



Photo: J. Boethling

# Rural transformation in sub-Saharan Africa

The present debate on rural transformation reflects a paradigm shift in addressing rural development. While, in past decades, rural development was mainly considered from a micro-level perspective, focussing on farming systems and value chains, the macroeconomic perspective of structural change now prevails in rural development studies. Setting out from trends in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the authors comment on how social inclusiveness and ecological sustainability can guide rural transformation dynamics.

The current debate on rural transformation in low- and middle-income countries is mostly based on an understanding of structural change following the pattern of industrial countries.

---

**Theo Rauch, Gabriele Beckmann, Susanne Neubert, Simone Rettberg**  
Centre for Rural Development (SLE)  
Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany  
Contact: [theorauch@gmx.de](mailto:theorauch@gmx.de)

Accordingly, rural transformation is seen as a shift of value added and employment from the rural-agricultural to the urban-industrial sectors, accompanied by increased agricultural productivity, growing farm size and intensified rural-urban linkages. This is the path that was taken by most European countries and has largely been adopted by newly industrialised East Asian countries like China or South Korea. High urbanisation rates in many African countries tend to suggest that

Africa might perhaps follow a similar route. Accordingly, some scholars envisaged a future development path for African smallholders (which still constitute the vast majority of farms south of the Sahara) in line with the motto “stepping-up, stepping-out or hanging-in”. In terms of a promotion strategy, this slogan was translated by its proponents into a target group-differentiated approach suggesting that resource-rich smallholders be promoted to become full-scale com-

mercial farm enterprises (“stepping-up”), while those with fewer agricultural resources but higher off-farm incomes be assisted in moving out of agriculture towards non-farm activities (“stepping-out”), thus leaving their land to the more advanced farmers, whereas the masses of subsistence farmers or marginal smallholders be helped to stabilise their subsistence basis and be provided with social transfers (“hanging-in”). To check whether or not such a strategy can fit in the context of sub-Saharan countries, it is necessary to analyse the past and on-going rural transformation dynamics there.

### ■ Sluggish transformation in sub-Saharan Africa

An analysis of development dynamics in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) based on aggregated macro-economic data shows that rural transformation is still sluggish. By and large, the smallholder-dominated agricultural structure has remained unchanged. Growth in agricultural production has been roughly in line with population growth. This means that a growing labour force has used the farm land still available to supply an increasing number of consumers and – to a lesser degree – external markets on the basis of widely unchanged production techniques. Farm sizes have stagnated at a level of one to two hectares. Agricultural productivity has not increased by any great measure. Most farm households have maintained their diversified and flexible rural-urban livelihood systems, composed of subsistence agriculture, cash crop production, seasonal off-farm employment and (often temporary) labour migration during the decades after independence. Still, neither agricultural nor off-farm income sources, neither subsistence nor the market and employment opportunities alone are sufficient and secure enough to ensure a living income.

What has happened more recently and what is often labelled as a “new rurality” is a shift within these rural-urban livelihood systems to-

wards non-farm and urban sources of income. While the number of rural households is still growing, many farm-based households are forced to manage their farming activities with a reduced labour force. Frequently, only women are left at home caring for the children and the elderly. The – often exaggerated – urbanisation rates (see article on page 27) reflect this shift. They should, however, not be mistaken for indications of a definite and permanent migration from rural

to urban areas. Most of the migrants are not successful in finding a safe and rewarding alternative income basis, even if they prefer to stay in the city. Thus, urban income sources mostly continue to form a supplementary income rather than an alternative to farming. Hence, rural-urban migration in Africa is mostly not a shift from farm to more productive non-farm sectors (as it should be according to the conventional rural transformation model), but one towards even less

### Urbanisation and new urban poverty in Zambia. The case of Kabwe

Zambia has been one of the forerunners of urbanisation in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, this country shows that urbanisation in SSA is no one-way trend. Much of the migration to urban centres characterise themselves as temporal or circular. During the 1990ies, the migration flows turned to the contrary in Zambia when prices rose and the level of income fell. Urban-rural migration was one way to escape from this urban trap during that period. Moreover, in Zambia as in other countries of SSA, there is a recently growing trend of land acquisition in rural areas undertaken by the urban middle-class.



*A woman breaking rocks in a rock quarry in Msisi, a slum outside Lusaka.*

*Photo: J. Barbee/NYT/Redux/laif*

Urbanisation as such is a livelihood strategy but no general way out of poverty. There is much evidence of a new urban poverty, which in Zambia is most visible in the fast growing peri-urban areas of Lusaka, the Copperbelt and emerging cities like Solwezi or Kabwe. The Mayor of Kabwe, Mr Richard Bango, looks full of concern on his city. The last census in 2010 counted 208,049 inhabitants in Kabwe. As immigration and natural population growth continues to be high, the Mayor has the bad feeling “that this number might double within five years”. The projections of the 2010 census are not that extreme, but they forecast that Kabwe will be inhabited by 269,759 people in 2030. And when it comes to income opportunities, the Mayor states that there is no evidence of significant improvement. On the contrary, formal employment is rather on the wane.

Mr Bango is concerned about the fact that the municipality is far from having enough financial and personal capacities to provide the basic infrastructure (water, sanitation, solid waste management, etc.) and the minimum social services of health and education for the rapidly extending peri-urban townships. According to the African Development Bank Group, urbanisation in Africa “has largely been translated into rising slum establishments, increasing poverty and inequality.” The problems of new urban poverty are above all challenging the urban local governments of SSA.



### Transformation in the pastoral areas of Ethiopia

Studies on rural transformation in Africa tend to focus on farming livelihoods, ignoring transformation processes within pastoral livelihoods, which are widespread in arid and semi-arid regions. At the same time, the economic and ecological relevance of mobile pastoralism is often underestimated by governments, so that strategic interventions are biased towards the support of sedentary forms of agro-pastoralism. The case of Ethiopia and the devastating impact of the current drought, especially in the lowlands of the Afar Region, point towards the deficits of previous external development efforts. The lack of context-specific strategies for pastoralists has led to their exclusion.

Major current trends in pastoral regions of Ethiopia relate to:

- a) an increasing sedentarisation and livelihood diversification towards subsistence-oriented agro-pastoralism, although livestock still represent the major source of income,
- b) shifts in land use regimes marked by enclosures on previously communally used land and the government appropriation of pastoral resources for the purpose of commercial irrigation agriculture, and
- c) the weakening of customary institutions for natural resource management.

The combined impact of these trends has been a significant reduction of livestock productivity, environmental degradation and loss of pastoral resilience. At the same time, there is increased in-migration of labour migrants from rural highlands searching for employment opportunities on the commercial farms. Small and medium towns grow as destitute pastoralists and educated youth move there.



*Sedentarisation is one of the major current trends in pastoral livelihood systems. Settlement of destitute pastoralists in the Afar Region of Ethiopia.*

*Photo: S. Rettberg*

Against the background of an increasing global and national demand of livestock products and increasing livestock prices, it is essential to make use of available potentials for an intensification of pastoralism which have been largely ignored up to now. This has to be supplemented through the creation of more diversified income opportunities, including non-pastoral sources of income. At the same time, possibilities for an extensive use of pastures have to be sustained as this is the only option for a sustainable and socially inclusive land use in certain areas.

productive informal service sectors, the expansion of which is to a considerable extent the result of growing numbers of job seekers rather than a growing demand for labour. An annual 15 million additional entrants to the labour market in sub-Saharan countries must be set against only two million additional employment opportunities in the formal sectors. Ac-

ording to all forecasts, the absolute number of rural people will continue to grow beyond 2050.

Thus, the major reason for the persistence of farm-based livelihoods is restricted employment dynamics in the African manufacturing sectors and productive "modern" service sectors. In contrast to 19<sup>th</sup> century Eu-

rope and late 20<sup>th</sup> century East Asia, African countries no longer have the possibility of protecting an emerging labour-intensive manufacturing sector against global competition.

### ■ New rural dynamics since 2008

While rural transformation dynamics have been constrained during the post-colonial decades, recent developments make it worth paying attention to this issue. Since the global agricultural boom and the food crises in 2008, new dynamics can be seen in rural regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Growing global demand for agricultural products, along with increasing population densities in rural areas, the deterioration of natural resources accompanied by the impacts of climate change and a new interest on the part of national and international investors in African farmland have triggered new dynamics in many rural regions south of the Sahara. Agricultural growth through the extension of the cultivated area is reaching its limits in many places. Providing more people with food and taking advantage of new market opportunities without destroying the natural resource base and ecosystems (soils, water, forests) requires an intensification of agricultural production, i.e. an increase in yields per hectare and per drop of water. Preserving extensive forms of cultivation or animal husbandry with low and insecure yield levels is neither feasible – taking the changing economic and natural environment into account – nor is it desirable from the small-scale farmers' point of view. A structural change in the rural economy in terms of a transformation from extensive towards more intensive land use systems seems to be inevitable.

### ■ The challenge of shaping the transformation in a socially inclusive manner

The big challenge for a rural development policy aimed at achieving "One World – No Hunger" is to shape that inevitable transformation process in a socially inclusive and environ-

mentally sustainable manner. Social inclusiveness is a must if food security is to be enhanced. However, a socially inclusive transformation process implies that no smallholder families will lose their land and subsistence basis without finding a safe and sufficient alternative economic basis for their existence. Those who lose their access to food as farmers must consequently acquire sufficient purchasing power to buy that food on the markets. In other words, any involuntary stepping-out of agriculture without a safe harbour will aggravate hunger rather than reducing it. Such safe harbours in off-farm economic sectors are to be seen hardly anywhere in Africa. Urban employment opportunities tend to grow during phases of raw material booms (as witnessed during the last decade) and tend to decline with shrinking world market prices for raw materials (as is happening at present).

As long as there is no dynamic expansion of safe and productive employment opportunities outside the agricultural sector, any socially inclusive rural transformation needs to be a change that takes place within the prevailing system of farm-based rural-urban livelihoods. Rural transformation, therefore, means in the first instance a broad-based and ecologically sustainable intensification of farming, accompanied by efforts towards improving off-farm employment opportunities, especially along farm-based commodity chains. Most African small-scale farmers have under-utilised potential for intensification at their disposal. Using location-specific and ecologically sustainable low-external input technologies, yields can still be doubled at most locations. Those who tend to underestimate the potential of resource-poor smallholders often overlook that many of their constraints are a result of decades of negligence on the part of governments and development cooperation.

Such broad-based intensification should focus on increasing land (rather than labour) productivity, taking the abundant and growing rural labour force into account. This, however, may have to be accompanied by focused

### Trends in SSA from 1961 to 2013

Factor	1961	1990	2013
Share of agricultural sector in GDP / GNI (%)	43	35	27
Share of working population in the agricultural sector (%)	83	70	62
Share of manufacturing industry in GDP (%)	n.a.	13	11
Share of working population in manufacturing industry (%)	n.a.	5	4.6
Share of working population in the service sector (%)	n.a.	25	33
Annual cereal production (million tons)	30	57	123
Annual cereal production / per capita (tons)	0.150	0.130	0.145
Cereal production/ per capita of rural population (tons)	0.17	0.17	0.23
Cereal area harvested (million hectares)	40	57	86
Yields of cereals (tons/hectare)	0.75	1.0	1.42
Average farm size (hectare)	1.6	1.5	1.6

Sources: FAOSTAT 2014, World Bank WDI, ILO 2013, Rauch 2012. Macro figures for SSA without South Africa

### Income sources, employment opportunities and rural poverty 2010

	2010
Farm income share of household income (%)	60-70
Subsistence share of food production (%)	60
Annual increase in working population (million)	15
Annual increase in formal employment (million)	2
Share of rural population in extreme poverty (< \$1/p/d)	40

Sources: Losch, Freguin-Gresh, White (World Bank) 2012

mechanisation steps which may be necessary to overcome specific labour bottlenecks within intensified cultivation systems. Intensification will have to be promoted in a manner specifically tailored to the location and target group: While densely populated, central and highly market-integrated locations may require value chain development and a focus on off-season crops, remote and marginal locations affected by soil degradation and variability in rainfall patterns may require a focus on sustainable land management techniques with improved soil and water conservation practices

aimed at increasing food security. In all of these cases, improved and inclusive agriculture-related service systems will be required. To make these systems affordable, the majority of small-scale farmers will have to organise to gain access to them. To make them feasible and cost-effective, context-specific service system concepts will have to be designed, taking the capacities and interests of public and private stakeholders into account. Relying on market forces and private initiative alone will not result in socially inclusive rural transformation towards a world with no hunger.

The article is based on the study "Rural Transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa" carried out by the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) as part of the One World – No Hunger special initiative launched by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It is part of the BMZ-financed research project "Towards a Socially Inclusive and Ecologically Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa". The study (SLE Research Paper No. 1, 2016) is available in English and German at: [sle@agr.ar.hu-berlin.de](mailto:sle@agr.ar.hu-berlin.de). The digital version can be downloaded at: [www.sle-berlin.de](http://www.sle-berlin.de)