

Land, Farming, Livelihoods, and Poverty: Rethinking the Links in the Rural South

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Summary. — Lives and livelihoods in the Rural South are becoming increasingly divorced from farming and, therefore, from the land. Patterns and associations of wealth and poverty have become more diffuse and diverse as non-farm opportunities have expanded and heightened levels of mobility have led to the delocalization of livelihoods. This, in turn, has had ramifications for the production and reproduction of poverty in the countryside, which is becoming progressively de-linked from agricultural resources. This requires a reconsideration of some old questions regarding how best to achieve pro-poor development in the Rural South.

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1. FEET OF CLAY: OUTLINING THE ISSUES (SIMPLY)

For most scholars and development practitioners, the poor world is largely a rural world and, in terms of livelihoods, this rural world is an agricultural one where farming predominates and where land is the critical resource. The assumption, sometimes explicitly stated but more often implicit, is that the solution to global poverty lies in the invigoration of farming and the redistribution of land. It is, in short, at the nexus between land and agricultural productivity that a resolution to rural poverty in the Global South—and therefore to global poverty—is to be found. For the UK Department for International Development, "...land is a fundamental livelihood asset [and] secure, safe, and affordable land is a necessary, but not always sufficient condition for reducing poverty (p. 1)" (DFID, 2002a, 2002b). Writing of rural Asia, Ali and Pernia state that "typically, the incidence of rural poverty is inversely related to the size of landholdings, decreasing from landless to sub-marginal, marginal to small, then to large farmers" (Ali & Penia, 2003, p. 3).

In light of views such as these, it is no surprise that development interventions tend to focus on the redistribution of rural resources and/or on a (re-)invigoration of agricultural production. While the ideological inclination

of those recommending fundamental land reform on the one hand, or the dissemination of new agricultural technologies (such as those of the Green Revolution) on the other may be different, they nonetheless identify the solution to rural poverty and underproduction lying in the countryside and, more particularly, in agricultural production. Not only do they see land/farming as a core ingredient in the essential recipe for rural development, but this is also invariably framed in terms of small-holder production. In these ways at least, they share the same ground and a common vision.

This paper seeks to challenge this farming- and land-focused vision on the basis that it overlooks the direction and trajectory of change in the Rural South and, therefore, also overlooks the emerging spaces for development intervention. It is in assuming that we should look to farming and the distribution and

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availability of resources in the countryside to address rural poverty that, it is argued, the difficulties and inconsistencies arise. In making this case, which I recognize will be contentious at times and problematic in places, I wish to link different bodies of work on agrarian change, namely: work on the structural transformations driving deagrarianization; on the production and reproduction of poverty in the countryside; on livelihoods; and on cultures of modernity. To do this, the paper will draw on evidence from across the Rural South and will attempt to make a generalized case that has resonance and relevance at a global level. In places, however, it will be necessary to flesh out and substantiate the broader assertions with detailed evidence and case studies, requiring a degree of elaboration at the local level. This more detailed material will be drawn, to a large extent, from the Southeast Asian region.¹ It is accepted that there are dangers in drawing associational links between “cherry picked” case studies and the general experience of rural development. Nonetheless, the paper intentionally attempts to get beyond the particular to reflect on the broader canvas of change.

(a) *The role of land and farming: the Rural South and the Rural North*

Livelihoods in the Rural South do, in many places and for many households—perhaps even in most places and for most households—continue to depend on small-holder agricultural production. The large majority of people in the Global South live in the countryside and the livelihoods of most, it would seem, are dependent on farming (Table 1). But, and even putting aside data deficiencies which would indicate that the figures in Table 1 overstate the role of farming and the size of the rural population and understate the level of out-migration from rural areas (see Deshingkar, 2005, pp. 14–15), there is the important issue of whether the present state of affairs in the Rural South will have any historical resilience. In other words, do the present and the past offer a reasonable guide to the future? Writing of Africa—the world’s most agrarian continent—Bryceson challenges “the unwarranted assumption that the African continent’s destiny is necessarily rooted in peasant agriculture” (1997a, p. 3 [emphasis in original]).

Scholars and development agencies do acknowledge the growing role of non-farm activities (local and extra-local) in rural econo-

mies and livelihoods. But the abiding sense is that these activities are still regarded as add-ons to the main business of farming. In the case of rural–urban migration, such is the level of official disquiet that it is not uncommon for policy makers and some scholars to propose controlling the process. The argument pursued in this paper is that not only are non-farm activities becoming central to rural livelihoods but also that an increasing number of rural households have no commitment to farming whatsoever. It is not, therefore, just a question of weighting and balance, but of a more profound transition from one way of making a living to another.

As a way into the discussion that follows, it is worth briefly reflecting on the recent historical experiences of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea where rural landscapes have been profoundly transformed over the last 30 or 40 years. The agrarian transitions of those countries have been collapsed into just two decades. No longer is access to land a necessary condition for reducing poverty, and farming is just one activity among many in the countryside. Indeed, “once the major source of income and employment, the agricultural sectors of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan gave up resources to the growing non-agricultural sector until, after remarkably short periods of time by international standards, protection and subsidization became essential to their survival” (Francks, Boestel, & Kim, 1999, p. 215). While the pace of change in East Asia has been truly remarkable, the experience of the region does show how livelihoods and production in the countryside can be reworked in less than a generation, even while households retain their rural base. More recently, countries like Malaysia have experienced a similarly rapid and deep agrarian transformation.

Given the rate of rural transformations in some countries, it becomes all the more surprising how wedded scholars and development practitioners are to the rural/land/farming paradigm summarized above. One of the key lessons of longitudinal village studies is how scholars characteristically misinterpret the trajectory of change in “their” communities.² When Michael Moerman returned to Ban Ping in Chiang Rai province in the Northern region of Thailand after an absence of just four years, he found that farmers’ actions had confounded his expectations: “It would be false to say that I had predicted this change, and dishonest not to confess that it surprised me” (1968, p. 185).³

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