Natural resource management and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa

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This chapter examines the opportunities and limitations of poverty reduction in Africa based on strategies of natural resource use. It argues that the small-farmer model of rural society that dominates policy-making fails to take account of key local dynamics. In particular, African use of land, water and other natural resources needs to be understood from a perspective that recognizes the integration of many rural people within broader national and international labour markets and its effects in terms of migration and distribution of labour. While new markets are being created by urbanization and by technological change, the capacity to take advantage of such opportunities tends to be unevenly spread among households, so that aggregate increases in investment and income are often accompanied by growing inequality between rural households. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of these economic dynamics for current policies favouring the decentralization of the management of natural resources.

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the relevance of agriculture, in particular, and natural resource management more generally, to strategies to reduce poverty in Africa. It focuses upon access to and the use of natural resources, particularly in rural areas where household expenditure ‘poverty line’ measures typically show a higher percentage of poor households than in urban areas. In doing so, however, it leaves open the possibility that the distinction between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ livelihoods may be difficult to define in practice (Bernstein 1992a, Ashley & Maxwell 2001). Long-term ‘chronic’ poverty is more likely among people who are particularly vulnerable due to their ‘life
stage’ (e.g. children, older people), or who are discriminated against at national or local level because of caste, ethnicity, or refugee/migrant status, or who are disadvantaged through illness or disability (Hulme & Shepherd 2003). To these general categories we may add that, in the rural context, the poor are likely to be those lacking access to natural resources, of which land, livestock, fisheries, forest or pasture are commonly the most important.

The chapter draws principally on recent literature on natural resource management in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region in which it is estimated that 46% of people are living on less than US$1 per day (Hulme & Shepherd 2003), although many of its themes have wider relevance to debates about how natural resource management can be harnessed to improve the well-being of the poor. As its starting point, the chapter uses the ‘small-farmer’ model of economy and society which has for many years underpinned development agencies’ vision for poorer countries (Mellor 1976, Delgado et al. 1998, Ellis & Biggs 2001). It begins by summarizing this model as set out by one of its recent proponents (IFAD 2001) and then considers an alternative interpretation of rural poverty and its uneven distribution, and the implications it has for policy prescriptions such as agricultural intensification and diversification, the decentralization of natural resource governance and market engagement of small-scale farming.

The small-farmer model

IFAD (2001) claims that 75% of the poor live in rural areas and that 60% are expected to do so even in twenty years’ time. The review by Bird et al. (2001) also concludes that people living in rural areas are more likely to be poor than those living in urban areas. IFAD goes on to claim that ‘six in ten of the world’s extremely poor earn their living mainly from farming or farm labour’ (IFAD 2001: 4). From this follows advocacy of a small-farmer model of poverty reduction in which smallholder production of food staples is expected to ‘play a critical role in the livelihoods of the rural poor’ (IFAD 2001: 4).

Within this model, the key to poverty reduction is perceived as increased productivity on ‘small, private farms’ through technological change, particularly improved seeds, fertilizer, and ways of ensuring more reliable moisture availability. While the model argues that technological change should be ‘labour-intensive’, it also asserts that productivity should increase faster than output prices fall, so that food producers and food consumers both gain. This, it is argued, will release labour for non-farm diversification to meet the growing consumption demands of smallholder households. Factors supporting this poverty-reducing transformation are identified as market liberalization, more control over assets (land, water, technology) and institutions by the poor (espe-