

# IDS Policy Briefing

The latest development issues for policymakers from the Institute of Development Studies

## New directions for African agriculture

**Most of Africa's poor are rural, and most rely largely on agriculture for their livelihoods. But African agriculture is slow-growing or stagnating, held back by low yields, poor infrastructure, environmental change, HIV/AIDS and civil conflict. However, this sweeping picture hides some important success stories. We need to ask why agriculture is contributing to poverty reduction in some places but not all. This IDS *Policy Briefing* highlights how social, cultural and political relations shape agricultural production, patterns of investment, the uptake of technologies and the functioning of agricultural markets. New solutions for African agriculture will be successful only if they focus on understanding and influencing processes of innovation, intervention and policy, not just their technical content. Such an approach needs to be rooted in context-specific analysis, allowing for scenarios and options to be elaborated and debated by the multiple stakeholders involved in the future of African agriculture.**

Following the G8 Summit and the Commission for Africa report, significant sums of money have been pledged in support of Africa's development. If this is to have any impact on African poverty, then 'getting agriculture' moving must be part of the solution.

The standard story-line about African agriculture though is not positive. In most countries, the sector is slow-growing or stagnant, held back by negligible yield growth, poor infrastructure, environmental change, erratic weather, HIV/AIDS and civil conflict.

But sweeping, generalised analyses often hide important stories of success. Are these successes exceptional and limited to particular contexts, or are they replicable across wider areas to benefit larger numbers of people? Why is agriculture contributing to poverty reduction and livelihood improvement in some places, but not in many? Identifying ways forward implies moving away from failed past prescriptions, learning from and building on current successes, and encouraging new and innovative thinking about future pathways and opportunities.

This Policy Briefing highlights some of the questions explored in a special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* which brings together 22 articles



Mikkel Ostergaard/Panos

**Livestock are a central part of the agricultural economy in Africa**

that examine the challenges facing African agriculture. There are three possible responses: 'technical fixes', 'market and institutional fixes' and 'policy fixes'. Each approach reflects a different way of looking at the problem, and each implies different ways forward.

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

- What role can agriculture have in the challenge to reduce poverty by half by 2015?
- Are any of the successes of African agriculture replicable across wider areas to benefit larger numbers of people?
- Is achieving European Union import requirements realistic? Are there other ways of thinking about agricultural trade options for Africa?
- Do the new frameworks, targets, plans and programmes of international organisations offer anything new for African agriculture?
- How do we generate new thinking, rooted in African contexts and grounded realities, that makes a difference?
- How can new strategies and alliances in favour of Africa's rural poor be brought about?

## Technical fixes: resource inputs and green revolutions

Perhaps the most common diagnosis of the problems of African agriculture focuses on input constraints: too little irrigation, high-yielding seed, draught power, credit, and so on. So the solutions seem straightforward: provide more dams and irrigation schemes, improved seed varieties, subsidised fertilizer, microcredit, extension and training.

In many cases, delivering inputs has produced the desired outcomes – farm production has increased, per capita food supply and income levels have improved and poverty rates have fallen. But the history of technical interventions in Africa is also littered with discouraging and well-documented failures. Too often the argument for technical inputs is derived from generic ‘expert’ assumptions, rather than a detailed analysis of farm-level constraints in particular settings. These assumptions are often based on spurious analogy (for example, that Asia’s green revolution can be replicated in Africa), or inappropriate evolutionary models (that Africa is expected to progress through the same stages of development as Europe in past centuries).

Africa is different – in its geography, agro-ecology, history, politics and culture – and is immensely diverse. Yet generalised, ill-informed visions of development have dominated intervention strategies, backed up by narratives about ‘progress’, ‘success’ and ‘modern’ farming. This raises questions not only about appropriate technologies and infrastructure investment, but also about institutional and social issues. While the importance of agricultural inputs is recognised, a note of caution must be sounded. No single input will provide the desired outcome on its own; much depends on what types of inputs, where, for whom and whether they address the relevant limiting constraints.

### THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF AGRICULTURE IN AFRICA

In their article, **James Fairhead and Melissa Leach** remind us of the extensive literature on African agrarian systems and the importance of taking the social, in its broadest sense, seriously. They highlight how social and cultural relations shape agricultural production and investment, the technologies employed and the operation of agricultural markets. For example, cropping patterns or marketing choices are not the result of a single economic decision, but are the outcome of negotiation between husbands and wives, between co-wives, and between them and their children. **Paul Richards and Khadija Bah** reinforce these themes and highlight the importance of looking at the agrarian roots of conflict in Africa, and particularly patterns of unequal access to resources and rights.

Despite the richness of studies of the social dimensions of agrarian settings, they have had relatively little impact on mainstream policy debates about Africa, mainly because of the dominance of other disciplinary specialisms. Agricultural economists, together with agricultural scientists and technologists, have dominated policy debates since the 1960s. They have advocated input-focused intervention strategies, addressing farm-level supply-side constraints to boost agricultural productivity, largely based on farm-level production function models. Such approaches have many merits. But, apart from overlooking the social, political and institutional processes that affect outcomes, farm-level economic analyses may also miss broader patterns and longer term trends which impinge on input choices and output scenarios, but are not easily incorporated in a farm-level view.

Climate change and HIV/AIDS are just two examples of wider trends that are having major impacts on agricultural production and livelihoods in Africa. Assessing what inputs are appropriate where and when has become a more sophisticated task than can be adequately captured within an input-output modelling framework. Re-thinking is needed in a number of ways. First we must challenge inappropriate assumptions about what ‘farming’ is about, and avoid being misguided by simplistic versions of modernisation theory. We must ask ‘whose knowledge counts?’ – not just in disciplinary terms, but by drawing more on local understandings of complex contexts. Second, the social, political and institutional dimensions of technical change must be taken into account, as must agro-ecological questions and environmental influences, including climate change. And finally, we must recognise that technical change, while necessary, is not neutral – it carries major social and political commitments, and major consequences for governance.

This has two major implications for the future:

- the need to embrace new disciplinary perspectives, to include social, political, health, environmental and other analysts in technology development and policy assessment.
- the need to highlight the key challenge of governing technical change, from upstream design to downstream delivery and regulation.



Productive agriculture is possible even in the harshest environments

Paul Weinberg/Franos

## Market and institutional fixes: getting prices and institutions right

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, a uniform view dominated donor thinking about agriculture in Africa. Promoted aggressively by the international financial institutions, the 'Washington consensus' policies focused on 'getting the state out' and 'getting prices right'. These ideas translated into market liberalisation, including the abolition or commercialisation of parastatal organisations and removal of input subsidies. Many countries resisted these reforms by phasing implementation, renegotiating funding conditionalities or indulging in bureaucratic foot-dragging. But, with few exceptions, agricultural reforms based on 'market fix' thinking were implemented across Africa.

The consequences for rural livelihoods have been highly variable. Some places and certain (mainly export) crops have enjoyed production and income gains. In Kenya, horticulture has been an economic success. In West Africa, cocoa smallholders saw significant growth for many years, and cotton has grown strongly in parts of the Sahel. For those who are well connected to markets and have products to sell for good prices, liberalisation has had positive impacts.

In other places, the story has been less encouraging. In Ethiopia, despite various radical efforts to boost agriculture, smallholders remain as vulnerable as ever. In Zambia, those farmers who have been unable to diversify into cash crops are worse off after liberalisation than before. In southern Africa clientelism has undermined accountability and processes of policy implementation, resulting in increased livelihood vulnerability and the food crisis of 2002.

For a variety of reasons, then, the gains from liberalisation in Africa have been patchy, limited or absent. Poorer farmers have lost the support once offered by (admittedly inefficient and often corrupt) parastatal marketing boards and government research and extension systems, but have rarely gained new support, markets or production opportunities.



Fred Hoogervorst/Panos

**Burkina Faso produces some of the world's highest quality, low-cost cotton but cannot compete with subsidised cotton from elsewhere**

In the light of this, now is the time to rethink. Some continue to argue that liberalisation offers the answer but that the reforms have not been sequenced well, that they have not been implemented properly, or that other factors (corruption, conflict, bureaucratic delay, 'cultural' impediments) have got in the way.

But other alternatives are emerging. Getting prices right does matter, but so does getting institutions right, and this must be preceded by putting certain basic conditions in place (including infrastructure and land reform). The primary diagnosis, however, is institutional. As **Andrew Dorwood** and colleagues argue markets cannot be expected to work as the textbooks predict if coordination is weak and institutions are missing. Addressing coordination and market failures requires support for regulated monopolies,

franchises, trader and farmer associations, combined with price guarantees, price support and/or subsidies for inputs, outputs or credit. This approach provides an important progression from the extreme neo-liberalism of the Washington consensus, defining a route to pro-poor agricultural growth that takes account of the complexities of local implementation and the need to invest in institutional innovation.

Others however argue that this response is still too limited, not least because it draws heavily on 'new institutional economics', which is largely silent on issues of politics and power. The social and political dimensions of real markets and institutions are crucial, since coordination and transactions are as much social and political issues as they are economic.

### GLOBALISATION AND INEQUALITY: NEW CHALLENGES

Globalisation has altered the structural and power relations that shape global agriculture to such a degree that local-level institutional coordination simply tinkers at the margins. **Adebayo Olukoshi** stresses the urgency of recapturing the development agenda from an African perspective, arguing that following external models has contributed to an emergent crisis, where poverty, inequality and disenfranchisement are leading to political instability and conflict. He sets out an agenda for 'investing in Africa' that goes well beyond an institutional fix to the heart of politics and governance. **Kojo Amanor** maintains that agribusiness is starting to dominate the profitable agricultural sectors, squeezing out others in the process. As a consequence, a dualistic scenario is emerging, where wealthy entrepreneurs linked to foreign capital and to political elites are making money from agriculture but others are languishing behind.

A dualistic model of a vibrant commercial agriculture, engaging with world markets, alongside a struggling smallholder sector that gradually withers away over time, is consistent with a 'modernisation' view of agriculture that is popular with many African governments and donors. But how likely is it that new commercial entrants in Africa will survive in the cut-throat world of global agriculture markets?

Perhaps agricultural trade can be boosted in Africa in more innovative ways. World markets are changing, sources of demand are shifting and there may be opportunities closer to home. Potential demand for agricultural products in Africa far exceeds supply, but trade is constrained by inappropriate barriers, poor transport and lack of information. Some African governments have initiated 'look east' policies, making connections with Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. These markets, still under-explored, offer a future for African agriculture that is not tied to conventional, more restrictive trade relationships.

Leaving aside the commercial viability of export-oriented agriculture under today's global market conditions,

others argue that the social and political consequences of increasing inequality within agriculture are of even greater concern. Tensions are rising in many countries between the smallholder majority and a new commercial elite.

As **Paul Richards** and **Khadija Bah** note, the extent to which African civil wars have also been agrarian crises has often been under-estimated. By failing to address issues of agrarian injustice at the root of recent African conflicts, donors and policymakers risk fuelling or reconstructing the causes of war.

There is thus a need to move far beyond 'getting prices right'. Agricultural policy reforms must be carefully sequenced and complemented with institutional arrangements for making markets work, bringing the state back in. But Africa's agricultural problems are not amenable to just a simple 'institutional fix'.

### **Policy fixes: experts, frameworks and initiatives**

A new policy architecture for Africa is now emerging. But how does this relate to local priorities? And how does it learn lessons from past policy

initiatives in support of agriculture and growth? The Millennium Development Goals provide a framework within which these new efforts are set. The UN's ambitious targets are supported by the African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), national poverty reduction strategies (PRSPs), and associated direct budget support mechanisms. But do these frameworks, targets, plans and programmes offer anything new, and will these new policy approaches succeed?

Following the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 90s, much of Africa is characterised by lack of government capacity in basic agricultural research and support. Many African farmers have not seen a government researcher or extension worker for years. In parallel, many countries have seen the emergence of a two-track agricultural sector: one profiting from new commercial opportunities, the other characterised by stagnation and poverty. Yet today, as recognition grows of the limitations of the liberalisation reform experiments, there is renewed interest in poverty reduction as the core challenge for development. Agriculture, it is argued, must be central to meeting this challenge.

In the past, policy failure was explained in a number of ways. Either the policy was deemed 'bad' (for example government support for subsidies and parastatals), or the policy was seen as 'good' but as implemented or sequenced incorrectly. Or it was asserted that good policies had no chance of working, given the un-level playing field in which they were implemented. All these explanations frame policy failure as a technical problem, amenable to technical solutions. It is perhaps not surprising that those on the receiving end of these expert-driven policy solutions – farmers or government staff across the continent – are bemused.

Several contributions to the *IDS Bulletin* highlight the social and political dynamics of policy processes. This approach emphasises not just the technical content of policy, but a wider appreciation of the processes by which policies arise and are implemented, thereby allowing them to be strengthened both technically and politically.

*Continues over page* ►



Jacob Silberberg/Panos

**New varieties suitable for local conditions are essential to boost agricultural growth**

## Livelihood contexts and scenarios

A core challenge facing us now is to go beyond conventional ways of thinking about African agriculture. Past debates have often been unhelpfully framed in terms of policy choices between dichotomous oppositions: smallholder versus large-scale commercial agriculture, subsistence versus market-oriented agriculture, cash crops versus staple food crops, or subsidies versus the free market.

All too often these debates reach the same appropriate but unhelpful conclusion: it all depends. No single scenario is inevitable, no single policy solution is appropriate. We can - and must - get beyond the sterile generalities of policy debates. Instead of developing policy solutions from top-down arguments and models, policy solutions must emerge out of the diversity and variety of local contexts.

### LIVELIHOOD PATHWAYS: MULTIPLE ROLES FOR AGRICULTURE

A number of papers in the *IDS Bulletin* attempt elements of a livelihood scenario. Each concur that there are different ways of getting people out of poverty, and each concludes with a nuanced version of the 'classic' debates, but is not framed by them. Thus for instance, **Godfrey Bahigwa** and colleagues argue for Uganda and Tanzania that the pattern of 'de-agrarianisation' and livelihood diversification may be inevitable, but rather than trying to stem the flow, policies need to support those leaving the land, and refocus in different ways for those who remain as rural producers. **Ben Cousins** and **Edward Lahiff** raise the question of what type of agriculture is needed in Africa, and the implications this has for land reform strategies. Many studies demonstrate low production and low productivity in the smallholder sector but miss the fact that, with many rural people engaging in diverse livelihood activities, farming may be just one part of a portfolio of activities. Farmers are not farmers in the standard mould – they do not respond to policies and interventions as they are 'supposed' to. This is not because they are 'irrational', 'backward' or 'non-modern', but because policy is out of step with the realities of their lives.



Agriculture is a family affair: social relationships between and within households are key

Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos

## New directions for African agriculture?

What new directions are needed for African agriculture? A number of key conclusions emerge:

- Generic policy assessments are of limited use for policy formulation and implementation. Instead, policy must always build on context-specific analysis.
- Detailed assessments of interlocking sets of constraints to agriculture must be developed from location-based analysis. This will require investments in local-level innovation systems.
- Typologies and scenarios should be developed for each context that go beyond simple either/or dichotomies, but offer different options for different circumstances.
- Methodological development for such work requires serious investment, both from within Africa and from donor countries.
- The agricultural establishment must be encouraged to think more creatively about the problem-solving process in African agriculture, and their place (and that of farmers) within it.

There is of course no magic bullet for the problems of African agriculture, no

technical, market, institutional or policy fix. The papers in the *IDS Bulletin* make the case for looking at context and particular settings before jumping to conclusions about what to do. We must also go beyond recycling redundant ideas, and learn from past failures. This is not to say that 'old' ideas – whether rural roads, irrigation schemes, land reforms, input subsidies or price stabilisation – have no utility. Possible solutions include some very old ideas but, importantly, these old ideas are qualified in new ways.

Central to all solutions are social, cultural and political factors. Rather than an expert-driven, technocratic approach, a more politically sophisticated stance is required. A new emphasis needs to be on understanding and influencing processes of innovation, intervention and policy, not just their technical content. Such an approach requires an interdisciplinary approach – bringing the best of economic and technical analysis together with insights from socio-cultural and political analysis. It also requires a thoroughly grounded approach, rooted in context-specific constraints analysis, allowing for scenarios and options to be elaborated and debated by the multiple stakeholders involved in the future of African agriculture.

## THE POLITICS OF POLICY PROCESSES: A KEY AGENDA

As **Adebayo Olukoshi** argues, the implementation of economic liberalisation in Africa became inextricably linked to a parallel process of patrimonial politics and elite accumulation, consolidating both commercial and political interests. The consequences for the rural poor, in a context of imperfect electoral systems with limited accountability, were rarely considered. **Patrick Mulvany** points to an increasingly globalised agri-food system and suggests certain 'technical fixes' may suit particular multinational interests in the seed and agricultural inputs industry. Whenever 'pro-poor' benefits are claimed for genetically-modified crops, for example, the underlying commercial and political interests must always be carefully examined. Sometimes self-interest is less evident, and policy processes unfold partly because no alternative is envisaged or aired. **Ian Scoones** shows how simple 'narrative' lines of argument can become deeply entrenched in ways of thinking and ways of acting. For example, highly contested policy narratives about desertification and deforestation have defined natural resource management strategies throughout Africa. This has occurred because narrow forms of expertise, routinised and locked into particular institutional settings, remain largely unquestioned.

At the global level, the challenge of getting African perspectives heard and incorporated into appropriate standard-setting and rule-making processes – in the WTO for instance – is immense. The levels of organisation and networking capacities required are often absent in African governments and can be easily undermined by donor behaviour. The scaling back of state capacity due to economic reforms has made the challenge even harder.

The agrarian politics of the post-reform era presents major challenges for the new organisational and political frameworks for African governance and development. The African Union, Regional Economic Communities and NEPAD must each address issues of politics and policy process at multiple levels. New strategies and new forms of political alliance are needed in favour of Africa's rural poor. What might they look like? How will they be brought about?

Several dangers exist. First, the new players in the policy game, familiar with technically-driven, expert-led decision-making, may slip back into the comfortable approach of separating the technical from the political. A second danger results from the new configurations of agrarian interests forged by the economic reform and adjustment era. These are not necessarily supportive of a pro-poor, smallholder-led agricultural regeneration: the new elites are good at repeating the latest

mantras of the donor community, but there is often a wide gulf between policy rhetoric and political action.

Confronting these challenges requires shifting the focus from technical policy content to an approach that links content to *process*. This brings politics to the fore. It also potentially brings new voices and perspectives to the table. This has some major implications for the way we think about and implement policy. It means, for example:

- going beyond narrowly-defined technical expertise, and recognising that policies must be negotiated outcomes, requiring the involvement of multiple players with different interests.
- not simply resorting to exhortations about needing renewed 'political will', but examining the interests and political choices underlying policy processes, and strategising around how pro-poor outcomes may be realised.
- openly debating the politics of agrarian change in Africa and internationally, recognising that this is necessarily a political process.
- building the capacity of 'technocrats' in government ministries to understand processes of policy change, so that they can influence change in favour of pro-poor outcomes.

## RESOURCES

'New Directions for African Agriculture', *IDS Bulletin* Volume 36, Number 2 (June 2005), edited by Ian Scoones, Aaron DeGrassi, Stephen Devereux and Lawrence Haddad.

## FURTHER READING

NEPAD (2005) Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, Johannesburg, NEPAD  
[www.nepad.org/2005/files/caadp.php](http://www.nepad.org/2005/files/caadp.php)

Commission for Africa (2005) *Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa*, London: CFA  
[www.commissionforafrica.org](http://www.commissionforafrica.org)

DFID (2004) *New Directions for Agriculture in Reducing Poverty*  
<http://dfid-agriculture-consultation.nri.org/process.htm>

Regoverning Markets Project  
[www.regoverningmarkets.org](http://www.regoverningmarkets.org)

Farm Africa (2004) *Reaching the Poor: Investment in smallholder agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa*  
[www.farmafrica.org.uk/documents/20.PDF](http://www.farmafrica.org.uk/documents/20.PDF)

## CREDITS

This briefing paper is based on a special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* (Volume 36, Number 2, June 2005) and has been written by **Ian Scoones, Aaron DeGrassi, Stephen Devereux** and **Lawrence Haddad** and edited by **Caroline Knowles**.

It is part of the work of the DFID-funded 'Agriculture and Pro-Poor Growth' research consortium hosted by IDS and involving ODI, Imperial College at Wye and partners in Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi.

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from *IDS Policy Briefings* in their own publications. In return, IDS requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.

The full text of *IDS Policy Briefings* and more information about the Institute and its work are available on the IDS website.

© Institute of Development Studies, 2005, ISSN 1360-4724

IDS Policy Briefings are published by the Institute of Development Studies and aim to provide concise, up-to-date reviews of important development issues. To subscribe,

[www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/briefs/index.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/briefs/index.html)

Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)1273 606261

Fax +44 (0)1273 681647 or 621202

Email [ids@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ids@ids.ac.uk)

[www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)