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Investing in rural people

Agricultural and rural development reconsidered

A guide to issues and debates

by
Steve Wiggins
Overseas Development Institute

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About the Author

Steve Wiggins, Research Fellow, Agricultural Development and Policy, at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has worked extensively on rural markets throughout his 35-year career, above all those that apply to smallholders in Africa, the operation of rural labour markets, the rural non-farm economy and specific application of market analysis to crises of food insecurity, providing the basis for policy recommendations on pro-poor market development. He has led ODI's work on food price dynamics in national, regional and international markets since 2008, analysing drivers and impacts of price spikes and assessing policy responses.

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Abstract

The role of small-scale family farms in development is the subject of long-standing debate. Despite predictions on the likely evolution of small farms, as urban and industrial sectors account for larger shares of economic activity, the agricultural landscape in the developing world continues to be dominated by family-operated smallholdings. Consequently, discussions continue over the extent to which market failures faced by smallholders can be overcome at acceptable public cost, though increasing involvement of private actors in providing required goods and services, as well as a range of institutional innovations, have shown scope to reduce the problem.

Most international organizations and donors generally advocate for the role that smallholders can play in increasing food production if suitable innovations are used to address market failures, though the attitude of governments is more mixed. Asian governments have generally supported smallholders, with favourable public policy facilitating access to extension, inputs and financial products. In Latin America, confidence in the contribution of smallholders has not been as strong, with support generally being connected to welfare concerns. In sub-Saharan Africa, more so than other regions, governments have tended to be attracted by the promise of capital-intensive larger-scale farms to boost productivity.

Looking at the wider agricultural and rural development landscape since 2000, three notable policy trends have emerged. First, despite recognition of the failure of market liberalization to promote growth and equity as predicted by the Washington Consensus, governments have been increasingly wary of intervening in markets, leaving unresolved the question of how best to address rural market failures. Second, the effectiveness of investments to provide universal coverage of key services – in particular related to health and education – has been marked. Given well-known traditional rural-urban gaps in these services, welfare improvements have been particularly notable in rural areas. Third, social protection programmes have achieved widespread success and are receiving greater attention. The second and third points may be surprising to the extent that neither addresses the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion. Ultimately, sustainable progress surely will require more finely tuned instruments adapted to deep-rooted causes of poverty and underdevelopment. For this, piloting new ideas, innovations and learning is needed.

Summary

Background and objectives

This report sets out the shifts in thinking, debate and approaches on agricultural development over recent decades. It charts the way in which these have come full circle, from the primacy of agriculture as central to rural development in the 1960s, to dwindling investment in the 1980s, and onward to its renewed presence on today's national development agendas.

These changes have been accompanied by important shifts in the development narratives that shape the way in which issues are framed, problems posed, and favoured responses chosen. Contemporary mainstream debates on agricultural policy orbit around notions like opportunity, competition, entrepreneurship, value chains and public-private partnership.

This paper, emerging from a range of commissioned papers that focus on Africa, is a guide to current debates, setting out the background to the changes of recent decades, distilling current thinking into narratives, and exploring today's critical issues in agricultural and rural development policy.

The main focus is Africa – the region with the most low-income countries, where most countries remain rural and agrarian, and where agricultural and rural development is seen as most problematic. However, significant insights can be drawn from comparisons to Asia and Latin America, for contemporary Africa as well as for its future development. The report also highlights the importance of two issues that are central to agricultural development but do not always feature prominently in policy: gender and migration.

Africa

Africa has seen the greatest changes in the **circumstances affecting agricultural and rural development since 2000**, with new opportunities for farmers thanks to economic growth and an increase in urbanization that is fuelling demand for more diverse and higher-value farm produce. Rising commodity prices have led to a new scramble for land by both domestic and foreign investors, particularly since the food-price spike of 2008. At the same time, the need to make agriculture more environmentally sustainable has become more prominent, alongside the need to adapt to and mitigate climate change.

Political interest in agriculture has revived, coinciding with the spread of democracies, the rise of the middle class and new sources of information. Donors from high-income countries have returned to agriculture in Africa after two decades of waning investments in the sector, while other donors from emerging economies have shown interest, as have some private foundations. As a result of all these changes, observers are on the look-out for signs in some countries that 'development states', of the kind credited with growth miracles of Asia, may be emerging.

Renewed interest in agricultural development has seen the **emergence of a compelling narrative** composed of three strands:

- The need to raise productivity of agriculture so as to contribute to structural transformation, arising from concern that agricultural growth has come from additional land and labour and higher commodity prices;
- An increasing view of agriculture as a business, with concerns over how best to link farmers to commercial opportunities in markets via supply chains;
- Renewed determination to close the gap between yields achieved in trials (and seen in other parts of the world) and those realized by farmers, a long-standing concern of agricultural scientists now confident that improved technologies for many crops and livestock produced in Africa could close the yield gap.

The three elements complement and reinforce one another: agriculture must be transformed, it is argued, by seeing it as a business and making use of technical advances. This is supported by arguments that agriculture is failing and in crisis, future populations will need more food, and underused land and water could, and indeed must, be put to work with new visions, investments and technologies.

The narrative stressed increased agricultural production and productivity first and foremost. It is assumed this will largely meet social and environmental goals as well: that higher productivity will boost incomes and create jobs to the benefit of the poor, while sustainable intensification can meet the environmental challenge.

A critical counter-narrative has emerged, largely from civil society, stressing the need to protect the environment through agroecological farming and to prioritize 'food sovereignty' – the right to healthy and appropriate food. This counter-narrative rejects the emphasis on farming as a business and food as a commodity: fairness, rather than efficiency, is the aim. By and large, this narrative has had little influence on official strategies and policies, with the significant exception of controls on the use of genetically-modified seeds and animals.

The dominant narrative prompts debates about economies of scale and associated access to capital and know-how. Can smallholders link successfully to input suppliers, banks, processors, exporters and retailers in increasingly demand-driven supply chains? Currently it is often the case that rural markets for inputs and finance fail smallholders. One potential answer is simply to replace private provision through markets with direct public supply of inputs, finance and marketing directly to farmers, as marketing boards often did in the past. Some governments, most notably that of Malawi, have provided input supply to smallholders over the past decade, typically through subsidy programmes for essentials such as fertilizer and seeds.

The alternative remedy for market failures is to look for institutional innovations (such as contract farming) and collective action (such as farmer cooperation) to overcome high transactions costs. Many such initiatives are under way, promoted by farmers themselves, agribusinesses, NGOs, government agencies and donors. But while pilot projects abound, the search is on to find models that can work at scale.

The report highlights concerns about the fate of marginal farms, disadvantaged variously by their location, lack of assets or some form of discrimination along class, gender or ethnic lines. Equally, concerns are raised about land tenure and whether customary tenure offers sufficient security for investment and conservation, allowing land markets to work effectively.

Recent programmes to register land collectively and individually at a lower cost than formal mapping and titling, as seen for example in Ethiopia, may offer a way forward.

It is hard to overstate the importance of these debates. If market failures cannot be overcome, then larger-scale farming will indeed be more efficient and productive than small-scale farming, since large operations avoid many of the market failures that smallholders face. This may in part explain why some governments in Africa have welcomed investors seeking land to farm on a large scale.

For proponents of the counter-narrative, the key issue is how to create an alternative economy, with more localized systems that support small-scale production and shorter supply chains.

Future agricultural development is likely to depend in part on state commitment to ensure that smallholders can overcome market failures, as well as on the development of the urban economy where broad-based growth may create more productive links to family farm agriculture and rural non-farm enterprises than if the cities see prosperity only for small elites. Predicting political choice is difficult, although favoured models have moved from emphasizing economic interest to the power of ideas: if ideas trump interests, then future options may be broader than once thought.

Asia

In contrast to Africa, rural Asia has seen a continuation of trends that were already apparent before 2000, rather than significant changes. Four trends can be picked out as particularly important for agricultural and rural development.

- Population growth has slowed: indeed, rural populations in much of South-East and East Asia have been falling for ten years.
- Industrialization and urbanization have continued, drawing people from rural areas to the jobs created in the cities and boosting opportunities for farmers to market higher-value produce to growing numbers of urban consumers.
- Diets have changed, with more consumption of vegetables, fruits, animal produce, vegetable oil and, in urban areas, processed foods, creating greater demand for higher-value produce from farmers.
- Rising world prices for agricultural produce since 2008 may have affected Asia less than other regions but, nevertheless, food prices have increased in real terms in line with the rising costs of fuel, fertilizer and labour.

The region is also seeing an increasing divergence between **rural areas well connected to cities and more remote, marginal rural areas**. Well-connected areas typically see intensification and commercialization of farming, mostly small-scale family farming. Wholesalers and processors increasingly source their produce directly from farmers, cutting out local traders. Improved prices mean that farmers have more resources to invest, boosting markets not only for farm inputs, but also for land, water and machine rental. The downside is that these changes benefit the better-endowed and better-located (family) farms that can provide reliable produce of sufficient quality. Marginal farms in more remote areas, often relying on little more than rainfed agriculture for their income, tend to be left out. Migration may often be the best – sometimes the only – option for the young and for newly-formed households in such areas.

Rural wages have been rising across much of rural Asia, particularly since 2000. Two drivers stand out: the slowdown in the growth of rural population accentuated by outmigration leading to rural labour shortages; and the growth of manufacturing and the urban economy that increases the demand for labour from rural areas. Rising wages have three important consequences: they reduce poverty by setting a floor to low rural incomes; they push up the costs of agricultural production that increasingly means that large Asian countries may be tempted to relax self-reliance on imports of staples; and they fuel a rise in manufacturing wages that may lead to some factories relocating to low-income countries with lower wages.

One imponderable for Asia, as for other regions, is the **environment**. Asia has developed its farming with scant regard to environmental costs, including overuse of scarce water. These problems need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Some highly-intensive farming in Asia may well need to rein back and become less intensive. While such changes may raise unit production costs, there would be savings on the costs of external inputs.

One-size-fits-all, 'big push' rural and agricultural policies that drove the green revolution look increasingly out of place in Asia. Until recently, increasing food production was the great challenge for the region, to ensure cheap food for all, end the threat of famine and create more jobs in rural areas – while a manufacturing revolution in the urban areas, employing cheap labour from rural areas, would drive economic growth. That vision has become a reality. Even though there are twice as many people in Asia now as there were in 1970 – when some already saw the continent as over-populated – most have a far higher standard of living than previous generations.

More diverse approaches to agricultural and rural development in Asia are now needed. In particular, eradicating the shrinking numbers of rural people still living in extreme poverty will require more specific and focused policies than in the past, targeting those who, because of their household circumstances, location, or individual misfortune, have not prospered. Specific dimensions of poverty are more likely to be addressed by tackling their detailed causes, rather than expecting rising average incomes to reduce poverty.

Latin America

Changes to the circumstances of agricultural and rural development in Latin America have been limited since the turn of the century and relate to rising world prices, a small decline in rural populations in some countries and the success of conditional cash transfers in helping to reduce poverty and long-standing inequality.

Latin America has a long and vigorous tradition of social science, often producing – and with good reason – trenchant critiques of social structures and power relations that had resulted in some of the highest rates of inequality anywhere in the world. Resulting policy debates have often posed proposals for reform against more radical propositions, a division that can be seen politically in the 2000s among the mainly left-of-centre governments, some of which accept liberal economies but use the state to achieve social improvements, and radical nationalist regimes more sceptical of liberal economy.

Unlike Africa and Asia, agricultural and rural issues are less central to economic and social policy in Latin America, as might be expected in a region where most people live in urban areas.

Four perspectives on agricultural and rural development since 2000 can be picked out.

- One is a narrative about **opportunities offered for export agriculture** by the region's relatively abundant land and water that give Latin America natural advantages for agricultural exports that have not yet been fully exploited.

The other three are concerned with how to deal with enduring rural poverty and deprivation:

- What to do about the sharp **geographic divide between rural areas well connected to cities and ports, and more remote and marginal rural areas**, where livelihoods are increasingly dependent on non-farm activities and migration;
- **The viability of small family farms**, in which some take a positive view of the benefits of judicious public support to allow them to play their part in economic growth. This has led to lively debate on the extent to which agricultural policy should focus on improving the competitiveness of commercial, often large-scale farms versus support for smallholdings; and
- The possibilities of **(conditional) cash transfers** targeted to poor households in rural areas, which have helped to reduce rural poverty and inequality since the 1990s.

As in Asia, the need for agriculture that is environmentally sustainable is recognized, but only rarely translates into practical action. There may be scope for rewarding smallholders who conserve their resources and capture carbon through direct payments.

Gender relations and migration

Gender

Interest in gender and agriculture has grown since 2000, with women's access to land, extension advice, credit and inputs coming under the spotlight. A compelling narrative argues that improving their access will lead to higher yields and incomes. But there is a risk of over-simplification in seeing gender relations only in relation to agricultural productivity. Too sharp a focus on agriculture can also blur the importance of many other things that affect the lives of rural women.

The dominant focus on production in agricultural and rural development thinking, at least in Africa, has narrowed favoured policies to those helping women become more efficient farmers and rural business operators. That may, however, have left less room for consideration of activities that could have more impact on women's lives by cutting the time they spend on arduous household tasks through improving access to clean water, sanitation, electricity and improved stoves.

Migration

Migration is now seen more positively than it was in 2000, owing to mounting evidence of its net benefits. Perhaps surprisingly, rates of migration, either domestic or international, may not be increasing and the common perception of a world increasingly on the move may be illusory. Another surprise is how often rural migrants maintain their village links and return home, even after decades away.

Changes in perspectives on migration have not, however, been matched by changes in policies. Many governments try to control and restrict migration out of rural areas, concerned that it would lead to overcrowded cities and seeing it, in part, as a sign of the failure of rural development. Indeed, policies to restrict migration may even be more common. However, civil society groups are often active in protecting vulnerable migrants at their destinations, through information on rights to fair treatment at work and to access to public services, and through simple but powerful approaches such as providing migrants with identity cards.

Policy lessons

Three key lessons on effective policy for agricultural and rural development emerge from this review.

First, while it is increasingly clear that the **liberalization of markets** is not enough to generate either as much economic growth or equity as desired, the market ideal is more widely accepted than ever before in the developing world. Governments are increasingly wary of intervention. That may be good news if it restrains the reintroduction of the damaging policies that led to high effective taxation of farmers in Africa in the 1970s. But it fails to answer the question of how to overcome the shortcomings of markets in rural areas, and especially those for rural financial services. This remains a critical challenge across much of the developing world.

Second, **basic investments such as delivery of rural services can work well**, as seen in rising rates of school enrolment, especially of girls in secondary schools, and lower morbidity and mortality rates resulting from the provision of basic health services, clean water and sanitation. Where governments have invested in rural people, subsequent surveys have confirmed that important indicators of welfare have improved. However, such policies and investments are not that newsworthy or politically eye-catching. They often deliver largely standardized services that aim for uniform national coverage, quite unrefined, 'blunt instruments' in some respects. Nevertheless, they have proved their worth.

Gender equality may be a case in point. It is difficult to make progress directly on the strategic objectives of changing social relations between men and women towards equity. Practically, however, blunt instruments can make a difference, as they have with the schooling of girls. Pressing ahead with the UN Women agenda of making sure that rural households have clean running water, a clean toilet, electric lighting and so on may be unsophisticated, but could make a big difference to the workloads of rural women and girls – thereby allowing them more opportunity to earn income, develop skills and participate in decision-making.

The third point concerns the **rising interest in forms of social protection seen in the 2000s**, where some programmes have achieved successes that not everyone thought were possible. Cash transfers in Latin America, for example, may not address underlying structural problems or the unequal power relations that seem to lock people in poverty, but they have proved mightily effective in treating the symptoms. Similarly, the public provision of guaranteed work in rural India has proved so effective at raising rural wages that it even provokes protests from rural landowners.

Such policy successes may surprise those who argue that policy should either address the underlying determinants of poverty and inequality, or be more fine-tuned to circumstances. Perhaps some aspects of development are, in reality, better pursued by relatively unrefined instruments, as opposed to the more finely-tuned, well-coordinated measures that are the stock-in-trade of consultancy recommendations. Policy does not always have to be either perfect or sophisticated to make a difference.

That, however, would overstate the case. Some questions of development can hardly be addressed by relatively straightforward measures, in large part since ways to achieve goals are simply not known: progress requires problems to be solved, innovations to be tried, learning to take place.

Nevertheless, there is a common thread now appearing in the governance and political economy literature that links both sets of thoughts. The 2000s have seen much interest in the 'developmental state'. Thinking in this area now accepts a more qualified appreciation of the virtues of better governance, where the agenda has shifted from 'good' to 'good enough' or 'best-fit' governance. Rather than insisting on certain absolute norms of governance, the developmental state may be seen as one that takes strategic responsibility for the relentless pursuit of overarching goals by whatever means are feasible in the circumstances. For some things, that may indeed mean deploying blunt instruments. For others, it may involve experimentation with learning. The common thread is determination: the result of a political coalition that invests political capital and funds in getting results.

Finally, it may seem surprising, given the frequent international meetings on this issue, but the environment usually takes a back seat when priorities are set out for agricultural and rural development. The price spike of 2007/08 prompted an urgent and energetic response from governments and private firms; but nothing similar can be said for concerns over the environment and climate change.

Introduction

Back in 2001, Ashley and Maxwell reviewed debates about rural development in the developing world, summarizing what were then seen as "**emerging issues in rural development**" (Ashley and Maxwell 2001). They sketched out a landscape where agriculture's centrality to rural development was in decline, where there were questions about the viability of small-scale farms, where commodity prices were falling, where environmental limits to agricultural expansions were being approached and, not least, where the rural non-farm economy was becoming more prominent. In some parts of the developing world, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa, both governments and donors had been reducing their investments in agriculture since the late 1980s.

Today, the wheel has turned: agriculture has moved up the public policy and private investment agendas, attracting (almost) as much attention as it did in the 1970s. The broader landscape, however, looks very different. Above all, most rural Africans live in a liberalized economy, where it is assumed in most – but not necessarily all – policy forums that liberal markets should be the basis of economic activity, with the state playing a supporting role. Commodity prices that were once thought to be in inevitable decline – including those for agriculture – have revived since the start of the century, to the surprise of many observers.

Alongside these changes we have seen important shifts in the development narratives that shape the way in which issues are framed, problems posed, and favoured responses chosen. Today's mainstream debates on agricultural policy orbit around notions like opportunity, competition, entrepreneurship, value chains and public-private partnership.

This paper is a guide to the current debates on agricultural development. It sets out the background to the changes of recent decades, distils current thinking into narratives, and finally explores critical issues in agricultural and rural development policy.

This review emerges from a set of commissioned papers on Africa (see Annex 1) that have been complemented by a review of additional literature to broaden the vision. The work has been steered by researchers from the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex (James Sumberg), the International Institute for the Environment and Development (Barbara Adolph and Laura Silici) and the Overseas Development Institute (Steve Wiggins).

The focus begins with Africa, given that this is the region with the most low-income countries, where most countries remain rural and agrarian, and yet where agricultural and rural development is seen as most problematic. An increasing share of development assistance goes to Africa, which receives the bulk of funding from many aid donors. But significant insights can be drawn from comparisons to Asia and Latin America, for contemporary Africa as well as for its future development.

The rest of this paper examines each of these three regions in turn, followed by a specific section on gender and migration – two issues that merit particular attention – before setting out key conclusions.

Africa

Emerging trends

The circumstances affecting agricultural and rural development in Africa have changed significantly since 2000, with some of these changes being internal to Africa, and others reflecting external influences (Table 1).

These changes cluster into three interrelated groups of factors:

- economic growth and opportunity
- leadership and policy shifts, and
- environmental imperatives.

Economic growth and opportunity. Since the mid-1990s, some African economies have grown much faster than they had since the mid-1970s. Radelet (2010) picks out 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa with 300 million inhabitants, where economic growth topped 3 per cent per person each year between 1996 and 2008, with another six countries close behind:

"Consider the economic turnaround in the 17 emerging countries: between 1975 and 1995, their economic growth per capita was essentially zero. But between 1996 and 2008, they achieved growth averaging 3.2 percent a year per capita, equivalent to overall GDP growth exceeding 5 percent a year. That growth has powered a full 50 percent increase in average incomes in just 13 years." (Radelet 2010)

Renewed economic growth has been driven by economic reforms and stronger institutions that have encouraged private investment, reduction of debt burdens, public investments, new technologies such as mobile phones, leadership in politics and business (Radelet 2010; IMF 2014), and higher commodity prices.[1] For countries that rely heavily on primary exports, the rise in commodity prices since the mid-2000s (Figure 1) has been an unexpected windfall. Higher oil prices, combined with the mandated use of renewable fuels in the European Union, the United States and some other OECD countries, have sparked interest in the growth of biofuel feedstock in Africa.

Higher food prices, of course, were not a blessing for all: for net food buyers on low incomes, including a large proportion of Africa's small farmers (Jayne et al. 2010), they were a burden and in some countries – Egypt and Tunisia being two prominent examples – they led to political protests.[2]

1. There is debate about the extent to which renewed growth in Africa has been generated by higher commodity prices. Growth, however, revived in most countries in the second half of the 1990s, well before oil and mineral prices began their rise in the early 2000s and agricultural prices started to increase in the late 2000s.
2. It is hard to calculate the exact impact of higher prices in the world food market on low-income households in Africa. The degree of transmission of world prices to domestic markets varied, with some inland locations seeing little impact (Minot 2010). Afrobarometer surveys suggest that urban low-income households became less food-secure after the food-price spike of 2007/08, but those in rural areas became more food-secure (Arora et al. 2012).

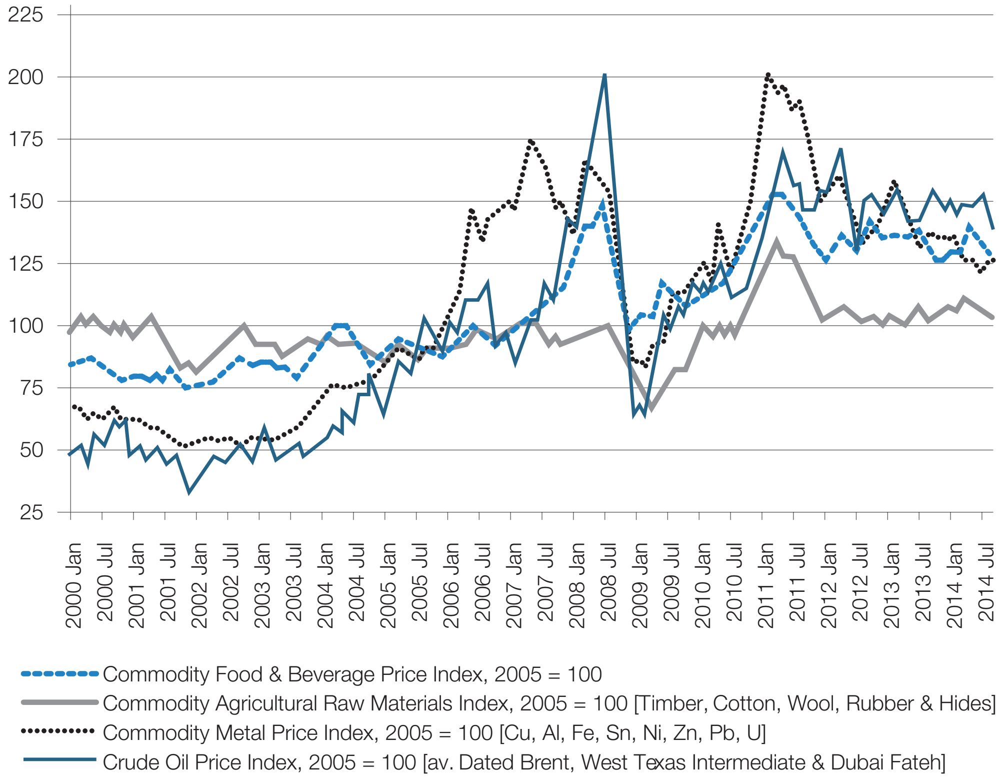
Rising commodity prices have had another consequence for Africa: a new scramble for land. For decades, most of the region's agricultural land was farmed by smallholders and attracted little interest from domestic or foreign investors, given the generally low prices for farm output. High commodity prices changed that almost overnight. From 2008 onward, state corporations from the Middle East and Asia, agribusiness multinationals and investment funds from Europe and North America sought land in Africa to farm for the export of food and biofuel feedstock back to their home countries. For the most part, their plans were for large-scale farms of more than 1,000 hectares. Less well publicized were land acquisitions by domestic investors, both individuals and companies, looking for land on which to grow crops for domestic and export markets. Although some of them aimed to build very large farms, many looked for more moderate holdings of 50 to 500 hectares (Deininger and Byerlee 2012; Cotula et al. 2014).

Table 1: Changes to the context of agricultural and rural development since 2000

Internal to Africa	External influences
Economic growth and opportunity	
ECONOMIC Sustained and accelerated economic growth in parts of Africa DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES • population (rapid growth with late demographic transition) • youth bulge: large numbers entering the workforce • urbanization, growth of the middle class	GLOBAL ECONOMIC CHANGES SINCE 2008 • rise in prices of food and energy on world markets • biofuels demand • financial crisis in OECD countries
NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA'S AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES • concentration of land: rise of medium-scale farms of 10-200 hectares • rise of domestic farm lobbies demanding support for agriculture	NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA'S AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES • (planned) large-scale land acquisitions by private investors and state corporations
LEADERSHIP • NEPAD and African Union leadership of CAADP	AID Renewed interest in agriculture from: • DAC donors returning to agriculture • entry of private foundations • entry of BRICS agencies
ENVIRONMENTAL • degradation of soils under continuous tillage • climate change leading to more volatile climate, lower potential of land	

Figure 1: Indices of international prices for commodities (deflated)

Index deflated by US GDP deflator



Source: IMF commodity price indices, adjusted by United States GDP deflator to year 2000 values.

Africa has been fortunate to side-step some external challenges over the years. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis that plunged the OECD economies into recession was less marked in developing regions, Africa included, because their financial systems were not integrated very strongly into the floundering global financial markets. As a result, economic growth was reduced only marginally in Asia and Africa.

The region has, in contrast, benefited from the new domestic opportunities presented by demographic trends. Population growth has started to slow down: fertility rates that were once as high as six births or more for sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s had fallen to below five by 2014. An increasing share of the population is of working age, with large numbers of young people entering the labour market: between 2005 and 2020, 200 million are expected to be added to the workforce, an increase equivalent to 3 per cent a year (Fox et al. 2013). This is a real opportunity, but only if decent jobs can be created for them.

Urbanization presents another opportunity. While urbanization has not been even or rapid across all African countries, it is clearly under way (Potts 2012). In 1970, 18 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lived in urban areas: by 2010, this had risen to 37 per cent – a level of urbanization that is higher than might be expected from per capita incomes, when compared with the historical experience of other countries (Henderson et al. 2013). Urbanization, combined with economic growth and rising incomes, has expanded the African urban middle class[3] – with the number of middle-class Africans expected to increase by 60 per cent between 2012 and 2022. Food sales are predicted to rise by almost 60 per cent over the same period (USDA 2013). Much of the increased demand in the cities will be for higher-value perishable foods – dairy, meat, fruit and vegetables – as well as processed foods, with clear implications for the agricultural sector.

Leadership and policy shifts. There is renewed political interest in agriculture within Africa, both nationally and in the continental forums of the African Union and the New Economic Partnership for Africa (NEPAD). Continental leadership crystallised in the 2003 Maputo Declaration by Africa's ministers of agriculture to commit to a target of 6 per cent annual growth in agricultural output, supported by allocating 10 per cent of public budgets to farming. Shortly after, NEPAD launched the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) to coordinate efforts to achieve those aims (NEPAD 2003).

Political changes have, of course, gone far beyond agriculture. Many African countries have had democratically elected governments for at least two decades, with several countries allowing government to pass peacefully from one party to another.[4] While it is also true that other countries have not yet made the transition to more democratic governance, the rising middle class may be changing the terms of political debate, fuelling a shift away from allegiance based on regional ties and open patronage and towards dialogue on national priorities. There are signs in some countries that some (elite) groups have built a consensus on development strategy to encourage investment and growth that will last beyond the usual electoral cycle (Booth 2014) – sparking the hope that Africa is seeing the creation of the kind of 'development states' that have been credited with miracles of economic growth in South-East and East Asia (Routley 2014; Booth 2015).

When it comes to external policy shifts, we see that donors from high-income countries have returned to agriculture after 20 years or so of waning investments in the sector. Their return was given extra impetus by the spike in cereals prices in 2007/08 that led them to commit US$22 billion for agriculture worldwide at the G8 meeting in L'Aquila in 2009 – a commitment confirmed at the G20 meeting in Pittsburgh a few months later. The traditional donors have been joined by official assistance from Brazil, China, India and other emerging economies, some of which are interested in developing Africa's natural resources for export to their own countries, while others see the potential of applying lessons from their own successes in agricultural development to Africa. Private foundations make up a third set of actors that are now investing in agriculture in Africa, with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation particularly prominent.

Environmental imperatives. While the challenges of arresting the environmental degradation associated with farming and pastoralism are nothing new, they have mounted. The need to make agriculture sustainable has become more pressing as populations have expanded in many rural areas and cultivation has become continuous (Tittonell and Giller 2012). Soil degradation and erosion, the conversion of forests to farmland, and the loss of agricultural biodiversity are among the increasing threats to sustained agricultural production. To these concerns can be added the need to adapt to and mitigate climate change (Nelson et al. 2010).

3. Estimates of the number of middle-class households in sub-Saharan Africa vary widely, from tens to hundreds of millions, depending upon the threshold income taken to denote middle class. What is not in dispute is that all forecasts predict the strong growth of the middle class in the future (AfDB 2011). Given that most foods are not luxury items, the increases forecast in food sales are likely to be realized, regardless of whether those included in the urban middle class have incomes just about the US$2 a day poverty line, at around US$3,700 a year, or US$20,000 a year.
4. Progress has not always been sustained: indeed, some slippage in democracy has been reported since the mid-2000s [see www.afdb.org/en/blogs/afdb-championing-inclusive-growth-across-africa/post/political-elections-and-democratic-fragility-in-africa-10188]. However, most countries are notably more democratic today in comparison with the political regimes seen in the 1970s and 1980s.

Leading narratives

A renewed interest in agricultural development in the context of the changes of recent decades has seen the emergence of a compelling narrative – that is, a shared understanding of an issue as an opportunity or a problem with an accompanying diagnosis of the causes and objectives, and a set of potential policy responses. This narrative has three main strands:

- agricultural growth as part of economic transformation
- agriculture as a business, and
- closing the yield gaps for food crops.

These elements have coalesced into a narrative that is associated, increasingly, with the notion of sustainable intensification – a notion that tends to prevail in official forums when government, development partners, private sector and foundations meet. Sections of civil society and some academics, however, propose a counter-narrative that stresses agroecology and food sovereignty.

Agricultural growth as part of economic transformation

The increased rates of economic growth seen in sub-Saharan Africa since the mid-1990s may be welcome, but its nature and effects have been questioned. The concern is that growth is based either very narrowly on minerals and oil, or else comes from traditional export agriculture. In both cases, growth has been supported by rising prices for commodities since the mid-2000s. It seems, therefore, that economies are not being actually transformed: there has been only a limited shift from primary activity in agriculture and mining to manufacturing and services, while productivity in all sectors and especially agriculture is increasing too slowly for sustained economic transformation. Indeed, between 1990 and 2005 labour tended to move from higher to lower productivity activities in Africa, with increasing fragmentation of the work force in agriculture and personal services, retarding growth and development (McMillan and Rodrik 2012).

The African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) produced its first continental review of progress towards transformation in 2014, arguing that:

"… recent economic growth, while welcome, will not by itself sustain development on the continent. To ensure that growth is sustainable and continues to improve the lives of the many, countries now need to vigorously promote economic transformation. Growth so far has come from macroeconomic reforms, better business environments, and higher commodity prices.

But economic transformation requires much more. Countries have to diversify their production and exports. They have to become more competitive on international markets. They have to increase the productivity of all resource inputs, especially labor. And they have to upgrade technologies they use in production." (ACET 2014)

While interest in transformation centres on manufacturing and high-value services, there are concerns about how to raise agricultural productivity – both as an end in itself and to allow labour to leave farming for higher-value activity. Attention has focused on the low productivity, especially land productivity, of much of Africa's farming, which is seen as achieving very low yields when compared with Asia, as well as growing too slowly if not actually stagnating. The immediate causes have been identified as the underuse of capital and inadequate know-how, while some also see insecure land tenure (outlined later in this report) as deterring investment (Omamo 2003; Binswanger-Mkhize 2009; Wiggins and Leturque 2010).

The transformation of any economy is expected to go hand in hand with transitions in development, as economies move from being predominantly agrarian to predominantly urban, and with labour moving from primary to secondary and tertiary activity, and migrating from rural to urban areas in the process (Herrendorf et al. 2013; Timmer 2009). This invites consideration of the extent to which new jobs can be created for those leaving agriculture, both locally in rural areas and in towns and cities.

Agriculture as a business

Since 2000, the emphasis has shifted away from seeing agriculture as an activity run by the farm household to meet multiple objectives, not all of them purely economic: a perspective reflected in the livelihoods approach that became popular in the 1990s (see Ellis 2000). Now it is suggested that small-scale producers should see agriculture as a business, first and foremost. This call for a shift in the outlook and behaviour of farmers – in effect a formalization of smallholder agriculture – is supported by policy and programmes to facilitate greater market engagement. For example, the second of the four pillars of CAADP is all about developing infrastructure to facilitate market access and trade (NEPAD 2003). The Alliance for an African Green Revolution (AGRA) also stresses the importance of market access:

"For many years, African countries have pushed for increased agricultural productivity without making an equal push for improving markets. The result: localized gluts of staple foods that drive down prices and cause farmers to abandon new technologies that seem not to add much value to their income."[5]

Some development partners, most notably USAID, have fostered the engagement of the formal private sector to stimulate agricultural growth to support poverty reduction. Programmes have been established to encourage formal businesses – both international and domestic – to invest in farming and agribusiness; to support them to undertake innovative but somewhat risky initiatives that promise developmental outcomes; and to link them to smallholders, supplying them with inputs and know-how, then buying their produce.

A prime example is the **New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition**, created in 2012 to bring together national governments, development partners and private firms to increase investment in African agriculture.[6] Coordinated and complementary investments by governments, donors and firms, backed by supportive policies, are expected to trigger additional private investment by both domestic and international firms – investments that will engage with and benefit smallholders. The New Alliance is not the first or the only such initiative: since the mid-2000s donors have financed challenge funds for private firms that are willing to undertake innovative activities; promoted growth corridors to stimulate commercial farming; and set up programmes to facilitate agricultural trade and to widen access for formal finance in rural areas (Wiggins and Keats 2014a).

Value chains are often the approach used to promote agriculture as a business, looking to see how and where in the chain productivity can be raised, efficiency enhanced, costs cut and higher returns generated for participants. Some international NGOs, such as ACDI/VOCA, SNV Netherlands and Technoserve, have considerable experience in this area. Innovation platforms, inter-professional bodies and other coordination mechanisms are common interventions (Vorley et al. 2009).

Closing the yield gap for food crops

The yield gap – the gap between crop yields per hectare achieved by African farmers and those achieved in research trials or in other parts of the world – has been a long-standing concern

5. AGRA website: http://agra-alliance.org/what-we-do/market-access-program/#.VBQ3ssJdU2Y, accessed 13 September 2014.
6. See www.one.org/us/policy/policy-brief-on-the-new-alliance.

for both researchers and policymakers. In West Africa, for example, farmer yields from rainfed crops are reported to be typically between one third and one half of their potential (Nin Pratt et al. 2011). Debate about the reasons for these gaps focuses predominately on access to new technologies, the incentives to use them, and whether farmers have the inputs and technical support to realize their potential.

Interest in closing yield gaps has intensified in the 2000s (Lobell et al. 2009; Neumann et al. 2010; van Ittersum and Cassman 2013; van Ittersum et al., 2013; see Sumberg [2012] for a critique of the use of yield gap in policy discourse). Agricultural scientists have become increasingly confident that improved management and technologies are available that can close the yield gap for many crops and livestock produced in Africa. What's more, some scientists believe that advances in biotechnology will help to address some of the remaining challenges of farming on land that has medium and low potential, such as advances in drought tolerance, as well the biofortification of vitamins in staple crops.

The revival of interest in the yield gap has helped to drive a strong narrative: the most direct and effective way to address the problems of food availability, food security and farm profitability is through the application of improved technology.

A dominant narrative

These three narrative elements – agriculture for economic development, agriculture as a business and interest in the yield gap – all complement and reinforce one another to create one dominant narrative: agriculture must be transformed by seeing it as a business and making use of technical advances – a narrative supported by the powerful framing of both problems and opportunities.

On the one hand, agriculture is seen as failing and in crisis, and the challenge is how to feed future populations. For example, the Montpellier Panel cites rising maize prices, widespread hunger and malnutrition, and the "need to double food production if the growing population is to be fed by 2050" as reasons for renewed efforts to apply better technology, in addition to the challenges of arresting environmental degradation and adapting to climate change (Montpellier Panel 2012).

On the other hand, opportunity is stressed: underused land and water resources could (indeed must) be put to work with new visions, investments and technologies. For example, the World Bank's "Sleeping Giant" analysis has suggested that the African Guinea Savannah, covering 600 million hectares, has the potential for transformation similar to that seen in the Cerrado of Brazil and north-eastern Thailand (World Bank 2009a).

In a context of renewed economic growth and acceptance of market economies, the challenge for agriculture is seen, first and foremost, as increased production and productivity. The centre of gravity in much research and policy argument has shifted away from the emphasis on poverty, equity and gender that predominated at the turn of the century, where agriculture was one component of livelihoods and where, increasingly, the rural non-farm economy was important.

Concerns over poverty and equity have not, of course, been set aside or forgotten: they continue to be part of the objectives of almost all official strategies. But as the central focus has narrowed to increasing agricultural production and productivity they have moved down the agenda, justified by the assumption that higher productivity will boost incomes and create jobs to the benefit of the poor. Environmental aims have also tended to take second place to productivity, here the working assumption being that intensification can – by choosing the appropriate technology – be sustainable.

Not everyone agrees with these priorities or the working assumptions that greater production can satisfy poverty and environmental objectives. It should be no surprise, therefore, that a critical counter-narrative has also emerged.

Counter-narrative: agroecology, food sovereignty and anti-globalization

The counter-narrative to increased agricultural growth to boost economic transformation is built around two connected propositions. One proposes agroecological farming, stressing the need to protect the environment first and foremost, and to make full use of local ecological cycles in agriculture. Support for agroecology has gained ground in wider policy circles. International NGOs, research institutes such as the International Centre for Research in Forestry (ICRAF) and the Institut national de la recherche agronomique (INRA), as well as some governments, including those of Brazil and France, have promoted agroecological practices and approaches. Above all, such approaches were central to the arguments of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) that were reported in 2008. Despite all of this support, however, these ideas have had a limited influence on the dominant production narrative – a result, at least in part, of the politics of knowledge, according to Scoones (2009) and Feldman and Biggs (2011). One particularly contentious issue is the use of genetically modified (GM) seeds and animals. Seen by some as a way to close yield gaps, for the critics they entail unacceptable environmental uncertainties, while the leading role of private corporations in the development of GM applications arouses fears of undue corporate power.

A second and related element of the counter-narrative concerns food sovereignty, defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Altieri et al. 2012, Nyéléni 2007).[7] The movement for food sovereignty rejects the emphasis on farming as a business and food as a commodity. Fairness in food systems, rather than efficiency, is the aim (Pimbert 2009). The movement fears that liberalized markets and free trade expose smallholders to unfair competition from large multinational corporations that have market power, most notably over seed production.

This counter-narrative is upheld, in general, by parts of civil society: NGOs, both national and international; farmer associations, particularly national and international federations; and some consumer interest groups. By and large, it has had little influence on official strategies and policies, with the significant exception of controls on the use of GM seeds and animals.

Debates and uncertainties

There are points of debate within both the dominant and the counter-narratives on agricultural development. For the former, key debates centre around a cluster of related concerns about scale, informality, market failures and land rights – leading to questions on the fate of marginal farms. Within the counter-narrative, a key discussion concerns the nature of a non-capitalist economy.

7. For both, see: www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?page=NWarticle.en&id_article=375 (accessed February 2015).

Debates within the leading narrative

Efficiency and productivity

A central set of questions concerns efficiency and productivity. How efficient are small-scale farms and informal rural non-farm businesses? Can they become more productive? If so, then how can the market failures that they typically encounter be overcome? And for the farms themselves, do current forms of land tenure offer sufficient security to invest and conserve land, and allow the efficient functioning of land markets?

Most farms in Africa, and indeed most rural non-farm enterprises, are **informal and small-scale**. For those seeking economic transformation, the low productivity of these businesses is a core problem – as may be their very informality. Perspectives on informal rural enterprises differ dramatically. For some (Nagler and Naudé 2014), small-scale rural businesses are the result of a failure to create more formal and higher-productivity enterprises. Others (Fox and Sohneson 2012), however, see the same microenterprises as creating badly-needed jobs and as, therefore, both a source of economic growth and a way to reduce poverty.

The issues here are economies of scale and associated access to capital and know-how. For farms, it has long been considered that few, if any, economies of scale apply to operations that are larger than can be managed by a single household (Johnson and Ruttan 1994). Indeed, there may be challenges that apply to larger economies of scale in the supervision of labour, flexibility and the timeliness of operations. It is often observed that smaller holdings have higher output per hectare than larger holdings (see Larson et al. 2012) – an observation supported by the 'inverse ratio' – although the most likely reason for this arises from failings in labour and land markets, rather than from any inherent superiority of smallholdings over larger operations (Collier and Dercon 2014; Dercon and Gollin 2014).

In the current century, however, there have been increasing doubts about the viability of small-scale farming (see Ashley and Maxwell 2001; Byerlee et al. 2009; Ellis 2000). One argument concerns new technology: advanced techniques such as precision farming may not be practical on small farms (Byerlee et al. 2009). Stronger doubts refer not to farming itself, but to whether smallholdings can link successfully to input suppliers, banks, processors, exporters and retailers. Food supply chains are increasingly coordinated by supermarkets, exporters and processors and their demands for quality, uniformity, timely delivery and – for exports – certification and traceability threaten to exclude smallholders who cannot meet these standards, leaving them to sell their produce in secondary channels at lower prices (Reardon and Berdegué 2002).

The difficulties that smallholders face in dealing with buyers in supply chains form part of a wider problem of **rural market failures** that prevent most smallholders from obtaining seed, fertilizer and other external inputs and the credit to buy them. In rural areas, inputs can be either hard to find, or only on sale at prices considerably higher than the costs of production and distribution. Indeed, most farmers have little chance of obtaining formal credit to buy the inputs they need, so they can only buy what they can afford from their own savings. The reasons for such failures include the high transaction costs of gaining vital information about the nature of products on sale, and about the character and competence of other parties to the deal.[8] Getting information is that much more difficult when there are so many small-scale farmers, and when suppliers, buyers and bankers come from very different backgrounds (Kydd 2002; Poulton et al. 2006).

Overcoming such market failures is, therefore, vital to allow smallholders to participate in the emerging supply chains. Can these failures be overcome and, if so, how? One potential answer is simply to replace private provision through markets with the direct public provision of inputs, finance and marketing to farmers. This approach was commonplace for crops in the past, when parastatal marketing boards controlled most supply chain functions other than actual farming. However, these boards were usually only effective at high public cost; costs that could not, ultimately, be sustained. Many parastatals were closed down, had their operations scaled back, or were reformed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite those experiences, the 2000s have seen some governments once again arranging input supply to smallholders, typically through subsidy programmes for fertilizer, seed and other inputs (Dorward and Chirwa 2014). In Malawi, for example, the Farm Input Supply Scheme has reached two thirds or more of farmers on 1.5 million farms since 2006, supplying them with limited amounts of seed and fertilizer for maize and other food crops at highly subsidized prices. Reported harvests of maize have increased significantly, to levels where the country should have a considerable surplus over domestic requirements. The benefits in increased production, reduced poverty and improved food security have probably exceeded costs (Chirwa and Dorward 2013). Not surprisingly, other countries in Africa have also introduced subsidies on inputs for smallholders (Jayne and Rashid, 2013).

Whether this is wise, given the high public cost, attracts fierce debate. The alternative remedy for market failures is to look for institutional innovations (such as contract farming) and collective action (such as farmer cooperation) to overcome high transaction costs. Such initiatives are largely private and have little or no public cost, although governments and NGOs may provide some initial support to private and collective efforts.

These alternatives can also often be tried locally, on a small scale, which allows for experimentation to find effective models. A plethora of such initiatives can be found across Africa: some promoted by agribusinesses and processors anxious to source produce from farmers who happen to be small-scale for the most part; others initiated by NGOs, trying to link poorer producers to markets to access inputs, obtain credit, and sell at higher prices; and still others managed by groups of farmers working collectively to gain economies of scale in their transactions with firms in the supply chains.

While such initiatives are not new, they have proliferated in the 2000s. With higher farm prices, agribusiness has had more incentives to source from smallholder suppliers. Governments, donors and NGOs have also reacted by supporting new forms of linkage (Wiggins and Keats 2014a). So far, these experiences have not always been well documented, and much less frequently evaluated. While pilot schemes and one-off arrangements are common, the search is on for working models that have the potential to reach significant numbers (say more than 100,000) of smallholders.

Land tenure is a related concern. Debates about tenure were invigorated towards the end of the past decade by the new scramble for African farmland and the emphasis on adoption of improved technology to close the yield gap. The changing circumstances outlined earlier in this report have lent the topic even more urgency: the growth of rural populations, and higher farm prices that

8. Not everyone sees these shortcomings as the result of market failures. Some see underinvestment by farmers as the result of government failure, where frequent, abrupt and unexpected changes in policy, such as bans on exports of food crops, can make agricultural investments risky (Jayne et al. 2002). Fears that profits may be expropriated by state officials or local political leaders if investments pay off may be another disincentive. Others propose that the low use of external inputs reflects the underlying economics when transport between the farm and city is costly, depressing the effective price paid at the farm gate and raising the costs of external inputs delivered to farms. Transport costs in some parts of Africa are notably higher than in other comparable areas of the world (Gollin and Rogerson 2010; Livingston et al. 2014) – the result, in part, of cartels among transport operators and the informal costs of passing through border controls and internal barriers along highways.

make agricultural investment more attractive, have made farmland both an increasingly scarce and an increasingly valuable commodity, as shown by the land deals of recent years.

Some argue that customary tenure that allocates rights to cultivate but not usually to transfer land gives farmers too little security to invest in and conserve their land (Goldstein and Udry 2008; Deininger and Ali 2008). Others maintain that customary tenure does not hinder investment: for example Besley (1995) on Ghana; Brasselle et al. (2002) on Burkina Faso; and Place and Otsuka (2002) on Uganda. Given the subtle variations in land rights and implied security under collective arrangements, it is not surprising that differing outcomes should be seen in different locations and at different times. In addition, the inability to pledge land as collateral against bank loans – one way to overcome failings in credit markets – is often seen as a further drawback to customary tenure.

This growing interest in tenure has been matched by new practice. In the past, those seeing customary tenure as an obstacle recommended formal surveying and registration of land as individual freehold properties. When this titling was tried, it often proved time-consuming and costly, with the risk that rights would be conferred to a single primary user of the land – usually a male head of household, thereby diminishing the rights of other household members, especially women farmers, and of any secondary or seasonal users of the land. In addition, it is not clear how effective such titling has been: in central Kenya, for example, actual land use bore little relation to the use set down in the register within a decade or so of titling taking place, as households had sub-divided and transferred land as they saw fit (Haugerud 1989). As a result, enthusiasm for formal titling waned.

More recently, however, intermediate measures have been pioneered, with schemes to register land collectively and individually at lower cost, as seen most notably in Ethiopia. Early reports suggest that certification in rural Ethiopia has met the demands for the formal recognition of locally-acknowledged rights, and that it has been economical, timely and largely equitable (Deininger et al. 2007; Deininger and Byerlee 2011).

Since the rise of food prices, there has been a rush to acquire farmland by foreign companies, both private and public, and by local companies and individuals (Hall 2015). This has provoked questions about how land can be allocated to investors legitimately, prompting both the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Bank to produce codes of practice on this issue. For poor and vulnerable rural people who use land, the question arises of how to protect their rights against arbitrary and unjust expropriation. Low-cost land certification, along the lines seen in Ethiopia, may be one response.

These issues are particularly relevant to peri-urban areas where dense settlement and proximity to the city creates demands for land for housing, decentralized industry and waste disposal, in addition to demands for agriculture.

The fate of marginal farms

Finding ways to overcome failings in rural markets matters for social, as well as economic, reasons: transaction costs tend to be higher when dealing with (marginal) famers who are disadvantaged by their location, lack of assets[9] or some form of exclusion related to their class, gender, cast, ethnicity, etc. It is these marginal farmers who are the most likely to feel the strongest effects of such failings, with women farmers, in particular, vulnerable to their impact. So, what is the fate of marginal holdings if agricultural policy focuses on transformation, business and closing yield gaps? Three responses can be seen.

9. As rural populations rise in Africa, farms are being further sub-divided with each generation. By the 1990s, the median smallholding in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Rwanda was below 1.2 hectares (Jayne et al. 2005): by 2014, the median will almost certainly have become smaller.

First, for those focused on yield gaps and the production of food crops for food security, the implication is that yield gaps should be closed on all farms, and perhaps especially on marginal farms where the operators tend to be poor and vulnerable to food insecurity. The concern is that market failures will stop these marginal farmers obtaining the inputs they need to raise production – especially if inputs have to be bought on (hard to find) credit (Tittonell and Giller 2012). They could, therefore, be trapped: unable to afford the means to work their way out of poverty (UN Millennium Project 2005; CPRC 2008). This line of thinking reinforces the need to cut the Gordian knot of access to inputs and finance.

While yields on marginal farms can probably be raised, whether full potential can be realized is another question, given that these households often lack not just land and capital but also labour. Intermediate technologies that require little labour and capital may be one solution.

A second response is that most marginal farms cannot generate sufficient income to escape poverty, no matter what access to finance and inputs they obtain. Therefore, the question becomes what additional or alternative livelihoods may be accessible to these households, either within their own rural non-farm economy or by migration (or by commuting, for those in peri-urban areas) to towns and cities.

For those households that cannot do this, the third response is that they need social protection, which then raises questions about how best to provide it.

The second two options are part of the framework proposed by Dorward (2009), who sees smallholders as having three options: either to intensify and commercialize their production (stepping up), to diversify their livelihoods into non-farm activities (stepping out) or to subsist (hanging in) – options that overlap for some farm households.

It is hard to overstate the importance of these debates. If market failures cannot be overcome, then larger-scale farming will indeed be more efficient and productive than small-scale farming. As Collier (2008) has argued, large farms often have ready access to capital and know-how, because they do not encounter the market failures faced by smaller operators. Sympathy with this view explains, in part, why some governments in Africa have been receptive to petitions from investors seeking land to farm on a large scale.

Debate within the counter-narrative

A key debate for the counter-narrative concerns the nature of an alternative economy and the sovereignty of food. In the past, the favoured alternative to capitalism focused on production in state or collective enterprises. These would be large enough to capture any economies of scale, well capitalized and use leading technology. They would, it was hoped, be as productive as private enterprise, generating profits that the state would reinvest for public benefit. Most socialist regimes tried large-scale agriculture under state or collective control, but these collective enterprises often produced less than expected and at a higher cost than planned.

Those proposing such food sovereignty today have different conceptions, where the ideal would be smaller-scale production in localized units, either by small collectives or households, serving local demand through short supply chains. Consumers and producers would be closer, while the production and consumption of food would be valued for its social and cultural meaning, rather than being only an economic and physical imperative. Some local initiatives in high-income countries follow these principles, but whether they could replace the current supply chains at scale is open to discussion. Food sovereignty alternatives to long-distance trade, in particular, remain vague. For some, the ideals are unreachable:

the food sovereignty movement only "slides past, rather than confronts, the contradictions intrinsic to all commodity relations and markets" (Bernstein 2014).

Discussion

There are four points of discussion in relation to agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular.

First is the importance of the debate within the leading narrative about **the potential of the existing organizational models and scales of operations that dominate farming and agricultural supply chains**: informal, small-scale and family-operated. Can these provide the foundation for increased production and productivity, or do they need to be consolidated into larger operations? This discussion centres on the degree to which rural markets can be made to work for small-scale operators. If these cannot function better, allowing the participation of smallholders and their effective articulation with formal firms in the supply chains, then larger farms will have such strong advantages that smallholdings will be either marginalized or absorbed by larger operators. This debate may not be resolved by further discussion: in reality, the argument will be swayed by the success of measures to mitigate rural market failures, and perhaps the performance of larger-scale farms.

Second, agricultural debates tend to understate the importance of **the growth of manufacturing and services that make up the urban economy**. The prospects for successful agricultural and rural development in Africa will be so much greater if the urban economy flourishes, stimulating local demand for food and agricultural raw materials, as well as providing jobs for those stepping out of agriculture. It is perhaps not surprising then that interest in urban economies in Africa has revived among those who have focused primarily on rural matters in recent years (see Christiaensen et al. 2013; Dorosh and Thurlow 2012).

Third, while it is inevitable that the future of rural Africa will depend, to some extent, on factors beyond the control of the continent's own decision makers and populations, much still depends on **how current debates are resolved through policy processes and public and private investment**. In considering possible futures for Africa, Chamberlin et al. (2014) see two critical influences: one external (the level of future world agricultural prices), the other internal (the breadth of domestic urban economic growth). They configure these two critical influences to identify four scenarios for Africa's rural futures, as shown in Table 2).

Clearly, a great deal depends on political choices that affect the breadth of urban growth, and the extent to which the state is determined to ensure that smallholders can overcome market failures. Predicting political choice is difficult, perhaps more so than in the past, given that ideas about political economy have changed considerably (Booth 2014). In the 1970s and 1980s, models of policy choice stressed the power of urban interest groups, which may explain, in part, the bias against farming seen in those decades. By the 1990s, ideas about neo-patrimonial states began to emerge, where leaders rewarded their supporters with a share of the 'spoils'. More recently, however, some markedly different understandings have come to the forefront, inspired by comparisons with experiences in South-East Asia: models that emphasize the power of ideas that seize the imagination of leaders.

If that is the case, then political choices are likely to be as diverse as the inspirations of political elites, and cannot be predicted on the basis of analyses of material interests alone. Indeed, narratives themselves become critical elements in political debate, both as expressions of dominant ideas and for the way in which they frame debates and make new ideas more or less admissible. Nevertheless, evidence from emerging experience may still be critical where unresolved debates remain.

The fourth and final point concerns matters that are not yet emphasized in the leading narrative, despite their importance, with **gender and the environment** being two prominent examples. They are far from absent in strategy documents and declarations that call, invariably, for actions to address gender inequity and to ensure that development is both environmentally sustainable and climate-smart. But they are not yet at the heart of many policy debates. When it comes to turning strategies into actions with budgeted programmes, they take second place to investments in infrastructure and technology for greater production. It is not that they are incompatible with the leading themes identified – it is that they do not fit neatly within them. The transformation narrative, for example, could stress support for human capabilities, which would require action to correct gender inequalities. But gender relations rarely figure when transformation is discussed.[10]

Table 2: Scenarios for Africa's rural futures?

	Constant or declining global food prices	Rise in global food prices
NARROW AND UNEQUAL URBAN GROWTH	**Unloved and unrewarding:** sees unequal development with mining, oil and gas often dominating, and rents accruing very narrowly to urban elites. Food imports likely as a cheap and simple way to feed people. Smallholders have only modest incentives to invest and innovate with rising pressure on the land.	**Large, landed estates (latifundia):** with opportunities to produce food profitably for the urban middle class and for export, both domestic elites and foreign companies try to obtain farmland on a large scale. Will large farms be more productive than smallholdings? Will they produce at lower cost than imports? Narrow-based urban development means limited job creation: land concentration sees smallholders crowded onto heavily-worked land. Possible outcome: a highly dualistic economy and unequal society.
BROAD-BASED URBAN GROWTH	**Compete and survive (slow and steady):** moderate world prices means that the incentives for domestic elites and foreign firms to obtain land will be less; while import competition will be stronger. Otherwise the growth links from the previous scenario apply. Much depends on how productive smallholder farming can become.	**Rising tide floats all boats:** more broad-based urban growth means greater demand from urban areas for locally produced goods and services. This stimulates more rural non-farm activity, which, in turn, generates capital for smallholders to invest and become productive. Elites have less chance to take over land. Since incomes rise for most people, higher food prices are not politically problematic, so consumer subsidies are not necessary, allowing more productive public investment.

Source: Chamberlin et al. 2014.

10. The African Transformation Report (ACET 2014) has barely a mention of either gender or women, and no discussion of gender relations, inequality or women's economic roles.

Asia

Continuing trends

In contrast to Africa, rural Asia has seen a continuation of trends that were apparent before 2000, rather than any significant changes. Four trends have been particularly important for agricultural and rural development:

- slower population growth
- growing industrialization and urbanization
- significant changes in diets, and
- higher world prices for food and other agricultural commodities.

Population growth has slowed across Asia as fertility rates have continued to fall. In the early 1970s, fertility rates for the region stood at around six births for every adult female: by 2012, the average for East Asia had fallen to below 1.9, less than the rate needed to maintain population levels, while average fertility for South Asia was just below 2.6. The slowdown in population growth has been especially marked in rural areas, where outmigration has been reducing the population still further. Since 2004, the rural population of South Asia has grown at less than 0.9 per cent a year, while that of East Asia has actually fallen by an average of 1.25 per cent a year.[11] Soon, it seems, declining rural populations will be the norm across Asia, reversing the increases that have been seen for several centuries.

Asia's **industrialization and urbanization** have continued since 2000, drawing people out of the rural areas to jobs created in the cities, while creating increased opportunities for farmers to market produce of higher value in the growing cities and for rural non-farm businesses with good access to the cities to link to urban supply chains.

Urbanization and rising incomes are both associated with **significant changes in diets** (FAO 2008). Since the early 1970s, there have been substantial increases in the consumption of vegetables, fruits, animal produce and vegetable oil. Processed foods are increasingly consumed in urban areas. In general, farmers have seen greater demand for higher-value produce, especially for livestock products.

These changes have been accompanied by rising levels of people who are overweight and obese (Keats and Wiggins 2014), although much of Asia still has a lower prevalence of obesity than countries of similar income levels in other regions. The Pacific islands, however, are exceptional: some of the highest rates of obesity in the world can be found in places such as Samoa and Tonga (Stevens et al. 2012).

While slowing population growth, falling rural populations and growing cities are all trends that are likely to continue in the near future, changes in diet are harder to forecast. There are concerns that Asian diets may come to resemble those of North America and

11. World Development Indicators, data for 2004 to 2013.

Europe, with heavy consumption of animal produce. Or they may remain distinctively Asian, with plenty of fresh vegetables, steamed rice and fish, albeit with more meat and dairy than in the past. Experience in Japan shows that high incomes do not necessarily result in people abandoning traditional diets. However, fast food chains are expanding their markets in the region, offering foods high in fats, sugar and salt that are promoted by seductive advertising.

Finally, **world prices for food and other agricultural produce rose significantly** from 2007 onward (see page 15). Although China, India and some other countries were able to insulate local prices against rising world prices – largely by controls on trade and use of domestic stocks – during the acute price spike of 2007/08, food prices still rose in real terms. In some cases, such as that of rice in China, prices have risen further since 2007/08 as costs of fuel, fertilizer and labour have increased.

Emerging processes and perspectives

Diverging rural Asia: well-connected versus marginal areas

Asia's urbanization and the growth of its urban economy have been concentrated in favourable locations – usually those that are well connected to other cities and the rest of the world. More often than not, cities have grown in areas of high potential for agriculture that tend to be irrigated and where new agricultural technology has been most applicable. The combination of growing demand from nearby cities, particularly for higher-value produce, plus good conditions for agriculture, has contributed to a marked division in rural Asia between these areas and those less well favoured – or frankly marginal – because of their more remote location and poorer resources.

Typically, well-connected areas are the ones that see the intensification and commercialization of farming, particularly in relation to small-scale family farming. The rural non-farm economy also tends to thrive in such areas. Agricultural growth that creates links in production and in consumption as farmers spend their increased incomes stimulates the non-farm economy. In addition, it seems that some rural non-farm activities are benefiting increasingly from being close to cities, including rural workshops that supply parts to urban manufacturing plants. Furthermore, rural households in well-connected areas have more opportunities to work in the urban economy, either by commuting from the rural home or by undertaking short migrations.

The more marginal areas, where livelihoods often have to rely on little more than rainfed agriculture, have considerably fewer opportunities. One of the few areas of economic growth in such areas is tourism to places of natural beauty and wilderness. Otherwise, migration out may often be the best – sometimes the only – option for the young and for newly-formed households.

These differences are accentuated by **improvements to agricultural supply chains**. A 'quiet revolution' in value chains for staples such as potatoes and rice in Bangladesh, China and India is taking place. Supply chains, where some 40 per cent of final product value is added after the product leaves the farm, are lengthening in distance while reducing the number of intermediaries. Practically all the change is taking place in the more dynamic, commercializing locations of the rural economy (Reardon et al. 2012).

Higher urban incomes and a demand for year-round high quality produce such as potatoes in South Asia have allowed part of these improvements to supply chains to be driven by supermarkets, whose prices for staples in Delhi and other cities are now lower than those of traditional retailers. Products are increasingly differentiated and traceable, such as rice packaged in branded packs in Beijing supermarkets (although it is still sold loose in Delhi and Dhaka). On the supply side, modern cold storage allows quality to be maintained: such stores now handle around 73 per cent of potatoes in India. Wholesalers operating stores buy directly from farmers, offering both improved prices and credit. Government intervention in the form of subsidies has supported the development of cold stores in India, but strengthening the national electricity grid has been even more important. In China, in particular, larger and more efficient rice mills have replaced smaller mills and are now transporting rice, buying from farms and selling directly to supermarkets, thereby bypassing traditional intermediaries.[12]

The changes go beyond processing and distribution, however. They can also be seen in input and factor markets that thrive on the increased profitability for farmers engaged in the evolving supply chains. These include markets for land and machine rental, and for farm chemicals and water. Old and potentially exploitative arrangements of credit that was locked into input supply and marketing by a landlord are now being displaced by more modern arrangements (Reardon and Timmer 2014).

The downside of these changes is that they tend to engage with farms that have more resources and that are better located (family) farms – those that can provide reliable produce of sufficient quality. It is the marginal farms that tend to be left out. As a result, such changes have the potential to widen existing social differences, even though increased activity in supply chains and multipliers from commercializing farms may generate more rural jobs. However, and more importantly, the proximity of cities increases the opportunities for more diversified options for farm households that are disadvantaged by their lack of land, capital or labour.

Rising rural wages: causes and consequences

Rural wages are rising across much of rural Asia, or at least in the arc from the south of the region and through the south-east to its eastern edge. The rises began in some countries long before 2000, but the trend has become more marked since then. In China, for example, extraordinary increases of 92 per cent were registered in rural wages between 2003 and 2007; in Viet Nam the median rural wage rose by more than three times between 1992 and 2008; in Bangladesh the average (male) rural wage increased by 45 per cent between 2005 and 2010; and in India rural wages rose by 35 per cent between 2005 and 2012 – all of these being increases in real terms. Furthermore, increases have accelerated since the mid-2000s in several countries, including China, India and Viet Nam. Where the data are readily available, differences have narrowed between male and female wages, and between more and less prosperous regions (Wiggins and Keats 2014b).

Cross-country analysis suggests two significant drivers of increasing wages. One is the slowdown in the growth of the rural population, accentuated by outmigration. As a result, the supply of cheap labour in some rural areas is stagnating and shrinking and there are now reports of labour shortages in rural Bangladesh, one of the most densely settled rural areas in the world. The other driver is the growth of manufacturing and the urban economy in general, presumably raising the demand for labour from the rural areas (Wiggins and Keats 2014b).[13]

12. In India, continuing requirements for many products to be sold through traditional wholesale markets (*mandis*) prevent streamlining of this kind, except, for instance, where a requirement for cold storage that is not available at *mandis* can be demonstrated.
13. Somewhat surprisingly, the growth of agricultural labour productivity – a proxy for agricultural demand for labour – proved insignificant.

Further increases in rural wages can be expected, as it is likely that rural population growth will slow still further in the future, while urban economies will continue to grow. If so, three important consequences are likely.

First, rising rural wages will set a floor for low rural incomes and reduce rural poverty – at least for those able to work. Indeed, they may set a floor for low incomes throughout the economy, since unskilled rural wages have, historically, marked the lowest returns to labour on offer. As a result, rising rural wages should reduce extreme poverty significantly for rural households with working members. It is still the case that most poor households in Asia live in rural areas, and many depend on labouring for much of their income. For example, in India in 2009/10, 39 per cent of the rural workforce depended on casual labouring: an increase from 36 per cent in 1993/94 (Alha and Yonzon 2011). It is not surprising then that Jacoby (2013) reports rising rural wages as a major driver of rural poverty reduction in recent decades in India.[14] That said, rural wages are still low in most countries and need to rise – perhaps to double in some cases – before the households that depend on them escape from moderate poverty (US$2 a day).

Second, rising rural wages will push up the costs of production in agriculture. With the higher costs of fuel and fertilizer seen since the mid-2000s, higher wages increase the costs of production still further. This is already apparent in China, where the costs of growing cereals rose by 50 to 70 per cent between 2005 and 2010, with the increases distributed fairly evenly across higher costs for labour, and those for seed, fertilizer and other physical inputs (Keats and Wiggins 2012).

Higher labour costs spur on mechanization for those tasks where machinery is cheaper than the increased cost of manual operations (Otsuka et al. 2015). Economies of scale may apply here, given that machinery (especially larger items like tractors and combine harvesters) has lower operating costs on larger fields; and given that these are so-called 'lumpy' investments that may be beyond the means of (very) small-scale farmers. If land markets operate, then smallholdings are likely to concentrate into larger farms.

Asian food prices will rise, limited to some extent by the possible lower cost of imports from the world market and by the willingness of governments to allow imports of cheap food that may threaten farmers' incomes. This will become an increasingly important decision for Asian governments as imported produce becomes cheaper than domestic production. China and India already import large and rising amounts of vegetable oil and animal feed: how soon before policies that stress home production of staples are relaxed and significant imports of cereals are added? Given that even those on very low incomes do not spend all their incomes on food and the benefit of higher wages should outweigh the hardship of higher food costs.[15]

Third, as rural wages rise, so **manufacturing wages have to increase** to recruit new workers. This effect is already being seen strongly in China, where the national workforce is now shrinking. Manufacturers can mechanize to economize on labour, or they can relocate to regions and countries with lower labour costs. If the latter, then it is likely that plants in

14. He applies a general equilibrium model with three sectors, farming, manufacturing and services, to district-level wage and price series data in India from 2004 to 2009, to find that rural households across the income spectrum benefit from higher agricultural commodity prices. These benefits arise because higher agricultural prices cause farmers to hire more labour, attracted from the other two sectors by higher farm wages. Local multiplier effects through higher spending by farmers and labourers spread the benefits.
15. Gallup polls carried out just before and after the 2007/08 food-price spike showed that many Asian households perceived greater food security after this crisis than before, probably because increased work and higher wages outweighed any increase in food prices (Headey, 2011).

coastal China will not only move inland to less prosperous areas with lower wages, but also relocate outside of China. Neighbouring countries in Asia with low wages may be the first to benefit from this, with Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia and Viet Nam being clear candidates. A further and intriguing possibility is that some Asian factories may relocate as far as Africa in search of lower wages. The World Bank (cited in *Wall Street Journal*, 2014) reports that Ethiopian factory wages for unskilled labour amount to one quarter of the wages paid in China. The logistics costs may be higher, but the overall costs are lower. Indeed, the first pioneer wave of relocated Chinese plants can be seen on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. One experienced analyst has speculated that as many as 85 million factory jobs could leave China in the coming years (Lin 2014). If just half of those jobs went to Africa, it would transform a continent where a surge of youth is entering the labour market.

Stepping out of farming: the rural non-farm economy, migration and the middle-income trap?

Rural livelihoods are becoming more diverse, an expectation confirmed by district and village studies that track change through time (for Tamil Nadu, see Harriss et al. 2010 and Djurfeldt et al. 2008; for Bihar, Datta et al. 2014; and for north-eastern Thailand, Rigg et al. 2012). Typically, households that once would have depended on agriculture, either farming on their own account or working on the fields of others, now have opportunities – either in the local rural non-farm economy, in commuting to the nearest town or city, or migrating to urban centres (both national and international). What's more, for those on low incomes, these options offer better rewards than most farm work. Thanks to these new options, rural incomes are rising even when agricultural production and productivity have risen only modestly.

In India, for example, neither manufacturing nor agriculture has, since the early 1990s, been growing fast enough to provide enough jobs for the expanding workforce, but the rural non-farm economy has been growing more quickly than most sectors for several decades. By the late 2000s, six out of every ten new jobs created in rural areas were non-farm. Increasingly, rural households in India work off-farm: between 1999 and 2007 the share of households with non-farm jobs (as primary occupations) doubled from 10 to 20 per cent – with probably many more households engaged in secondary non-farm occupations. Rural incomes rose between 1999 and 2007 at an annual average rate of 5.7 per cent in constant terms, a rate similar to that seen in urban areas despite the modest growth of agriculture. While returns to agriculture grew for both farmers and labourers, incomes from rural non-farm activities grew faster – by an annual average of 9.3 per cent (Binswanger 2012).

Migration seems to be increasing. As will be discussed in section 5, it is remarkable how few migrants move permanently from their villages. On the contrary, many retain their village links and return even after decades away. Observers of contemporary Thailand (Rigg et al. 2014) see a danger here: that migrants do not specialize and invest in skills sufficiently, because they see their migration as only temporary. This limits improvements in labour productivity and prevents both the village and the urban economy from taking the next steps up the economic ladder. Progress in farming, non-farm activity and migration has lifted people out of poverty, but propelling them from medium to high incomes may prove more challenging.

Discussion

Asia's green revolution has taken place largely on **small-scale, family farms**. In the past, these farms have had advantages over larger units in the supervision of labour and flexible operations. Improved technology has been largely neutral in scale. And governments have often acted to make sure that they have had access to inputs, technical advice, credit and a guaranteed price for any marketed surplus.

The advantages of machinery over ever more costly labour may change this. So too may the requirements of new supply chains that may be more efficient, but demand more from their farmer suppliers in produce quality – freshness, uniform maturation, size, shape, colour and so on. Requirements for certification, traceability and credence characteristics such as no use of child labour, careful use of pesticides, and organic standards may also increase the pressure towards increased scale of enterprise.

The current dominance of smallholders may, therefore, change (see Timmer 2005). Land consolidation may be likely, for example. Household members may leave the more marginal small farms altogether, either remaining in their village and taking local employment in the non-farm economy, or else migrating for urban jobs. Where some of their unused land is rented out, this will allow the operational holdings of those remaining in farming to increase, although reluctance to cut all ties with the land may well make this a slow process.

One imponderable is the **environment**. Asia has developed its farming with scant regard to environmental costs, and the imperatives of producing food and creating livelihoods have taken precedence over environmental sustainability. The results can be seen in salination of irrigation schemes, pollution from run-off of farm chemicals and from farm animal waste, acidification of soils subjected to repeated applications of manufactured fertilizer, deforestation and drainage of wetlands, loss of biodiversity both on and off farms, and the overdrawing of groundwater aquifers (UN and ADB 2012; Rosegrant et al. 2007). At some point – indeed, with increasing urgency – this needs correction. Given that some farming contributes to greenhouse gases, action is all the more necessary. And layered on top of this there is climate change itself, which will require farming systems that are more resilient to more variable weather.

Some highly-intensive farming in Asia may well need to rein back and become less intensive – using less water and fewer external inputs, and changing monocultures for more diverse systems that integrate crops, livestock, aquaculture and trees to maximize ecological cycles for water and nutrients. Such changes may raise unit production costs, although there would be savings on the costs of external inputs. They may reduce total output, although integrated systems may lose little. Such changes, while demand for food increases with rising incomes, would raise the pressure to import staples into parts of Asia. Correspondingly, the returns to other parts of Asia that have the capacity to expand agriculture and export would rise (as they would in other parts of the world such as Africa and Latin America where land is relatively abundant). So far, however, there are few policies to encourage more sustainable agricultural systems, but it is hard to imagine that it will be long before they become a priority.

A final reflection is that **one-size, 'big push' rural and agricultural policies** look increasingly out of place. Until recently in Asia it was possible to see increasing food production as **the** great challenge, to ensure that cheap food for all would end the threat of famine, with the huge bonus of creating more jobs in rural areas. Meanwhile a manufacturing revolution in the urban areas would drive economic growth, fuelled by the availability of much labour from the countryside at low wages. That vision, born in the 1950s and 1960s, has succeeded in much of Asia: the desperate circumstances of mass poverty and hunger faced in the past are long gone.[16] Even though there are twice as many people in Asia now as there were in 1970 – when some already saw the continent as over-populated – most now have higher standards of living than previous generations did. Above all, the spectre of famine and mass starvation has been banished.

For agricultural and rural development, the landscape is now more varied. The different territories – both well-connected and remote – cry out for differentiated approaches. Eradicating extreme poverty will require more specific and focused policies than in the past, targeting those who, as a result of their household circumstances, location, or individual misfortune, have not prospered. Specific dimensions of poverty are more likely to be addressed by tackling their detailed causes, rather than expecting that rising average incomes will reduce poverty.

16. See Myrdal's Asian Drama (1968).

Latin America

Continuing trends

As with Asia, relatively little has changed in the circumstances of agricultural and rural development in Latin America since 2000. Most of the significant changes affecting the region's rural areas began in the 1980s and 1990s, rather than more recently, as listed by Berdegué and Fuentealba (2014):

"The past three decades have seen the region: liberalize and open its economy, including its agricultural sector; dismantle numerous public services related to agriculture; redefine the relative roles of the state, markets and civil society in development; nurture a growing number of medium and large corporations, including multinational ones, that play a dominant role in agriculture as in other sectors of the economy; dramatically expand the provision of basic health and education services, including in rural areas; introduce television, radio and mobile phone communications to the majority of rural areas; reduce its population growth; concentrate population in urban centers, including small and medium provincial towns and cities; expand the rights and opportunities of women; re-establish democracies and strengthen the rule of law and the respect of human rights; increase the responsibilities of regional and local (municipal) governments; expand the size, voice, and contributions of organized civil society; deforest vast regions, contaminate many of its rivers and lakes, and further erode its soils, while at the same time experience an awakening of an environmental consciousness and activism on the part of growing sectors of the population." (Berdegué and Fuentealba 2014)

This is a wide-ranging list, spanning economic liberalization, better public services, and improved governance, set against a context of (moderate) economic growth, urbanization and environmental deterioration. No wonder that the authors comment that "[Latin America and the Caribbean] is truly a very different place than one generation ago" (Berdegué and Fuentealba, 2014).

As outlined earlier in this report, world prices for agricultural commodities have risen since 2000. This, together with continuing increased demand from Asia (China above all, for soybeans) constitutes a major opportunity for Latin America as a region that still has large areas of land and water that can be cultivated and where production costs can be low.

In common with Asia, Latin America is now seeing its rural population decline, albeit to a lesser extent: the region's rural population has fallen only by the equivalent of 0.25 per cent a year since 2004, and with considerable variations across countries. The region's less well-developed countries still have rising rural populations, but the two most populous countries, Brazil and Mexico, both have falling rural populations – as do most countries of the Southern Cone.

If there has been a surprise since 2000, it has been the welcome news that long-standing inequality and poverty in Latin America are falling – the result, in part, of the successes of conditional cash transfers (as will be explained below).

Emerging processes and perspectives

Latin America has a long and vigorous tradition of social science, often producing – and with good reason – trenchant critiques of social structures and power relations that had resulted in some of the highest rates of inequality anywhere in the world. Sharp divisions in perspectives have often arisen between those favouring reform and those who see that only radical changes will make any lasting difference.

During the 2000s ideas have developed against a political landscape where left-of-centre governments are common; split between reformists who accept liberal economies but use the state to achieve social improvements, and radical nationalist regimes more sceptical of liberal economy and prepared to intervene in this sphere (Castañeda 2006). Some of the achievements of the reformists call into question some of the more radical narratives.

Unlike Africa and Asia, agricultural and rural issues are less central to economic and social policy in Latin America, as might be expected in a region where most people live in urban areas. Four sets of issues for agriculture and rural development can be picked out. One is a narrative about agricultural opportunity in a continent that has natural advantages for agricultural exports that have not yet been fully exploited. The other three are concerned with how to deal with enduring rural poverty and deprivation, whether that be by harnessing spatial processes, by addressing the problems of small family farms or by direct measures to raise the incomes of poor rural people.

Opportunity and the need to be competitive

There is hardly anywhere else in the world that has quite the agricultural potential of parts of Latin America. The rise in prices on world agricultural markets, the potential of underused land and especially water (Nepstad 2011; Piñeiro and Bianchi 2011), and the experience of large-scale exporting of both standard commodities, such as soy from Brazil and Argentina, and high-value produce, such as fruit, vegetables and flowers from Mexico, Colombia and Chile, means that the region has opportunities to expand production.

In the past, thinkers on Latin America, such as Celso Furtado, André Gunder Frank and Raúl Prebisch, have been prominent in proposing that dependence on primaries (anything from a farm to a quarry, or from a mine to a forest) was a route to low growth, poverty and exploitation. Therefore, those who see opportunities in agricultural exports have had to defend their position. Piñeiro and Bianchi (2011), for example, take issue with common objections to a focus on primaries, arguing that the idea of a secular decline in the terms of trade for primaries is increasingly dubious, and that the pitfalls of the 'resource curse' (where rents lead to Dutch disease and poor governance) can be avoided.

To take advantage of such opportunities, the region has to maintain and increase its competitive advantages in both agriculture and logistical supply chains. Sufficient public investment in transport infrastructure is needed – for example, to overcome the congestion in Brazilian ports, and to replace costly road haulage by river navigation and rail to get produce out of the interior of South America (Chaddad and Jank 2006).

Investments in transport would be easier to fund if the distortions in public spending for agriculture were corrected. Studies carried out in the early 2000s (de Ferranti et al. 2005; Soto Baquero et al. 2006; López and Galinato 2006) showed the quite extraordinary degree to which agricultural budgets were spent on subsidies – effectively private transfers – the lion's share of which typically ended up with wealthy farmers, ranchers and agribusiness. More generally on policy, the importance of not overtaxing export agriculture – a curse of Latin America in the past – has been stressed (Foster and Valdés 2011), as has the cost of policy distortions to agricultural productivity (Ludena 2010). Trade deals are seen as advantageous in improving the region's access to the markets of the North (Salcedo et al. 2010).

This narrative comes close to recommending a fully liberalized economy with minimal state action. Some evidence shows that when the heaviest distortions and controls are removed, agriculture grows – with Brazil from the late 1980s onward often cited as the prime example (Barros 2009; Chaddad and Jank 2006). Others would qualify this, remembering the banking collapse of the early 1980s in Chile, and the way that export agriculture was subsequently fostered in that country by modest, but astute and strategic, state support (Foster and Valdés 2011).

This narrative barely considers the condition of small, family farms: when it does, the expectation is that they will benefit from the reduction of net taxation of agriculture and investment in transport and other public goods in rural areas. But there is a reluctance to offer more support for small farms, fearing that this could lead to the reintroduction of distorted policies and protectionism, and divert funds from public goods to subsidies – albeit better-targeted subsidies than in the past (Chaddad and Jank 2006).

Nevertheless, the force with which advocates of further liberalization make their case reflects the strength of opposing voices that reject unfettered liberalization and globalization. These views, in their various degrees of radicalism, have gained the upper hand in many countries: Latin America is unusual in the number of ruling parties that take left-of-centre positions and that have been re-elected. Given this context, the region has some rather different – and influential – perspectives on agricultural and rural development.

Differentiation: territories and family farms

A very different theme emerges from those looking at both social and geographical differences in Latin America. As in Asia, a sharp distinction can be drawn between those rural areas that are well connected to cities and ports, often with medium to high potential land and sometimes with underemployed land and water to put to use, and those areas that are more remote and marginal. The former areas include those where export agriculture flourishes, often with production in large units, as well as peri-urban zones where farms of varying sizes can produce for the urban markets (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2004). Supply chains in these well-connected areas often work effectively and efficiently. Where agriculture employs labour intensively, as for example in the production of flowers, fruit and vegetables, many jobs may be on offer in fields and packing sheds.

Some of the more remote areas, despite their current isolation,[17] have long-standing and quite dense settlement, with smallholdings predominating. Rural households in such areas have often suffered from the inadequate pubic provision of services such as education and health, find it difficult to access financial services, and may face discrimination because of their ethnicity and language. Increasingly, their livelihoods depend on rural non-farm activities and migration, both domestic and international. In the past their situation would have been seen as desperate, since rising rural populations meant sub-division of land and a dilution of the few assets they had. However, that situation has been reversed in some cases as a result of shrinking rural populations and outmigration, as those who remain in rural areas take on the fields of those who have left, as seen in parts of the Bolivian altiplano (Urioste 2005).

17. The highlands of Peru, for example, may now be remote from the thriving coast, but were once close to the heart of the Inca Empire.

What options are there for such marginalized areas? Some see them as having prospects limited to migration, social transfers and possibly payments for environmental services (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2004). Others, however, see this as perhaps an over-simplification of reality that overlooks the possibilities for action, both socially and geographically. Socially, Berdegué and Fuentealba (2014) identify a large groups of smallholders who are neither completely marginalized nor, on the other hand, that well placed, but who might be able to participate in more intensive and commercial small-scale farming, given some public investment and support to overcome market failures.

Geographically, the 2000s have seen rising interest in the possibilities of rural territorial development (*desarrollo territorial rural*) (Berdegué 2014). The great disparity in economic growth, and the reduction of poverty and inequality seen across the city-regions of Latin America, has prompted some observers to search for the ingredients that have distinguished successful city-regions from the less successful. Those pursuing this line see the most likely causal variables lying in local institutions (rules of the game), social networks and leadership. These are, however, variables deeply embedded in social structures and not necessarily readily amenable to straightforward policy instruments or investments. It is not that clear, therefore, how to reproduce successful models.

The rural territorial approach differs from past perspectives that tended to see social structures as the product of forces of capital operating at national and international levels that would be next to impossible to affect, other than through radical political change.[18]

Debates about marginality are closely linked to concerns about the viability of small-scale family farms – our next issue.

Prospects for small family farms

Past analyses have been quite negative about the prospects of smallholders in Latin America, seeing them as structurally disadvantaged in national and international systems and, therefore, unlikely to prosper without radical reforms (Kay 2006). Indeed, in some radical accounts – such as those held by the leadership of Nicaragua after the 1979 revolution, for example – smallholders have been seen as relics from some pre-capitalist or feudal past that should be replaced by larger-scale units with social intentions along the lines of collectives or state farms (Biondi Morra 1993).

More recent assessments are less gloomy (IFAD RIMISP 2014; CEPAL 2013): successful regions, it is observed, often have dynamic smallholders. Yet even here, there are differences of opinion. For some, judicious public support to smallholders may allow them to participate in economic growth. Others see economic opportunity as more limited, but they stress the value of the small family farm as the nucleus of diverse livelihoods, as a social support, and as a repository of cultural values. It is this intrinsic value, rather than any economic potential, that has inspired the vigorous social movements that have emerged in Latin America in recent decades to demand land, public support and protection for small family farms.

There is, it seems, a considerable diversity of opinion on the economic viability of small farms, the social desirability of maintaining them, and on policies that are appropriate for them. This diversity reflects the diverse processes and outcomes seen across the region, but it also arises from evidence that qualifies – or plainly contradicts – the dire predictions expressed about the impacts of economic liberalization. For example, when Mexico liberalized its

18. Even then Latin America's experience of profound revolutions – Mexico 1910, Bolivia 1952, Cuba 1959, and Nicaragua 1979 – has not been that promising. Most revolutionary regimes have found it difficult to break the mould or, having done so, to deliver prosperity.

economy in the 1980s and 1990s and, above all, joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the decline of the Mexican peasantry and of maize farming was widely expected. It has not quite turned out that way: areas under maize have actually increased, encouraged by state support through *El Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo* (PROCAMPO) area payments and *Alianza para el Campo* public investments (Salcedo et al. 2010). Despite legislation in the early 1990s to make *ejido* (collective) land tradable, there has been no widespread dispossession of smallholders. In fact, rural poverty in Mexico has fallen since 1994 – albeit not dramatically.

This leads on to the next point.

Transfers, poverty and equality

In the 1990s, Mexico and other countries introduced cash transfers targeted to poor households in rural areas, conditional on those households sending their children to school and taking infants to health centres. Mexico's programme *Prospera* (initially called *Progresa*, then *Oportunidades*) has been repeatedly evaluated, with positive reports of reduced poverty, improved education, health and nutrition. As a result, the programme has been expanded to include more ambitious elements, such as giving rural youth a trust fund to invest in training or a business, with the fund growing the longer they stay in school. For a middle-income country, with only a quarter of the population in rural areas, *Prospera* is affordable.

Brazil has created and expanded its *Bolsa Familia* programme that also transfers cash to poor households. By 2010 there were conditional cash transfer programmes in 18 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, benefiting more than 2.5 million households, or 113 million individuals (almost 20 per cent of the entire population) at an approximate cost of 0.4 per cent of the region's GDP (Bastagli 2010; Cecchini and Madariaga 2011).

In both Brazil and Mexico, such transfers are credited with contributing to an unexpected reduction in inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient (Lustig 2013). They have also contributed to the equally welcome, and also unexpected, decline in rural poverty seen in the 2000s. Those writing in the early 2000s (David et al. 2000; Kay 2006) were dismayed to see only slight reductions in rural poverty during the 1990s. They thought, therefore, that structural obstacles were preventing poverty reduction. However, the percentage of rural households living in poverty fell from 64 per cent in 1999 to below 50 per cent by 2012 (CEPAL 2012). This has happened with little structural change: part of the reason probably lies with the transfers.[19]

Discussion

If ideas about agricultural and rural development in Latin America have shifted considerably from where they were in say, 1990, that does not mean that all the debates are settled. On the contrary, discussions are lively and three key issues can be singled out.

One is the extent to which **large-scale commercial farming, often with export orientation, is promoted by the state and supported by society** in general. In the past, the large farms of Latin America were too often unproductive, rentier estates contributing little to national development. While there are still some examples of such large, landed estates, many of today's large farms[20] are productive, capitalized enterprises that have done much to boost

19. Other plausible reasons include education in rural areas – thought to be a strong driver in Brazil – and possibly better options in rural non-farm activities and migration for some rural households.
20. These are not necessarily the previous unproductive estates. In countries such as Peru, most of those estates were redistributed or nationalized in the 1960s. But some of the very large, landed estates (*latifundia*) did capitalize and intensify their production when it became clear in the 1960s that not to do so would leave them vulnerable to expropriation.

Latin America's agricultural growth and its exports. Admirers of this sector call for trade agreements that will give such farms better access to export markets, and for investments in transport infrastructure to cut the costs of moving and exporting produce.

Not everyone appreciates this sector, however. Some governments fear that exports will lead to increased domestic prices when world prices rise, and restrict exports at such times. Parts of civil society have a historical mistrust of landowners, would like to see their land redistributed, and would prefer that public support be directed to small-scale family farms. Trade agreements may be popular with business, but are usually treated with suspicion by parts of civil society, including alliances of small farmers and landless agricultural workers. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether those in favour of large farms will get the policies they want, or whether large farm interests will take second place to the social aims of civil society groups. Such tensions can be seen clearly in Brazil, where there are now two different ministries for agriculture, one of which is dedicated to small-scale family farms. Brazilian trade delegations have been known to appear at conferences with recommendations from this latter ministry to protect against some imports, while the other ministry pursues free trade (Chaddad and Jank 2006).

The second issue is the **fate of small-scale farms**. As in other parts of the world, their viability is a bone of contention. Can they participate successfully in a market economy and provide living wages to small farm households? If they need support to do so, as probably applies to many, is this support just rural public goods such as roads, education, health, and extension services, plus, in most cases, assistance to overcome market failures in accessing credit, inputs and technical advice? Or do they need explicit protection through guaranteed prices for output, subsidized inputs or trade barriers against competing imported produce?

An alternative approach sees smallholders as households trapped on low incomes, with little chance of raising them through farming, and recommends support on social grounds. If the justification is welfare, then cash transfers may be a better way to achieve such ends than support to production.

Another consideration is environmental stewardship, where smallholders might be rewarded with direct payments provided they can show that they conserve their lands, water and agricultural biodiversity – and possibly also sequester carbon in their farming systems.

More so than most other parts of the developing world, the middle-income countries of Latin America may contemplate supporting incomes of small-scale farmers directly for a mixture of reasons – social, environmental and even cultural. Such support becomes ever more affordable as the region urbanizes, economies grow and the number of people living in the countryside falls. If such income support were to come about, with payments targeted to smallholders and those following more ecological practices, then the wheel would have turned full circle from the past when typically large-scale commercial farms received rents from the state.

The third and last point concerns, once again, **the environment**. As in Asia, there is a recognized need to make agriculture environmentally sustainable, but this does not always translate into practical actions to match commendable policy objectives on sustainable agriculture. The most visible environmental policy initiatives aim to prevent the conversion of tropical forest to farmland, above all in Amazonia (Assunção et al. 2012).

Cross-cutting themes: gender and migration

This section looks at evolving ideas about rural gender relations and migration – two issues that are of critical importance to agricultural development, yet often 'missing' from tangible policy responses.

Gender and agricultural development

Interest in gender and agricultural development dates back to the 1970 publication of Boserup's Woman's Role in Economic Development (Boserup 1970), if not earlier. Since then, interest in gender in development has grown strongly, with advances in the understanding of the issues[21] and associated international initiatives[22] to promote development with gender equity. By 2000, the third Millennium Development Goal aimed "to promote gender equality and empower women" and, with the revival of attention to agriculture in the 2000s, interest in gender and agriculture has mushroomed.

This interest, however, has tended to see gender equity as instrumental to agricultural and rural development. Here, women's empowerment should help women to invest in and intensify their own farming and rural non-farm businesses. The resulting extra production and income in the hands of women, it is argued, will lead to better child health and education, food security and improved nutrition (see, for example, Alkire et al. 2012; CGIAR 2013).

Women's empowerment is, therefore, widely applauded as 'smart economics' (Chant and Sweetman 2012). For agriculture, a specific example stems from the frequent observation that yields from women's plots are lower than those on equivalent male plots – a difference usually attributed to women having less access to improved seed, fertilizer and labour. If women had equal access to the means to farm, it follows that yields on women's plots should rise by 20 to 30 per cent in one estimate – an increase sufficient to reduce the number of hungry people worldwide by 150 million (USAID 2012). It may not, however, just be a matter of inputs: even when these are provided, women farmers may still achieve lower yields, given that they may have less technical knowledge, less time, and face a range of other disadvantages (World Bank and ONE 2014).

Such instrumentalist views of gender equity have been criticized for obscuring the goal of deeper change in gender relations:

"…a privileging of instrumentalist meanings of empowerment associated with efficiency and growth are crowding out more socially transformative meanings associated with rights and collective action…" (Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009)

… as well as for diverting effort away from political mobilization for change:

21. From 'women in development' to 'gender and development' to gender mainstreaming.
22. Most prominently, the series of World Conferences on Women that began in 1975 and that have subsequently taken place every 10 years.

"In contrast to indigenous notions of empowerment that promised transformation through mobilization and collective action, this alien 'empowerment' is individualist, instrumental, neo-liberal. It peddles in gender myths that sustain an image of the 'good woman' as the deserving object of development assistance." (Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010)

The dangers of too narrow a view of gender can be seen in overly simplified gendered analysis where, for example, programmes for gender equality target female-headed households and unwittingly give less attention to the many more rural women who live in male-headed households. Unhelpful and potentially misleading simplifications can also be seen when assessing the amount of food that women farmers produce (Doss 2011), or the land that they access in Africa (Doss et al. 2013). The idea of the unitary household where members interact fairly and selflessly has long been recognized as obscuring potential conflicts within the household (for example, Hunt 1991). But in this realization lies the opposite danger of assuming that joint ownership and decision-making between men and women will privilege men and leave women at a disadvantage. This, for example, has spawned the notion that microcredits for women who live with men will often be captured by those men, leaving the women with debt and no benefit. Reality, of course, is a great deal more varied.[23] In addition, an exclusive focus on women can overlook the importance of changing male roles[24] and their implications for their gender relations with women (Chant 2003).

Because changes in relations within households are so difficult to observe, it is, however, difficult to know whether gender relations are becoming more equal. Millennium Development Goal 3 for gender equality and women's empowerment has three specific indicators of progress: equal proportions of boys and girls in school; the share of women in paid work outside of agriculture; and the share of female parliamentarians.

The first of these is particularly important for rural areas. Across the developing world, gender differences in schooling have narrowed: by the 2000s, 73 per cent of boys and 69 per cent of girls were in school in rural areas – only a small gender gap. From 1990 to 2012, the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in secondary school – an important indicator of change, given that secondary schooling affects women's marriage, health, fertility and status – increased from 84 per cent to 97 per cent across the developing world (World Development Indicators, World Bank).

Progress may also be seen in falling fertility rates in developing countries: a trend that began 40 years ago in Asia and that is now almost universal. For women as farmers, some see progress in the growing popularity of farmer field schools as a way to promote and diffuse agricultural innovations (Davis et al. 2010). Others see the potential of mobile phones to give women direct access to information on technical problems and prices in markets (Aker and Mbiti 2010).

Whether such advances amount to significantly greater empowerment is, however, more difficult to determine:

"Although … some women, somewhere might have benefitted from the changes identified, it is not possible to say whether any progress identified now will be sustainable, or, possibly more important, 'transformatory' for women and gender relations. … In searching for evidence of 'good practices', 'economic empowerment', or 'successful interventions', neither the terms nor the criteria to assess them are straightforward." (Okali and Keats, 2015)

23. Kabeer (2001) takes pains to explore what women do with their loans in rural Bangladesh, recording the touching cases of women who even use borrowed funds to buy their husbands out of debt bondage.
24. When economic change takes away male jobs, the results can be disastrous for women, not only because of loss of income to the household, but also because some demoralized men may take to drink or violence as an outlet for their frustrations (see, for example, Francis [1998] on men in Kisii, Kenya).

In reality, a focus on women as farmers can obscure a major dimension of the lives of rural women: their overwhelming responsibility for the everyday life of the household. Despite the extraordinary demands placed on rural women when water (and fuelwood) is distant from the home – demands recognized more than 30 years ago – progress on the improved provision of clean water and sanitation in rural areas has often been slow compared with the need. It is good, therefore, to see a flagship report from UN Women, Gender Equality and Sustainable Development, stressing that simple, practical advances in access to water, sanitation, electricity and clean stoves could make big differences to the lives of many rural women and girls (UN Women 2014).

Debates over whether rural gender equality and empowerment are achieved by incremental measures to improve women's lives, or whether more direct action is needed to transform gender relations, remain valid but unresolved. One conclusion, however, from this brief review suggests that the focus on production in agricultural and rural development thinking, at least in Africa, has narrowed the range of actions to help women become more efficient farmers and rural business operators. This may have left less room for consideration of activities that could make more of a difference to women's lives by saving them time spent in often arduous household tasks.

Migration

The understanding of migration from rural areas since 2000 has tended to see migration as a more positive development than used to be the case, in contrast to some early and influential ideas that saw such movement as problematic. Harriss and Todaro (1970), for example, proposed that individuals migrate from rural to urban areas when formal wages are higher than rural wages, but that this must be set against their slim chances of finding formal employment. The argument ran that rural people would move to cities hoping to get a formal, better-paid job, only for many of them to end up with precarious informal jobs. Rural-urban migration was, therefore, a problem to be discouraged (Lall et al. 2006).

Subsequently, the 'new economics of migration' (Stark and Bloom 1985) sees migration from rural areas far more positively. Individual movements are seen as resulting from households deciding to allocate their labour where it earns more, to diversify income sources and to accumulate capital for agriculture or non-farm business to overcome the chronic lack of credit in rural areas. So migration from rural areas promises to increase rural household incomes – given that remittances from migrants may outweigh the loss of labour in the rural household, reduce variations in incomes and the risk of severe deprivation, and overcome failings in rural credit markets.

More recently, and particularly since 2000, economic interpretations of migration have been complemented by broader framings where people move as a function of their own capacity – education, skills, health – and aspiration (de Haas 2014). Migration is also facilitated when social networks span both the home and the destination, conveying personal information about opportunities, as well as offering practical help to arriving migrants in finding work and accommodation. Such networks help to explain why migration is often stronger from villages that have already seen some development, rather than from the poorest locations. They also explain why migrants from the same district or village often cluster in particular destinations.

These more positive theories of migration have been matched by mounting evidence of its net benefits. For example, migrants from households in the Kagera Region of north-western Tanzania who have moved from their home villages since the early 1990s have been more likely to escape poverty than those who stayed (Beegle et al. 2008; Christiaensen et al. 2013). Migration from villages in Bihar State in India to cities within and beyond the state, as well as to farms in more prosperous parts of the country and to building sites in the Gulf, has led to greater consumption in home villages, more children going to school and more health spending (Datta et al. 2014; Singh et al. 2011). Similar net gains have been reported for migrants from rural north-eastern Thailand (Rigg et al. 2012, 2014).

The extent of migration is not well known: it is difficult to record all movements in censuses and household surveys, and these may have different criteria for the distance moved that counts as migration, and the amount of time spent away before someone counts as a migrant. From what is known, however, rates of migration may not be increasing. Internationally, the fraction of the world's people who are international migrants has remained at around 3 per cent for several decades (de Haas 2014). National statistics on internal migration show migration rising since 1990 in some countries, stable in some, and falling in others, with no clear patterns (Bell and Edwards-Charles 2013). The common perception of a world increasingly on the move may be illusory – a perception created perhaps by the increasing frequency of short-term travel for business and leisure.

Many migrants may return to their home areas, even after years of being away. For decades, observers have noted that men moving to cities in Africa often leave the rest of the family at home in the village, then return when they have, in effect, retired from urban work (Low 1986; Potts 2000). This phenomenon might have once been seen as specific to Africa: a function, in large part, of collective land rights where residence in the village had to be maintained to guarantee access to land, and of a failure to develop the urban economy. However, similar reports are now coming from Asia as well, as in the case of north-eastern Thailand already mentioned.

Migration appears ever more diverse and varied as our understanding of it increases. The same applies to its impacts. Perhaps it should be no surprise that the impacts vary when so many factors are at play: the different circumstances of migrants and households, their motives for movement and their employment at destination, for example. Migration can, therefore, be seen either to depress agriculture in the home areas by taking workers away in their most productive years, or to stimulate it through the remittances that allow families to buy inputs and hire replacement labour. It can be seen to make life more difficult for wives and mothers who have more to do – with less help – on the farm and in the house when men migrate. Or alternatively, it may be seen to improve their lives, as the remittances allow them to hire more help, set up small businesses and buy time-saving aids such as running water in the home and gas stoves (FAO, IFAD and ILO 2010).

More recognition is now being given to the social impacts of migration. Again, some observations are positive: poor households with migrants gain status as their incomes rise; migrants return with greater self-confidence as a result of new skills learned at destinations; and women left in charge of households may have been able to make decisions that would otherwise have been made by their migrant husbands. On the other hand, migration has its social costs, with both migrants and those who stay at home reporting sadness and loneliness at their separation, even if both parties often see the sacrifice as worthwhile overall for the benefits it can bring (Singh et al. [2011] on Bihar, and Eversole and Johnson [2014] on the Philippines).

These changes in perspectives on the possible benefits of migration have not, however, been matched by changes in migration policies. Many governments still try to control and restrict migration out of rural areas, amid concerns that migration would lead to overcrowded cities, and see it as a sign of the failure of rural development. Indeed, restrictive policies may be increasing: by 2013, 80 per cent of countries had policies to limit rural-urban migration, up from 38 per cent in 1996, according to a United Nations survey (2013). This is particularly true for least-developed countries, where the percentage trying to limit migration from rural areas had risen from 53 to 88 per cent (United Nations 2013).[25]

That said, more interest is being shown – by civil society at least – in protecting vulnerable migrants at their destinations. Providing information on rights to fair treatment at work and to access to public services such as education (for migrants with children) and health care, is one example (Lall et al., 2006). Just providing migrants with identity cards has made a difference in India, where several NGOs have created documents recognized by city authorities. Such cards can help migrants to access services, protect them against police harassment, and link them to insurance and union membership (UNESCO 2013).

25. Policies to restrict migration range from negative attempts to deter movement, such as registration of residence that limits rights to anyone leaving their assigned location, to more positive measures to make rural life more attractive, such as investment in rural services. It just may be that within the bundle of policies, the pendulum is swinging from the former to the latter. Certainly the best-known negative deterrent, China's *hukou* residence permit, is being relaxed considerably to the advantage of migrants.

Conclusions

Three things stand out from this review:

- the significance of long-standing, continuing and ever more important debates about the future of small-scale farms;
- the diversity and fluidity of non-agricultural dimensions of the rural economy; and
- lessons from policy since 2000.

The long-standing and continuing debate about the future of small-scale farms

The role of small-scale family farms in development and the eventual fate of smallholders ('peasants') is one of the longest-standing issues in agricultural development, with debates going back to the late nineteenth century if not earlier (Harriss 1982). The end of the peasantry has been repeatedly predicted, yet in the second decade of the twenty-first century most farms in the developing world still remain family-operated smallholdings.

As a result, old questions about economies of scale, the productivity of small farms and their likely evolution as economies grow while shifting from largely rural and agrarian to urban and industrial, continue to provoke lively debate. In every region of the developing world, the question of whether small farms can be the basis for increased production and productivity is not only a key question, but also a largely unresolved one.

Technically, the argument turns on whether the market failures that small farmers face can be overcome – within the bounds of acceptable public cost. This may be achieved by substituting state for private provision of goods and services, accepting that rural markets will never work well enough for smallholders – or at least, not in the early stages of development. Alternatively, institutional innovations, many of which will also be private, may resolve the problem. The incentives exist: economic opportunity and profit should motivate both smallholders and formal firms in supply chains to find ways to overcome market failures. Yet to date, contract farming, successful farmer associations and the like, have tended to reach only a small fraction of smallholders – and often those who already have more resources than others.

Those who doubt that such failures can be overcome, without disproportionate public cost, believe large farms now have significant advantages over smallholdings. Policy, they argue, should therefore facilitate the formation of larger operating units for production, productivity and efficiency.

Asia should provide some insights into what is possible and desirable, as so much of its land remains in (often very) small holdings. In rural areas that are well connected to cities, it seems that family farms persist, even with the modernization of supply chains now reported for staples, not just high-value produce. But it is likely that these farms are increasingly differentiated, with a minority specializing in farming and intensifying their production, while most provide supplementary income for rural households that obtain most of their incomes from non-farm activities and remittances from migrants.

Such differentiation among smallholders throws up two challenges: flexible access to land, and the creation of working model responses to rural market failures.

First, land markets need the flexibility to allow some concentration of holdings in larger operating units – while allowing those rural households that want to retain ownership, but lack the means or inclination to cultivate, to do so. In the past, debates over land tenure usually contemplated sweeping reforms, with absolute transfers of land rights on a large scale from (very) large landowners either to the state or to tenant farmers and landless farm labourers.[26] Current reality suggests that more graduated policies are needed: at issue are small-scale transfers of land between neighbours (perhaps temporary arrangements), with rentals, sharecropping and loans predominating over outright sale. Finding ways to facilitate such transfers, while protecting the rights of the vulnerable, calls for careful innovations in land policy, developed through consultation with farmers: a challenge given lack of information on current low-key changes in land tenure not captured by most formal surveys and censuses.

Second, the more market failures for small-scale operators can be overcome, the more broad-based agricultural development can become, widening the options for households that have land even when their farms are increasingly becoming part-time enterprises. Institutional innovations to overcome the disadvantages of small-scale operations are not lacking: indeed, the new staple supply chains of China and India depend on them. In Africa, a plethora of such initiatives can be seen, even if most operate on a limited scale. The challenge is to learn from these, to find and develop working models – not just pilots – that can be replicated or adapted to wider circumstances.

The fate of the world's smallholders will not be decided, however, by the feasibility of institutional innovations alone. Governments, of course, can have a major say, so the political imagination matters. This varies by regime, but some regional tendencies can be seen. By and large, Asian governments seem content to see much of their agriculture farmed on a small scale. Smallholders have sometimes been treated favourably, with public policy working to provide access to extension, inputs, credit and insurance. Something similar applies in parts of Latin America, but here there is less confidence that small farms can be a force for growth, so assistance tends to be motivated mainly by welfare concerns. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, support for smallholders is often fragile. Most governments do not readily see the strengths of smallholders; instead they see them as a relic of a past that has little place in the future. As a result, promises that larger-scale farms will inject capital and know-how into agriculture tend to capture the political imagination.

Most donors and international organizations, however, recommend and support smallholder development,[27] as do most parts of civil society, be they international or local NGOs. Some are heavily engaged in piloting innovations to overcome smallholder disadvantages in markets,

26. Increasingly, the dramatic, large-scale land transfers seen between the 1950s and 1980s in Asia, some parts of Latin America, and occasionally in post-colonial Africa, appear unusual, isolated historic events: almost a heroic period of agrarian reform. They seem ever less instructive for contemporary policy debate.
27. Indeed, it is remarkable how most DAC donors have reiterated their faith in smallholder development since 2000. The arguments of those who recommend consideration of medium- and large-scale farming have apparently had little impact on these agencies.

such as the development of value chains for small producers, contracting, farm input dealerships and challenge grants for firms prepared to link to smallholders. Some are also looking for new ways to strengthen land rights through, for example, low-cost certification.

Diversity and fluidity in rural development

Urbanization and investments in transport means that cities are increasingly accessible for many people in rural areas, with greater interaction between the two. Therefore, rural households and their individual members in these increasingly well-connected rural areas have more options than in the past, including migrating or commuting to urban areas, starting non-farm enterprises or being employed by such a business. These changes do not readily show up in conventional statistics, especially when the new options relate to secondary, seasonal and temporary occupations. Panel surveys of households that might allow such change to be tracked through time are still rare, at least for economic characteristics.

At the moment, policy is not yet fully tuned in to these diverse options, and it is not that clear what the ideal policies to facilitate such diversification would be. Take the case of the rural non-farm economy. Understandings that have come to be widely accepted in the past decade emphasize an enabling investment climate in rural areas, with the state investing in rural public goods including roads, electricity, water and schooling; and, where possible, policy stimulating the establishment of rural financial services. Other, more closely tailored and specific public actions to develop the rural non-farm economy are recognized either as grace notes, such as business development services, or as not offering value for money, as in the case of building rural industrial estates.

Migration policy is even less well defined. Although evidence and the practical experience of civil society agencies who work with migrants largely concur on an agenda of facilitating movement while protecting the rights of migrants, most governments still see migration out of rural areas as undesirable – as something to be limited.

Even less is known about how best to support those rural areas that are not well connected to cities. Past attempts have been made to subsidize enterprises in remote areas, but recent thinking – such as the *World Development Report* for 2009 (World Bank 2009b) – sees few prospects for such areas, especially when they have limited natural potential, at least in the early stages of development. High and upper-income countries may have the means to support the economies of remote areas, but such policies may be unaffordable for other developing countries, and seemingly provide poor returns to limited public budgets.

Policy lessons

Three key policy lessons emerge on effective policy for agricultural and rural development since 2000.

The first is the **paradox of the waning of the Washington Consensus** (Kanbur 2009). While it is increasingly clear that the liberalization of markets is not enough to generate as much economic growth or equity as desired, the market ideal is more widely accepted than ever before in the developing world. Governments are increasingly wary of intervention. That may be good news if it restrains the reintroduction of the costly policies that led to high effective taxation ('negative protection') of farmers in Africa in the 1970s. But it fails to answer the question of how to overcome the shortcomings of markets in rural areas, and especially those for rural financial services.

The second is that **basic investments such as delivery of rural services can work well**. Rising rates of enrolment of children in school, with a narrowing of the gender gap between boys and girls, can be widely seen. The provision of basic health services, clean water and sanitation has paid off in lower morbidity and mortality. Where governments have invested in rural people, subsequent surveys have confirmed that important indicators of welfare have improved.[28] However, such policies and investments are not that newsworthy: they may not be politically eye-catching either. They are often quite unrefined, delivering largely standardized services that aim for uniform national coverage, and are not necessarily well coordinated with one another. To describe them as blunt instruments might seem to disparage them, yet in large measure, that is what they are. Nevertheless, they have proved their worth.

Gender equality may be a case in point. It is difficult to make progress directly on the strategic objectives of changing social relations between men and women to establish equity. Practically, however, the blunt instruments can make a difference, as they have with the schooling of girls. Pressing ahead with the UN Women agenda of making sure that rural households have clean running water, a clean toilet, electric lighting and so on may be unsophisticated, but could make a big difference to the workloads of rural women and girls – thereby allowing them more opportunity to earn income, develop skills and participate in decision-making.

The third point concerns the **rising interest in forms of social protection seen in the 2000s**, where some programmes have achieved things that not everyone thought possible. Cash transfers in Latin America, for example, may not address underlying structural problems or the unequal power relations that seem to lock people in poverty, but they have been mightily effective in treating the symptoms. The provision of guaranteed rural work in India has proved so effective at raising rural wages that it provokes protests from rural landowners (Gulati et al. 2013; Narayanamoorthy and Bhattarai 2013).

Policy successes on both the second and the third points may surprise those who argue that policy should either address deep lying determinants of poverty and inequality, or at least be more fine-tuned to circumstances. What lessons should be drawn? Perhaps some aspects of development are better pursued by blunt instruments, as opposed to the more finely-tuned, well-coordinated measures that are the stock-in-trade of consultancy recommendations. Policy does not always have to be either perfect or sophisticated to make a difference.

That, however, would overstate the case. Some questions of development can hardly be addressed by straightforward measures, given that the precise ways to achieve most development goals are simply not known: progress requires problems to be solved, innovations to be tried, learning to take place (Andrews et al. 2012; Booth and Unsworth 2014).[29]

Nevertheless, a common thread that links both sets of thoughts is now appearing in the governance and political economy literatures. The 2000s have seen much interest in the 'developmental state'. Thinking in this area accepts a more qualified appreciation of the virtues of better governance, where the agenda has shifted from 'good' to 'good enough' or 'best-fit' governance (Booth and Unsworth 2014). Rather than insisting on certain absolute norms of governance, the developmental state may be seen as one that takes strategic responsibility for

28. Demographic and health surveys (DHSs) are finally being carried out regularly in many low-income countries, so trends are easier to see.
29. Recent writing about iterative, problem-solving approaches to development revives a 30- to 40-year-old set of thoughts, most notably set out by Chambers (1974), Korten (1980) and the "Management in Development" chapters of the 1983 World Development Report (World Bank, 1983).

the relentless pursuit of overarching goals by whatever means are feasible in the circumstances. For some things, that may indeed mean deploying the blunt instruments. For others, it may involve experimentation with learning. The common thread is determination: the result of a political coalition that invests political capital and funds in getting results.[30]

Coda: environment and climate change are still taking a back seat

Publicly, and particularly in international forums, the good intentions of making agriculture environmentally sustainable and 'climate-smart' are legion. Yet it is hard to see this reflected where it most matters: in concerted national efforts. The environment and climate change usually take a back seat when it comes to the priorities for agricultural and rural development.

The 2000s have seen a dramatic test of where those priorities lie. Compare the energetic reactions, both public and private, with the spike in food prices on world markets in 2007/08, to the rather pedestrian pace with which environmental and climate change initiatives have been pursued. Within months of cereals prices hitting their early 2008 peaks, G8 and G22 summits had agriculture high on their agendas: by 2009 US$22 billion had been committed to tackle the problem. Meanwhile, investors, state enterprises from the Gulf and East Asia, agribusiness and hedge funds in London and New York were scrambling to acquire (grab) land in Africa. Similarly, the targets set by African ministers of agriculture at Maputo in 2003 were straightforward, clear and memorable: they concerned public investment to stimulate agricultural production – climate change and the environment were not mentioned.

It is a moot point as to when a tipping point may be reached – the point at which environment and climate change will get quite the same concerted, urgent action. It may be closer than we realize; but for the moment, environmental sustainability and adapting to, and mitigating, climate change are flags that are saluted on a regular basis, but that have not yet reached the heart of most action plans for agriculture.

30. China provides examples of both approaches. The reforms of the late 1970s can be seen as partial measures by the standards of 'good governance' (Bromley and Yang 2006; Rodrik 2003), but blunt and imperfect as they may have been, they worked. China, however, was not dogmatic: it experimented, learned lessons and subsequently refined policies and programmes (Rodrik 2014).

Annex 1: Papers prepared

ON AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT	
Synthesis paper for Africa	Barbara Adolph, Laura Silici, Jim Sumberg, Steve Wiggins
Rural futures: how much should markets rule?	Henry Bernstein and Carlos Oya
Understanding policy choices and the role of evidence in the political economy	David Booth
Rising food prices, new commodities and urbanisation	Thomas Jayne
Rural economic diversification	Felicity Proctor
Small farmers, agrarian transitions and contested policy responses	Doug Gollin
Financing agriculture and rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa: Progress, challenges and the way forward	Richard Meyer
The rehabilitation of agricultural subsidies	Andrew Dorward and Ephraim Chirwa
Agricultural technology: innovation, governance and promotion	Andy Hall
The social relations of agrarian transitions	Dzodzl Tsikata
Rural resource 'grabs' or necessary inward investment?	Ruth Hall
Data quality and ICT: Knowing about African agriculture	Towela Nyirenda, John Kazembe and Kiringai Kamau
NON-AFRICAN PAPERS AND MEMOS	
The future of small farms in Asia	K. Otsuka, Y. Liu and F. Yamauchi
Notes on rural Asia	John Farrington
Gender and women in agricultural and rural development: A broad synthesis	Christine Okali and Sharada Keats

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