Comparing the Agricultural Performance of Africa and Southeast Asia over the Last Fifty Years

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Introduction
The idea behind the Tracking Development research project of comparing ‘Southeast Asia’s economic miracle’ with ‘Africa’s economic stagnation’ summarizes the widely perceived notion of the difference in performance by the agricultural sectors in these two world regions over the last fifty years. One of the main conclusions drawn by David Henley and Jan Kees van Donge is that the economic breakthrough in Southeast Asia can be explained well only if one looks at the massive state-led rural development campaigns there from the 1960s onwards, which resulted in a major agricultural revolution and in generally successful rural poverty alleviation. This was much less the case in Africa where many state elites simply made the wrong choices, neglecting the rural peasants and trying to implement an elite-based industrialization strategy that went wrong. This essay looks at the statistical evidence of the perceived differences between Southeast Asia and Africa based on FAO data, and for Africa as a whole and the four pairs of countries that featured in the Tracking Development project: Indonesia and Nigeria; Malaysia and Kenya; Vietnam and Tanzania; and Cambodia and Uganda. I restrict myself to FAOSTAT figures and my interpretations of these figures, and will make an overall comparison of the eight countries at the end of the contribution.
Africa as a Whole

In my 2011 inaugural address entitled ‘Silverlining Africa’,1 I showed that the current agricultural situation in Africa is not as bad as it is often portrayed and that, particularly in the last decade, major improvements can be seen. If we look at the last fifty years, African farmers have succeeded in more than doubling the area under cultivation: from 101 million hectares in 1961 to 209 million hectares in 2009,2 which is equivalent to 7% of Africa’s total land area. Most of Africa’s land mass is uncultivated and is mainly tropical forest, savannah, desert, and semi-desert regions (10% of it having some form of protection order placed on it, for what it is worth), and most of it is sparsely populated.

Africa’s cropping data dynamics mirror the eras of Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism. In the 1960s, when most African countries had gained political independence, their new governments were embarking on a trajectory of rapid economic expansion, dreaming of industrialization and ‘development’, and often neglecting their agricultural heritage and the well-being of their farmers. However, relatively benign weather conditions and the path dependency of colonial modernization and agricultural commercialization schemes of the 1950s still allowed for an expansion of the continent’s cropping lands. The 1970s saw a decline in almost all crop lands due to adverse weather conditions and the harsh anti-agricultural and anti-rural policies that created an atmosphere of rural despair that is still feeding Afro-pessimism today. In the same decades, Southeast Asia and China were preparing the ground for their own economic breakthrough based on state-led policies that favoured agriculture and their rural populations.3 The late 1980s saw a recovery in Africa, which continued into the 1990s, including a rapid rise in the amount of crops sold on the world market as a result of the increased global prospects for Africa’s economy. The last decade has shown steady crop expansion but one very

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3 One can question the social and environmental costs of these state-led pro-rural policies. In Indonesia, the massacres and authoritarian rule after 1965 hit the rural working poor very hard, and China’s Cultural Revolution and the preceding so-called Great Leap Forward were disastrous for many in the countryside who simply did not survive. The boost in agricultural production for the world and urban markets has also created major environmental problems: deforestation, decreased biodiversity, soil and water pollution, and erosion.