African States and Agriculture: Issues for Research

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State and Agriculture in Africa

Among scholars and policy-makers alike, there is much agreement that the agricultural crisis is the major structural and policy problem facing Africa today. Nearly all other critical contemporary problems and policy issues — such as health, disease, refugees, the problem of feeding cities, the failure of communal villages, the increasing national debt, and the balance of payments deficits — are causally linked to the food crisis. Macro level data on production, food imports, and nutrition in Africa all point toward a significant post-war deterioration in many regions and sectors of the rural economy, particularly in staple food production [World Bank 1981]. Far less clear, however, are the underlying processes which account for this situation. Whereas most African food systems proved generally resilient throughout the colonial period, in spite of the expansion of export crops, expropriation of land, and labour migration, the localised crises caused by drought and refugee concentrations now seem to emanate from fundamentally weakened or defensive rural production and distribution systems. The manner in which the erosion of agrarian self-sufficiency has occurred, however — the precipitating conditions and the way they interact — is unclear. It therefore presents a challenge both to re-analyse existing data and to re-examine the conceptual frameworks which have been employed in the collection and interpretation of those data.

The state's importance in constraining or promoting agricultural change has received much more attention in recent years than in earlier literatures [Bates 1981; Hart 1982; Palmer and Parsons, 1977], as reflected in the broad debates surrounding the relative developmental merits of 'states' and 'markets' in coming to grips with the current crisis in African agriculture. Clearly, an analysis of state policies and institutions in Africa is essential to an understanding of the origins and nature of the present crisis and to an exploration of alternative institutions and policies. Many of the issues which are central to the agricultural crisis require an understanding of politics and administration. Moreover, states have increasingly assumed responsibilities of economic management, and agricultural productivity is considered a national problem which should be dealt with through state policies. However, there has perhaps been a movement from the position that market forces constitute the fundamental explanatory basis for agricultural change to an overemphasis on state power. Apart from a few unambiguously positive state influences, such as the lifting of restrictions on smallholder production, and a few negative ones, such as the effects of certain marketing board policies, it is unclear how influential the state is, or can be, and in what ways.

Historical circumstances seem to have created a paradox; the state is considered to be a major agency responsible for, and capable of, transforming agriculture, but particular states have so far failed to do so. At the moment, this question often seems to be addressed on ideological rather than empirical grounds. For example, the World Bank report (1981) implies that African bureaucracies are the major architects of the problem, while Hart (1982) sees the state in an unpromising struggle with poor and backward agricultural conditions, and dependency theorists see the common predicament of African economies as the outcome of international penetration. Analyses of particular cases indicate that the interrelations are more complex than any of these positions suggest, and that local situations, whether of growth and resilience, decline and disintegration, or of open opposition, must be seen comparatively and historically as an outcome of all three. Obviously, technical management and political exigencies are often at cross-purposes or may have contradictory implications. Equally, governments are constrained by external political and economic conditions. It is therefore essential to explore the linkages between external conditions, modes of state intervention, patterns of rural development, and the exigencies of state performance.

IDS Bulletin, 1986, vol 17 no 1, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

Macroeconomic Policy and the State

Much recent literature on the African food crisis argues that agricultural production on the continent has been severely constrained by poor incentive systems, and that the key to alleviating the food crisis lies in the design and implementation of better macroeconomic policy for agricultural development. Like the 'new macroeconomics of agriculture' for developed countries [Schuh 1976], this approach stresses the impact of macro policy on farmers' incentives, and therefore on production and distribution. The emphasis is on both traditional macroeconomic policy areas, such as fiscal, monetary, and budgetary policy, and also trade policies, especially tariff and exchange rate policy. Analyses of the impact of budgetary policies focus on the percentage of public investment allocated to agriculture, which is excessively low when compared with the percentage of the population, labour force, or GDP in agriculture. Available figures suggest that between one and three per cent of gross fixed investment is allocated to agriculture in Burundi, Togo, and Zambia, eight per cent in Kenya, 12 per cent in Zimbabwe, and 16 per cent in Rwanda [FAO 1982]. When coupled with evidence on the importance of agriculture as a source of demand for labour-intensive goods and services [Mellor 1978], a strong case is made for increasing the percentage of budgetary allocations to agriculture. That governments have failed to do so is often cited as a principal cause of agricultural stagnation.

Analyses of fiscal policies emphasise the form and finance of consumer and producer subsidies. A set of microeconomic issues (e.g. how are the subsidies administered, what is the coverage, how effectively are they targeted, etc.) loom large in this discussion [Reutlinger and Selowsky, 1976; Timmer, et al, 1983]. From the macro perspective, finance is the most important subsidy issue. Taxation often drives a wedge between private and social costs and benefits, leading to a reallocation of resources. Moreover, governments tend to rely on relatively more distorting forms of taxation, such as taxes on specific crops, which reduce the incentives to farmers.

Fiscal policy may also stimulate inflation if deficit spending is required to finance the subsidies. The uncertainty generated by inflation leads to private investment being channelled into land speculation rather than into productivity raising technologies. Moreover, inflation affects farmers' incentives by changing the real value of their input and output prices. These effects are especially important for the 'macroprices' of the exchange rate, the interest rate, the wage rate, and ultimately, the rural-urban terms of trade.

Indeed, the exchange rate is increasingly viewed as the key macroeconomic variable for agriculture. The problem is one of overvaluing the currency, whether directly (through the choice of an inappropriate nominal exchange rate) or indirectly (by having a nominally fixed exchange rate combined with a rate of inflation greater than that of major trading partners). An overvalued exchange rate adversely affects agriculture by shifting the terms of trade against exports and import-substituting goods (which includes agricultural products) and in favour of imports (e.g. wheat) and non-tradeables, especially services and construction. Governments often respond to the resulting trade imbalances by placing tariffs or, especially, quotas on imports. Such a response creates rents for urban elites, diverts resources to such activities, and raises the prices of industrial goods, thereby further depressing the terms of trade facing agricultural producers. The sum of all these forces is an adverse shift in the terms of trade facing farmers. These 'disincentives to agricultural production' are now often held to be the major cause of sluggish agricultural performance, and 'getting the prices right' has become a major concern in the agricultural development literature.

Price incentives are undoubtedly important, even crucial, to agricultural development. Yet understanding macro policy is not sufficient for understanding the current crisis of African agriculture. The World Bank asserts that one-third of the variance of LDC growth performance is explained by a 'distortion index', which is a composite measure of the macro policy variables discussed above. Clearly, much remains to be explained even if we are exclusively concerned with production. The same source noted that such distortions had almost no power to explain differences in income distributions. One could go further: for example, Malawian smallholders have seen a deterioration in their terms of trade, yet their output has increased [Ghai and Radwan 1983; Harvey 1983; Kydd and Christianson 1982]. Nigerian food producers (who are given some limited protection by transportation and marketing costs) have seen their terms of trade rise from 100 in 1968 to 272 in 1977 [Collier, in Ghai and Radwan 1983:208], yet there is little evidence that Nigerian food production per capita has increased. Nigerian agricultural prices typically exceed international prices (NPCs greater than 1) [World Bank 1982], and Cameroonian prices are below world levels. But Cameroon has increased agricultural production per capita. Of course, the data bases for these calculations are weak. The point is simply that additional information is necessary to fill some of the gaps and address the inconsistencies. In particular, it is important to clarify the nature of interactions among macroeconomic variables; local processes of ecological change, resource allocation, and social organisation and conflict; and the formulation as well as the impact of government policies on agriculture.

Although there now exists a variety of arguments on why governments pursue policies inimical to agriculture, the diversity of views reflects the highly unsettled status of the debate. On the one hand, those in the Public Choice tradition like Robert Bates argue that farmers make poor coalition partners when they bulk large in the population as a whole. Urban elites seek to protect their position and incomes by taxing agriculture, favouring cities, and compensating rural friends through selective input subsidies [Bates 1981]. De Janvry (1981), on the other hand, locates the origins of these policies in the logic of 'disarticulated accumulation'. Wages in import-substituting industrialising LDCs are only a cost, not also a source of demand as in more developed countries. Agricultural and macro policies are designed to reduce costs, especially food costs, and to favour the accumulation of profits by local and transnational firms. The various perspectives in this debate are valuable and need to be carefully scrutinised. Yet, the wide variety of policies followed by African governments and their divergent outcomes suggests that all such theorising about government policies needs to be closely grounded in detailed, historical work on the interaction of government structure and capacity, rural social groups, and macro and micro economic policies.

National Agricultural Policies

All African states make and implement policies which affect agriculture. Not all, however, have strong interest groups or lobbies represented in government which promote the causes of farming, animal husbandry, or transport and distribution. Even where agricultural interests are influential, the actual possibilities for controlling directions of change may be quite limited. Moreover, most forms of state action attempt to meet both political and economic/productive goals at the same time, and must not, therefore, be expected or assumed to be internally or mutually consistent. The course of local change has been heavily influenced by the state since the imposition of colonial rule, but the direction of change is by no means directly derivative of one or another policy. Land tenure systems have been altered, taxation imposed, local elites formed or supported, markets established, prices set and so on, but the ways in which these various policies have or have not supported one another and why, still need exploration. A narrow concentration on one element of policy precludes placing it in a broader social context.

Marketing provides an example. Many governments have controlled market prices in one way or another, but the particular institutional framework through which this has been attempted has had very important ramifications. Marketing boards, cooperatives, requisitions, and direct market inspection have all been set up at various times and in various places. Hence the kinds of interests they represent, their characteristic goals, and the way in which their activities have related to other aspects of government agricultural policy have varied. The implications of one institutional form rather than another, and in distinction from market control 'in the abstract', must be examined historically and comparatively.

The actual effects of agricultural policy are, in other words, a complex outcome, not just of the confrontation between 'the state and the peasant', or national and particular local structures, but also of the total configuration of state policies. Recent work on state farms and other state-financed projects suggests that political support for a local elite and success on the technical level may be opposed goals under some local conditions [Heyer et al. 1981]. One needs to look back to colonial development projects to search for parallel situations and dynamics: mixed farming systems, the introduction of plough agriculture, the paysannat schemes, the Provident Societies, and so on. Research issues need to be posed around the question of how the interests of particular rural groups or strata have found political representation, and the difference these have made to policy, and to the forms of the institutions linking the state to regional and local systems.

Rural Development Projects

One area in which better analysis of the formulation and impact of state policy seems critical for improving agricultural performance is state-managed agricultural and rural development projects. State-managed projects have emerged in virtually all African states since the 1960s. Whether undertaken by state agencies alone or with the joint sponsorship of an international agency such as the World Bank, these projects usually attempt to modernise peasant production through a variety of techniques including: tractor hiring schemes, improved seeds, new genetic strains, infrastructure in the form of roads, electrification of schools, subsidised fertilizers, credit facilities, and where irrigation is possible, access to state controlled irrigated water resources. Recent studies of these schemes convey widespread agreement among scholars that they are expensive and technically flawed, and that they usually fail to achieve expected outputs [Palmer-Jones 1980]. The picture that emerges is one of repeated failure, not only to alleviate poverty among lower income groups, but also to achieve even the primary goals of the programme and projects.

In his review of agricultural policies in Nigeria from 1910-78, Forrest (1981) suggests a record of repetition of failure. Beginning with the Niger Agricultural Project and continuing through settlement schemes and mechanised food farms in the 1950s, farm settlements in the 1960s, and irrigation projects in the 1970s, Forrest provides striking evidence that large-scale projects have been and are still being pursued on the basis of grossly miscalculated initial assumptions. Thus, tractors do not plough on time; irrigation water supply is erratic; lack of spare parts causes delays in repairing pumps, vehicles and tractors, which are also affected by shortages of petrol and diesel; there are limited supplies of fertiliser; and there are major shortages of both unskilled labour and managerial staff. In the planning of the Kano River Project in Nigeria, the analysis of labour availability was based on mistaken assumptions that had already been seriously challenged at the time the project was being designed [Wallace 1981]. As so often happens, relevant evidence available locally was ignored by those responsible for the project design.

These findings raise a number of critical issues for research. Why do such fundamental mistakes continue to be made? If it is not possible to do any better, why do such large schemes continue to be supported? There are a number of possible explanations for the repetition of failures. Among them are the hurried planning of large-scale projects, due in part to career structures and incentives within donor agencies and recipient state bureaucracies. Perhaps more likely is the impossibility of designing a successful large-scale project in the conditions that exist in much of rural tropical Africa today. The cost of obtaining information on the basis of which one could plan with confidence is often prohibitive and the time involved is often considered too long. Moreover, large-scale interventions require large inputs of managerial and organisational resources that are scarce; they require support from well-developed marketing and other institutions, and they make substantial demands on imported or locally produced inputs that are both expensive and scarce. Large-scale projects continue to be supported nevertheless, and a more careful analysis of the reasons would go a long way toward clarifying the dynamics of the political processes which underlie the formulation of these and other state policies which affect agriculture in Africa.

Do insecure political elites support large-scale projects in order to be able to distribute access to irrigated land or 'integrated' areas to their clients? If so, can the same political elites survive bitter attacks from more vocal nationalist factions that the regime is bargaining away 'national sovereignty' by agreeing to World Bank and IMF recommendations? Do those responsible for state schemes prefer large-scale projects because they are visible, relatively self-contained, can be implemented in conditions in which participants can be controlled, and provide relatively secure mechanisms for extracting surpluses and generating financial flows which ensure the repayment of the loans involved? To the extent that the crisis in African agriculture and food production was partly induced by state policy and indecision, proponents of any solution must consider the possibility that political interests ruling the state, the state bureaucracy, or state-controlled information will render any simple solutions unattainable. Perhaps African states depend too heavily on rural production to allow an autonomous peasant system to become transformed through voluntary market activity. The historically evolved legitimacy problem of the state *vis-à-vis* the peasantry suggests that peasant political interests must be represented in policy formation if past errors are not to be repeated. But there are powerful obstacles to encouraging peasant involvement in decision-making such as the paternalism of rural development managers toward the peasantry, the inefficiency of responsible agencies, and the interests of larger farmers who benefit from the concentration of land that often follows active state intervention into the rural economy. Better research on such questions is needed to illuminate the political complexities which underlie the states-vs-markets debates.

Law and Land Systems

An integrated and comparative study of the legal aspects of African rural landholding systems would go to the heart of the relationship between state and 'private' interests in land. It would also reflect indirectly on the extent to which landholding systems are affected by transnational produce markets, labour markets, and the policies of international agencies. Since legislative and administrative measures are two of the principal techniques through which planned changes are introduced by national governments, the impact of rules and agencies that are in place, including their indirect and unofficial consequences, is a matter of great concern.

There is, in the existing literature, considerable statutory material and technical writing about particular land law systems in Africa [for examples see James 1971; Ley 1972; Okoth-Ogendo 1976]. There is also a large literature on rural farmers in relation to legal rules and policy measures affecting them [Ault and Rutman 1979; Hart 1982; Kuper and Kuper 1965]; for example, the analyses of attempts in Kenya to consolidate fragmented landholdings [Brokensha and Glazier 1973], or the work on the uneven response to land reform in Ethiopia, following land nationalisation in 1975 [Cohen and Koehn 1977; Ottaway 1978]. But there is much less writing grounded in close, detailed local study that connects the legal material to socioeconomic conditions, and that grounds both in cross-disciplinary perspectives on the process of change [for some recent and forthcoming exceptions, see Comaroff 1977, 1980, 1981; Goheen forthcoming; Moore 1973; Peters 1983; Werbner 1982]. More of such linking work, both historical and current in outlook, is badly needed. Nowhere has the vast scattered literature been drawn together in a coherent contemporary analysis, nor have the conceptual issues raised in some individual studies been explored comparatively.

Some conceive of the legal dimension of land essentially in terms of the formal statutory facilitation of individual private ownership and the purchase and sale of land. The model is one in which individual rights in land and marketing of land are assumed to displace a more communal and economically egalitarian indigenous system in which land was not bought and sold. The commoditisation of land is perceived as generating accumulations of land by an elite, proletarianising the landless, and increasing economic differentiation in rural areas. Changes in law are seen simply as technical facilitating factors. This process certainly has taken place in many areas and deserves close attention where that is the case. But the model is too general, does not begin to consider the great variations in African tenure systems, has too narrow a conception of the legal dimension, and tends to postulate the total replacement of one system by another. A realistic assessment must be made that takes local conditions and practices into account and considers the way in which these interact with larger economic and political conditions. Such an assessment requires not only knowledge of the official legal rules regarding land, but also information about who uses them and for what purpose. National legislation, local 'customary' law, local administrative regulation, and major economic and demographic factors all impinge on rural settings. To discern which has more to do with giving agriculture its current 'shape' requires both deep local knowledge and a comparative dimension. Causal questions should be posed in comparative contexts with the objective of identifying general constellations of critical factors.

In Africa, as in many other parts of the world, the implementation of legislation or administrative measures is at best uneven, and is frequently beset with obstacles [David 1971]. Often, the formal system does no more than provide opportunities which are then seized, or not, by sectors of the population or by outsiders who understand the rules and see benefits for themselves. Rather than being a matter of state enforcement in the direct coercive sense, the process of implementation is often a matter of an opportunity taken up or not. Research should explore the conditions under which national legislation or administrative or judicial action regarding land has substantial effects, on whom, and what they are. While many accounts of individual instances exist, drawing them together, and making significant general inferences, needs to be done.

Since virtually all African countries involve a plurality of indigenous legal arrangements and a variety of crops, it is not a simple task to study the interconnections between national legislation (and/or administrative policy or judicial decision-making) and local landholding systems. There are many varied local answers to the questions of under what conditions the holder has full rights of disposal, and under what conditions his capacity is limited [Lyall 1971]. There can be new reasons for the apparent maintenance of 'traditional' social relationships surrounding land. Who must consent to a sale? Who is a proper witness to assure the buyer that the seller has clear title [Parkin 1972]? Legislative intention, judicial understandings, and rural realities are seldom congruent [Asante 1965]. That does not mean, however, that government schemes have no effect, only that their effects are mediated by existing arrangements and contextual factors in such a way that the outcome is neither a maintenance of the 'traditional' system as it was, nor an implementation of the legislative or judicial vision.

Other kinds of law-related questions should be asked in addition to those directly germane to land markets and the individualisation of land titles. One kind of question concerns the legal and administrative frameworks used when the state intervenes directly in agriculture, as in the form of state farms, state sponsored settlement schemes, the allocation of unoccupied lands, the establishment of cooperatives, land registration plans, marketing boards, price controls, and the like [see Knauss 1978; Hill 1978]. Another approach is to examine the legal frameworks of large private landholdings, laws relating to incorporations, to partnerships and other collective enterprises, as well as laws relating to the regulation of marketing. The law of inheritance is central to most smallholders and relates to problems stemming from partition. Tax law is an important factor in some settings. The regulation of the credit system can also be a significant factor where loans for fertiliser, irrigation, or other capital improvements are at issue. The effectiveness of laws that try to prevent or correct the fragmentation of landholdings should be explored. Where there is landlessness and loaning of land, or the landlord-tenant relationship is common, the legal concomitants of those relationships are germane to agricultural production [Goheen forthcoming; Odenyo 1973; Moore 1973]. Land pledging for cash and mortgaging of various kinds can, in certain situations, become important forms of land transfer [Snyder 1981]. There are also ancillary legal questions beyond the matter of arable land regarding access to natural resources such as grazing land, water, firewood, building supplies, wild foods, animals, fish and birds, etc. The closing off of areas to which local residents had customary access, or the allocation for farming of what were formally common areas, can seriously disrupt pre-existing systems of use, and may generate new balances of advantage and disadvantage [Peters 1983; Pilgrim 1981].

This cursory review illustrates the breadth of the legal dimension of land problems, and suggests both the importance and the scope of the subject. Indigenous African legal systems in the rural areas have been transformed, but not wholly replaced. The nature of their persistence and alteration could indicate a great deal about the reach of colonial and post-colonial governments and the embeddedness of land law in politics and economy. The situations of the land-rich, the land-poor, and the landless are reflected in law. Where law has been used as the means of directing social change, the study of the local effects of such efforts constitutes the closest thing to a controlled experiment in social science. Studies of land law and related legal arrangements are practical since they deal with relatively public information. Some such studies already exist. A synthesis of existing work and further development of the subject is certain to have significant practical and theoretical implications.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been twofold: first, to suggest directions and issues for future research on African states and agriculture; and second, to demonstrate the need for an analytic framework which: (i) views African agriculture as resulting from the interaction of a series of technical operations with a variety of social, biological, political, and ecological processes; (ii) understands farming structures in relation to the overall patterns of resource control; (iii) views political, economic, and cultural structures in Africa as continually changing as they become more integrated into national and international systems; and (iv) conceptualises the interdependence of households, regional economies, and national and international systems, so that research focused on any one level requires some understanding of the pattern of interaction across levels. No single method can illuminate the complex interrelations envisaged here. Going beyond disciplinary boundaries is essential, but that entails more than the additive process of grafting on another perspective. Clearly, as this volume indicates, an understanding of the role of African states in agriculture is critical. The challenge for future research is to examine the formulation and impact of changing state policies within a framework which illuminates the dynamics of change in the context of both external constraints and interrelated processes at the local level.

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