

THE BLAME GAME AND WHAT IS RECOMMENDED FOR SUCCESSFUL
AGRICULTURE IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

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About 75% of agricultural productive resources in Sub-Saharan Africa are communally owned. The World Bank and other promoters of a second Green Revolution (the use of synthetic materials and high yielding crop varieties to increase crop production in developing countries) in Africa perceive this phenomenon to be a challenge to commercial agricultural development. The promoters of the Green Revolution in Africa advocate the change from communal ownership of agricultural resources to private ownership. This position is thought to accelerate agricultural development through private investments. However, in order for policy makers to promote successful commercial agriculture, it is crucial to understand how local institutions and communities operate. These institutions vary from one community to another. Unfortunately, the prescription of a general policy for all, will lead to some successes, some failures and a lot of local resistance to the good intentions of policy makers.

What is the African communal property system?

Communal ownership of agricultural productive resources is governed by a set of complex and interlocking interests. These productive resources include, but are not limited to, land, labor and seeds. Typically, productive resources are vested in traditional authorities such as chiefs, leaders of lineages and heads of families. The governance and access of the resources vary from one group or community to another. Peoples' ability to access these resources is dependent on their relationship with the kin group or the community as a whole.

The need to understand African traditional institutions for successful commercial agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa

Between the late 1950s and 1970s, most African states together with the World Bank and other development partners attempted to steer their agricultural sectors towards commercial production. This was not successful since production declined after some few years of increase. The failed commercial agricultural development initiative was later blamed on government interference and the nature of resource governance. This led to the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs in the late 1970s to early 1990s in these countries.

The Structural Adjustment Program advocated liberalization and the cutting back of government interference in agriculture markets. But that did not lead to better agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, at the beginning of the 21st century, development partners in the agriculture sector started calling for more support for smallholder farmers.¹ This was in contrast to the agricultural development promoted in the 1950s to the 1970s which focused on large-scale farming. Smallholder production was seen as the best way for agriculture development.

¹ Smallholder farmers are farm units and individuals not fully integrated into the market. Their production is mainly geared towards self-subsistence although surplus is sometimes sold

Support for smallholder farmers increased after the 2006/7 world food price hikes and the rise in land grabbing in Sub-Saharan Africa. There were calls for more investment in smallholder agriculture by private capital and agribusiness firms instead of acquiring appropriating common resources, especially communal lands. However, agribusiness firms and the World Bank perceive communal ownership of resources to be a challenge to smallholder commercial agriculture development. To them, what is needed for a successful development of smallholder agriculture is the privatization of the common properties, in which individuals can register and get title deeds for their properties.

The idea that communal ownership is the enemy of commercial agricultural development is wrong. There is available research that shows how the fluidity and adaptability of African social institutions to economic development helped in the promotion of commercial tree crops such as cocoa and oil palm in the past.² The success of cocoa and oil palm production in West Africa can be attributed to the adaptability of communal ownership, control and access to resources.

Transactions through these social networks and impersonal commercial relations were the main means tree crop farmers established and maintained their plantations. In West Africa, farmers without prior access to working capital were able to rely on their kin or the larger community to gain access to land, labor, and various forms of agricultural resources to establish and maintain their own farms.

Communal ownership of agricultural properties is not only helpful in the establishment of commercial farms but also serves as the main source through which poor members of society get access to resources to establish subsistence farms. Subsistence farms provide the main source of food and income to farmers in most developing countries where there are little or no other social safety networks. Privatization of the already diminishing common agricultural resources will further marginalize the poor, especially women who rely on social networks to access these resources which they could hardly afford in the capital market.

The solution to align common objectives

Agricultural production in developing countries has been the main concern for many international organizations and policymakers. However, these international organizations and policymakers pay little attention to the positives of local institutional organizations. Local institutions which are not homogenous affect individual members differently, especially the vulnerable members who rely on the collective group to gain access to resources. Policies targeting rural or agrarian communities are not only changing the face of rural economies but also the relations of agrarian production within the family and the larger community. Individuals have to cooperate for the sustenance of the community. There is therefore the need to understand why communities adapt certain resource governance systems especially when the system is not static, but opens for negotiations.

My prescription is a more general one. The negotiability of communal property system is not an inconvenience for foreign investment in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. What is currently needed is for policy makers to understand the complex relationships which govern resource management and access in Sub-Saharan Africa. The World Bank and agribusiness firms must focus on creating synergies between the divergent

² See Hill, 1957; Berry, 1993; Gyasi, 1994; Amanor, 1999; Amanor & Dedituarah, 2001

interest groups in the communities for the success of the current commercial agricultural development. Since these arrangements are not against commercial agricultural development. This will help prevent situations where communities will have to unite against changes in their institutional arrangements of resource management, as it is happening in some communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. The promotion of private property systems will also create complex political and social structures in which people will compete to accumulate resources and capital rather than work towards sustainable community management.