

A Historiographical Survey of the Futility in Building Sustainable Rural Communities via State Agricultural Policies in sub – Saharan Africa: the Case of Ghana

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Abstract. As the title of this paper states, this article provide the conceptual and practical framework to examine how and why rural communities in sub – Saharan Africa increasingly in the past came under stress as result of the regions state development policies; undermining efforts and attempts at achieving sustainable rural communities. The preliminary methodology thus adopted by this paper is that based on historiographical survey and the approach of analytical research as it identify and investigates the interrelationship between state developmental policies and, agricultural growth and the sustainability of rural communities in sub –Saharan Africa. The enforcement of capitalist agricultural policies, techniques and methods as part of the general framework of neo-liberal economic paradigm, as advocated in today’s global political economy system, is having sustained effects on sub –Saharan African societies. Thus, to say the least, the re – introduction of capitalist economic policies into the agricultural sector is undermining the traditional social fabric of the regions rural communities. Large segments’ of the rural population of this part of the world have become vulnerable to continuous food, and other basic needs deficits in the face of conspicuous consumption by the elite few. This paper, is an attempt to explain why the attempt to promote sustainable rural communities in the face of low agricultural output by small-scale farmers or peasants within the last three and half decades has become a herculean task for development practitioners and policy makers alike.

Keywords: Agricultural productivity, Community, Rurality, and Sustainability.

1. Introduction

To help accomplish the task of this paper, two theoretical perspectives and explanations of the causes of low agricultural productivity and its resultant difficult task of attaining sustainable rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa are considered. The first perspective holds that, the causes of sub-Saharan Africa’s low agricultural productivity and attempts at developing sustainable rural communities can be located in the attitudes and ethos of small-scale/peasant farmers. The second argument emphasizes that, the modern African state discourages increased agricultural output and hence, the sustainable development of its rural communities through its pro – urban economic policies. With Ghana as a case study, the paper argues that while there is some truth in the first reason as elucidated, it’s rather the second perspective that best helps us to understand why the sustainable development of rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa has been hindered. If the state stopped interfering completely with the market (as was tried ujamaa co-operative) agricultural productivity would not necessarily improve thus, seriously undermining the path toward the sustainable development of rural communities. On the other hand, if conservative peasant farmers totally did forgo their years of accumulated knowledge and rather, adopted modern agricultural practices, the well-being of rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa will not improve as a result of increased agricultural productivity predicated on modern agricultural techniques and practices. To enhance the drive toward sustainable rural communities, a more viable strategy calls for the African state to provide a steady, adequate and affordable supply of consumer goods and agricultural inputs to the peasant farmer. These by no means, automatically translate into improved communities, but will provide the spring-board from which improvements in agriculture will gradually extend into the long-term development of sustainable rural communities. In the next section of this paper, a review of the relevant literature is undertaken. Thus, a brief understanding of the

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subject matter-rural, community/ies and sustainability- are undertaken here first, before an attempt to explore the linkages that lies between them are carried out. Section three provides the linkages between low agricultural productivity and the non-sustainability of rural communities. In section three, efforts to enhance the path toward sustainable development of rural communities via agricultural productivity in sub-Saharan Africa delved into. Section four contains the conclusions and recommendations.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

It is difficult to give an in-depth precise definition of what is meant by the term/concept “rural.” This stems from the fact that there is no agreed upon criteria in the measurement and analysis of the concept. Thus, the definition or explanation of what is meant by the concept-rural will to a large degree, be different from that put forward by the geographer, political economist, sociologist and the anthropologist etc. These differences in the definition of rurality, led Saraceno (1993), to propose a general definition of the concept. He writes that because of the differences in the threshold and differences in criteria, what is “rural” is a residual category of all that is not considered as “urban.” In most sub-Saharan African countries, rural areas are where the sizeable percentage of ones’ external family resides or dwells outside the main urban centres or central places in the country. In these countries, rural areas are referred to as “Home-towns or Villages.” The mere mentioning of “my home-town or village” within the Ghanaian or sub-African context, raises emotional attachments to a geographically defined agricultural, and serene area where elders and ancestors of ones’s family reside. In spite of the similarities and common characteristics that are associated with rural dwellers, certain norms and values are expected to be exhibited by an indigene from a particular home-town or village.

Like so many other terms or concepts, “Community” has no fixed definition or meaning as it connotes different meanings to many different people. To use the works of Bryden (1994:44), community has been interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that there are “communities of interest.” Secondly, the community takes on either a physical or social connotations such as villages, watersheds or islands. For the purpose of simplicity, I will use and adopt the meaning drawn between “Gemeinschaft” and “Gesellschaft.” The German scholar Ferdinand Toennies (1965), distinguished between the two terms by arguing that community or Gemeinschaft refers to the natural grouping of people based on kinship and neighborhood, with shared culture and folkways. On the other hand, he equated Gesellschaft with society which is based on impersonal contractual and legal relationships that are independent of other commonalities. To him, a modern city or state is more a community. Failing to account to the conflicts that exist in communities as elucidated by Toennies, Koenig’s (1968:28), definition of what is meant by communities captures almost whole heartedly, the current situation of rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

3. The Linkage between Low Agricultural Productivity and the Non-Sustainability of Rural Communities

In recent decades, several African countries have experienced severe food shortages, and famines are not uncommon. Cash crop production has not been impressive either. Population growth has outpaced food production in most of African countries especially in the rural regions and also, their ever spawning urban shanty townships (Adedeji, 1992, Baker, 2010). This situation does not order well for a region where agriculture contributes about 20 to 60 percent (%) of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employs an average of 80% of workers (with majority located in rural communities) and accounts for 50 to 90% of exports (Cleaver, 1985). Africa’s agricultural crisis and its implications, as Adedeji (1992) explains has manifested itself in many negative forms. The crisis has reduced the tempo of activities in Africa’s public sector, caused factory closures and production declines in the private sector, swollen the ranks of the unemployed and denied large sections of Africans residing in rural communities’ access to essential social amenities and services. A clear contraction of what a developmental path toward sustainable rural communities should entails. A Baker (1984:14) puts it “The connections between agriculture on the one hand, and living standards on the other hand are strong”. The vice president of Ghana recently alluded to the fact that in spite of over a decade of macro-economic reforms, poverty remains high in all of the rural communities in Ghana. As he noted, a recent poverty assessment study, under taken by the Ministry of Social Service Services and Welfare reveal

that, nearly 54% of Ghana's poor crop farmers (small-scale or peasants) who derive their primary sources of income from farming and other farm-based activities (the Ghanaian Online Chronicle, 1998; Anyemedu, 1991:210-11; Martin, 1991: 257; Obimpeh, 1988:24; Novicki, 1988:21; World Resources, 1994:95). It is argued here that, rural communities are not developing on a sustainable path because African countries do not allow the markets to function effectively. It's said that producer prices are artificially kept low, and subsidized agricultural inputs are often available only to elite farmers (Bates, 1981; World Bank, 1981/1989). Sachs (1993:5) indicts the World Bank and other multilateral development institutions for the frenzy it has placed on macro-economic analysis and prescriptions issued to Southern countries. He suggests that the ideals and mental habits of the South are considered to be at odds with the ethos of an economic society.

According to Malinowski (1966) and Hyden (1980), the peasant mode of production (perceived conservative attitude) is pre-capitalist and pre-communist, and the values which govern their decision making rational is in part informed by their dependence on the natural environment and in part by what he calls 'the economy of affection' which is rooted in the values of reciprocity. Their mode of production provides them with the basis for social actions which are different from those sought by the state.

Like many African countries, Ghana chose dirigiste policies in its early attempts to achieve economic growth (Rimmer, 1992; Busumtwi-Sam, 1996; Alphine and Pickett, 1993). The backbone of the drive towards rapid industrialization was the agricultural sector, which in Ghana's case was dominated by small scale cocoa farmers. A study of the economic policies of 18 developing countries conducted by Krueger, Schiff and Valdes (1991), noted that Ghana had the highest direct and indirect taxes on agriculture from 1960 to 1984. A World Bank study of 31 developing countries in the 1970s found that Ghana had the highest level of distortions and the lowest growth rate of 0.1% (cited in Huq, 1988:21). In 1970, agriculture was taxed to the tune of 61% value added (cited in Alphine et al 1993:19). The result was dramatic decline in cocoa exports. In the 1964-65 crop year, Ghana exported 557,000 tons of cocoa. By the 1980 crop year exports had fallen to 185,000 tons (Ewusi, 1989; Sarris and Shams, 1991; Ansah, 1991:147; Baker, 1989). When producer prices rose dramatically to 112% between 1986 and 1988, under Ghana's Economic Recovery Programme, farmers responded by restoring their abandoned farms and replanting new cocoa trees (Sarris et al 1991; Rothchild, 1991; Hug, 1988; Herbst, 1991). This suggests that the peasant cocoa farmer is dynamic and rational. Citing Helleiner (1975), Jonathan Baker (1984) has argued that sub-Saharan Africa's rural producers do respond to income incentives by expanding production. The evidence, therefore, challenges the established view that peasant are resistant and unresponsive to market incentives (Toye, 1991).

4. Efforts to Enhance the Path toward Sustainable Development of Rural Communities via Agricultural Productivity in sub-Saharan Africa

Reference has already been made to the centrality of agricultural inputs increasing productivity as strategy to enhance the establishment of sustainable rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ghanaian peasant, like most of his/her sub-Saharan African counterparts, is deeply aware of the benefits of applying chemical fertilizers to crops and is often willing to apply them. However, problems have been encountered in the areas of supply, distribution and affordability. Hateful (1989:94) and Loxley (1991), have noted that in 1974, 74% of fertilizer imported into Ghana went to only two agricultural regions. Another problem has emerged; fertilizers for the most part are available but small-scale farmer are unable to afford them. According to Asenso Okyere (1994), demand for fertilizers has declined because of increased prices as subsidies have been removed as part of the Ghanaian government's Structural Adjustment Programme (Asuming-Brempong's, 1994; Bukh, 1979).

Ghanaian peasant, and for that matter most of sub-Sahara Africa, are also constrained by the problem of obtaining credit to expand their farms and, hence better their livelihoods and that of their respective communities (Hoff, Braverman, and Stiglitz, 1993; Adesina, 1996). According to Mikell (1991) it will not be possible to understand Ghana's political economy and its emerging problems, such as urban unrest and resurgent local-level activism as well as dissatisfaction, unless an in-depth analysis is made of how rural communities view and are affected by the new economic and political programmes.

5. Conclusion

The evidence from Ghana suggests that the problems associated with attaining sustainable rural communities cannot easily be solved by strategies aimed at increasing agricultural productivity through neo-liberal economic policies. Problems identified in sub-Saharan Africa's agricultural sector shows that, the problem is complex than they appear to be. Governments attempt to develop sustainable rural communities via increased producer prices for agricultural produce has not generated the necessary incentive condition for farmers to increase production. Small-scale farmers have not been able to increase production which would have translated in to increased incomes, improved livelihoods and ultimately, the sustainable development of their respective communities. It therefore appears that economic incentives alone will not be enough for output to increase. The peasant farmer might want to increase his/her yield and thus, improve upon the standard of living in the household and collectively, that of the community at large. Rather, the farmer is confronted with myriad of constraints in his/her endeavours. In the nutshell, the drive toward sustainable rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa will greatly depend on this fact; the state's willingness and ability to respect and learn from its rural constituency.

6. References

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