Chapter 7

Local Careers and Mixed Fortunes in Africa’s Globalizing Food Exports

The Case of Nile Perch from Lake Victoria, Uganda

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New high-value food export crops have been emerging across Africa since the 1990s and are replacing traditional cash crops as the mainstay of African economies. Taking the macroscopic view, these global food exports appear promising as they can lift ordinary Africans out of poverty by creating new career opportunities, but a closer look at the local level unveils a situation of mixed fortunes. By looking at fishermen, traders and other economic actors making a living in the Nile perch export sector at Lake Victoria, Uganda, the chapter shows how local frames of meaning underpin their fortunes. Ethnographic analysis of their professional trajectories uncovers a tendency to perceive the business and other people in individualistic terms, and this compromises successful local careers. The chapter thus raises critical questions about conventional interpretations of Africa’s globalizing food exports that emphasize institutions/structures over African agency.

The Problem: Understanding Local Careers in Africa’s Globalizing Food Exports

New food exports have been emerging across the African continent since the 1990s: fresh fish, fruit and vegetables. Sometimes also referred to as non-traditional exports, these include high-value products that have penetrated the global market and thus connect Africa to overseas (mainly Western) destinations (Ouma 2012). These new global exports are making a significant contribution to national economies, often rivalling traditional cash-crop revenues (Swinnen 2007). At a local level, they are also associated with businesses, jobs and other economic activities that hitherto did not exist and are thus creating

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new career opportunities. This is a significant development as these new exports are often emerging in parts of Africa where (i) possibilities for economic diversification were limited in the past; (ii) multiplier effects are virtually non-existent; and (iii) the opportunities for scaling-up into more profitable avenues are restricted because of global political-economic realities (Amanor 2009). This chapter hopes to provide a better understanding of the emergence and/or functioning of these new local careers as it is expected that they can throw more light on the causes and consequences of Africa's insertion into broader, global economic frameworks. It focuses on one particular example, namely the booming export business of Nile perch from Lake Victoria, Uganda.

Neoliberal interpretations of emerging local careers in Africa's global (food) export sector highlight the success of recent economic reforms (Diop & Jaffee 2005). Put in place since the 1980s, African economies have received an impetus by introducing policy packages consisting of: (i) currency devaluations; (ii) the abandoning of foreign-exchange controls; and (iii) the leveling of barriers to entry, such as taxes and trade licensing (Rimmer 2003). This led to a supply response, whereby hitherto subterranean, local African entrepreneurs, suppressed by decades of a hostile business climate, suddenly began to invest in new economic activities, thus also creating employment (Dijkstra & van Donge 2001). Once the supply response met with foreign investment and overseas demands, this process accelerated rapidly and led to a proliferation of new professional career opportunities and trajectories.

This chapter agrees that in the case of Uganda, economic reforms adopted by the Museveni administration promoted development after decades of economic mismanagement by the Amin and Obote regimes (Fulgencio 2009). Yet it challenges the optimistic notion that greater possibilities for exporting Nile perch pushed ordinary Ugandans into new careers. It will be shown how capital accumulation and a pattern of upward economic mobility are not the automatic outcomes of reform and questions will be raised about how a framework emphasizing economic opportunity can explain this.

More critical observers agree that Africa's new global exports may have boosted the careers of some Africans but they stress that these are usually those of people from the ranks of a small economically privileged class and the countries’ administrative and political urban elites (Bayart 2000). Proponents of this view argue that these elites have seen a new occasion to create barriers to trade (or ‘rents’) in the emerging high-value food-export chains in order to benefit from it personally (Bernstein & Campling 2006). For instance, rapid access to essential airlifting facilities, needed to ensure the smooth functioning of the cold chain along which perishable food exports flow from source to overseas destinations, have evolved as a key economic resource over which