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Urbanization and linkages to smallholder farming in sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for food security

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews evidence on African urbanization trends and consequences of these for the smallholder sector and rural food security. Urban growth is less rapid than often assumed and consumption rather than production driven, while liberalized trade regimes have globalized food systems. Urban insecurity and rural poverty are handled through self-provisioning arrangements in both rural and urban areas, which may undermine the role of urban areas as sources of demand for rural produce. Smallholders in rural areas close to existing urban areas are likely to benefit most from growing markets for high value products. Food security must be the priority for marginal areas untouched by urbanization.

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1. Introduction

Radical shifts in food systems have characterized the post-World War II period. Growing global populations alongside changes in dietary patterns and energy consumption have increased demand for agricultural products as food, animal feed and biofuel feedstock (Mitchell, 2008). Such long term trends were augmented by short-term influences on food prices in 2008, when a series of droughts, an abrupt increase in diversion of maize for biofuel use, export bans on rice and speculative behavior in grain markets broke four decades of declining food commodity prices. The subsequent reaction to food price increases in countries as diverse as Haiti, Egypt and Mexico pointed starkly to the globalized nature of food systems.

The food price crisis also reflected an increasingly liberalized global trade regime which has gradually reduced the agricultural trade surplus in developing countries and recast these countries as net importers (Pingali, 2007). For the least developed countries in particular, the agricultural trade deficit is forecast to widen over the next couple of decades (Pingali, 2010).

Tied to shifts in global patterns of demand are also increasingly globalized structures of procurement and food retailing as well as changing consumer preferences in developing countries. Growing foreign direct investment in agriculture and food processing, the increasing role of supermarkets and a Westernization of dietary preferences interact to shape the process of the nutrition

transition among increasingly urbanized populations, while also affecting rural smallholder producers through new demands for consistent quality and supply (McCullough et al., 2008; Reardon, 2007). Meanwhile the vulnerability of small producers to climate change effects is forecast as particularly problematic, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Annez et al., 2010).

Patterns of urban population growth and their implications for smallholder farming are likely to be shaped both by the global influences outlined above as well as more localized aspects. Economic dynamics have perhaps received the most attention in the literature and concern the forward and backward linkages between agriculture and the nonfarm sector, as economies move through the process of structural transformation. This understanding needs to be complemented by an analysis of urbanization processes, the types of agricultural production systems found in rural areas and how these are influenced by proximity to urban areas.

While growing urban populations, rising global food prices and a low yield domestic agriculture constitute a potentially combustible mix in SSA, the available evidence on urbanization trends and the possible consequences of such changes for smallholder farmers have not been evaluated. The following study contributes to addressing this research gap by reviewing the social science literature on the subject in three ways. Firstly, the theoretical linkages between urbanization and smallholder based agriculture are examined. Secondly, recent empirical data on urbanization processes in SSA are analyzed. Finally, the potential impact of these processes on smallholder agriculture and rural food security are considered.

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2. Situating urbanization and smallholder agriculture in the theoretical literature

2.1. Farm-nonfarm linkages and urbanization

A large body of literature within the field of economics documents urbanization as the spatial and demographic outcome of a broader process of structural transformation (Timmer, 2009). Movement of capital and labor from agriculture to manufacturing and services, largely found within urban areas, reduces the share of agriculture both in total value added and in the labour force as the economy expands (Chenery and Syrquin, 1975; Timmer, 2009). Globally this process has been underway for some time, with agriculture at present employing a third of the global labor force and producing a share of value added of 2–3% (Satterthwaite et al., 2010).

Standard structural transformation models focus on the interplay between rural and urban labor markets as drivers of urbanization: increasing agricultural productivity expands food availability and gradually allows rural people to enter nonfarm employment. In the Asian case, the Green Revolution was matched by the attraction of labor into an emergent industrial sector (Gollin et al., 2012).

As suggested by Hazell et al. (2007), particular push and pull factors and their outcomes are influenced by regional characteristics: where access to productive assets within agriculture is relatively equal and initial production potential is high, rising agricultural labor productivity produces a food surplus which enables family members to leave agriculture for work in the nonfarm sector. Demand for rural services intensifies with the upgrading of agriculture, resulting in stronger linkages to small rural towns. In turn, urbanization increases demand for agricultural products. Eventually the nonfarm economy evolves towards higher return activities and agriculture loses its role as the primary driver of the regional economy. Small towns through their direct links to surrounding rural areas take on a special role in early transformation processes (Tiffen, 2003; von Braun, 2007). In marginal areas, by contrast, falling agricultural productivity pushes people into labor intensive, poorly remunerated, nonfarm livelihoods, with urban areas functioning largely as outlets for sale of products from these activities (Hazell et al., 2007).

2.2. Urban bias perspectives, mobility and multi-locality

While the perspectives outlined above have an essentially optimistic view of urbanization, negative perceptions of rural urban interaction can be found in literature from the same period. The most influential contribution in this respect is Michael Lipton's (1977) classic work *Why Poor People Stay Poor* and its "urban bias thesis" (UBT). Lipton's (1977) argument centers on the inequitable and inefficient distribution of resources between rural and urban areas. The concentration of organizational and political power in urban centers, leads to policy biases that retard human capital formation in rural areas. Urban bias is amplified by government policies of industrialization aimed at import substitution. Together with regulated producer prices this tilts the rural urban terms of trade to the disadvantage of rural areas.

In a recent contribution, Jones and Corbridge (2010) re-evaluate the UBT in the light of structural adjustment policies that have to some extent redressed the rural urban terms of trade. As urban population growth continues, poverty is also increasingly urbanized while the globalized economy means that urban poverty is tied to rising global food prices (see also Bezemer and Headey, 2008). The distinction between rural and urban is blurred by increasing mobility and livelihoods that span a number of different places in what are called multi-local livelihoods (Andersson

Djurfeldt, 2012; Andersson Djurfeldt, 2014; Foeken and Owuor, 2008; Mberu et al., 2013; Potts, 2010; Tacoli, 2008).

2.3. Linking smallholder agriculture and urbanization

The linkages between rural and urban areas and the role of these linkages vary greatly depending on the tenure structure and size of farm units. Perspectives stressing the potential of broad based agricultural growth within African family farming tend to focus on the relatively egalitarian tenure structure of the smallholder sector (Hazell et al., 2010). The case is often made that the Asian Green revolution, and the more recent experiences of India and China, point to the potential of pro-poor agricultural growth in unimodal tenure systems (Ravallion and Datt, 2002; Ravallion and Chen, 2004). By contrast, in Latin America, where land distribution is bimodal, new technology and commercial opportunities within agriculture, have benefited large scale mechanized farms, rather than smallholders.

Spatial perspectives showing how uneven development processes enhance regional differences, and inter household disparities can also be found in the literature (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2013; Andersson Djurfeldt et al., 2013; Parnwell, 1996). Satterthwaite and Tacoli (2003) consider small and intermediate sized urban centers in particular, and their potential role in rural and regional development and poverty reduction. Through a number of case studies, the authors demonstrate the weak linkages between large scale agricultural production geared directly towards global markets and lower level urban development. By contrast, poverty reducing, local level growth – in both rural and urban areas – is connected to high value, intensive production on relatively equitably distributed land (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1986; Satterthwaite and Tacoli, 2003). Rural hinterland development, therefore, is connected to macro level policies and processes. Although patterns of mutual dependence can emerge between small towns and their rural surroundings, the nature of this contact is not necessarily favorable to smallholder farmers. The *dynamic* interaction between smallholders and lower level urban centers therefore requires the prior integration of rural producers into national and international value chains (Hinderink and Titus, 2002).

3. Empirical tendencies in African urbanization

3.1. Measuring urbanization

Urban growth is driven by natural increase and rural to urban migration, with the combination of the two varying regionally and nationally (McGranahan et al., 2009). Moreover, when urban areas expand physically, or rural population densities increase, rural areas are reclassified as urban, as boundaries move or the population thresholds for fulfilling urban definitions are reached (Beauchemin and Bocquier, 2004).

Since urbanization involves the redistribution of population over time, consistent definitions are crucial to international comparability. Unfortunately, definitions of urban areas – which tend to rest on a combination of population size and functional criteria – vary widely among countries. In populous countries, as pointed out by Satterthwaite (2007, 2010) a change in the urban census criteria would alter global levels of urbanization. Shifts in urban thresholds in regionally important countries such as Nigeria or Brazil, would change the size of the urban population in Africa and South America, respectively. Comparability is further confounded by a general lack of census data, especially in SSA. Population data as well as urban classifications carry political implications as they may determine electoral constituencies,

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