

REVIEWS — COMPTES RENDUS

Agricultural development and food security in Africa*Fantu Cheru, Renu Modi*

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Despite the Millenium Development Goals and the global interest in trying to guarantee food security for all, the African continent is still suffering chronic food shortages. At any given time, several Sub-Saharan countries have difficulties meeting their populations' food demands for want of a stable production system, but essentially because of a lack of political stability. The global food crisis is deepening, as climate change leads to stagnating or declining agricultural productivity, as shortages of fertile land and water inhibit the expansion of production that should follow growing population trends, and as growing demand for biofuel increases the competition for land. Given these extreme circumstances, agricultural development and food security are, or ought to be, back at the top of the development agenda. Increasingly, both sovereign and private investors have set their sights on the African continent which still has abundant, and as yet unexploited, land reserves, as a potential source of global food and other agricultural commodities.

This growing interest in African land has brought with it competing approaches on how to tap into the continent's agricultural potential. On the one hand, there are those domestic and foreign actors who want to see agricultural transition and transformation along the lines of Western Europe, the USA, and other major agricultural exporting countries the emphasis here is on investment in advanced industrial agriculture, mechanization and use of chemical fertilizers, genetically modified organisms, and so on. On the other hand, there are domestic forces that see great potential in investing in small-scale farms, with an increased emphasis on environmentally sound production systems that follow agro-ecological approaches aimed at meeting household food security. The proponents of this latter 'small is beautiful' approach regard the over emphasis on industrial agriculture as a threat to the existence of small-scale famers, and to the land and water resources on which they rely.

However, the discussion as to which of these approaches is best, does not adequately address the root causes of the productivity crisis in agriculture. Most, if not all, key blockages to realizing ambitious development goals indeed lie in political and institu-

tional issues that influence the content and direction of agricultural policy making in Africa. Ideally, the latter African governments should formulate and implement agricultural policies conducive to driving up the productivity in a mutually complementary way of both small-scale farmers who want to become self-sufficient, and bigger commercial farmers who produce for local, regional and international markets. Such policies are necessary to achieve national food security, provide jobs, reduce poverty and establish the agricultural sector as an engine for Africa's development, c.q. industrialization. It is the contention of this book that Africa should draw lessons from the development path that has been followed over the last decades by large developing countries such as India, Brazil and China, which according to the editors have been 'able to embark on a programme of agriculture-led industrialization, lifting millions of their citizens out of poverty in a relatively short, 30-year period', thus also building a highly competitive industrial sector.

The task of transforming Africa's agriculture and achieving food security has been reaffirmed by the African Union, as shown by their adoption of a Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. Achieving food self-sufficiency will obviously be complex and multifaceted. One thing, however, is clear: huge investments in vital production infrastructure will be needed, and new production paradigms, inputs and innovative technologies have to be introduced on a massive scale in order to sustainably improve productivity, reduce poverty and raise Africa's competitiveness in world markets. The extent to which emerging countries, such as the three mentioned above, can help to realize these objectives is obviously a matter of great interest among African policy makers, NGOs and farmers' organisations. It is against this background that the content of this book has to be evaluated and interpreted. The bottom line is that these three emerging economies, can both share their respective experiences in transforming their backward agriculture, and can become a source of technology, skills and finance to help generate the critical boost in infrastructure that African agriculture needs.

Needless to say that the lessons that can be learned from these 3 countries should be critically analysed. When a country's actions are guided by the suspect principle of Increasing production at whatever price, the result can mean (as can be seen in the 3 nations in question) environmental degradation, a growing divide between rich and poor, and what we may term a democratic deficit in letting people decide on their future. Moreover, these three have also grown at the expense of the African continent. Indeed, increased direct investment in African agriculture by foreign investors, particularly from emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil (but also Saudi Arabia, and others), has been the subject of much criticism from civil society organisations, since these investments are often equated with widespread land dispossession of local populations.

The proponents of this book, seem to question whether this form of land-grabbing as it has become known, is negative at all. They indeed claim it would be a mistake to dismiss the potential contributions of foreign direct investment for unleashing African agriculture, which in turn would promote industrialization, social transformation and broad-based poverty reduction in the continent. Food for thought and some hearty dis-

cussion, I would think, as the latter positive effects hinge on whether African governance is indeed strong and uncorrupt and willing to share income from these contracts with their people. *Quod* mostly *non*, I am afraid to say. In this respect, the book editors seem to underestimate and even ignore one of the starting premises of the book, i.e. that governments in Africa are usually poor policy makers, and often incapable of resisting the adoption of easy recipes offered to them by external players who act in their own interests, rather than those of the African poor. Even though the editors call for some pragmatism, the debate is still open as to whether this new form of colonialism will be different from the previous one.

Nevertheless, the book does claim to examine critically whether foreign and sovereign investments from China, India and Brazil do indeed create new opportunities for the transfer of appropriate (sic) farm technology, build local capacity and know-how, reverse the persistent productivity decline in agriculture, generate local employment, improve local living standards and ensure food security. This examination is divided into five sections. In the first, the overall research approach is elaborated, and the contemporary and historical debates on the role of foreign capital in Africa's agricultural development are explained. This first part highlights and confirms the (possible) role of foreign development investment (FDI; be it official or private) in fostering development processes in Africa. It also warns that if African governance fails to put in place appropriate checks and balances, the latter FDI in African agriculture could indeed perpetuate 'accumulation by dispossession' processes that were common in the past. The second part looks at the scope and content of India's private and public sector engagement in African agriculture. It very much mirrors the Indian government's official position in this, and therefore fails to critically address the possible negative impact associated with India's investments in African agriculture, especially in view of the many mistakes made by India itself in developing its own agricultural sector. Moreover, official Indian 'aid' would seem to be built on the same patronizing views often associated with Western donors, who claim that only outsiders can put the African continent on a transformational path. Moreover, is the Green Revolution India has forged since the 1960s really the development model best suited to Africa's agriculture? Luckily, the positive views of the first two proponents in this part (chapters 3 and 4), are somewhat counter-balanced by what follows in chapters 5 and 6, where the large-scale acquisition of land by Indian companies in Ethiopia is critically assessed. Brazil's strategy to transform African agriculture is the focus of section three. Though still low in absolute amounts invested, Brazil has some ideas on how it can bring in know-how (through its mega, state-run R&D institute EMBRAPA, amongst others). Guinea-Bissau a former Portuguese colony which is amongst the only lusophone countries on the continent can, in this respect, be considered as a test case for Brazil's ambitions in the field.

Last but not least, China's engagement with African agriculture is presented within the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. It has been pointed out that to date China is and has been much less active when it comes to acquiring land in Africa (much less than India or the Middle East), even though it is expected that this policy

might soon change, as with increasing incomes among average Chinese consumers, demand for agricultural commodities is expected to grow beyond the capacity of domestic production. Chapter 11 points out that China's post-1979 agriculture-led development was the outcome of strong incentives provided by the government through land tenure reform and pricing, coupled with major public investment in infrastructure, research into seeds and soils, increased fertilizer production and use, farmer education and the creation of off-farm employment through local enterprise development. As such, the premises behind this model are neutral enough to be adopted by African governance. Maybe the most important take-home message is that China's success in increasing production hinged on a strong, effective development-oriented policy framework based on a long-term vision and strategy. The authors conclude that China's approach has always been pragmatic and based on learning from others, adapting to local circumstances, scaling up what works and abandoning unsuccessful experiments, a lesson which is indeed instructive for African countries. But it also presumes the latter's governments would indeed be well enough equipped to be able to develop such a vision, and importantly to translate it into a strategy and approach that would be followed and maintained (with corrections where needed) for years to come.

The concluding chapter reviews the evidence presented in the preceding chapters and concludes that the three countries' contributions have been positive. However, a number of issues need to be addressed: including land rights and the downstream effect of technology and infrastructure designed for commercial agriculture on the surrounding communities; and also how to ensure that smallholders would also benefit from these networks. It rightly concludes that the crux of the problem is how and whether a transparent governance framework will deal with the latter. Or, in short: no governance, no go!

The book is well-edited, and clearly written. As a collection of individual contributions, I have seen worse, and for this the editors are to be congratulated. A good read for those scholars interested in international aid and South-South initiatives.

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