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INTRODUCTION

Interrogating the technocratic (neoliberal) agenda for agricultural development and hunger alleviation in Africa

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This paper introduces a special issue that critically examines the dominant technocratic, neoliberal agenda for agricultural development and hunger alleviation in Africa. We briefly review the history of African agricultural and food security policy in the post-colonial period in order to contextualise the productionist approach embedded in the New Green Revolution for Africa, a strategy comprising the use of hybrid seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides to boost crop production. This approach is underpinned by a new and unprecedented level of public–private partnerships as donors actively work to promote the private sector and build links between African farmers, input suppliers, agro-dealers, agro-processors, and retailers. On the consumer end, increased supermarket penetration into poorer neighbourhoods is proffered as a solution to urban food insecurity. The papers in the special issue complicate understandings of this new approach and raise serious questions about its effectiveness as a strategy for increasing food production and alleviating hunger across the continent.

Keywords: Africa; agriculture; food security; green revolution; value chain; supermarketization

Introduction

While languishing on the back burner of African development agendas for years, agriculture and food security are now leading priorities with significant donor interest (Bourne, 2014). The twin goals of increased food production and a better fed African population are being conceptualised in a manner, and supported by a constellation of actors and donors, that is simultaneously new and old. This new mix of ideas and players is reorganising African development as we know it. Indeed, actors in this arena often refer to Africa as the last frontier of agricultural development. It is simultaneously a region of vast untapped agricultural potential, a zone of capitalist agricultural expansion, and the final pocket of global hunger to be conquered. The synergies of capitalism and philanthropy, globalisation and humanitarianism, are inseparable. Scholars, of course, would be remiss not to study this unfolding melee of activity. We believe geographers, with their long history of studying agriculture, food security, vulnerability, and hunger, can and ought to be leading the charge on this scholarly front.

This paper introduces a special issue that critically examines the technocratic and neoliberal agenda for agricultural development and hunger alleviation in Africa. This

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is an agenda that conceptualises African agriculture that is locally oriented and disarticulated from the global economy as a major problem. Indeed, proponents argue that the existing agricultural model is holding back development, depriving the global economy of needed food stuffs, and exacerbating hunger on the continent (Horta, 2009). The solution to these problems is a ‘New Green Revolution for Africa’, an approach involving the use of hybrid seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides to boost crop production (Annan, 2007; Toenniessen, Adesina, & DeVries, 2008). It is further argued that this new approach is best adopted within the context of global value chains, that is, African farmers need to be integrated into chains of input suppliers, the processors and transformers of agricultural products, and retailers. This approach involves a new and unprecedented level of public–private partnerships, as donors work to increase the penetration of the private sector and build links between African farmers, input suppliers, agro-dealers, agro-processors, and retailers (Hartmann, 2012). The private sector, in turn, sings the virtues of this new approach and supports it through rhetoric, active involvement in sales, as well as philanthropic activity (e.g. Page, 2012). Within this new regime, hunger is to be addressed in both the rural and urban contexts. Rural hunger is allayed when small farmers produce more crops that they may consume directly or, more importantly, when their higher incomes (achieved through the sale of cash crops) allow them to purchase adequate food. Urban food insecurity is addressed by increased domestic food supply and the penetration of food retailers (mainly of the supermarket format) into poorer neighbourhoods.

The authors in this special issue complicate understandings of this new approach to agricultural development. In The Gambia, Bornstein (2015) adds nuance to the top–down view of seed dissemination by showing that small farmers often demonstrate more agency than previously thought possible when interacting with improved seed varieties such as the much-heralded New Rice for Africa. In contrast, in northern Ghana, Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr (2015) find that high external input agriculture is not only ill-suited to the prevailing political economy and ecology of production, but also undermines small farmers’ agency in solving day-to-day farming problems. They describe complex and gendered labour dynamics within households that, together with shifting migration patterns, complicate the use of fertiliser and hybrid seed. Peyton, Moseley, and Battersby (2015) take us to Southern Africa where the supermarketization phenomenon is further advanced than in other region of the continent (Reardon & Hopkins, 2007). Here, the Government of South Africa has embraced the penetration of supermarkets into the poorest neighbourhoods as a solution to urban food insecurity. Their analysis shows the limits of this approach as the formalised structure of the supermarket is found to be incompatible with the consumption strategies of the poorest households, revealing the significance of the informal economy in Cape Town and the limitations of the food desert concept¹ for understanding urban food security. Finally, Jones, Schnurr, Carr, and Moseley (2015) reflect on scholarly fieldwork in Africa as it relates to agriculture and food security. They complicate and build upon the assertion that professional development pulls international development practitioners and applied researchers away from the field, offering insightful reflections on the ambiguities associated with maintaining and adapting a commitment to applied fieldwork amid changing professional, personal, and contextual situations.

The twists and turns of African agricultural and food security policy

Today's technocratic and deceptively apolitical agenda for agricultural development and hunger alleviation in Africa is best understood as the latest chapter in a long-standing policy struggle. Agriculture was a priority for many African countries in the years following independence when food self-sufficiency was at the top of the policy agenda (Moseley, Carney, & Becker, 2010). In this era of the 1960s and 1970s, the vast majority of African countries sought to produce as much of their own food as possible in the name of national security. In many cases, African food producers were helped along by heavy investments in agricultural extension, and the introduction of some Green Revolution packages of improved seeds and inputs (especially for maize in Southern Africa and rice in West Africa). The current notion that Africa was 'left out' of the Green Revolution (e.g. Denning et al., 2009) is problematic, given the increased use of external inputs and the turn to Green Revolution approaches in agriculture by many African governments during this period. At this time, food security thinking was similarly premised on the belief that sufficient food supply (a function of home grown production and net imports) was equivalent to food security. As such, the overarching policy of food self-sufficiency neatly tied together agricultural and food security objectives. This is exemplified by the United Nations' approach to measuring food security at the time, known as the food balance approach, which monitored national food supply (domestic production plus net imports) versus the caloric needs of a country (Moseley & Logan, 2005).

The era of food self-sufficiency in African food policy circles came to a crashing halt in the early 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism. The World Bank's (1981) 'Berg Report' stressed rolling back state involvement in development in African countries and giving wider responsibilities to the private sector. Structural adjustment throughout the 1980s and 1990s led to significant retrenchments in agricultural extension and agricultural research (Carney, 2008). As such, there was a dramatic reduction in public development investment in and focus on African agriculture, with a shift away from food crops in this era, and some anaemic interest and investment maintained in cash crops for export such as cotton, cocoa, and flowers (Moseley & Grey, 2008).

While not (necessarily) causally related, conceptions of food security also began to shift dramatically at the same time neoliberal reform was underway in Africa. An important intellectual insight was Amartya Sen's (1981) work on entitlements. Sen argued that hunger was more about inadequate access to food (conceptualised as entitlements) than sufficient quantities of food being available on the market. While fairly straightforward, this conceptual breakthrough was important for understanding a number of examples in African history when the poor were dying of hunger when plenty of food was available. Classic among these cases was the famine which wracked the West African Sahel during the early 1970s (Franke & Chasin, 1980). In this case, people were dying of hunger in Senegal, Mali, and Niger, when peanuts (a key sauce ingredient and source of protein across the region) were being exported to Europe. Further nuance was added to this understanding by scholars like Watts (1983) who, working in northern Nigeria, demonstrated that famine was often a product of social vulnerability created through historical processes rather than drought, overpopulation, or underproduction (see also Watts & Bohle, 1993). In this case, colonialism had fundamentally changed livelihood systems in northern Nigeria, resulting in a shift from subsistence to cash crop production, and a declining practice of storing grain reserves for dry years, and this opened up new spaces of vulnerability.

Sen's conception of food security, with its attention to access, dominated international African food policy circles for about 15 years, from the late 1980s through the early 2000s. While not intended by Sen, his ideas were increasingly enmeshed in a free market approach to food security wherein African countries were encouraged to specialise in a few exports, in which they were deemed to have a comparative advantage, and then trade for food if needed. Free marketers could support the emphasis on 'food access' as long as it meant a focus on poverty alleviation and economic growth. What the neoliberal agenda did not support were investments in social safety nets (as called for by Sen), other than famine early warning systems. This approach seemed to work well throughout the 1980s and 1990s when global food prices were relatively low. Thinking began to shift, however, when global food prices started to slowly rise from 2000 and then spike significantly in 2007–2008 (Moseley et al., 2010).

When the global community's attention shifted back to African agriculture after a 20-year hiatus, the international consensus on 'food security as access' shifted as well. Sen's view of food security succumbed to the rebirth of the technocratic focus on food production as the best way to solve global, and especially African, food insecurity. Beginning in the mid 2000s, momentum started to build among donors for a New Green Revolution in Africa as the best way to address food insecurity. Building on the belief that the first Green Revolution (an international effort to bring hybrid seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides to the Global South) had largely bypassed Africa, the idea was to (re)launch a similar effort more tailored to African crops and conditions (Annan, 2007; Toenniessen et al., 2008). This approach included an emphasis on linking farmers to global value chains (which may terminate in supermarkets for some more developed African urban markets (explored in this issue by Peyton et al., 2015).

Whether or not such an effort will address household food insecurity, as opposed to just increasing food production, depends on the way it is undertaken. McMichael (2013) argued that linking farmers to global value chains will lead to greater financial risks, losses, and debt dependency for smallholder producers (issues alluded to in the northern Ghana study in this issue by Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner-Kerr (2015). Some scholars and advocates argue that a food security-sensitive approach would target the poorest of the poor who are habitually the most food insecure. This means introducing low cost, sustainable enhancements to farming, such as intercropping, agroforestry, composting, and soil conservation measures, in order to help poor, rural households feed themselves yet minimise financial risk. For example, work by Bezner Kerr, Berti, and Shumba, (2010) in northern Malawi has demonstrated that such approaches are possible (see also Patel, Bezner Kerr, Shumba, & Dakishoni, 2014).

Sadly, these types of interventions are only a small portion of the portfolio being pushed by advocates of the New Green Revolution for Africa. Rather, most proponents envision a more capital intensive approach to agriculture involving supply chains of input suppliers, increasingly large producers, agro-processors, and expanding international markets. In some cases, long-term land leases by foreign entities, the so-called land grabs, are also legitimised by this world view as they are seen as a 'show case' for new production strategies. While this approach may improve overall agricultural production in Sub-Saharan Africa, we remain sceptical that it will do much to improve household food security.

How is it that the donor community shifted, in a few short years, away from an entitlements based approach to food security toward one that emphasises food production above all else? The Group of Eight Countries' (G8) New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NAFSN), launched in 2012, is instructive in this regard. This initiative, a

\$3 billion commitment by the G8 plus 21 African and 27 multinational companies, aims to lift 50 million people in Africa out of poverty by 2022. This programme is unprecedented in terms of its level of collaboration and coordination with international agribusiness. According to a USAID (n.d.) fact sheet on the initiative: ‘The private sector can increase food availability by not only increasing investment in production but also by linking smallholder farmers to broader markets and creating incentives for innovation that improve productivity’. While ostensibly a G8 initiative, the NAFSN is primarily a US led programme. Given the close links between this initiative and the business community, one could argue that those in the American aid circles have learned from the Chinese whose development assistance has very tight links to Chinese business interests. The more likely explanation, however, is the rise of ‘philanthrocapitalism’ in the US, where former and current business leaders, through the strength of their foundations, have increasingly come to influence the shape and direction of US international development programmes (Thompson, 2014). Central to the philanthrocapitalist world view is a belief that private enterprise is the fundamental agent of progressive change and that business acumen trumps other forms of expertise. It is also very convenient when a company’s profit motive lines up nicely with an initiative promoting the end of African hunger (Patel et al., 2014).

Amidst all the fan fare for a New Green Revolution in Africa, the upsurge in donor and corporate interest in African agricultural production, and the rising tide of super-marketization, it is now more important than ever for scholars to take a hard look at the changing African landscape of food production and consumption. The four papers that follow in this special issue open up this research terrain in new and exciting ways, while building on geography’s long standing and deep involvement with agriculture and food security issues (National Research Council [NRC], 2010). Geographers’ commitment to fieldwork in their study of food and agriculture is also touched on by Jones et al. (2015) in this issue. The reality is that the dominant conception of how best to address food insecurity may have actually regressed under the new constellation of public and private actors working on African agriculture and food security. The problem, of course, is that there is little to no profit to be made in eradicating hunger. The big money, for input providers, agro-processors, and traders, is in building more capital intensive, and market integrated, African farming systems. The renewed technocratic and neoliberal emphasis in agricultural development and poverty reeducation in Africa under the so-called New Green Revolution for Africa, and its supermarket corollary in African cities, may well serve the big money interests, but this collection of initial research on the approach suggests that the extent to which it will enhance household food security for the poorest of the poor remains uncertain.

Note

1. Food deserts are areas where access to nutritious, affordable food is lacking, due to limitations stemming from the geographies of poverty, transportation, and food distribution (Peyton et al., 2015). This idea was first developed in the UK to recognise disparities in people’s ability to access healthy food in urban areas (Wrigley, 2002).

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