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RURAL AFRICA AT THE CROSSROADS: LIVELIHOOD PRACTICES AND POLICIES

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The last two decades of the 20th century stand out as a period of momentous change for sub-Saharan African economies. Amidst high levels of material uncertainty and risk, rural populations have become more occupationally flexible, spatially mobile and increasingly dependent on non-agricultural income-generating activities. This paper synthesises the findings and main policy implications of new empirical studies on rural livelihoods emanating from the De-Agrarianisation and Rural Employment (DARE) research programme at the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS).

Policy conclusions

- Largely as a result of structural adjustment performances, diversification out of agriculture has become the norm among African rural populations.
- Diversification is higher than suggested by previous studies and takes many different forms, including migration among (especially younger) men, and the sale of home-making skills among women.
- Diversification offers many opportunities, but also brings high levels of financial and personal risk, and threatens traditional agrarian and family values.
- If it is to support diversification efforts, policy must:
 - i. promote the development of human capital, equipping people with the skills to work in new environments
 - ii. continue the search for appropriate, low-cost ways of enhancing agricultural productivity
 - iii. undertake participatory assessments of spatially-based comparative advantage and provide services for this to be exploited

Introduction

Published statistics largely fail to capture the centrifugal forces associated with occupational experimentation in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) over the last two decades: livelihoods are drawing on a proliferating range of sources. Yet the wider social and political implications remain unclear. The attitudes

of African rural dwellers towards their actions are highly mixed, possibly best characterised by the phrase - betwixt and between': some live with high expectations of material returns on the basis of an ever-shifting livelihood base. Many profess occupational or locational identities that are more pertinent to the past than the present. Recent income diversification tendencies are blurring rural-urban contrasts. This paper asks how policy has deliberately or inadvertently spurred these changes, as well as how it can address today's pressing developmental and welfare concerns.

De-Agrarianisation and Rural Employment (DARE) research findings from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Congo-Brazzaville, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa provide comparative data on changing economic and social patterns in a wide variety of rural settlements. Box 1 provides a numerical listing of the collaborating researchers' African Studies Centre (ASC) working papers (WP) that are summarised here.

Box 1 DARE case study areas and researchers

General summary

1 Bryceson, D. (1999) Sub-Saharan Africa Betwixt and Between, WP 43.

Ethiopia

2 Demeke, M. (1997) Rural North Shoa, WP 25.

Congo-Brazzaville

3 Paravano, P. (1997) Congo-Brazzaville, WP 23.

Nigeria

4 Chukwuezi, B. (1999) Igboland, WP 37.

5 Iliya, M. (1999) Sokoto State, Northwest Nigeria, WP 39.

6 Meagher, K. (1999) Kaduna State Savanna, WP 40.

7 Mustapha, R. (1999) Southwestern Nigeria, WP 43.

8 Yunusa, M.B. (1999) Middle Belt, WP 38.

Tanzania

9 Jambiya, G. (1998) Lushoto District, WP 28.

10 Madulu, N.F. (1998) Sukumaland, WP 27.

11 Mung'ong'o, C. (1998) Njombe District, WP 26.

12 Mwamfupe, D. (1998) Rungwe and Kyela Districts, WP 29.

Malawi

13 Tellegen, N. (1997) Mchinji and Salima Districts, Ashgate.

South Africa

14 Bank, L. and Qambata, L. (1999) Mooiplaas, Ciskei, WP 34.

15 Manona, W. (1999) Melani, Ciskei, WP 32.

16 McAllister, P. (1999) Shixini, Transkei, WP 33.

Zimbabwe

17 Berkvens, R. (1997) Mutoko Communal Area, WP 24.

A complete list of partner organisations and individual researchers of this DGIS-funded programme as well as the full text of the DARE summary report are available at the ASC, [Leiden website](#)

The next section considers overall continental trends, followed by a more detailed examination of rural livelihood patterns revealed by the research. A third section teases out some of the major tensions embedded in the broad-based reorientation of livelihoods, leading to a discussion of policy options. The conclusion returns to the issue of sub-Saharan Africa's 'betwixt and between' status, arguing that the uncertainty could be alleviated with a more directional policy approach.

Demise of the peasant developmental context

The seven countries covered here exhibit major differences in population size, levels of urbanisation and agriculture's contribution to the national economy, nonetheless, they share common trajectories. All are undergoing 'de-agrarianisation' and, more specifically, 'depeasantisation'.

'De-agrarianisation' is defined as a long-term process of occupational adjustment, income-earning reorientation, social identification and spatial relocation of rural dwellers away from strictly agricultural-based modes of livelihood (Bryceson 1996).

'Depeasantisation' represents a specific form of de-agrarianisation in which peasantries lose their economic capacity and social coherence, and demographically shrink in size. They literally unravel as communities. Depeasantisation can be traced with respect to any one of the characteristics listed in Box 2.

Box 2 The distinguishing features of 'peasants'

'Peasants' constitute a distinct type of agrarian producers having the following four main characteristics, namely:

- i. **Farm** – the pursuit of an agricultural livelihood combining subsistence and commodity production.
- ii. **Family** – internal social organisation based on the family as the primary unit of production, consumption, reproduction, socialisation, welfare and risk-spreading.
- iii. **Class** – external subordination to state authorities and regional or international markets which involve surplus extraction and class differentiation.
- iv. **Community** – village settlement and traditional conformist attitudinal outlook. A peasant livelihood involves a changing agrarian labour process that is responsive to internal differences like climate, local resource variation, and demography, as well as to external stimuli like markets, taxation, and other forms of state intervention. Thus, 'peasantries' are best understood as societies moving towards or away from these four characteristics.

Adapted from Shanin, (1976)

The countries discussed here have all been subject to 'turning point policies' that have initiated processes of depeasantisation, ranging from restrictions on access to land in South Africa in 1913, through the urbanising effects of the 1970s oil boom in Congo-Brazzaville and Nigeria, to the far-reaching impact of the removal of agricultural subsidies under recent Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the other four countries.

From 1980–95, the widespread enforcement of SAPs opened the door to de-agrarianisation, implicit in the market's search for optimised returns on investment. Peasant agriculture, with its subsistence orientation and relatively low yielding, unstandardised agriculture and high transport costs, was the antithesis of the growing dominance of agro-industrial production in the world's agricultural commodity trade circuits. This period marked the convergence of global de-agrarianisation and African depeasantisation, reflected in the steady relative decline of African agricultural exports.

But the non-economic aspects of SAPs have increasingly been recognised as important. International financial institutions (IFIs) and donors have turned their programme efforts to 'democratisation' and 'good governance', and the institutional dynamics of an 'enabling environment'. Most recently, they have directed

enquiry into ‘social capital’ networks. Nonetheless, there has been a reluctance to consider how neo-liberal policies impact on African rural social structures. Rather the tendency has been to see African social institutions, especially those associated with rural peasant societies, as ‘constraints’ to the implementation of economic policies, inferring that vested interests and traditional conservatism cannot rise to the market challenge. The following section argues the opposite – African peasant societies have been extremely responsive to neo-liberalism with as yet unclear implications for the social and economic fabric of African countries.

Rural restructuring

Peasants’ deteriorating commercial agriculture

African countries’ barter terms of trade declined by roughly 30–50% between 1980 and the early 1990s with wide variations across countries. South African rural dwellers were perhaps the least affected. Very few actually produced agricultural commodities for domestic let alone export markets. Congo-Brazzaville’s small size, recent history of political instability, and high rate of urbanisation predating SAP had already compressed the peasant commercial sector. Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe, on the other hand, had significant levels of peasant commodity production which were adversely affected by agricultural subsidy cutbacks.

SAPs largely dismantled parastatal marketing boards that had serviced peasants’ input requirements, enforced commodity standards, and provided single-channel marketing facilities and controlled prices. Their replacement by private traders was patchy, and left farmers with a more uncertain market environment, widely fluctuating producer prices rocketing input prices and tenuous input supply (DARE 6–7, 9–11). This led to some retrenchments, toward crops requiring few purchased inputs and offering either quick returns or more regular, year-round harvesting.

Curiously, the Nigerian government departed from standard SAP prescriptions with successive bans on staple food imports. This provided a window of opportunity for peasant producers, primarily larger-scale farmers who produced for Nigeria’s huge urban market without the threat of being undercut by cheaper foreign imports (DARE 6). Even smaller peasants stood to gain in the short run by selling or renting out their land to bigger farmers and engaging in wage labour on the bigger farmers’ newly consolidated larger holdings (DARE 5). In stark contrast, farmers in areas of central Tanzania that had become the grain heartland of the country under pan-territorial pricing and input subsidies, experienced the decimation of their market. Private traders ignored their existence off the main road and agricultural incomes declined by 70% between 1979 and 1992 (DARE 11). In South Africa rural incomes rose, but this was largely owing to the removal of racial imbalance in pension payments. All three South African study sites witnessed a decline in field agriculture and re-focusing on home production.

Overall the evidence suggests that peasants’ adjustments prompted by increasing input costs and poor market prospects were leading to a reallocation of land and labour away from commercial agriculture. And yet IFIs, such as the World Bank, call for export diversification into non-traditional crops, especially horticulture. Horticultural products have highly demanding production and marketing requirements, that widely geographically-dispersed, under-capitalised African peasants are even less likely to be able to produce on a sustained basis. African peasant agricultural commodity production is increasingly losing its place in the world division of labour.

Rising cash needs

At the same time as returns from peasants' commercial agriculture became less certain, daily cash requirements were increasing under the economic stringency of SAPs. Subsidies were being removed from agriculture, education and health. School fees and 'user fees' at health centres became a high priority in peasant household budgets. Inflation reached rural producers and consumers through the higher prices for agricultural inputs. Market liberalisation, from the perspective of the rural consumer, tended to expand choice but at arm's length, for much of the tantalising merchandise came with unaffordable prices. Meanwhile, peasants were faced with higher input prices, and in many areas higher expenditures on food purchases. What almost everywhere tended to decline was the allocation of resources to social gift-making and ceremonies, with some erosion of the social fabric of village life (DARE 6, 10).

Increasing income diversification

When and why?

The DARE survey findings, barring those from South Africa, report a surge in non-agricultural income sources over the past 15 years of SAP implementation. This is a rather perverse outcome for a set of policies that was originally implemented in the name of correcting urban bias and 'getting the prices right' for Africa's peasant farmers. Rural contextual features militating for non-agricultural involvement include pressures on land in parts of Nigeria and the high levels of risk associated with climatic variation in Zimbabwe (DARE 5, 17). Certainly, there are many forces influencing peasants' selection of income-diversifying activities, but it is nonetheless important to ask why they are now so generalised across the various agro-ecological zones of sub-Saharan Africa. In an atmosphere of neo-liberal hype about the benefits of agricultural market liberalisation, there has been little space for realistic assessment of the significance of peasants' risk-aversion, income diversification and overall labour allocative behaviour.

Box 3 Evidence of increasing diversification

- 67% of household dependants' involvement in non-farm activity in Doma, Nigeria was initiated during the last 15 years. 43% had no previous economic activity before setting up then (Yunusa, DARE 8).
- In the Mwanza region, Tanzania, over 50% of existing non-agricultural activity started in 1990 or thereafter and another third in the 1980s with only 16% of respondents involved in non-agricultural activity in the past (Madulu, DARE 10).
- In the Tanga region, Tanzania, the urge for starting up non-agricultural activities came in 1980s (Jambiya, DARE 9).

Source: Bryceson, (1999) (DARE 1)

Rural households and non-agricultural income sources

'Non-agricultural activities' are defined here as any work that does not directly involve plant or animal husbandry. The evidence suggests that the vast majority of households have one or more non-agricultural income sources, be it active participation in trade, service provisioning or craft work, or more passive receipt of a transfer payment in the form of a state pension or remittances from relatives. These are categorised in Box 4.

Box 4 Typology of diversification

The range of non-agricultural activities varies markedly from place to place, ranging from modern to traditional, high to low-income-earning, and formal to informal. They fall into three basic 'complexes' related to specific regional agro-economic zones:

- **Complex A – Local services (Ethiopia, Malawi):** characteristically, non-agricultural activities in these remote areas were primarily of a service nature, as well as some handicraft activities, catering to a restricted local market. Beer-brewing stood out as the single most important activity in terms of numbers of producers and consumers (DARE 13).
- **Complex B – Trade (Nigeria, Tanzania, Zimbabwe):** these study sites had histories of active participation in labour migration and/or agricultural commodity production. They were market responsive, with reasonably mobile local populations that were aware of income-earning opportunities and consumer demand beyond their immediate locality, often facilitated by historical links with urban areas. The Nigerian, and Zimbabwean case studies to greater or lesser degrees are represented here. Trade was the single most important activity.
- **Complex C – Transfer payments (Zimbabwe, South Africa):** these were areas that had been historically dominated by rural labour out-migration and the absence of peasant agricultural commodity production. Populations were extremely mobile, characterised by geographical movement between town and countryside at specific stages of their lifecycle. Rural non-agricultural earnings were passive in nature. Most of the earnings derived from transfer payments, either pensions or remittances from non-resident relations. Remittances in kind – undoubtedly to some extent a response to inflation – constituted 42% of non-agricultural earnings of Zimbabwean rural households (DARE 17), hence the importance that rural dwellers placed on the frequency of visits from their urban-based relations. Both South African and Zimbabwean rural areas have experienced recent expansions of local-level bureaucracies which have offered some formal employment opportunities and these have had the highest positive effect on per capita income and have provided the best insurance against risk.

Source: Bryceson, (1999) (DARE 1)

The typology in Box 4 does not infer exclusive distinctions between the three categories nor does it offer exhaustive coverage of the inter-relationship between different agrarian patterns and non-agricultural activities. On the contrary, most areas showed a great deal of overlap in terms of the kinds of non-agricultural activities that took place.

Finally, in most cases, the pursuit of non-agricultural activities was a year-round phenomenon, subject primarily to fluctuations in local purchasing power rather than seasonal lulls in the agricultural work calendar.

Do non-agricultural activities provide risk-aversion and consumption smoothing?

Previous surveys converge on an estimate of roughly 40% of African rural household income on average being derived from non-farm sources (Bagachwa, 1997; Reardon, 1997; Ellis, 1998). By contrast, DARE survey results are remarkable in finding much higher levels of 55–80%.

Such a large gap is hardly likely to result merely from methodological differences. Most of the surveys upon which these 40% estimates are based were conducted during the 1980s or early 1990s. It is probable that the on-going tendency for declining agricultural commodity production combined with expanding participation in non-agricultural activities is proceeding apace. Certainly, time-series in Nigeria suggest this (Box 5).

Box 5 Changing composition of income over time in Nigeria

Data from the Nigerian cocoa production area study site showing a remarkable rise in household participation in non-farm activities from an average of 33% in the mid-1980s to 57% in 1997 at the time of the DARE survey. When broken down by income group, there are striking differences: the low-income group's participation increases dramatically from 35 to 80% while that of the upper income group declines slightly from 33 to 25%. The middle income group jumps from 30 to 50% over the same period.

Source: Mustapha, (1999) (DARE 7)

In some areas, respondents saw their first involvement in such activities as a somewhat shameful admission of their failure to provision themselves from agricultural production. Most case studies, however, are documenting a general rural process already well-advanced that is now considered normal, not unusual, and certainly not shameful.

Proliferation of income earners within the rural household

Households are often pursuing more than one, sometimes several, different non-agricultural activities simultaneously or at different points throughout the year. Most of the activities are highly opportunistic in nature, involving quick responses to market demand and supply. However, changing labour force participation patterns are also readily apparent. More and more household members are entering non-agricultural production and the male household head's dominant role as family cash-earner is eroding. Rural women are also earning cash, but largely based on their home-making skills and so generally less remunerative compared with men. Sales of prepared snacks, beer, hair plaiting, petty retailing, prostitution, knitting, tailoring, soap making, midwifery are a few of the many services that they now sell.

In Tanzania, village women often referred to their new income-earning role in terms of it having been thrust upon them by worsening economic circumstances. However, the DARE case studies suggest that rural men, albeit under duress, have accepted their wives' and daughters' cash-generating work outside the home and may even encourage it, sometimes in sharp contrast to attitudes held only a decade ago (DARE 9).

In the Middle Belt and northern parts of Nigeria, well before SAPs, women were active in food vending and petty retail trade, both having the advantage of low start-up capital requirements. Muslim women's increasing participation is sometimes linked to a perceived inability of husbands to support all their wives (DARE 5). The strong attraction for women is that the earnings they generate from non-agricultural activities are theirs, whereas earnings from farming belong to the family.

In most DARE case studies, non-agricultural activities provided entry points and flexibility unavailable within traditional agrarian sectors dominated by male patriarchy. Much the same flexibility and prospects of early cash returns underpin the eagerness observed in many areas of youth to engage in trading, and to reject agriculture.

One of the defining characteristics of peasantries is the strength of family ties. Extended family structures dominate, as they are compatible with labour demands of agrarian production. However, over the last 20 years men's labour input into, and returns from, cashcropping have diminished and undermined their role

as family provisioners. The decline has been so rapid and forceful that most able-bodied adults as well as many children have had to seek income opportunities. The individualisation of economic activity and the increasing tendency to engage in non-agricultural income earning have had a dissolving effect on long-standing agrarian divisions of labour as well as economic rights and responsibilities within peasant households. Pooling of income within the domestic unit is weakening as categories of people who formerly were not expected to earn income now simultaneously receive less from male heads of household, and assert a right to determine how their own income is spent.

Decreasing rural isolation

The linkage between physical mobility and social change is poorly researched in the social sciences. Urban migration rates are the best indicators of physical mobility we have but they are an inadequate basis for understanding the impact of peasants' mobility on rural communities, and the nature of town-country links.

From the case studies, it is apparent that in spite of its economic imperative, there is considerable wariness about the migration process and scepticism about its benefit/cost ratio, especially on the part of the older generation or 'women left behind'. Remittances are often smaller than expected, and many are aware of threats such as AIDS which urban areas pose (DARE 11, 14–16).

Gone are the days when urban and rural areas present strong dualistic contrasts (DARE 4, 15). Non-agricultural income diversification has spawned both close and long-range migratory movement, often to urban areas. People are well aware of livelihood conditions outside the village, and some choose to act on that knowledge.

Diversification and class differentiation

Under economic liberalisation production has become more concentrated in areas having favourable agro-climatic conditions or low transport costs. In many areas, farmers with very small acreages are increasingly selling or renting their land out to larger-scale farmers and turning to agricultural wage labour or non-farm activities (DARE 2, 5). Class stratification is deepening in places where only middle/higher income farmers have the capital needed to enter lucrative non-agricultural activities. Even in areas which have not experienced generalised land shortage such as in Njombe, Tanzania, young households with restricted land access have become more dependent on non-agricultural economic activities or resort to migrant labour (DARE 11).

Coping with uncertainty: tensions within African peasantries

The previous section has outlined trends towards the declining coherence of peasantries, with respect to their marketable farm production, family structures, class position and rural communities. The following section examines four tensions in closer detail.

Securing economic survival: market experimentation vs subsistence fallback

Dual strategies of experimenting with diversification while retaining a subsistence fallback are complementary, reducing the likelihood of total production failure. On the other hand, the two demand very different skills and ways of thinking.

The DARE findings suggest that non-agricultural activities, whilst potentially contributing to overall risk reduction, can in themselves be risky. For many, non-agricultural experimentation is capital-demanding

(DARE 6, 13) so that continued reliance on subsistence production represents a vital safety net: it provides some degree of food security and affirms community-held agrarian values. Depeasantisation can be materially beneficial or impoverishing. The policies of national governments and international agencies play a decisive role in influencing positive or negative outcomes.

Marshalling resources and social networks: household solidarity versus individual autonomy

Peasants' relations within the family and in the rural community dominate their social life. Land, labour and capital tend to be mobilised within these units. The stability of the peasant family rests largely on its ability to provision its members not only in terms of basic needs like food, but also through the transmission of agrarian resources generationally.

But in densely populated areas, an increasing number of male offspring are not receiving any inheritance. Besides the gradual build-up of population pressure, the sudden realignment of local terms of trade and agricultural prices associated with SAPs has often made families work harder to meet basic needs. As the returns from peasant agricultural production deteriorate, internal exchange relations within families are being transformed, producing ambiguity and tension about individual members, rights and responsibilities. The boundaries between household solidarity and individual autonomy are becoming blurred.

There are four major tendencies evident in the current social restructuring, namely: resort to 'incomplete' family units, i.e. locational separation of the reproductive couple for the sake of income-earning (DARE 17); reduction in the size of large extended families in the direction of nuclearisation (DARE 5, 8); weakening of dependency ties on gender and age lines within family units (DARE 14); and, women's efforts to use matrilineal ties to further their material security (DARE 3).

An unacknowledged identity crisis: agrarian conservatism versus sceptic otherness

The tension between agrarian and non-agrarian perspectives, is nowhere more evident than in the variety of identities villagers are adopting, and the fact that one's stated occupational identity does not always conform with the reality of one's work life. For many, non-agricultural activities have imperceptibly snowballed from 'filler' cash-earning tasks, to year-round activities providing ready cash. For still others, especially youth, it dominates their work lives in terms of labour time and cash-earnings. However, in many areas, people still see themselves as 'farmers first and foremost' (DARE 10). The moral order of villages rests on agrarian values which people do not wish to question publicly or appear to be transgressing. To do so may risk loss of social legitimacy. Thus, the growing importance of non-agricultural activities so salient in individual and household economic strategies is often hardly recognised in notions of status and propriety upheld by the community and in some places, this disjuncture between economic reality and social status serves as a wedge between the generations. These changes have impacted differently across study locations: many (especially of the older generation) associate the switch to non-agricultural activities with moral decline and increasing landlessness among the youth; in some areas the maintenance of agriculture-related rituals has fallen to women (DARE 14), and in others, whilst great value is still placed on links with ancestral land and traditional symbols of well being (large cattle herds; bulging grain stores) in reality, non-agricultural activities are economically dominant.

Strengthening or weakening the economic foundation of rural livelihoods? linkages between non-agricultural activities and agriculture

Overall, villagers are becoming highly responsive to a wide range of investment opportunities and allocate cash accordingly. This is generating a new dynamism. On the other hand, the productivity and purchasing

power evident in the Asian Green Revolution have yet to materialise in the case study areas in any substantial way. Leaps in productivity arising from technical innovations in agriculture and non-agriculture are not strongly in evidence, although they are hinted at in the field of transport where bicycles and some motorised vehicles are becoming more widespread. This lack of measurable increased productivity is no doubt related to the strong trade and service-sector bias of non-agricultural activities at present. Overall, it is apparent that the sectoral linkages are characterised largely by the net flow of cash and labour out of agriculture towards more service-oriented rural economies whose forms and economic viability are still congealing.

Policy responses: sustainable rural livelihoods and social capital approaches

During the last two decades, SAPs and other economic liberalisation policies instigated by the World Bank and other international donors have prioritised market forces, limited the role of the state, and spurred depeasantisation throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Now however, the conditionality underpinning SAPs has been proven unworkable, and the Washington consensus is losing some ground to environmental and poverty lobbies.

As part of the same retreat from unbridled neo-liberalism, a number of donor agencies have now adopted a 'sustainable rural livelihoods' (SRL) approach, which stresses rural risk management aimed at: '[r]educing vulnerability – helping people to develop resilience to external shocks and increase the overall sustainability of their livelihoods' (Carney 1999:3). The approach puts people at the centre, and attempts a holistic diagnosis by taking their non-agricultural income-diversifying activities into account, emphasising the social and environmental as well as economic dimensions of rural life.

In this context, the issue of rural labour displacement with all its occupational and spatial implications cannot be avoided. Enhancing the employment chances of increasingly marginalised rural peasant farmers is an enormous developmental task that requires clearly specified target groups, activities and timing. Particular efforts will be needed if the SRL's open-ended participatory approach and poverty reduction objectives are to mobilise decision-making power and be capable of generating the sense of direction needed to advance the economic prospects of the rural people involved. Much attention has been allocated to 'social capital' in this context. Definitions of social capital vary but tend to centre on trust relationships that facilitate economic exchange. Common rules and norms pertaining to reciprocity and exchange are expected to build trust, connectedness and networking of social institutions such as clubs, societies and producers' groups. However, emphasis on building 'social capital' may be counter-productive, representing donors' attempts at making-do with declining physical resource transfers, rather than reflective of the actual needs of rural dwellers. The build-up of human capital rather than social capital is what is fundamentally at issue in view of the labour redundancy that sub-Saharan Africa's peasantries are currently experiencing.

Confronting uncertainty with capability

The future of African rural dwellers lies increasingly in labour force participation outside of rural agriculture. They need literacy, numeracy, knowledge of the national language, and various occupational and computer skills that will give them the means to command sufficient income for themselves and their families, as well as to raise the overall level of labour productivity in their respective countries. Capability enhancement through human capital investment is vital.

This paper ends with a schematic proposal for peasant transition that takes account of peasants' current

coping strategies and poor competitive position in the world market. The strategy has two main aims: first, to facilitate provisioning of rural households' and communities' local-level, daily needs; and second, to strengthen public policy, training facilities and infrastructure for future occupational diversification and specialisation. To highlight its schematic nature, we refer to the 'ABCDs' of the policy strategy as follows:

'A' is for agriculture

The DARE research findings suggest that African rural dwellers throughout sub-Saharan Africa deeply value the pursuit of farming activities. Food self-provisioning is gaining in importance against a backdrop of food price inflation and proliferating cash needs. A Green Revolution has yet to take hold in sub-Saharan Africa. The use of improved input packages is in fact on the decline. Effective input packages have not been developed for the drier African environments and the packages that do exist for the higher rainfall areas need to be supplemented with expansion of intermediate technology to increase the returns to labour (DARE 17). There should be a renewed seriousness about addressing sub-Saharan Africa's growing food deficit, and identifying what role peasants can play in increasing food output. Without a more sensitive use of fiscal instruments, which may include selective and temporary subsidies, larger-scale farmers will by default be the major commercial staple food producers.

'B' is for betwixt and between

Donor interventions directed at non-agricultural activities raise questions and dilemmas. Every villager has a different workportfolio that is intricately suited to the individual's needs. Whatever activity is targeted, the intervention is likely to affect other activities in the portfolio, usually by diverting the labour of the portfolio-holder. Those offering external support cannot trace through these individual ramifications. People must be offered options from which they themselves can choose. Such options would aim not only to enhance short-term labour productivity, but also longer-term capital investment and career planning.

One of the major sticking points of village-based non-agricultural activities is the lack of in situ purchasing power. Local programmes could be set up that enhanced local purchasing power through public works schemes or community work exchange and voucher systems. DARE studies confirm the utility of rotating credit schemes (DARE 14). Efforts could be made to expand these schemes and to introduce technical skills, administrative or accountancy training into the rotating credit groups.

'C' and 'D' are for certainty of direction

Depeasantisation is set to continue and raises many pressing challenges and threats to economic welfare and political stability, but it can be harnessed to good effect with the right policies. This requires a positive, future-oriented strategy that lays the foundation for occupational diversification and specialisation.

The first and most pressing need is to establish a strong foundation for rural skill base improvement especially among the youth. This entails resuscitating primary education that has slumped in much of sub-Saharan Africa during the budgetary cutbacks and economic stringency of the SAP era. Besides formal educational opportunities, rural children need extra-curricular clubs and learning programmes that can expand their informal education, giving them a firmer grasp of practical skills, mathematics, basic science and reading, to take into their adult life. Participatory development projects that pivot on realistic assessments of villagers. agrarian/non-agrarian prospects vis-à-vis local and national markets are vital. Such projects could be more focused and useful if they involved groups distinguished on the basis of gender and age cohorts.

Governments at national, regional and local levels need to engage people in assessments of their geographical comparative advantage in the search for local specialisations. By examining regional resource bases and the complementarity of different forms of production within the regional unit, economic opportunities become apparent. Consortia of government, NGOs, private businesses and local people, could become involved in a common vision of regional potential that would facilitate infrastructure building. On-road/off-road accessibility should also be addressed. Can access be improved for off-road locations or can viable employment activities be found that balance their locational disadvantage?

Rural land tenure policy is a vital issue that is linked to the question of geographical comparative advantage, but is fraught with historically-ingrained equity issues that have to be carefully weighed against productivity concerns. However, as rural labour is absorbed into non-agricultural pursuits, political demands for land access may ease.

With the use of labour-intensive techniques, essential improvements in rural infrastructures need not be prohibitively expensive. One prerequisite is that the capital-intensive construction methods of western-trained engineers be used only when necessary.

Conclusions

SAPs have triggered a huge, unplanned income diversification response in African rural areas. Peasants are now poised between an active search for viable income sources, while retaining the security of their peasant subsistence fallback, however meagre that may be.

Yet, peasant 'holding operations' have been effective against great odds. Youthful out-migration paradoxically provides a means of sustaining agrarian community coherence and conserving its values. However, cracks are beginning to show, and signs of social dysfunction associated with urban areas are surfacing in villages. Internal patriarchal authority within peasant households is challenged by youth as well as by women. Local community leadership may be questioned. Petty crime associated with poverty becomes more prevalent. Nonetheless, a fundamental rural-urban dichotomy remains in rural dwellers' minds: rural areas represent security in the form of self-provisioned food, family exchange relationships, and relative physical tranquility whereas urban areas represent opportunities and high risk; 'cash and cares', that many, especially older people, would prefer to avoid.

Each DARE case study portrays a delicate balancing act as people succeed to varying extents in cobbling together their livelihoods somewhere in the spectrum between farm and non-farm, family and individual, and rural and urban contrasts. But it is worth reminding ourselves that the studies discussed here are, in fact, 'success stories'. Civil disorder or war afflicts more than one-third of Africa nation-states and has meant that rural populations in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa have not managed to achieve a balance. Some of this conflict can be traced to the pressures of peasant agrarian transition. Poverty alleviation of rural target groups in select donor project areas is not enough – the whole continent is undergoing tumultuous change. 'Betwixt and between' – the balancing act of African rural dwellers – cannot be maintained indefinitely. Sensible directional policies that confront the daily dilemmas of depeasantisation are imperative.

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