reform.

Owning land in Africa means owning wealth. The more you have the better your chances of economic and political entitlement.

In recent times, the increased focus on the land question reflects the failure of development, principally the absorption of growing populations into an industrialising model and diversified economy.¹⁴ The preponderance of land governance issues such as forest encroachment, illegal urban land grabs and encroachment of slums usually reflects the tension between social development and market-based approaches and uneven control of land ownership. The modern system of private land rights now typically includes the ownership and long term leasehold of land mainly purchased through mortgages and formalised registration systems. The challenge for the African state however has been to connect the neo-liberal land reform narrative with issues of development. History is replete with instances of informal development practices in African societies such as squatting on private or state owned land for housing and livelihood activities. Such activities are considered to be illegal development and are seen as undermining central development plans. However, development in this regard would mean taking into consideration economic activities that are carried out on land acquired through formalised and legalised tenureship structures. But growing pressures over control of farming lands and the resurgence of popular demands over land reforms in countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively underscore the internal and external dimension of the political economy of African land.

In Kenya as an example, the issue of the Mau forest evictions is a thorn in the state's flesh due to the ethnic component and propensity for armed violence. As the government is still reeling from the post-election violence of 2007, the prospect of evicting residents who illegally settled in the Mau forest is complicated. The underlying bone of contention is environmental degradation and illegal public land occupation. The more than 25 000 settlers, who are mainly pastoralists and smallholder farmers, have degraded and destroyed the environment to make way for their settlement and

farming activities.¹⁵ There is now fear that the Maasai and Kipsigis ethnic groups, both of whom have stakes in the Mau forest complex, might clash violently. In South Africa, on the other hand, the situation is slight skewed towards the muscle of the private mining sector. With burgeoning global and domestic energy demands, South African mining companies are trying to cash in on the ever growing demand for coal power and natural gas. This has negatively affected agricultural operations in the Free State, Karoo and Mpumalanga whereby famers have complained that farms are being polluted by heavy salts and metal from unsealed water pollution.¹⁶ Under these conditions of land scarcity especially for emerging black famers and a new government committed to prioritising rural development through induced land sector policies such as Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme, there will be a general need to recognise that a vibrant agriculture and natural resources sector underpinned by balanced access to land resources is critical in establishing an agrarian economy and to improving rural living standards.

The new wave of narratives on African land policies and development now centres on the new battlefield for farming in Africa. It involves mainly European and Middle Eastern countries buying large tracts of land in many parts of the developing world including Africa. Studies by International Institute for Environment and Development and International Fund for Agricultural Development¹⁷ have documented the emerging picture on large scale land acquisitions especially in Africa. What is emerging is that many land deals have occurred in Africa involving millions of hectares purchased by foreign buyers that can be attributed to a series of push and pull factors. A key driver of push factors is the global food supply problem and uncertainties surrounding constraints in increasing arable land for agricultural production, the global expansion and need for bio-fuel production and increasing urbanisation that have pushed up the demand for food and feed prices. Qatar for example has recently purchased 100 000 hectares of land in Sudan for growing wheat and rice to ensure a steady supply of food for the nation's ever growing population, while South Korea announced a USD6 billion deal in November 2008 to lease roughly half the arable land in Madagascar for a period of 99 years.¹⁸

Some pull factors that have been identified are the nature of the land deals. While in the past the nature of the deals were shrouded in secrecy on who and what was offered, it has now come to light that the deals most often involve government-to-government sanctioned transactions often triggered by African countries offering investment opportunities in the form of available land. This exemplifies the active role of the state as an agent of development in Africa. Most land in Africa is owned by the state and in other cases all untitled land is also owned by the state which ultimately means that controlling such vast areas of land can be used as a yard stick by states to dictate and measure new patterns of land tenure policies and opportunities for land investment. Another complicating factor is the entry of wealthy investors and hedge funds that are seeking to make significant profits from agricultural land deals in many parts of the world including Africa. Part of their structured deals has been buying undervalued available land and hedging future profits from the appreciating land value during periods of agricultural food shortage and commodity boom and partly by investing in farming the land and increasing productivity.

While international codes of conduct and guidelines have been set in terms of land investments, there has been no documented evidence on how applicable these are to the

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local population who have not participated in nor benefited from the land allocation process. This recent rush for a free market economy in property as a way of securing rights has created a new set of land tenure systems and agrarian reform strategies that economically rewards private holders of title and discredits any traditional means of development. Central to the model of foreign land acquisition and conflict over land that is currently taking place in Africa are questions of who is a citizen, farmer and what rights do they have?¹⁹ Decisions made on such issues hinge on political processes in agriculture policymaking since land acquisition, whether by foreign or local buyers, may ultimately still result in displacement of citizens as demands focuses on higher value lands and proximity to infrastructure and markets.

Conclusion

The nascent African state has always been aware of the general need to hold on to agriculture as part of a larger scheme of nation building and controlling the mode of production as a source of national revenue for the state. While the original logic for transforming African agriculture had its credible gains the dilemma now was that the state had to contend with emerging competing domestic and global interests. Global neo-liberal policies and popular forms of development expressed by external and development aid agencies soon made African agriculture a development quagmire; where policies prescribed mismatched what the realities and priorities on the ground dictated.

The unfolding development trend has been to comply with global narratives and patterns of agriculture policymaking on issues such as bio-fuels and foreign land ownership since these have foreign policy backing and bearings on economic and geo-political relations. The decision on how African states will be able to amenably navigate these difficult policymaking scenarios may ultimately mean integrating comprehensive mechanisms for local perspectives and priorities to be mainstreamed into policymaking discussions that affect future decisions on agricultural research, foreign investment and patterns for public expenditure in the sector. The need for moral, social and economic considerations towards agriculture development will be needed as rural economies contend with poverty reduction strategies. But the unequal land tenure system and declining public expenditure climate for farmers especially small-holder farmers may trigger the exclusion of various social categories of the population in policymaking processes and may eventually hinder broad-based development. This outcome has and will remain a critical feature in future development aid discourses and state intervention narratives.

While the dominant paradigm of development policymaking and implementation will still fall under the purview of the state, the checkered past of varied gains and discreditable failures cannot be forgotten. The state will now need to develop and sustain policies, regulations and legal systems that encourage private actors and stakeholders to be involved and invest in development activities. However, how these development activities unfold is an issue of governance since the questions of where, whom and by how much needs to be addressed. In the past, emphasis of accountability were vertical as states had to account to institutions such as aid agencies who financed and advised on issues of macroeconomic stability and aid efficiency. Nowadays, the plethora of those that the state has to be accountable to has expanded. Vertical and

horizontal accountability now makes room for multi-level governance and for states to be accountable to civil societies, religious bodies and private actors who demand participation and empowerment on development issues as well as international bodies and regimes who demand rule-bound procedures and norms of implementation.

Parallel to the changing governance and development position is the understanding of societal relationships and cultural set up that complicates the wider relationship of vulnerability and livelihood strategies. It is important to recognise that women who form the majority of the rural smallholder farmer population are not in a position to tap into credit and inputs for productive agriculture. This makes a case for understanding rural dynamics and social mobilisation techniques for development assistance in rural communities. The current system of agriculture production and policymaking is still generalised and does not cater for the bifurcated nature of the sector. Large and smallholder farmers have distinct priorities and varied needs. Their ability to access credit, services, infrastructure and land is skewed to favour large-scale farmers. Within this environment, without carefully thinking about the dichotomous nature of agriculture production, the risk of sinking into an abyss of class, ethnic and ideological policy stereotypes will persist without galvanising progress made towards development.

Policies and development assistance that aim to promote rural development have also to acknowledge that rural poverty cannot be resolved by enhancement of agriculture and natural resource governance alone. The widening of the economic base in poor countries is a necessary requirement for livelihoods and productivity growth to improve i.e. become stable and sustainable over time. The pursuance of a long term equitable and sustainable livelihood solution is contingent upon the pursuit of natural resource sustainability in terms of relevant education and training, emphasis on integration of national and regional economies and conducive policy environment that supports rural and national development in a humane manner.

The process will include a bold move towards building a broad consensus among actors on issues such as comparative advantages and delegation of function in terms of co-production of activities that relate to agriculture and rural development. For such interventions to be successful, women and the youth cannot be excluded. Increasing their capacity in local governance structures and production techniques may facilitate their growth strategy beyond the farm gate and into institutions of development.

With the agricultural development agenda on many external agencies' radar, there is an opportunity for Africa to capture the interest and resources for the benefit of agricultural growth and poverty reduction in Africa, driven by local priorities and ambitions for development rather than externally imposed models and solutions. With geo-political positions changing around the world, the role of Africa and agriculture has become clear and central in global politics. The entry of new actors, approaches and ideas about how to change the face of African agriculture is welcomed but this has to be aligned with democratic reforms and to create favourable investment conditions and gains that will be passed to food producers and consumers alike. Solutions have to be bottom up; endogenously created on existing farming styles and models of production. This way legitimacy of intervention is established and mobilisation of resources and personnel is coalesced. Deriving lessons and experiences from particular positive outcomes on investment and intervention practices from the state will help build upon best practices and build common purpose on the best way forward. A major

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concern however is if the current global focus on African agricultural development is able to provide an opportune period of broad-based socio-economic gains for rural economies or would, in its current form, the top-down land acquisitions and reform processes add trepidation to Africa's development paradigm?

Endnotes

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- ² See Colin Leys (1975), *Underdevelopment in Kenya: the political economy of neo-colonialism, 1964-1971* (London: Heinemann Educational)
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ See Aaron de Grassi (2005), *Political Studies of Agricultural Policy Processes in Africa, 1975-2005: Review, Critique and Recommendations*.
- ⁵ See Alain de Janvry and Elisabeth Saoulet (2008), *Agriculture For Development In Africa: Business As Usual Or New Departures?* University of California at Berkeley
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- ⁷ See Nienke Beintema and Gert-Jan Stads (2004), *Investing In Sub-Saharan African Agricultural Research: Recent Trends*. IFPRI.
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- ¹³ See Sam Moyo (2007), "Land in the Political Economy of African Development: Alternative Strategies for Reform", *Africa Development*, Vol. XXXII, No. 4.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ See <http://nairobiChronicle.wordpress.com/2009/07/30/mau-forest-politics-...2> accessed 11 April 2011.
- ¹⁶ See <http://www.timeslive.co.za/news/article275637.ece>. <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-04-15-farmers-say-no-fracking-way-to-shell> 15 accessed 11 April 2011
- ¹⁷ See *Land Deals In Africa: What's In the Contracts?* (2011) by International Institute for Environment and development and Land Grab or Development Opportunity? *Agricultural Investment And International Land Deals In Africa* (2009) by Food and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations (FAO), The International Fund For Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the International Institute For Environment And Development (IIED).
- ¹⁸ See <http://farmlandgrab.org/15210> and http://money.cnn.com/2009/06/08/retirement/betting_the_farm.fortune/index.htm accessed 13 April 2011.
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