

# Food security, agricultural policies and economic growth



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# What is the matter with African agriculture?

Veterans' visions  
between past and  
future

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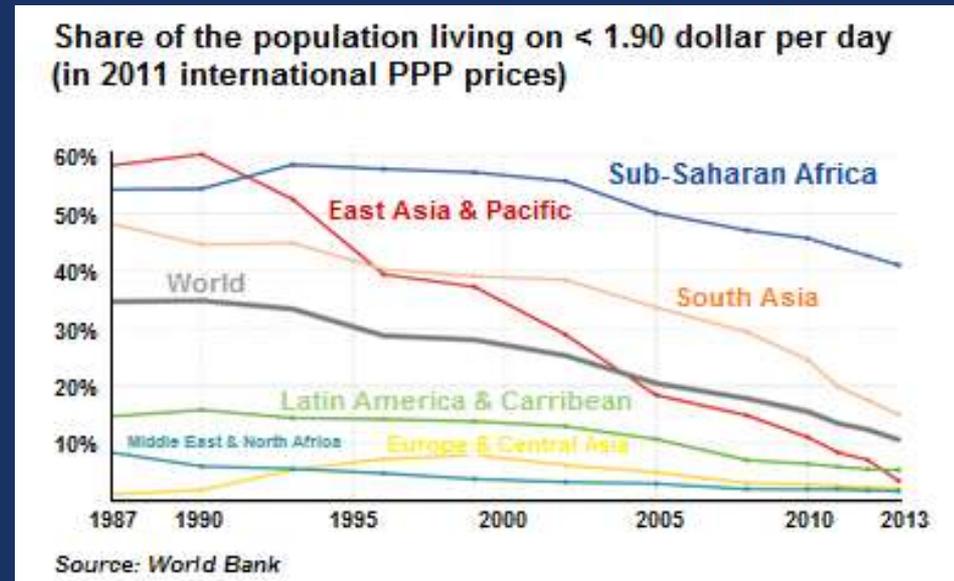
## *Mutsaers & Kleene (2012)*

Forty development veterans looking back at their attempts to get African agriculture moving:

- *Little trust in new optimism about 'Africa rising'*
- *Infrastructure is bad, farmers lack work ethic, politicians are selfish, development aid is ineffective*
- *Much of farming continues being trapped in a unsustainability spiral of poverty and resource depletion*
- *The young flee the land but lack of industrial growth makes urbanization unsustainable*

# Contrast with Asia

- Half a century ago, Asia rather than Africa was trapped in an unsustainability spiral
- Yet Asia has since passed through a Green Revolution and industrialization, while Africa has fallen into the spiral



***Whence this difference?*** As long we cannot explain questions like this, new development concepts risk ending the same way as earlier development fads

Why has Africa stayed behind?

## *Unsatisfactory answers*

- Poor soils / unfavourable climates
- Roots & tubers
- Lack of work ethic / entrepreneurship
- Corruption
- Slave trade / colonialism / neocolonial exploitation

Djurfeldt et al. (2005), Van Donge et al. (2012): *it has something to do with the state and farm policies*

## Why the fates of regions differ

# *Tentative explanation*

- 19th century Fossil Biomass Revolution allowed rise in living standards, but realizing this possibility depended on state support for smallholder modernization

*Modern growth required agricultural development as a booster*

*Fossil Biomass Revolution also created new obstacles to agricultural investment*

*Boom/bust dynamic, overproduction, withdrawal of substantial investors*

*All countries that have successfully developed their agriculture have supported self-employed farmers!*

# Why the fates of regions differ

## *Tentative explanation*

- 19th century Fossil Biomass Revolution allowed rise in living standards, but realizing this possibility depended on state support for smallholder modernization
- Whether societies introduced such support depended on (1) international power relations, (2) the political tide in strong countries, and (3) their own social fabric
  - *Ad 1: Strong countries ↔ weak societies*
    - Strong countries could make their own policy choices
    - Room for manoeuvre of weaker societies is constrained by strong countries
  - *Ad 2: Social imperialism (1870s-1930s) → welfare statism (1930s-80s) → neoliberalism (1980s-now)*
    - Under social imperialism, strong countries left weak societies little policy room
    - Under welfare statism, they slackened the reins
    - Under neoliberalism, they tightened them again
  - *Ad 3: History has created different kinds of societies*
    - ‘Farmer societies’: graded class structures, states with some autonomy from economic elite
    - ‘Landlord societies’: polarized class structures, oligarchic states
    - ‘Horticultural societies’: kin-structured, patrimonial states ‘owned’ by leaders of dominant clan

Generated pressures for supportive farm policies

Stimulated privileging large farms

Stimulated ethnic-clientelistic competition for spoils of office

# Why the fates of regions differ

## *Tentative explanation*

*Green Revolution was based on supportive domestic farm policies, not just fertilizer and high-yielding varieties*

Asia had many weak, densely populated farmer societies

- In the social imperialist period, lack of support for smallholder modernization pushed these societies into an unsustainability spiral
- In the welfare state period, new independent governments introduced supportive farm policies → Green Revolution → industrial growth
- In the neoliberal period, these countries had grown strong enough to withstand external pressure

Africa had many weak, land-abundant horticultural societies

Not in crowded 'native reserves' → 1930s erosion alarm

- Under social imperialism, land abundance still provided a safety valve
- However, new independent governments spoiled the opportunity that the welfare state period provided
- Ensuing debt crisis made them defenceless against strong country pressure in the neoliberal period → population growth pushed these societies in an unsustainability spiral

## Why the fates of regions differ

# *Tentative explanation*

*Hard neoliberalism (austerity, privatization, trade liberalization) prevented weak countries from redressing the problems that had started because they had failed to use the opportunities of the welfare state decades*

**N.B.:** neoliberalism did not end the reality of market failure in agriculture! (Farm policy 'liberalization' in strong countries really had a (green-)mercantlist nature)

*Soft neoliberalism (social safety nets, participation, 'empowerment', fair trade marketing etc.) could not remedy this*

## Africa had many weak, land-abundant horticultural societies

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# Africa rising??

- Only enabled by temporary improvement in international commodity prices after the mid-2000s
  - *Decades with higher commodity prices have always caused economic growth to revive in Sub-Saharan Africa*
  - *The agricultural price rises led to some flickering signs of economic dynamism, but increased oil revenues ended up in the pockets of the ruling elite*
- Now that commodity prices have come down again, the 'African miracle' has evaporated

# Similar stories can be told about other regions

## E.g. Latin America

- Mainly landlord societies
- 1930s-70s attempts at 'inward-looking development' failed because neglect of smallholders led to rural poverty and rampant growth of a slum economy
- Ensuing debt crisis gave leverage to strong country donors who forced them to dismantle their social-developmental policies → lost quarter century
- Post-2000 'pink tide' depended on global commodity price rise and is ebbing now that commodity prices have fallen

# Why this is not just a problem for poor countries

- Unsustainability spirals block modern economic development keeping population growth unsustainably high
  - *The unsustainability spiral in which Asia fell under social imperialism has added a few billions extra to world population*
  - *Green Revolution and industrialization have dismantled this population bomb, but a new bomb is ticking in Africa...*
- Low-hanging fruit of the Fossil Biomass Revolution has been picked
  - *Exploitation of fossil fuels runs into constraints*
  - *Traditional sources of global agricultural growth are becoming depleted*
  - *Massive problem of soil degradation*
  - *Competing claims on land are increasing*

UN Population Division: population of Africa may increase from 1.2 to 4.4 billion in 2100

*Without far-sighted policies, the troubles of the poor may be aggravated by a new global scarcity crisis, with effects that will hit rich countries as well*

# What should be done?

Stabilize international agricultural and energy markets  
*(through buffer stocks, trade quotas and flexible biofuel mandates)*

Allow poor countries to protect their farmers against cheap imports  
*(revoke the Economic Partnership Agreements of the EU)*

Co-finance public investment in hard and soft rural infrastructure in poor countries  
*(in some respects, the Chinese do better than we)*

Introduce land reform in landlord societies and help beneficiaries to modernize their production

Limit the claim on land for animal foods and non-farm purposes

Work on innovations that can really boost living biomass production  
*(stop bickering about gentech vs agroecology)*

Work on a technological revolution that makes our economies less carbon-dependent  
*(stop subsidizing research for a 'new bioeconomy')*

***But how to build the political will?***

# Thanks!

*For elaboration see:*

