From Suitcase Farmers to Telephone Farmers
Agriculture and Diversified Livelihoods among Urban Professionals

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The world food crisis in 2008 refocused global attention on Africa’s underutilized agricultural potential and calls for a Green Revolution for Africa were reignited. A dominant paradigm suggests that if African smallholders had access to efficient markets for inputs and outputs, they would adopt new technologies and increase productivity. This would not only increase access to food but would also create an avenue out of poverty for the smallholders involved. This chapter however argues that for Africa to unlock its full agricultural potential, agriculture needs to move from being a semi-subistence livelihood activity to being a professional commercial venture. It picks up the thread of the literature on rural livelihood diversification and deagrarianization. In the turbulent decades since decolonization, descendants of the former ‘peasant class’ have built livelihoods in which agriculture fits into a range of income-generating activities. This is not only the case for peasant farmers but also for those with clearly urban-professional identities whose portfolios of livelihood activities include agriculture. In Kenya, this Africa-wide phenomenon is called ‘telephone farming’. Compared to the average small farmer, telephone farmers have better access to the resources needed to invest in commercial agriculture, such as land and capital. They appear more interested in adopting non-traditional agricultural technologies. At the same time, they are faced with serious constraints concerning the creation of profitable ventures as they lack the social and human capital needed to compensate for their time constraints. Further research is needed to experiment with agricultural business models embedded in contemporary socioeconomic realities.

Introduction

After having risen steadily since 2002, global food prices shot up unprecedentedly in 2007/2008 (Mitchell 2008). This was caused by structural factors in combination with incidental harvest losses due to drought and floods. These structural factors included a growing population and increasing consumption, alternative uses for food (animal feed and biofuels), an increase in input prices associated with high oil prices and a decline in agricultural productivity in certain parts of the world (World Bank 2012). The increase in food prices soon caught international public attention and was termed the World Food Crisis.
Calls for a green revolution were not new to Africa and can be traced back to the agricultural development projects in Mexico of the 1940s before spreading elsewhere in Latin America and Asia in the 1950s and beyond (Rockefeller Foundation 2006). The aim of the green revolution was to generate a ‘large increase in crop production in developing countries achieved by the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and high-yield crop varieties’.1 To support this, various international agricultural research institutes were established under CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research), as were numerous national research institutes.2 Since the 1970s such institutes have invested extensively in research on Africa. Although the green revolution is considered to have been generally successful in Asia and parts of Latin America, it is widely considered to have failed in Africa (Holt-Gimenez 2006).

Some of the arguments for this failure are technical. It is, for instance, argued that the wrong cultivars and crops have been improved. The focus has been on developments in growing wheat, rice and yellow maize rather than crops such as sweet potato, cassava and tropical white maize.3 In addition, it is argued that recommendations for fertilizers are often not well suited to the prevailing soil conditions. Such technical critiques argue for a better adjustment of the green revolution to local circumstances (Voortman 2013). Much of the critique against the green revolution is ideological and driven by a mistrust of the corporate interests of agri-technological companies. The green revolution is also equated with large-scale monocultures that are related to environmental damage. The alternative paradigm promoted is food sovereignty, which implies less dependence on markets but a focus on ecological farming.

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2 Such as the Kenyan Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) in Kenya, the Zambian Agricultural Research Institute (ZARI) in Zambia and the National Agriculture Research Organisation (NARO) in Uganda.