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Pro-poor agricultural growth – Inclusion or differentiation? Village level perspectives from Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade pro-poor agricultural growth strategies intended to raise smallholder productivity and increase commercialization among smallholders have been put forth as the key method for addressing poverty in rural Africa. By contrast perspectives that challenge this model question the market optimism and presumptions of higher smallholder efficiency that underpin the pro-poor agricultural growth model. Little longitudinal data exists that can shed light on questions related to sustainability of growth patterns and their distributional consequences at the village level, however. This paper uses a mixed methods approach to trace growth dynamics as well as the distributional aspects of such growth in terms of access to agrarian resources and local level labour relations. Quantitative data was used to select three villages in Zambia that had experienced pro-poor agricultural growth between 2002 and 2008. These villages were re-surveyed in 2013 and supplementary qualitative data was collected. Two of the three villages showed sustainable growth patterns. While the sources of such growth as well their distributional outcomes were different in the two villages, the reasons for such differences are related to Zambian agricultural policy as well as geography.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade the politically appealing notion of pro-poor, or broad based agricultural growth has been advanced as the way forward for Africa's rural poor. Rising domestic interest in smallholder[1] agriculture has dovetailed with policies proposed by donors, global philanthropic foundations and regional coalitions. Policies that address the plight of smallholders are justified on economic and social grounds, in part resurrecting the smallholder-led model of agricultural development under the label of pro-poor agricultural growth. In turn such perspectives are based on the presumptions that small scale farmers are efficient producers capable of providing for their own food security as well as producing a marketable surplus (Mellor, 1995; Lipton, 2005). In this respect, the experiences of the Asian Green Revolution, showing the poverty reducing effects of broad based agricultural growth are used to validate more recent policies, with the implicit assumption being that Africa can mimic the Asian development path (World Bank, 2007; Timmer, 2009).

The market optimism of pro-poor growth perspectives can, however, be contrasted with critical analyses of agrarian class dynamics that stress the differentiating tendencies of capitalism and suggest that the integration of peasant communities into global input and output markets will enhance class based differentiation at the local level (Havnevik et al., 2007; Bernstein, 2010; Bernstein and Oya, 2014).

In the present paper we describe and analyse village level processes of economic change and their implications for the distribution of incomes and land. We revisit households in three villages in Zambia that showed signs of broad based agricultural growth in the period 2002–2008 (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2013) as expressed through a general improvement in livelihoods and increased agricultural commercialization.[2] Households in the villages were resurveyed in 2013 and qualitative field work was carried out, with the

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[1] While there is no universal size criterion for "smallholders", the sector consists of family managed farm units, relying largely on family labour. In practice this restricts farm size, compared to the large scale sector. In the African context the smallholder sector uses low levels of farm inputs, mechanization and irrigation, when compared with the large scale sector. Moreover, levels of commercialization are low, with the majority of smallholders being subsistence or semi-subsistence farmers (Weber et al., 1988). The median farm size for sub-Saharan Africa is around 1 ha for most countries in Africa (Collier and Dercon, 2014).

[2] Although examples of villages can be found in the broader dataset where increases in agricultural commercialization occurred in the period (Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2014), limitations in the dataset do not permit an assessment of the poverty reducing effects of this commercialization.

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aim to assess the sustainability of such growth, while seeking possible explanations for these processes in local level institutional environments.

Two research questions guide the analysis in what follows: firstly, we consider the sustainability of growth patterns found between 2002 and 2008 and address the distribution of incomes and assets in villages that have experienced sustained growth as well as their consequences for local labour relations. Secondly, to the extent that patterns of growth have been different in the villages under inquiry, we identify local explanations for these differences related to institutional factors tied to agricultural policies as well as geography.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Two main strands of theory provide contextualization for the analysis. Comparative perspectives on broad-based agricultural growth - drawing mainly on literature emphasizing the potential for market oriented smallholder production, are used as the starting point. These theoretical vantage points are contrasted with perspectives that question the market optimism of the pro-poor agricultural growth proponents, highlighting instead challenges related to smallholder efficiency as well as differentiation within the smallholder sector.

2.1. Smallholder-based pro-poor agricultural growth

As suggested at the outset of this article, over the past decade agricultural policy in sub-Saharan Africa has refocused on enhancing smallholder productivity following the 'lost decades' of the 1980s and 1990s. The main objectives of such policies have been to enhance food security, reduce rural poverty and encourage broad-based agricultural growth (Dorward et al., 2004; Diao et al., 2010). Most emblematic of this reorientation is perhaps the smallholder focus that pervades the World Bank's flagship report, the *World Development Report* for 2008 *Agriculture for Development*.

Two main theoretical tenets underpin the smallholder focus: that smallholders relying on family labour are efficient producers (Haggblade and Hazell, 2010) and that increased smallholder commercialization encourages broad based economic growth. Improving market access and redressing poor producer incentives for food crops especially, are therefore central to pro-poor agricultural growth strategies (Dorward et al., 2004; Jayne et al., 2006, 2010). Linking smallholders to domestic, regional and sometimes global value chains is in this respect fundamental to these approaches. In turn, rising incomes among smallholders enhance the prospects for consumption linkages to the nonfarm economy as well as possibilities for diversification out of agriculture, paving the way for more long term structural change (Haggblade et al., 2007).

Empirically, the smallholder approach is supported by the experience of the Asian Green Revolution, that points to the poverty reducing effects of enhanced smallholder productivity – both among family farmers themselves and among landless labourers (Rosegrant and Hazell, 2000; Hazell et al., 2010). In the Asian experience, poverty reduction based on agricultural growth was connected to unimodal systems of land tenure paired with inclusive processes of technology transfers that raised productivity among a broad segment of smallholders (Ravallion and Datt, 2002; Ravallion and Chen, 2004). Here the role of the state and the influence of national policies were imperative in supporting land reform, subsidizing farm inputs and building human capital.

Although macro-level poverty reduction has been documented as one of the outcomes of the Asian Green Revolution, how to ensure and evaluate inclusivity in the context of the African smallholder model is less straightforward. Pro-poor growth perspectives therefore acknowledge the segmentation of smallholder populations based on their commercial prospects. Subsistence-based farming may be less well served by policies aiming to link smallholders to markets than by safety net interventions (Masters et al., 2013). In this sense, poverty reduction among the poorest and most vulnerable rural populations may need to be ensured through policies outside the agricultural sector, for instance through cash transfer programs.

2.2. Challenges to pro-poor growth perspectives

The feasibility and benefits of the pro-poor agricultural growth agenda have been questioned both within the sub-discipline of agricultural economics as well as within the broader field of social science. The smallholder focus of broad based agricultural growth strategies has been questioned by proponents of large scale farming, who argue that the prospects for technology uptake and linkages to modernized procurement and marketing systems are superior in the large scale sector. By extension, the possibilities for reducing rural poverty through creating wage labour opportunities, as well as improving food security are judged to be greater in this sector (Collier and Dercon, 2014). Pro-poor growth strategies have also been criticized for not taking into account the physical and social realities characteristic of much of rural Africa, for instance varied agro-ecology, poor infrastructure, low initial smallholder productivity, rising climate related unpredictability and weak linkages to the industrial sector (Ellis, 2007).

Critics of broad based agricultural growth are also found within the literature on agrarian class differentiation, where the market emphasis of pro-poor agricultural growth is perceived to lead to increasing rural differentiation (Havnevik et al., 2007). It is suggested that commercialization raises costs and imposes risks that result in accumulation among large- and medium-scale farmers at the expense of weaker households. As suggested by Oya (2010), however, not much longitudinal work is available within this tradition providing limited scope for drawing conclusions over time.

Recent empirical trends related to generally shrinking land sizes as well as increasing differentiation of land sizes within the smallholder sector (Jayne et al., 2014), also cast doubt on the prospects for inclusive, agrarian based growth. Moreover, future uncertainties are connected also to the possible intergenerational challenges arising from an increasingly youthful (rural) population (Losch, 2012).

The possibility for inclusion may be further compromised by the widespread discrimination against female farmers in relation to agricultural assets across a variety of regional and national settings (Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2013). At an overarching level, FAO (2011) data suggests that only 15% of landholders in sub-Saharan Africa are women, whereas other studies point to lower use of labour (Takane, 2008), technology (Doss and Morris, 2001) and inputs (Peterman et al., 2010) among female farmers. Extension services primarily addressing the needs of men (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2010) compound these other types of discrimination.

2.3. Pro-poor agricultural growth policies

The challenges for smallholder agriculture in Africa are greater, and the leeway for African agricultural policy makers is smaller than the empirical comparison with the Asian Green Revolution implies. While African smallholders face challenges similar to those of their erstwhile Asian counterparts – for instance unaffordable inputs, poor infrastructure and underdeveloped markets - the severity of these challenges is more profound and the resources available to tackle them are smaller. In a context of limited public resources, strategies for ensuring smallholder-led agricultural growth are therefore often characterized by policies targeting