



## Commercialisation: A meta-approach for agricultural development among smallholder farmers in Africa?



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 May 2012

Received in revised form 19 March 2013

Accepted 24 May 2013

Available online 16 June 2013

#### Keywords:

Agricultural commercialisation

Meta-approaches

Contextuality

Heterogeneity

Smallholders

Cassava

Zambia

### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of commercialising smallholder farming for agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa. First it questions the validity of an overarching 'metanarrative' approach to development. Then it discusses the different types of knowledge, values and method and draws attention to the increasingly heterogeneous development policy context and also the heterogeneity among the smallholder 'targets' of agrifood policies.

Second, a case study exemplifies this critique in the context of an existing multistakeholder strategy of commercialising the Zambian cassava sector. Although limited in scope, the primary research illustrates how a commercial supply response should not be assumed from within a rural sector more concerned with food security.

The study casts doubt on the validity of a commercialising metanarrative. Rather, it endorses the need for a multidisciplinary understanding of the particular and local context which influences knowledge generation and development design, accounting for different value systems and perceptions of reality and smallholder farmer decision making within heterogeneous contexts.

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### Introduction

The World Bank's World Development Report (WDR) 'Agriculture for Development' (2007) drew attention to the importance for sustainable development and global poverty reduction of investing in agriculture, particularly among smallholders in developing countries. Synthesising knowledge from a wide range of sources, the Report offered a typology of rural poverty in relation to three agricultural worlds: 'one agriculture-based, one transforming, one urbanized' (p. 1). For Sub-Saharan Africa, which is mostly agriculture-based, the WDR argued that growth will happen through investment where the agricultural potential is medium to high, while at the same time ensuring the livelihoods and food security of subsistence farmers: 'Getting agriculture moving requires improving access to markets and developing modern market chains. It requires a smallholder based productivity revolution...' (p. 20). The aim is to achieve sustainable development and poverty reduction through the development of commercial agriculture.

Another World Bank report, *Awakening Africa's Sleeping Giant* (World Bank, 2009) argued that, 'for the foreseeable future, reducing poverty in Africa will depend largely on stimulating agricultural growth'. The basis for optimism about poverty reduction is

that within more favoured agricultural areas and for a range of commodities, African agricultural smallholders can be internationally competitive.

This revised focus on agriculture within the wider international community has been welcomed even by critics (Akram-Lodhi, 2008; Kay, 2009), and emphasises the importance of investment in agriculture for poverty reduction and the fundamental underpinnings of development in poorer countries, redressing more than two decades of neglect of agriculture. Nevertheless, there is a growing urgency to consider a wider range of views which can inform the development policy debate for the period post-2015: currently 'there is a homogeneity of thinking among the organizations and agencies worldwide that attends to the question of agricultural growth' (Feldman and Biggs, 2012).

This article addresses questions arising out of the policy of commercialising agriculture. Commenting on the meta-analytical approach to policy design, it stresses the importance of the particular and local context. This argument is followed by a case study which draws on the experiences of a European Union-funded programme for growth and poverty reduction through commercialising agriculture. This is the cassava sector development strategy in Zambia, part of the "All ACP Agricultural Commodities Programme" (AAACP)<sup>2</sup> which was launched in September 2007,

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and whose aim is to improve incomes and livelihoods of agricultural producers and reduce vulnerability at household and macro levels.

The paper continues as follows: Section 'Against a development 'metanarrative'' criticises the vision of commercialising smallholder agriculture as a meta-approach for agricultural development, explores the concepts of knowledge, meaning and method in development policy; and then notes questions that are not satisfactorily addressed by the commercialisation narrative for smallholder agriculture, including diversity in the 'big picture' of development approaches, and heterogeneity in the 'small picture' of rural households characteristics. The importance of contextual 'locality' and 'particularity' are highlighted. Then a case study is reported: Section 'The context: Cassava in Zambia' explains the context of empirical research into smallholder behaviour and commercial production in Zambia, followed by the quantitative and qualitative methodologies (section 'Empirical research') and results (section 'Findings'). Overall conclusions linked to the general critique of commercialisation policies as a meta-approach for smallholders are presented in section 'Conclusions and implications'.

### Against a development 'metanarrative'

#### *'Incredulity toward metanarratives'*

Since the Enlightenment rationalism and modernism have been the 'metanarrative', or overarching interpretative framework explaining knowledge and experience. A critique of 'metanarrative', attributable to Lyotard (1984), emerged within postmodern thinking as a reaction against positivist and modernist interpretations of the world. It denied a 'totalising' explanation of reality and embraced heterogeneity, 'local determinism' and 'particularities' – the quality of characteristics which pertain to a specific case or context or reality. The 'grand' narrative was said to be unhelpful and inaccurate for interpreting the world, and for policy prescription, and should give way to smaller, 'local' narratives that more precisely and correctly explain phenomena which are particular, heterogeneous and local (Poole, 2005).

#### *The 'discourse of the market' versus rural differentiation*

The methodology of the WDR is a meta-analysis. The emphasis of 'Agriculture for Development' (2007) is on commercialisation as a metanarrative for developing country agriculture and poverty reduction – both modernising in the sense of development theory, and modernist in the sense of underlying philosophy. It assumes rather than questions the essential attractiveness of market incentives and profit maximisation, whereas for many people in developing countries, agriculture is on the one hand more than a question of economics, and on the other often is not perceived to be an 'attractive' profession (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2011).

Various authors have criticised the WDR approach to engage smallholders in commercial markets: Havnevik et al. (2007) consider the WDR to be consistent with the World Bank's mistaken philosophy of 'market fundamentalism'. Feldman and Biggs (2012) contrast the WDR with the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology and Development (IAASTD). Agreeing with Broad (2006: 388), they note how the IAASTD critique of agricultural productivism has been sidelined by the neoliberal 'mainstream'. McMichael (2009) is suspicious of the attempt to include – or suborn – smallholders within value chains that are synonymous with a corporate food regime. Indeed, 'exclusionary corporate agriculture' might well be a consequence of the type of project envisaged in the Sleeping Giant report. Like

McMichael, Amanor (2009) also highlights the differential but often exclusionary results of agribusiness investment and market access.

In its defence, the WDR does note that 'heterogeneity defines the rural world' (World Bank, 2007: 5), and that national agendas for agriculture need differentiation: 'Agendas differ by country type, reflecting differences in priorities and structural conditions across the three agricultural worlds. The agendas must be further customized to country specifics through national agricultural strategies with wide stakeholder participation' (World Bank, 2007: 19). 'Particularity' is sought through the presentation of a typology of rural households which distinguishes five livelihood strategies within the three worlds: market-oriented smallholders; subsistence-oriented farmers; labour-oriented households; migration-oriented households; and diversified households. For Akram-Lodhi (2008), it presents a somewhat nuanced assessment of agrarian development.

While such clustering and customisation are welcome and analytically useful, they have limitations (Poole, 2000). Kay notes that the WDR advocates three pathways out of rural poverty which can be based on agriculture, the non-farm economy or outmigration – but are unlikely to help the poorest of the poor (Kay, 2009). Rather than accounting for differentiation within the rural population, Kay argues that this narrow approach is a prescription for furthering an agroculturalism which fails to address the development challenges facing the majority of independent rural smallholders.

Thus the level of 'differentiation' in the WDR and in the mainstream literature is both limited and reductionist. It glosses over the development 'losers', whose limited assets and capabilities consign them to exit from agriculture and often from rural life into – probably the lowest – echelons of an urban-industrial society. Exit from agriculture can mean unemployment, social disruption and urban deprivation within a context of burgeoning populations, climate change and resource scarcities.

Thus, the levels of differentiation commonly used are not very 'local' or 'particular', reflecting the methodologies of meta-analytical approaches and the growing influence of thematic reviews. They do not get deep into the hearts and minds of rural household members. Differentiation and customisation are conceived only within the overarching imperative of commercialising agriculture.

This academic critique is paralleled by a growing popular movement. The concept of food sovereignty originated in Latin America during the 1990s as a rights-based approach to improving food security, self-sufficiency and control of the agrifood supply chain within a discourse of agroecological sustainability. As a widespread reaction against agricultural market liberalism and agrifood industry globalisation, the transnational peasant movement, *La Via Campesina*, represents at least 200 million farmers and rural workers, plus a range of organisations and indigenous groups worldwide (Rosset and Martínez-Torres, 2012). Naranjo (2010) argued that food sovereignty can be achieved locally, even within a context of general globalisation, through policies which enable smallholders to improve their well-being, food security, self-esteem and to forge an adequate livelihood without engaging in global markets. Thus, food sovereignty has the potential to contribute to the development of local food systems and the promotion of agroecology, in the same way as the notion of a solidarity economy offers an alternative approach to mainstream economic organisations and relationships.

#### *Knowledge and policy*

It is possible to value what the WDR does while remaining sceptical about what it does not do. Related to the philosophically and empirically problematic nature of the metanarrative itself, there are difficulties with synthesising nature of the WDR process.

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