

# **AGRO-PESSIMISM, CAPITALISM AND AGRARIAN CHANGE: TRAJECTORIES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) appears to be obvious and is widely noted in the literature on African<sup>1</sup> development. For example, the Commission for Africa (2005) states that ‘agriculture contributes at least 40 per cent of exports, 30 per cent of GDP, up to 30 per cent of foreign exchange earnings, and 70 to 80 per cent of employment’. There is however wide variation across countries in the relative importance of agriculture measured in terms of its contribution to GDP and exports, as well as aggregate evidence that agriculture’s share of GDP has declined significantly in many countries. Still, the significance of agriculture as an occupation (either as “main” or “secondary” occupation in both rural and peri-urban areas) is well established.

Conventional wisdom tends to present us with two images. First, one hears that there is significant potential for agricultural development, often understood in static terms of comparative advantage.<sup>2</sup> This informs agriculture-centred development strategies where ‘agricultural productivity gains must be the basis for national economic growth and the instrument for mass poverty reduction and food security’ (World Bank 2007: 19).<sup>3</sup> Second, this potential is regarded as severely constrained for several reasons and aggregate agricultural performance is judged to have been disappointing if not dismal. The literature on Africa, especially in the aftermath of the global recession of the 1970s, has been largely pessimistic, and despite some more nuanced assessments in recent times, ‘Agro-Afro-pessimism’ continues to permeate policy discourse.

The pessimism around agricultural performance, coupled with the optimism about its potential and the necessity of agriculture as an engine of development, combine to inform many of the most popular agriculture-centred policy recommendations for Africa, notably the quest for an ‘African Green Revolution’ to boost farm productivity and the promotion of smallholder export production to raise farmers’ incomes, drive growth and reduce poverty all at the same time.<sup>4</sup> These policy fads and conventional platitudes, albeit containing some sensible ideas about which it is hard to disagree, tend to obscure tensions between intended and unintended outcomes, and power relations and inequality, as they are often presented in terms of simplistic win-win scenarios. Thus, it is expected that a Green Revolution is not only possible, but that it can help masses of smallholders out of poverty. It is assumed that export crop expansion will raise incomes thereby not only lifting masses of smallholders out of poverty but turning them into successful and viable entrepreneurs. The contradictions involved in agricultural development processes are therefore neglected: the fact that accumulation and generally ‘development’ can be both a progressive and awful process and

‘varies only, and importantly in its awfulness’ (Kitching 1989: 195); that there are no easy answers or panaceas; that also large-scale commercial farmers, despite their superior means, need strong support from the state to thrive; that markets open opportunities but are discriminatory; that, despite pro-liberalization rhetoric, ‘economic agents’ do not like competition and will do all they can to stifle it; that smallholders can expand their production and incomes by deepening the exploitation of their household members, notably women and youth; that the expansion of relatively decently remunerated wage employment in agribusiness farming comes with tough working conditions and uncertainty. All these dialectic tendencies, rather than ignored, should be an analytical and empirical starting and fundamental point.

This chapter has two over-arching aims. First, it attempts to question generalised ‘agro-pessimistic’ assessments of agricultural development in SSA, by emphasizing the substantial evidence of success, the marked unevenness in agrarian/rural development trajectories between and within countries and the diversity in initial conditions at the time of independence. Second, the chapter will discuss the diversity of agrarian structures and processes of change by referring to analyses of the uneven development of capitalism in the continent, particularly in relation to shifting agricultural policy regimes towards liberalization and state withdrawal. In conclusion, the chapter will briefly explore the challenges and implications of globalization and in particular the emergence of global value chains for African agriculture and prospects of capitalist development, with a final reflection on the challenges faced by African states.

## GETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: THE FOUNDATIONS OF ‘AGRO-PESSIMISM’ IN AFRICA

Devereux and Maxwell emphatically assert that ‘SSA is the only region in the world currently facing widespread food insecurity as well as persistent threats of famine’ (Devereux and Maxwell 2001: 1). Many studies and reports on rural Africa stress the significant levels of undernourishment and malnourishment and its association with increasing poverty in the last 30 years, to highlight the disaster facing most African populations.<sup>5</sup> There is no question that undernutrition is a serious problem in SSA and indeed that, in comparison with other developing regions, some indicators of nutritional status are particularly alarming.<sup>6</sup> It is also true that some countries still face episodes of famine, increasingly related to conflict and much less to production problems or food availability (Devereux 2001). However, it is misleading to overemphasise the bleak picture and ignore the progress made despite the enormous challenges and constraints. These pessimistic accounts risk falling into the trap of advocating costly and unrealistic programmes of food self-sufficiency, which numerous African governments have drafted since the 1960s without much success. An often-cited statistic by agro-pessimists is the rate of decline in per capita food production on aggregate terms (see Figure 1). Unfortunately, both the food production data and the population data used to illustrate this decline are extremely unreliable. Besides, ‘average calorie intake has serious limitations as a nutrition indicator’ (Deaton and Drèze, 2008: 70). Ignoring these problems for the moment, the apparent decline in per capita food production in SSA was especially marked in the period 1970-84, but it should be noted that food production over the last decade has grown in line with population and has been significantly faster than the rate of growth of the rural population.

Much of the ‘gloom and doom’ literature, indeed, presents evidence that compares the situation in the 1970s with the situation in 2000. In other words, the assessments tend to be confined to the period of global recession followed by neoliberal globalization. In order to make a more reasonable assessment one needs to go further back in time and get a sense of what has happened in the long term.<sup>7</sup> ‘Agro-pessimism’ was a view shared by advocates of liberalization at the time when the World Bank published the Berg Report in 1981 and by ‘neo-populists’. The former were particularly critical of the performance in the 1960s and 1970s blaming ‘agrarian crisis’ on excessive government intervention and policy ‘mistakes’ (Sender and Smith 1984). The latter criticized both ‘modernist’ state interventions and subsequent liberalization efforts, suggesting that smallholders and especially food producers had been systematically discriminated against by successive policy regimes in SSA and that an excessive focus on export crops had undermined household food security (Amara and Founou-Tchuigoua 1990; World Bank 2007; Hyden 2006). There are, however, strong empirical reasons to cast doubts on these pessimistic accounts.

First, it is imperative to consider data quality for food production more seriously. The quality of agricultural statistics may have improved recently but in many countries annual staple production statistics remain guesstimates. This means that if we have an aggregate figure of a decline of 15 per cent in aggregate farm production per capita recorded between 1965 and 1995, the thesis of ‘crisis’ ‘depends on being sure of the numbers to within 15 per cent accuracy, a figure well within the range of errors in data’ (Wiggins 2002: 102).<sup>8</sup>

Another problem is that data quality varies a great deal from country to country and from period to period. One source of unreliability is precisely how raw data are generated. In many countries and for many years food production statistics have been routinely produced by government officials in provincial or district departments where production levels are ‘guessed’ after various factors are taken into account, such as rainfall in the region, input distribution and so on (cf. Svedberg 1999). The problem is that rainfall and input distribution are likely to be very variable even within small administrative units and this variability cannot be captured by even the most well-intentioned officials. Less well-intentioned officials may have incentives to inflate or deflate food production statistics depending on the implications of the figures, whether it is to pretend to have met government-set targets and score points within the administration or to attract more funds and projects from donors, which may generate much needed rents at the local level.<sup>9</sup> In general, however, the main constraint on the generation of good annual agricultural data is material. Statistical offices are under-resourced, especially at local level and getting accurate production information from sparsely populated areas where many farmers hardly keep records of their output, especially where some production is consumed within the household, is a massively demanding task.

Second, the quality of agricultural data has been uneven across crops. In particular, especially for the first two or three decades after independence, many SSA countries did not produce or under-reported data on roots and tubers (yam, cassava, sweet potato, etc.) as well as small livestock, despite their massive importance for nutrition (Guyer 1987; Berry 1984; Sender and Smith 1986: 100). As a result, food production may well have been underestimated especially during the period 1960-85.

Third, reported discrepancies between recorded food production and increases in calorie intake at least until the early 1980s suggest that domestic production estimates were biased downwards by the evidence of fast rising food imports (see Figures 1 and 3 for official series).<sup>10</sup> This matches micro-level evidence on nutrition and domestic food supplies in urban centres, which is inconsistent with the idea of a production crisis (see Guyer 1987; Berry

1984; Wiggins 2002). In other words, rapid urbanization, industrialization and changes in diet patterns could have been accompanied by increases in imports that did not necessarily imply a reduction in domestic food production. In fact, recent FAO analysis of cereal supply sources shows that over the last 40-year period and especially since the mid 1990s *both* domestic production and imports increased on aggregate (Kidane et al. 2006: 9). In many countries, food imports (40 per cent of which is usually accounted for wheat, rarely produced in SSA) did not compete or displace domestic production (with exceptions like rice in Senegal and meat in Côte d'Ivoire)<sup>11</sup>, and often import increases were more associated with trade and industrial policies than with alleged domestic production shortfalls (Mortimore 2003). Nor have food imports become an increasing drain on foreign exchange since their relative share of total merchandise imports has stagnated at around 10-11 per cent in the last decade (Figure 2). Finally, problems with African food trade data also vitiate the reliability of production estimates at country level. The notorious problem of smuggling is well documented and, arguably, the process of liberalization and currency devaluations during the 1980s and 1990s may have made 'visible' output flows previously concealed by conspicuous inter-country smuggling, especially for cocoa between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, coffee between Ethiopia and Kenya (Dercon y Ayalew 1995) and groundnuts around Senegal.

A critical review of food production statistics and trends also offers insights into another debate that has preoccupied pessimists, namely the effects of 'cash-crop' or export-crop expansion in African farming systems. Aggregate trends show significant increases in export crop production from the colonial period onwards (Sender and Smith 1986; see also Figures 4-6 and Table 2). In aggregate, it is hard to discern a negative relationship between food production and export crop production in absolute or per capita terms. The variability of export crop performance across countries and periods does not seem to mirror any opposite trends in food production. In fact, as Mortimore (2003) shows for a sample of West African countries, significant increases in export crop production were accompanied by equally impressive food production trends. Micro-level evidence has consistently shown a positive relationship between engagement with cash/export crops and household food security as well as child nutrition, and no convincing evidence of competition between cash- and food-crops (see studies referred to in Maxwell 2001 and Sender and Smith 1986; see also von Braun and Kennedy 1986, Peters 2006 and Benfica et al. 2005).

The foundations of 'agro-pessimism' also shake if one offers a more balanced interpretation of actually published statistics and when the significant number of agricultural success stories are considered. Sender (1999) argues that annual agricultural growth rates of 2.34 per cent between 1965 and 1995 (and 3.1 per cent after 1984) cannot be regarded as unimpressive especially if compared with 1.5 per cent growth rates in the now advanced capitalist countries during the early stages of their industrialization. For a more extended period, between 1961 and 2005 the compound annual agricultural growth rate in real terms is still 2.4 per cent. Part of this growth was due to a rather good, albeit uneven, performance in export crop production, especially for tea, cotton, cocoa and tropical fruits – mangoes, pineapples - (with SSA annual growth rates of 4.7 per cent, 3.3 per cent, 2.6 per cent and around 2.8 per cent between 1960 and 2007), tobacco (until 1999) and less impressive for coffee and groundnuts (less than 1 per cent p.a.). This growth has been possible not only through land expansion, as the land frontier became more closed in some areas, but also and more significantly through notable yield increases, even though not as fast as other Asian competitors (in the case of cocoa, for example). The growth of non-traditional agricultural exports (fruits and vegetables and cut flowers) has also been impressive since the 1990s (see Table 2).

These aggregate statistics, however, mask significant variation across countries, another reason to question generalizations about ‘African agriculture’. A number of countries have attained real agricultural growth rates superior to 3 per cent (especially the protagonists of the ‘cotton revolution’ – see below- i.e. Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso; and also Kenya, Nigeria and Malawi, all for different reasons). Some countries have performed much worse, with growth rates below 1 per cent, as is the case of small states and islands (e.g. Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles) and some countries severely affected by conflict (e.g. Sierra Leone and DR Congo). Some particular contrasts are illustrative of the importance of diversity, history and context to assess agricultural performance in SSA. For example, cocoa production and exports followed quite different trends in Ghana, where performance was very disappointing until the 1990s, and Côte d’Ivoire, where cocoa production expanded continuously on the basis of both expansion in cultivation land and significant increases in yields (see Figures 4-5). Differences in agrarian structures, agro-industrial linkages and policy regimes account for much of this divergence between the two neighbouring countries. The disparity also serves to question the hypothesis that underperformance of agriculture in Africa is mostly due to unfavourable external conditions, especially to declines in world market prices. For other crops, the ‘cotton revolution’ in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Benin) contrasts with less impressive cotton performance in Eastern and Southern Africa.<sup>12</sup> Similarly cereal production and yield growth is significantly better in Southern and Eastern Africa than in Middle and West Africa. In contrast, performance in roots and tubers in West Africa has been much better than in Southern Africa. Contrasts can also be drawn within countries. In Zambia the Northern and Western provinces are, in terms of both export and food production, very disadvantaged compared with the Central Province, the corridor linking Lusaka with the Copperbelt and parts of the Eastern Province where cotton contract growing has flourished. In Mozambique, the relative agricultural dynamism of the provinces of Manica, Tete and Zambezia clearly contrast with the poor agricultural record of Inhambane and Gaza provinces. Over time, Zimbabwe has in a fairly short time span moved from being one of the most successful agricultural exporters and grain producers in the continent until the 1990s to a situation of humanitarian emergency amidst agricultural and economic collapse.

The diversity stressed above and some of the good performance that a more balanced account of long-term trends is illustrated in Figure 5 and Table 2 and also reflected in a significant number of ‘success stories’ (see Wiggins 2005 and Gabre-Madhin and Haggblade 2004; Maredia et al, 2000). These can be classified into supply-side and demand-side success trajectories. The first (supply-side) group includes impressive performance in a range of situations typically associated with agricultural research and technological diffusion (Gabre-Madhin and Haggblade 2004)<sup>13</sup> such as: (a) regional-research-led improvements in cassava yields as well as product quality, which made cassava also a profitable cash crop in West Africa; (b) fast increase in rice production in Mali, through irrigation and better seed variety and especially the creation and diffusion of NERICA ‘New Rice for Africa’, an African rice variety very successfully introduced in several countries (in terms of yields and pest resistance); (c) research on and diffusion of HYV (high-yield seed varieties) of maize in Eastern and Southern Africa (especially Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Malawi), resulting in significant yield increases and better commercialization of maize; or institutional arrangements like in the case of (d) the excellent performance of cotton production and marketing through state-led vertically integrated chains in West Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal). These supply-side stories generally confirm the decisive role that state intervention can play in agriculture, where establishing the basics is essential for agricultural development (Dorward et al. 2004, see also Lele and Christiansen 1990). The second category of success stories (demand) includes cases such as: (i) the horticultural, fruit and cut flower export drive,

spurred by a combination transnational agribusiness demand and state support, particularly in Kenya, Zambia, Côte d'Ivoire, and more recently Ethiopia, partly led by global agribusiness in search of new sourcing locations and partly in connection of state-led programmes; (ii) the dairy sub-sector in Kenya; (c) the thriving belts of agriculture around cities and small towns, which have responded to urban demand for vegetables, fruit, livestock produce and grain and local dynamism even in contexts of apparent macroeconomic stagnation (see Guyer 1987 and Wiggins 2002); (d) the effective (and guaranteed) demand created by parastatal marketing boards until the early 1980s, which helped even small resource poor farmers in isolated regions to engage in cash crop and more input-intensive farming through implicit and explicit subsidies (especially on transport and inputs), thereby addressing the market failures that have become so obvious with market liberalization afterwards.

In this section I have so far questioned the foundations of pessimism on African agricultural performance. However, the same empirical evidence can also be used to show the below-par performance of *many* African countries in comparison with the massive success of several Asian, particularly East and South-east Asian competitors. In other words, African performance in agriculture has not been bad but could have been very much better given the favourable international demand conditions. A good indicator of this differential performance is the loss (and low levels) of *market shares* in global markets for several agricultural commodities, especially 'traditional exports', in which many SSA countries had positions of dominance until the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> This is especially the case for coffee, palm oil, oilseeds, tea, cotton, cashew nuts and oilseeds, and, in particular, for all measures of agricultural productivity. This evidence shows that on average SSA has performed inadequately in comparison with better performers, particularly in Asia.<sup>15</sup> There are structural and historical reasons for this relative underperformance as Karshenas (2001) shows. First, initial conditions were very different in SSA and Asia, if one takes the early 1960s as a point of departure. By that time, most African countries were already severely disadvantaged in terms of the infrastructure and production conditions required for agricultural modernization. In most SSA territories high land/labour ratios were the norm in contrast with massive labour abundance and much greater land pressure in Asia (Barrett et al. 2001, Austin 2005).<sup>16</sup> Low demographic densities (Table 1) and the related lack of sufficient infrastructural investments during both the colonial and post-colonial periods marked the conditions for a more extensive and precarious agricultural development path in most African regions. Labour constraints and relative land abundance (although with lower soil quality) have indeed been a hindrance to more rapid intensification and to the emergence of capitalist forms of production, whereas in Asia pressures to intensify and accumulate appear earlier and more forcefully. However, the experience in 'settler' economies in Southern Africa has also shown how natural conditions can be changed with accumulation through forced dispossession, resulting in contradictory outcomes of dynamism with social injustice, labour repression and gross inequality (notably South Africa). At the same time, the emergence of coalition of interests to support agrarian accumulation and modernization through state intervention (e.g. Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritius, Kenya and post-apartheid Zimbabwe) also attenuated some of the structural obstacles highlighted by Karshenas. These structural features and the differences in historical trajectories reflect the uneven development of capitalism in African agriculture and the historically-contingent agrarian dynamics that have characterized SSA from the colonial into the post-colonial times. The next section will discuss these matters.

*Rural Capitalism and Capitalists*

An initial appreciation of the uneven development of capitalism in African agriculture and the contingency of agrarian dynamics as a result of interactions between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors can be made by highlighting the variety of agrarian structures in terms of land distribution and forms of production. Despite the common image of African agriculture as characterized by ‘smallholders’ or an ‘amorphous peasantry’ (cf. Hill 1968), one can note very important variations in the distribution of land by farm size, particularly within the small- to middle-scale range (0-20 ha). A basic comparison between selected countries on the basis of agricultural census data illustrates this variety by showing that the proportion of total cultivated land in farms below 1-2 ha and farms above 5 ha varies markedly from country to country, even among those countries lacking forms of large-scale industrialised agriculture (see Figure 7).<sup>17</sup> This wide range of land concentration and farm-sizes reflects the legacy and current variety of labour regimes, with more or less reliance on family labour, casual hired labour, seasonal migrant labour and, in the past, slave labour. The variety in forms and scale of rural accumulation is also marked, especially if one compares extremes such as the settler economies of South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe with the predominantly pastoral societies of parts of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa (Oya 2007b).<sup>18</sup>

This diversity is associated with the way ‘agrarian questions’ have been addressed and resolved or not in SSA. According to Bernstein (2004), Africa has faced great difficulty in resolving the ‘classical’ agrarian question, i.e. in achieving a transformation towards capitalist forms of production; the disappearance of ‘peasantries’; and creating political alliances between urban and rural labour or an organized proletariat. Thus, in SSA, agriculture has made only a limited contribution to primary accumulation for industrialization. Bernstein’s pessimism also extends to the prospects for the formation of a national bourgeoisie and the emergence of developmental states in Africa. However, on this matter there is no consensus. While some argue that (rural) capitalist classes, albeit still weak and unevenly developed, have emerged and continue to do so in most of SSA (cf. Oya 2007b; Hill 1970; Sender and Smith 1986; Austin 2005; Rapley 1993; Ghai and Radwan 1983), other authors are more sceptical about the idea of an emerging African capitalist bourgeoisie, especially in the countryside, where an ‘uncaptured peasantry’ persists (cf. Hyden 2006, chapter 4; Berry 1993). The uneven emergence of rural accumulators, in some views, is consistent with the relatively low incidence of landlessness in African social formations, which has partly led Berry (1993) to defend a thesis of ‘accumulation without dispossession’,<sup>19</sup> despite survey evidence of growing polarization and land pressures in the era of neoliberal globalization (Raikes 2000, Peters 2004). Berry (1993), in this respect, has always advanced the idea that class, kinship (social networks) and various sectional interests are not mutually exclusive in Africa and that class differentiation can occur within kinship networks, which shape the incidence of redistribution and kin-related patronage that is frequently observed in the continent.<sup>20</sup> In Oya (2007b) I have argued that the stories of African rural capitalists provide some evidence of the sort of ‘grass roots’ capitalist development mentioned by Warren (1980), and other researchers of African capitalism (Rapley 1994; Hill 1970; Austin 2005). Whereas available evidence points to a dominance of ‘capitalism from below’ (through smallholder differentiation)<sup>21</sup>, there is no shortage of evidence concerning accumulators originating from a variety of ‘ruling’ classes, whether pre-

capitalist landed rural elites or members of a rising urban petty bourgeoisie of merchants, bureaucrats and politicians (Oya 2007b, Kitching 1980).

### *Rural social differentiation*

Some of the disagreements and unanswered questions above are a result of problems with the available evidence, both in terms of availability and quality. In fact, studies of rural capitalists and rural accumulation are extremely scarce; research has tended to concentrate on ‘peasants’ and ‘small farmers’ as if these were the only or even most appropriate empirical and analytical categories. In fact, agricultural, expenditure and income data disaggregated by class of farmers have not been collected on any systematic and consistent basis. Nevertheless, scattered quantitative and qualitative evidence, mostly through micro-surveys and in-depth studies, tends strongly to support the hypothesis of marked rural social differentiation, partly reflecting a process of polarization within rural areas, partly as a process of formation of various classes of farmers different from one another in terms of farm size, productivity, input intensity, labour hiring practices and forms of income diversification (Barrett et al. 2001; Raikes 2000; Oya 2007a; Ghai and Radwan 1983).

For example, it is well documented, that colonial penetration had already provided an impetus to processes of rural differentiation, particularly with the spread of ‘legitimate commerce’, cash cropping and tax-related cash needs. For this period Sender and Smith (1986: 21) provided a long list of rural surveys on different parts of rural Africa, which ‘unambiguously demonstrate that some rural entrepreneurs operate extensive tracts of land’, often land previously occupied by smaller farmers. More recently, several studies based on national rural household surveys have identified distinct classes within the smallholder population and in particular a top ‘third’ or ‘quintile’ who are larger in farm size, more market oriented and much more reliant on hired labour than the poorer small farmers in the same villages and regions, i.e. an incipient class of small-middle-scale rural capitalists (for relevant survey data see Jayne et al. 2003, Barret et al. 2001; Mortimore 2003; Peters 2006).<sup>22</sup> These are the farmers that hold the key for the expected successful integration of smallholders in high-value agribusiness chains (World Bank 2007). Conversely, the significant and increasing proportion of smallholder farmers who are *net buyers* of food attests to the growing ‘proletarianization’ of small farmers, and their families and their increasing inability to survive on their miniscule farms (Staatz and Dembele 2007; Devereux 2001; Raikes 2000).<sup>23</sup> However, given the inadequate growth of demand for wage labour in rural areas and the bleak prospects for good jobs in towns, particularly in the post-liberalization context of de-industrialization, their access and attachment to land remains conspicuous as a last ditch form of insurance.

### *The state and shifting policy regimes towards liberalization*

The role of the state has obviously been critical in determining agrarian dynamics and the uneven development of capitalist production relations. State intervention, both before and after the era of the Washington Consensus, had contradictory and uneven effects on agrarian transitions and the formation of incipient agrarian capitalism. On the one hand, the efforts to modernize agriculture and to accelerate the growth of productive forces in the countryside through a combination of marketing boards and rural development agencies for research, extension and input distribution, did indeed create conditions for the emergence of middle- and large-scale farmers whose dynamism underscores some of the success stories, especially in export crops, outlined above. Some of these farmers emerged from the ranks of

smallholder farmers and rural merchants and gradually accumulated to become potential capitalists (Oya 2007b). On the other hand, indiscriminate, pan-territorial and pan-seasonal state support (mostly through official guaranteed prices and subsidized inputs), together with legislation to constrain private property rights (in favour of a combination of state control with customary rights), encouraged the survival of poor peasants in remote areas, i.e. acted as a form of rural 'welfare state' that helped small poor farmers achieve simple reproduction on the basis of access to land and casual work for richer farmers or in towns, without being compelled to disappear (Wiggins 2002).<sup>24</sup> In fact, the (still predominant) ideological commitment to small farmers, together with public expenditure cuts, donor pressures on policies and reduced aid flows to agriculture in SSA have been obstacles to the spread of capitalist relations of production in a large number of African countries.

During the same period there were also sharp contrasts between regimes inclined to support the emergence of a national (rural) capitalist class (e.g. Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Malawi) and regimes that embraced an anti-capitalist and pro-peasant rhetoric soon reflected in deliberate or unintended measures, often driven by dreams of food self-sufficiency and peasant communes, which eventually constrained accumulation in rural areas thereby affecting the possibility of surplus creation for more sustainable industrialization (see Sender and Smith 1990 on Nyerere's Tanzania; also cases of Ethiopia, Nkrumah's Ghana, Sekou-Toure's Guinea and post-Independence Mozambique). As some newly independent states managed the space to develop their own agricultural 'modernization' plans (often in the image of old 'colonial' plans and doctrines) they also legislated to demonstrate national resistance to plantation systems and a commitment to the Africanization of capital, land and labour. Nationalist movements and governments, unable to provide sufficient social infrastructure and livelihoods to a growing but scattered rural population, often opted to play the card of showing 'that 'foreigners' and colonialists would no longer dominate agricultural production' (Sender and Johnston 2004: 143). Outcomes in both sets of regimes were not homogenous and, as in the case of Cote d'Ivoire, Ivoirien capitalists advanced neither at the expense of foreign capital (with which they allied) nor at the expense of the peasantry (Rapley 1993).

Nevertheless, structural adjustment and liberalization altered the rules of the game and weakened states<sup>25</sup> to an extent that agriculture has increasingly become a space of 'social Darwinism' where farmers' differentiation has become more visible and ruthless. The anti-state bias and wave of structural reforms brought by the Washington Consensus in agriculture actually reflected that 'the first impulse towards agricultural adjustment really came from the imperatives of macroeconomic reforms and the concomitant fiscal and financial squeeze of deflationary policies in the 1980s' (Oya 2007a: 278). In other words, agricultural policies were effectively subordinated to macroeconomic stability and the idea of a minimal role for the state, marking the end of broad-based 'modernist' nationalist strategies for agriculture at the service of industrialization. The 'one-size-fits-all' structural adjustment agenda was promoted regardless of marked documented diversity across countries, crops, classes of farmers and without consideration of external opportunities and constraints. Not surprisingly then, during the past thirty years, the effects of market liberalization have been contradictory although generally negative for agricultural performance, especially with regards to some traditional export crops, land and labour productivity and marginal small farmers. With liberalization, farmers could no longer rely on a stable and guaranteed source of cash income, as prices began to fluctuate markedly, and states gradually stopped providing a guaranteed market outlet, altogether increasing the high risks faced by most African farmers. Furthermore, the collapse of public input distribution systems and the general increasing costs of previously subsidized inputs, especially imported fertilizers, seed, and fuel made real

incomes not only erratic but also declining in many countries and for a majority of producers. In addition, some of the progress made in agricultural research and in the availability and dissemination of improved varieties was partly undone by the same deterioration of public input distribution and subsidy systems in many African countries, with Zambia and Malawi providing particularly stark examples in the 1990s (Pardey et al. 1997; Havnevik et al. 2007).<sup>26</sup>

The ‘Social Darwinism’ induced by agricultural reforms is noteworthy but not surprising. First, market forces have exposed the inability of large segments of the smallholder population to reproduce themselves in a ‘Chayanovian’ fashion under more competitive conditions and facing much greater risks (in both production and marketing). This has resulted in accelerated processes of differentiation (growing rural inequalities) leading to growing incidence of wage labour in the countryside, migration and distress-driven non-farm activities (Bryceson 2000; Reardon 1997; Raikes 2000; Ponte 2002).<sup>27</sup> Barriers to entry into the most lucrative segments of the non-farm economy (very heterogeneous in itself) have also increased rural inequality (Reardon 1997; Raikes 2000). These trends have exacerbated pressures on many households’ simple reproduction and unevenly spurred the gradual formation of rural labour markets, where poorly paid casual labour is a widespread phenomenon (Ponte 2002). They have also exacerbated land conflicts (Peters 2004). The demise of labour institutions in urban Africa in the era of structural adjustment has also contributed greatly to the informalization of labour and to complex patterns of labour circulation, migration, ‘footloose’ working households straddling economic activities, employment status and residence. It is in this precarious context that the still limited opportunities offered by globalization for access to markets and employment creation often appear as ‘saviours’ in the eyes of the promoters of liberalization, given the failure to sustain the industrialization efforts of the 1960s and 1970s (cf World Bank 2007). Second, the process of liberalization and adjustment in the countryside has not only left ‘losers’, as winners emerge by reaping the opportunities open by a liberalized environment with declining state regulation. Arguably, large-scale capitalist farmers in many countries were able to withstand the effects of state withdrawal thanks to their higher level of capitalization and their greater capacity to gain access to global commodity chains (see below). However, large farmers had also benefited from pre-reform interventions and were likely to suffer from the relative scarcity of yield-enhancing inputs and technology as well as from the credit squeeze in agriculture (Oya 2007b). Similarly, a small segment of better-off smallholder farmers who managed to integrate in agribusiness chains also benefitted from higher incomes and the opening of more lucrative markets in non-traditional exports, even though still exposed to the risks and uncertainties associated with entry in these highly demanding and mobile global chains (Peters 2006; Jayne et al. 2003; Gibbon and Ponte 2005). Amongst the main beneficiaries, richer traders (as opposed to street vendors) and moneylenders stand out. Despite the expectation that markets would become more competitive with the abolition of parastatal marketing boards<sup>28</sup>, the pervasiveness of market failures in output and input marketing<sup>29</sup> as well as the squeeze in publicly provided credit means that a class of richer rural and urban-based traders (and moneylenders, often one and the same thing) have made the most of seasonal and territorial price volatility, thereby using the huge transport costs to their own advantage through oligopsonistic power at village level (see Mosley 2002; Oya 2007a: 286-7).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS IN LIGHT OF THE GLOBALIZATION CHALLENGES

The reforms towards liberalization have coincided with (and partly facilitated) global capital restructuring and a marked increase in the power of global agribusiness and buyer-driven agricultural commodity chains (Gibbon and Ponte 2005; Watts 1994). The challenges and opportunities presented by globalization in African agriculture will be very briefly reviewed here in light of the historical overview presented above. There are three main issues and policy questions to address.

First, is the extent to which globalization and the new global food regime make the agrarian question of capital obsolete in developing countries (Bernstein 2004). In other words, a context in which global food giants, controlling large shares of value chains between production and retail as well as input markets, may no longer need a transformation of production relations in agriculture towards fully-fledged agrarian capitalism as long as a selected class of peasant (smallholder) farmers can be successfully incorporated into the chains. This is indeed the hope that the World Bank exhumes in its analysis of the relations between (small) farmers in developing countries and high-value global markets (cf. World Bank 2007). However, a closer examination of previous experiences of ‘small farmers’ with global agribusiness (usually via contract farming) tends to show that: (a) some become disguised wage labourers bearing the risk of fluctuating world prices decided elsewhere (Bassett 2008) or the risk of crop failure - which effectively may be a preferred option for flexible agribusiness not too concerned about product quality and reliability (cf. Watts 1994); (b) more often than recognized, the main beneficiaries of direct and stable connections with agribusiness chains, particularly in high-value dynamic markets (horticulture, cut flowers, fresh fruits), are either fully established large-scale capitalist farmers or dynamic mid-scale producers (frequently equated with the ‘top third’ of the smallholding population mentioned before). This is largely because existing global value chains, increasingly dominated by retail giants, pose very stringent demands on quality, traceability, timeliness and even ‘social responsibility’ that only a minority of dynamic farmers can meet (Gibbon and Ponte 2005; Amanor 2005; Dolan and Sutherland 2002). Therefore, the success of connections with the ‘global food regime’ in actually nurturing domestic agrarian capitalists cannot be assumed away. The question is also whether such a trend would be capable of generating an adequate rate of growth of employment for the growing labour surplus population (Bernstein 2004; Dolan and Sutherland 2002). These are indeed important empirical questions that require more substantial research.

Second, accelerated processes of commodification typical of neoliberalism *cum* globalization are affecting social dynamics in rural Africa, as elsewhere in the developing world. Some have already been discussed in the previous section. One trend shared with other developing regions seems to be the process of de-agrarianization, widely attributed to the inability of large segments of the small farming population to survive on their own farms in a context of market liberalization, withdrawal of direct and indirect state support and competitive pressures from global markets.<sup>30</sup> This process entails a growing mass of footloose labour floating between urban and rural areas in coping migration patterns in search of casual jobs or a variety of forms of low-productivity self-employment. They also reflect a growing significance of the so-called ‘rural non-farm economy’ as a site of distress-driven labour surplus absorption (Reardon 1997). The available accounts tend to tell stories of distress, where whole households or individuals within households, men and women, leave farming

and search any alternative available in rural or urban areas (Raikes 2000; Breman 2000). In this context, the strategies of investing in social relations noted by Berry (1993) may indeed be breaking down as evidence on changes in labour mobilization patterns from social negotiation to individual contracts as well as increasing conflicts over land seem to suggest (Ponte 2002; Peters 2004). Sometimes, the rural non-farm economy opens sites of accumulation but this may result, according to some authors, in a constraint on *agrarian* accumulation if returns are disproportionately invested in diversified activities especially in the sphere of circulation (trade, transport).<sup>31</sup> There is also some (less cited) evidence of distress-induced re-agrarianization, particularly in countries that urbanized earlier and later experienced a gradual but continuous deterioration of living conditions in towns. The most obvious example is Zambia, where, according to Census data, the fastest increase in agricultural households has taken place in the predominantly urban areas of Lusaka and the Copperbelt. The main reasons for this counter-tendency are found in declining employment opportunities in towns, notably the crisis of the Copperbelt corridor and its industries as well as the impact of HIV/AIDS, which compels affected people to return to rural areas.

The processes noted above can be interpreted in a pessimistic fashion that contrasts with the more optimistic account I have given above. In fact, the gradual demise of smallholder farming is often seen as the culmination of African ‘agrarian disasters’, particularly by those (read neo-populists) who strongly believe in the desirability and viability of small farmers in Africa. However, arguably these processes mainly reflect the ongoing Social Darwinism that may well be consistent with fairly positive trends in terms of aggregate production, export growth, export diversification towards higher-value crops and so on. Is neoliberalism *cum* globalization exposing the structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities of small-scale farming in SSA? Probably yes. Are (small-scale) farming populations shrinking elsewhere in Asia and Latin America? Indeed they are, and ‘agro-pessimism’ does not abound there, particularly in Asia (Rigg 2006). The key difference does not lie in agriculture so much as in the failure of most African countries to have sustained adequate rates of industrialization from very low levels at Independence, largely as a result of the 1970s crisis and ensuing market reforms that killed infant industry policy options.

Third, after years of adjustment-led withdrawal from interventions in agricultural markets and years of erosion of capacities to generate home-grown long-term strategies, most African states find themselves facing the daunting task of having to cope with multiple, and often contradictory agendas brought by the donor aid agencies on which they partly depend, and trying to achieve the need to generate sufficient employment and foreign exchange to maintain growth and political stability. The policy space and range of tools to achieve these competing demands is now very narrow, after decades of donor-induced economic and institutional neoliberal reforms, particularly as most agricultural policy initiatives normally require some form of subsidy, which has been out of the policy menu since the 1980s (Raikes 2000).<sup>32</sup> The loss of policy space in agricultural policies is unquestionable but perhaps equally worrying is the decline in resources devoted to agriculture by governments and donor agencies. The World Bank, which remains one of the leading donors in Africa for agricultural development, reduced its lending portfolio for this sector from a peak of 32 per cent of World Bank in 1976–8 to only 6.5 per cent during the period 2000–5 (Pincus 2001: 196; World Bank data).

Nowadays, token measures of selective protection within WTO rules (such as Senegal’s attempts to ban imports of palm oil affecting its domestic and recently privatized vegetable oil industry) and ‘disobedience’ with regards to fertilizer subsidies (e.g. Malawi since 2007)

are unlikely to be sufficient to meet the employment and globalization challenges lying ahead. Instead, bolder and longer-term approaches will be necessary, especially: substantial increases in public investments in infrastructure (particularly in irrigation and land improvement), making use of labour intensive public works also designed to tighten rural labour markets; a revamp of agricultural research and innovation to fulfil the obvious potential to improve crop yields on a large scale; careful attraction of agribusiness investments to transform productivity in segments of the agricultural sector and open access to high-value markets on conditions of monitorable employment and net foreign exchange generation; development of national food markets and systems of provision in a way that benefit both a class of dynamic market-oriented farmers and the mass of poorer net buyers of food for whom low and stable food prices are key for survival; all complemented by sustainable forms of universal protection through, perhaps, unconditional cash transfers or basic income grants. Of course, only specific combinations of *some* of these measures may be politically and economically feasible in the short-term, especially in aid-dependent countries, but these may work as long as they are framed within a longer-term development strategy where agriculture may play an important, even if perhaps not central, role. As Scoones et al. (2005 : 9) conclude: ‘No single scenario is inevitable, no single policy solution is appropriate..’.

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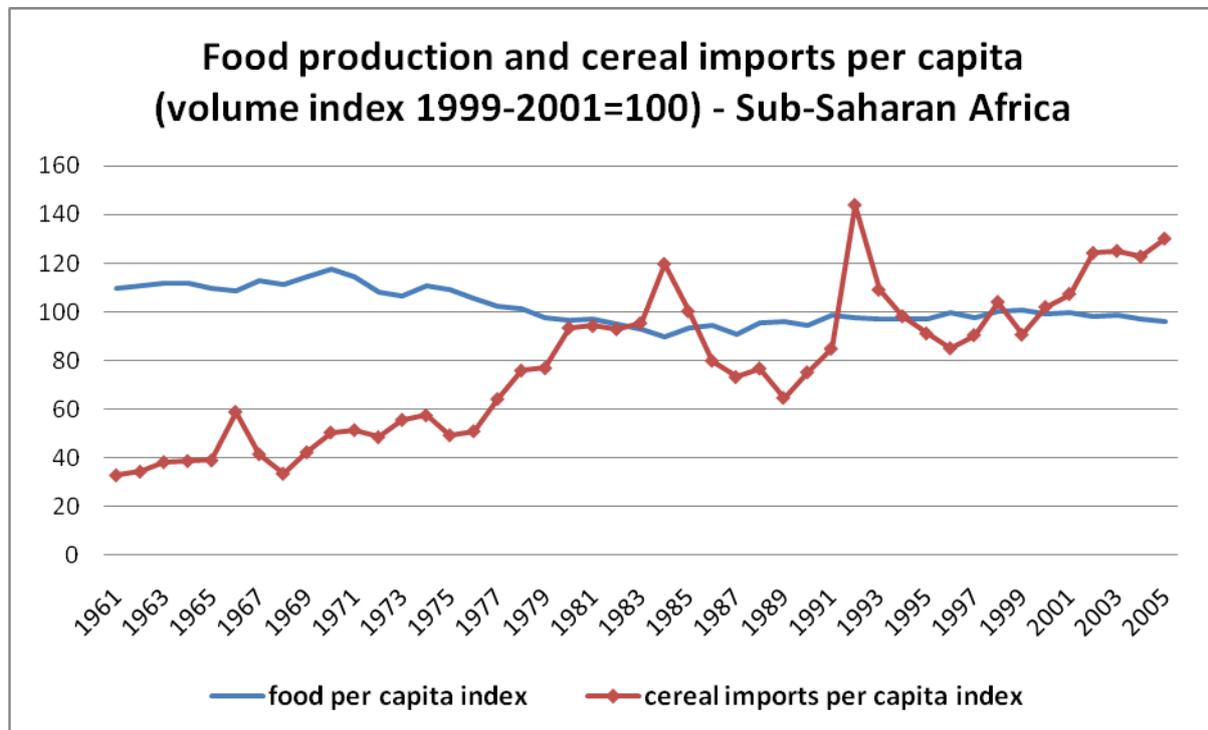
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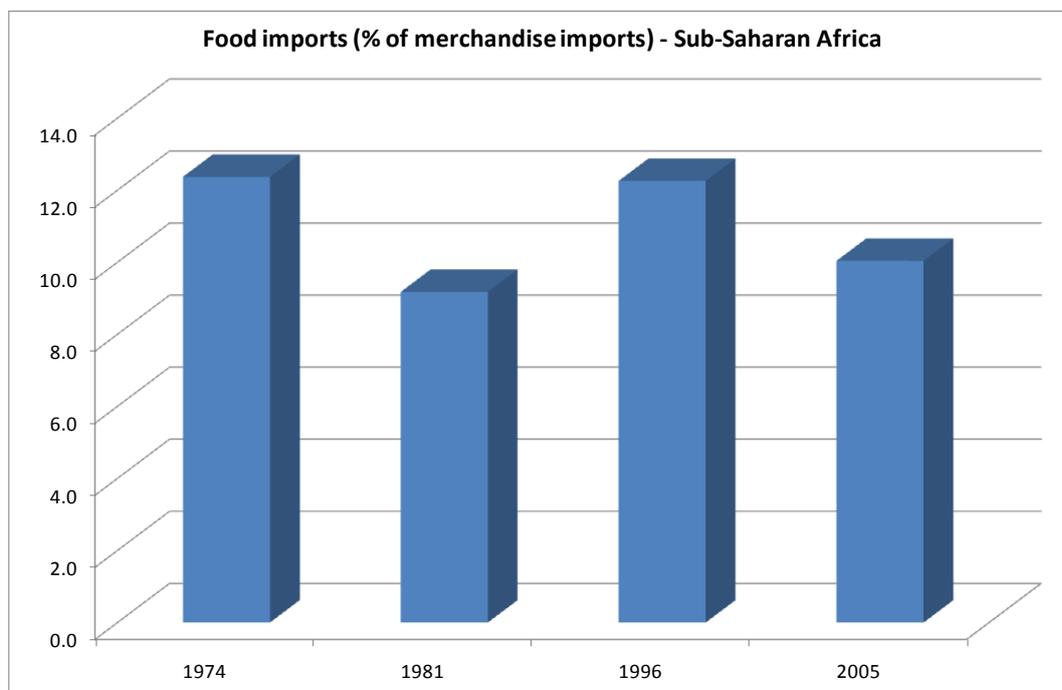
## TABLES AND FIGURES

**FIGURE 1. FOOD PRODUCTION AND CEREAL IMPORTS PER CAPITA**



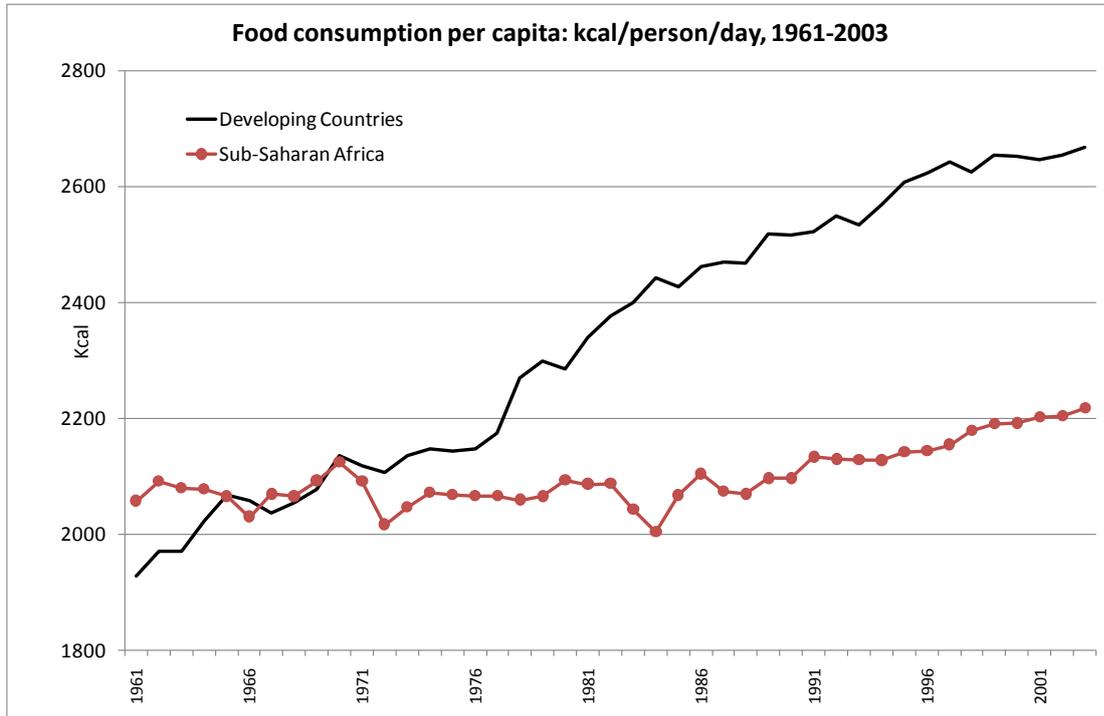
Source: FAOSTAT

**FIGURE 2. FOOD IMPORTS AS A PROPORTION OF TOTAL IMPORTS: 1974-2005**



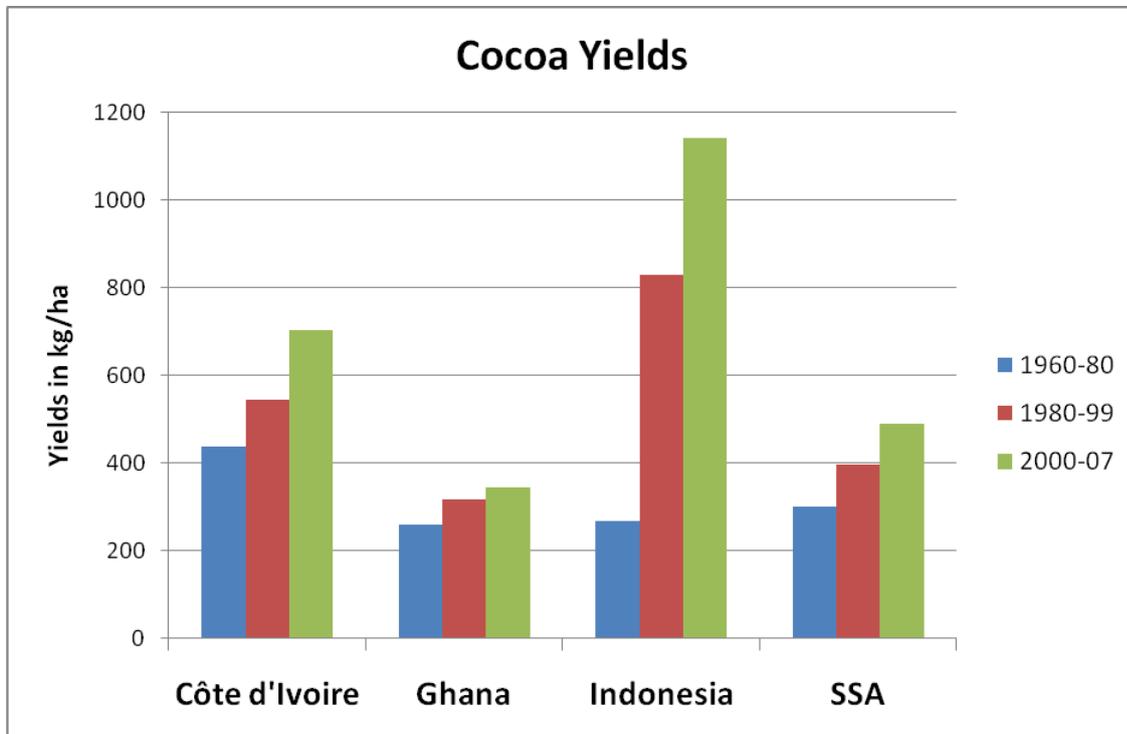
Source: World Development Indicators 2008 (World Bank)

**FIGURE 3. FOOD CONSUMPTION TRENDS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**



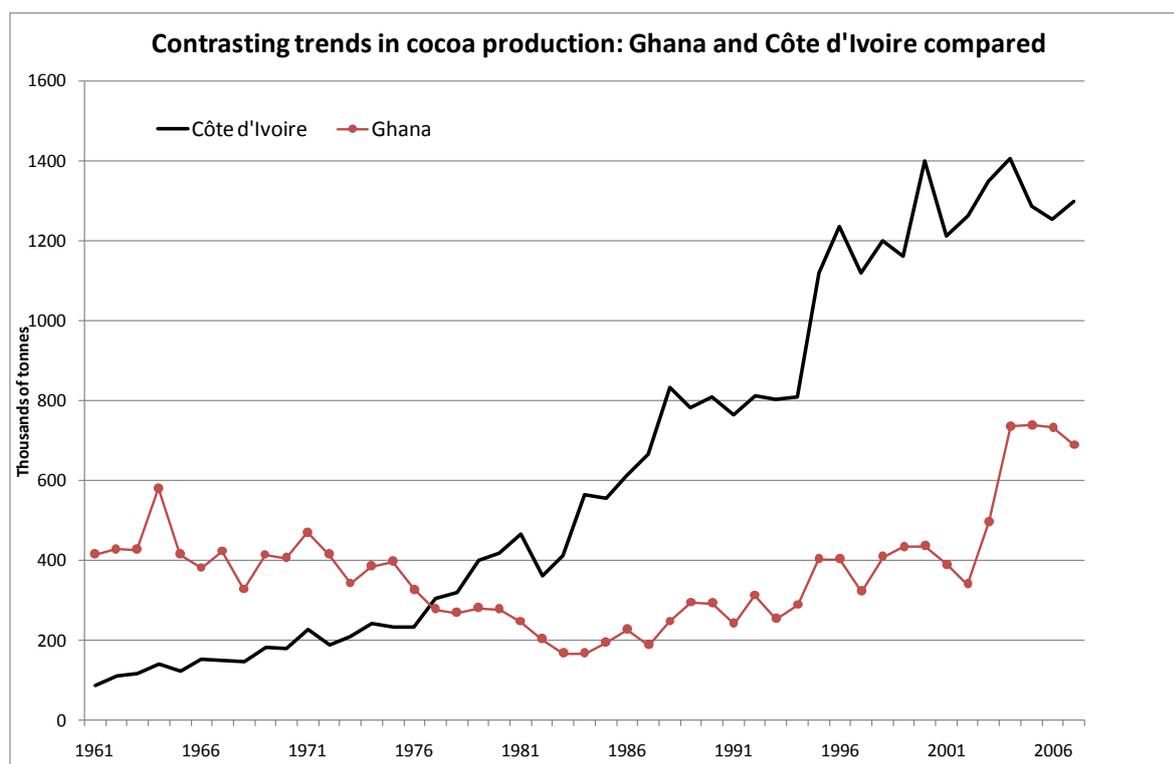
Source: FAOSTAT

**FIGURE 4. EXPORT CROP PRODUCTIVITY INCREASES: COMPARISONS FOR COCOA**



Source: FAOSTAT

**FIGURE 5. A CONTRAST OF AGRICULTURAL TALES: GHANA AND COTE D'IVOIRE**



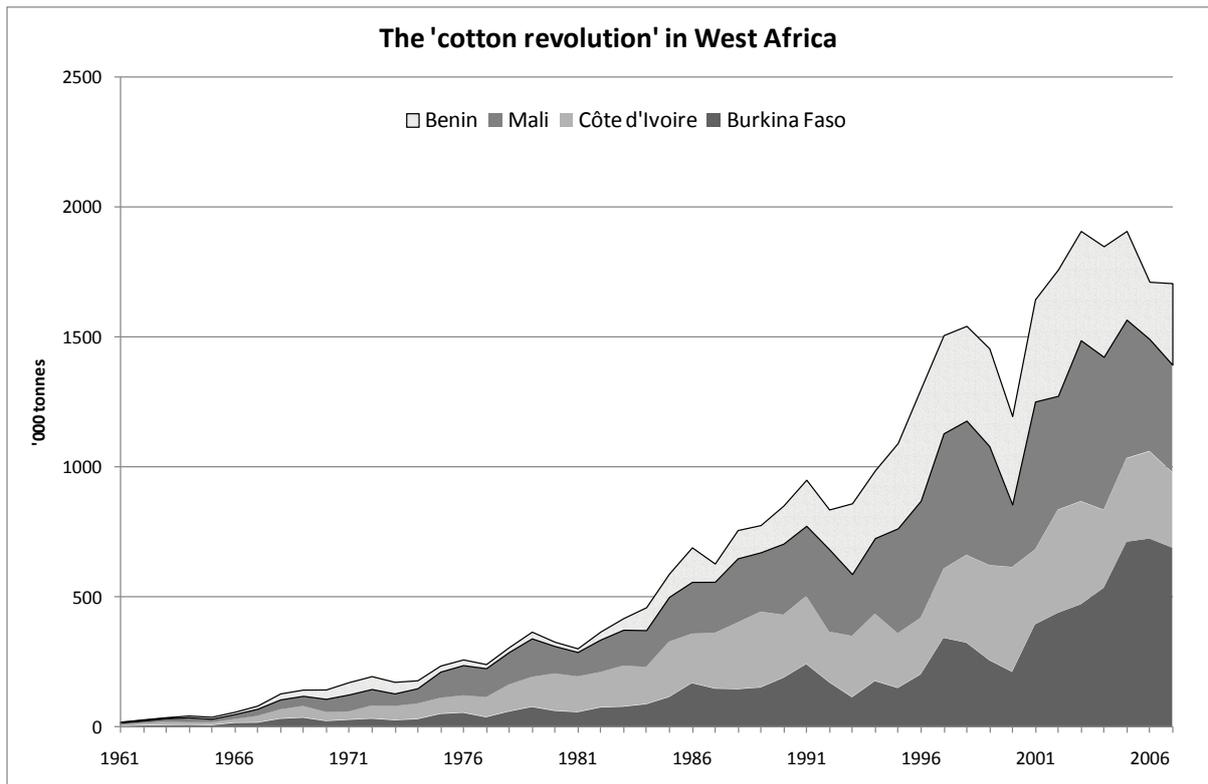
Source: FAOSTAT

**Table 1. Agricultural Population per Hectare of Arable Land ( persons/ha )**

	1990-92	1995-97	2003-05
<b>Developing Regions</b>	2.6	2.7	2.7
Northern Africa	1.7	1.6	1.6
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>2.0</b>
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.8	0.7	0.6
Eastern Asia	6.2	6.1	5.3
Southern Asia	3.0	3.2	3.4
South-Eastern Asia	2.7	2.8	2.6
Western Asia	0.9	0.9	0.9

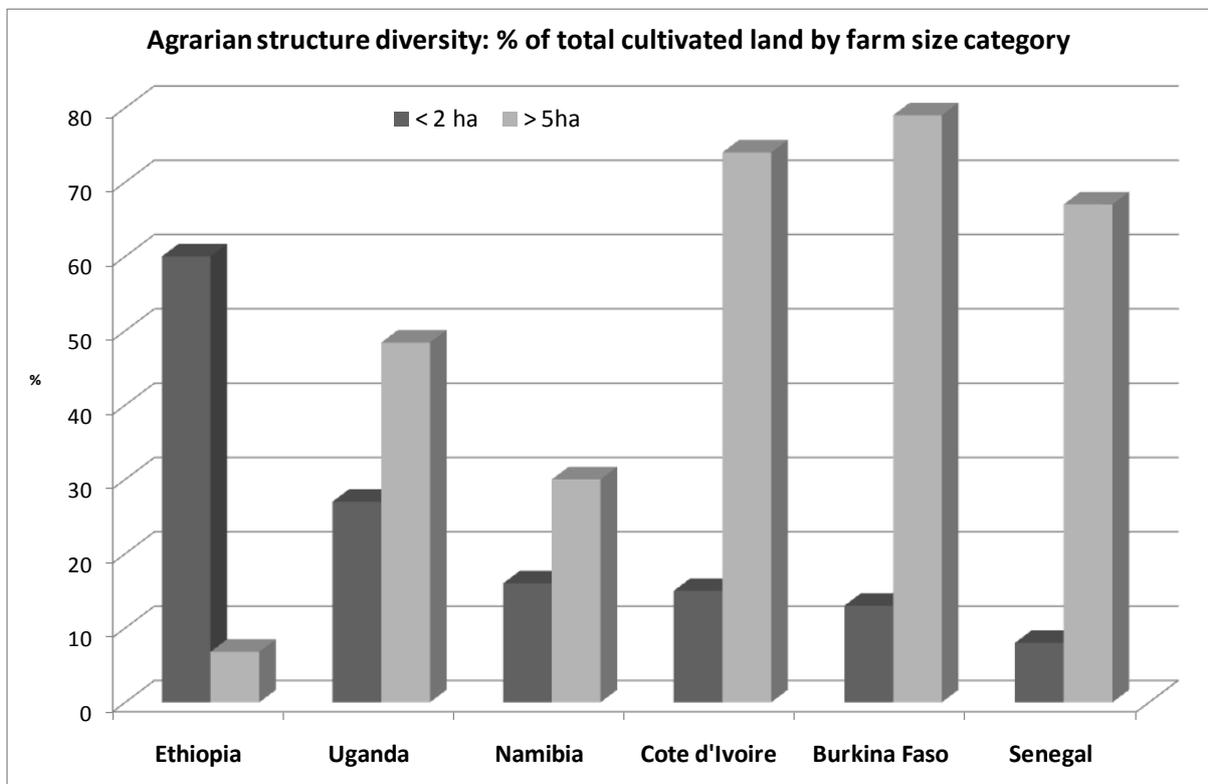
Source: FAOSTAT

**FIGURE 6. COTTON PRODUCTION EXPANSION IN WEST AFRICA, 1960-2007**



Source: FAOSTAT

**FIGURE 7. LAND CONCENTRATION AND SMALLHOLDINGS: SELECTED CASES**



Source: Author's elaboration from FAOSTAT (Agricultural Censuses)  
<http://www.fao.org/ES/ess/census/wcares/default.asp>

**Table 2. Growth of vegetable production (index 1980 = 1000)**

		<b>Côte d'Ivoire</b>	<b>Kenya</b>	<b>South Africa</b>	<b>Zambia</b>
1	1960-69	48	60	66	62
2	1970-79	69	79	85	83
3	1980-89	118	114	113	114
4	1990-2002	188	299	128	127
	<i>ratio 4/1</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>5.0</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>2.0</i>

Source: FAOSTAT

<sup>1</sup> From here any reference to Africa will mean Sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank (2007) places most African countries in the group of 'agriculture-based countries' where agriculture is a major source of growth and most of the poor live in rural areas

<sup>3</sup> Several countries in SSA put agriculture at the centre of development strategies, particularly in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, more or less following the same static logic cited above. Ethiopia is one particularly interesting example of move towards agriculture-centred development strategies.

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank calls for a 'smallholder-based productivity revolution in agriculture' (World Bank 2007: 232). The Commission for Africa report (CFA 2005: 237) calls for developed countries to support 'measures to improve production and the efficiency of African agriculture' while addressing unfair subsidization of agriculture in OECD countries that affects African smallholder farmers' incomes (see also Bassett 2008). The NEPAD Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme states that 'African governments have agreed to increase public investment in agriculture by a minimum of 10 per cent of their national budgets and to raise agricultural productivity by at least 6 per cent' <http://www.nepad-caadp.net/about-caadp.php#Vision>

<sup>5</sup> According to FAO data, the percentage of undernourished in total population is close to 30 per cent in aggregate in SSA followed by slightly over 20 per cent in South Asia.

<sup>6</sup> But see Svedberg (1999) for a more nuanced and empirically careful approach to nutrition data in Africa. Svedberg also shows that despite high levels of undernourishment in the 1990s, there had been a decline since the 1970s. He also suggests that there are biases in undernutrition figures for SSA, as discrepancies with anthropometric data show.

<sup>7</sup> For example, food production per capita did increase by almost 20 per cent between 1960 and 1970, before the 'crisis'.

<sup>8</sup> Svedberg (1999) reports studies showing margins of error in the 15-46 per cent range.

<sup>9</sup> See Ponte (2002) and Berry (1984) on data politics and Devereux (2001) with reference to famines.

<sup>10</sup> Schatz (1983) triangulates sources to finally contend that in aggregate food production per capita may have actually increased in the period 1960-82. During this period food imports to Africa almost quadrupled. Between 1980 and 1994 food import growth slowed down partly as a result of foreign exchange constraints, but import volumes still increased from 8 million tonnes in 1980 to 12 million in 1994.

<sup>11</sup> In practice Asian rice imported to Senegal (particularly Thai broken rice) has long been preferred for its taste and culinary properties by Senegalese households thereby reducing the actual substitution effects between domestically produced and imported rice.

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<sup>12</sup> See Bassett (2001) for an in-depth historical account of the ‘cotton revolution’ in Côte d’Ivoire and the role of small and mid-scale farmers in this success story.

<sup>13</sup> A success story that combines supply and demand drivers but that is essentially about farmers’ adaptability to situations of land and demographic pressure is the story of agricultural intensification, growing commercialization and income improvements in the Machakos district in Kenya (Tiffen and Mortimore 1994).

<sup>14</sup> According to FAO data, SSA’s shares in global agricultural exports fell from about 8 per cent in the 1960s to nearly 2 per cent nowadays (Kidane et al. 2006: 35)..

<sup>15</sup> Comparisons with Asia are frequently made to highlight the relative underperformance of African agriculture.

<sup>16</sup> However, as noted by Austin (2005), shifting factor ratios mean that labour abundance and land pressure (with conflicts) become increasingly widespread across Africa (see also Peters 2004).

<sup>17</sup> The contrast is particularly stark between the more egalitarian and land scarcer Ethiopia, and some West African countries where small-to-mid-scale dominates and agricultural growth has taken mostly an extensive pattern.

<sup>18</sup> Despite its frequent association with ‘traditional’ forms of survival, areas dominated by pastoralism have increasingly become subsumed by capitalism and displayed capitalist tendencies, especially through the development of cattle markets within countries and across borders in Mauritania (Ould Cheikh 1990) and parts of the Horn of Africa, where livestock exports are a basic source of accumulation and not just survival. Water-related conflicts also become the site of new enclosures and accumulation by dispossession and differentiation.

<sup>19</sup> Berry (1993) thus claims to question a historical materialist approach, which she limits to the ‘Lenin model’ of polarization and dispossession (Bernstein 2004, 122).

<sup>20</sup> See Bernstein (2004) for a critical view on Berry’s thesis and her functionalist superficial interpretation of Lenin’s model of agrarian transition from below.

<sup>21</sup> Especially if one includes settler capitalists of Southern Africa as emerging from the ranks of migrant (white) peasant farmers

<sup>22</sup> Smallholder differentiation is intimately associated with the rise of middle-scale farmers. Bernstein (2004: 131) notes that the consolidation of a ‘middle’ peasantry and marginalisation of poor peasants unable to reproduce themselves as capital is a widespread outcome of the competition between small farmers (petty commodity producers in Bernstein’s terms).

<sup>23</sup> In a review of several country studies the proportion of net buyers among smallholder farmers ranged from 30 per cent to 67 per cent (Staatz and Dembele 2007).

<sup>24</sup> To a certain extent many African states in the 1960s and 1970s were victims of their own optimism about their capacity to please many constituencies at the same time and build up legitimacy in a late process of state formation (Oya 2007a: 284). See also Raikes (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Weakened in terms of the available policy space, political will and capacities to deal with short- and long-term imperatives for agricultural transformation.

<sup>26</sup> For extensive reviews and a variety of conclusions on different aspects of agricultural liberalization see Kherallah et al. (2002), Oya (2007a), Havnevik et al. (2007), Mkandawire and Soludo (1999), Raikes (2000), Peters (2006) and Amanor (2005).

<sup>27</sup> Peters (2006) shows substantial micro-level evidence of rapid increasing inequality in Malawi (the income ratio of top and bottom income quartiles increased from 3 to 11 between 1986 and 1997) and a significant degree of household ‘churning’ between income classes, related to their insertion in tobacco growing schemes.

<sup>28</sup> Obviously, from a previous situation of near state-monopsony, competition in marketing networks somewhat increased but not to the extent expected by reformers (Oya 2007a, Kherallah et al. 2002). Moreover some of this additional competition in reality reflected the new ‘visibility’ hitherto illegal trade practices.

<sup>29</sup> In fact there is no substantial evidence that marketing margins and costs were reduced by market liberalization, thus questioning one of the most basic rationales for reforms (Oya 2007a: 281).

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<sup>30</sup> See collection of essays in Bryceson et al. (2000) as well as Reardon (1997) and Rigg (2006).

<sup>31</sup> See Bernstein (2004: 131) and Berry (1993).

<sup>32</sup> Some exceptions of resistance start to emerge. Since 2007, Malawi defied the World Bank and the IMF by reintroducing fertilizer subsidies, which, according to government claims, have boosted maize production. In response, traditionally ‘anti-subsidy’ agencies like the World Bank have begun to accept the idea of temporary ‘market smart’ subsidies (whatever this means) to stimulate input markets (World Bank 2007: 232), ‘but the conditions for using them efficiently are demanding’ (World Bank 2007: 152).