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THE GENDERED IMPACTS OF LIBERALISATION POLICIES ON AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIES AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS

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Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic liberalisation has been taking place in SSA since the early 1980's, when many countries undertook stabilisation and restructuring measures of unprecedented scope as conditions for further loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IFIs). In 2004, individual countries are continuing to liberalise their trade regimes, to encourage private investment, foreign and private, and to maintain fiscal discipline. IFI loans are now more closely tied to the adoption of national poverty strategies - itself a tacit recognition that structural adjustment has not brought ordinary people in African countries out of poverty. The structural adjustment decades have been marked as much by contestation over the policies and their effects as they have been by the policies themselves. By now the minority critical position of the late eighties and early nineties has become more mainstream. There is a widespread recognition that the anticipated growth rates have not occurred and that the sought stimulus to production, to technological change and to a restructured composition of the economy has been muted at best. Nowhere are these debates more important than with respect to the agricultural sector and African's rural populations. In most SSA countries a high proportion of the population lives in rural areas, is dependent on agriculture for its livelihood and is poor. One of the further characteristics of this rural population is that the family - or more properly the household - is a key institution within the rural economy. Divisions of labour based on gender and generation have an impact on the effects of liberalisation. Conversely the gender and generations are affected in different ways by the impact of changes in the macro-economic environment for agricultural production and in the institutions that deliver inputs and distribute outputs. This paper seeks to provide an overview of these gendered impacts.

An initial section looks at the background to economic reforms and describes liberalisation policies, especially with respect to agriculture and assesses their rural impacts. It makes the important point that any discussion of gendered impacts needs also to take on board that rural poverty and food insecurity in general have increased in many areas during the structural adjustment decades. Section 2 explores 'the evidence base' - what data are there which tell us about gendered impacts? I suggest that there is surprisingly little information that disaggregates by gender, at either national or district or community level in case studies. This poor evidence base affects the form of this paper. The substantive discussion begins with a fairly lengthy case study of Tanzania in which I examine what we know about the gendered impacts of liberalisation on rural men and women's livelihoods in Tanzania. Themes from this case study are then placed within a review of what we know about the gendered nature of the rural economy in sub Saharan Africa as a whole. This gives some indication of how widespread the findings from Tanzania might be in the continent as a whole. The paper concludes by summarising the effects of liberalisation and discussing the evidence for changes in rural gender relations occurring as a result.

2 LIBERALISATION, AFRICAN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL POVERTY

By the early 1980's many African countries were in severe economic crisis characterised by worsening budget and balance of payment deficits, stagnant growth and stagnant or declining social indicators. Prices for primary agricultural commodities had been dropping on the world market and this, plus the hike in oil prices, had produced very deteriorating terms of trade for African countries. As interest rates climbed, governments had increasing difficulty in servicing their international debts. These conditions opened the way for the international financial institutions to set extremely stringent conditions for further loans, the centrepiece of which were requirements of economic stabilisation and restructuring. IMF stabilisation measures, including currency devaluation, exchange rates liberalisation and cuts in government spending, aimed to impose strict fiscal and monetary discipline. These were followed by liberalisation measures, which although they did vary from country to country, took a highly standardised form. Typical structural adjustment measures included trade liberalisation, especially through reducing tariffs, investment deregulation, privatisation of public utilities, marketing boards and other state enterprises, reform of the agricultural sector, the labour market and pensions and the liberalisation of domestic markets. Public expenditure reform included the elimination of subsidies in the social sectors and the imposition of user fees. The aim of adjustment restructuring was to limit the role of the government in the economy and to dismantle all forms of restrictions, to promote private sector investment and ensure that markets determined prices. The diagnosis was that Africa's economic crises were a result of heavy state involvement in the economy, which led to marked inefficiency and rates of public expenditure that were high and out of control. Adjustment measures were based on a neo-liberal agenda of the efficiency of the market as a driver of rates of production and a distributor of goods and services and a strong stance against all forms of state activity in the economy.

In truth most post-independence African states were heavily involved in their countries' economies. At that time there was a widespread view that markets and other existing civil institutions in post colonial Africa were not adequate to build a strong economy and achieve growth and poverty alleviation (Eicher 2003). Independence then was accompanied by import substitution policies, restrictive international trade policies and active state involvement in investment through state owned enterprises and state owned corporations. Paramount amongst these were the institutions for marketing major agricultural products - the state marketing boards. These provided subsidised inputs and usually adopted pan territorial pricing, which meant farmers in remote areas received the same prices as those closer to urban markets. These agricultural parastatals initially promoted good growth in agricultural production, but this was not sustained, as they gradually ran into trouble. Many began to incur heavy losses in paying prices well beyond the cost of production and marketing to small farmers, in areas which were marginal for the production of staple crops such as maize and/or which were well off the major infrastructure routes. Inefficiency and patronage also contributed to high parastatal operating costs, which in turn contributed to spiralling national budgets.

Most of the initial economic reform in the food and agricultural sector revolved around liberalising markets by abolishing or reducing the role of parastatals that were involved in procuring, transforming and selling of food and export crops. Market and trade liberalisation in the agricultural sectors were important because of agriculture's role in generating employment and income, in providing wage goods and earning foreign exchange. Throughout the nineties however other forms of trade liberalisation reform continued and became more prominent with the formation of the WTO. Latterly most countries have been engaged in liberalisation measures relevant to international trade, with the removal of tariffs and other restrictions to open up African economies to world markets.

The effects of the early liberalisation and restructuring were hotly debated. As fuel, food and transport costs soared and families cut back on education and use of the health services, the initial response of those pro-structural adjustment was to argue that there would be some transitional costs to some sectors of the population. However World Bank President James Wolfensohn, admitted in April 1996: "Adjustment has been a much slower more difficult and more painful process than the Bank recognised at the outset" (SAPRI 2003: 5). The literature is now increasingly dominated by much more sober assessments of the impact of liberalisation. Authors from various institutional and political perspectives argue that overall growth rates in African economies have been disappointing. Where growth rates have been good, it is often for special reasons. Uganda for example is regarded as a liberalisation success story and has achieved good positive growth rates. However the political turmoil and conflict of the years preceding reform had decimated the economy and these good growth rates are from a base line of economic performance that was very low indeed. The picture with respect to poverty reduction is also mixed, with some countries showing meaningful decreasing poverty rates but by no means all.

In all countries, the effects on poverty have not been uniformly felt by all sections of the population. There have been winners and losers. Amongst those who have been negatively affected, the rural poor, or certain categories of rural household, figure prominently. In many cases too, quantitative assessments of changes in poverty rates in rural areas are contradicted by findings from qualitative studies and clear explanations of these discrepancies are lacking.[1]

Initially, structural adjustment impacted on rural populations in three main ways[2]

- They were negatively effected by the fees and charges imposed within education and health.
- They were particularly affected by the removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs and the closing down of marketing boards, which initially produced loss of income.
- An additional process affecting rural areas was retrenchment in urban public or industrial employment. Many of these retrenched workers returned to the countryside, either within a particular country, or more often within a region. Zambia and Malawi were particularly affected by the return to rural areas of male labour migrants who had been working elsewhere in southern Africa.[3]

Subsequently rural populations have been particularly affected by the continued disappointing performance of agriculture. It is now clear that growth rates in agriculture have been quite flat over the long term, especially when the initial figures are deflated by population growth. Commercial farmers have been in a much better position to take advantage of increased prices of agricultural products and new

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[1] For a discussion of the quality of poverty data in Zambia see OXFAM IDS 1999

[2] Rural areas were also affected by declining overseas aid to agriculture, which was cut back in the 1980's (von Braun et al 1993).

[3] Some of the main movements back to Malawi of labour migrants occurred before Malawi's main liberalisation measures.

markets. In several countries and for particular agricultural commodities, liberalisation eventually produced spurts in smallholder production of particularly export crops, but over time these have not been maintained. The welfare effect on rural households depends on whether private market institutions have developed to deliver inputs and knowledge and to purchase crops. It also depends on whether households had assets of various kinds to respond to new incentives and new markets. Many commentators have pointed out that many rural small holders have not been in a position to respond positively. In a recent discussion of globalisation and the rural poor Killick makes it clear that he thinks this state of affairs is likely to continue. "In the long-term poor smallscale farmers are unlikely to be able to respond to population pressures, growing international competition, agricultural commercialisation and greater technology use" because they lack assets (Killick 2001).

The negative welfare effects on some rural populations became particularly apparent in Southern Africa in 2002, when several countries experienced severe food shortages, or in the case of Malawi and Zimbabwe, famines. This crisis blew up very swiftly and caught governments and donors unawares. Effects were widespread. 'Continuing food crisis has brought great suffering to as many as 14 million inhabitants of the region' (RCSA 2003). The immediate cause of these food crises was region- wide drought and localised flooding in 2001-2202. But all the sources agree that the adverse impact on household food security had been made much worse by an underlying environment in which many households are (already) highly vulnerable (see sources listed below). The depth and severity of this unpredicted food crisis galvanised research, policy and advocacy work to document the scope of the problems and identify the causes.

The food security situation had been identified as in decline in southern Africa as early as 1999, when Agbalu and Hassan found that: while "in the 1970s per capita food and cereal production were high enough to meet the food and income requirements of the average household in the region; today virtually all countries in the region produce and consume less food per capita than they did in the 1970's" (Abalu and Hassan 1999). A 2003 review concludes that "food insecurity …is a pervasive problem in southern Africa, which has been steadily worsening for at least three decades" (RCSA 2003:1, listing Duncan 1998, Mullins 2002, von Braun 2003, Wiggins 2003, World Bank 2003). "It is clear beyond doubt that a large proportion of the population in rural, and to a growing extent in urban, Southern Africa is experiencing great difficulty in securing adequate food in both amount and quality" (RCSA 2003:1)

In a careful review of country vulnerability studies Wiggins concludes that households are vulnerable because of "long term inadequacies of livelihoods" (Wiggins 2003). He attributes this to three main factors:

- Long term development models and strategies have 'disappointed and failed' across 'the main production sectors of the region (e.g. mining industry and agriculture)'

- 'Approaches and programmes aimed at revitalising the small holder-farming sector during the 1990s have not had the hoped for impact nor have growth strategies aimed at strengthening the commercial sectors'.

- 'Economic reform designed to produce higher rates of agricultural growth have …resulted in increased vulnerability and a decrease in the efficacy of livelihood options for the rural poor' (Wiggins 2003)

Food insecure households were found to have livelihood systems that are 'fragmented and fragile and their poor asset base leaves them highly vulnerable to exogenous shocks and adverse trends'.

The 2001-2002 food crises in Southern Africa throw the spotlight on what has been happening to agriculture under liberalisation and on to the livelihoods of poor rural households. They confirmed that for many households there is little to fall back on if macro-economic policies result in shocks to household livelihoods and suggest that we should bear in mind that many men and boy children, as well as women and girls, are suffering.

3 GENDER DIFFERENTIATED EFFECTS: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON DATA SOURCES

Research and analysis on gender relations in rural Africa has, for thirty years, been dominated by accounts of the gender division of labour in farm households and its links with economic development. This body of work was initiated by Boserup's early 1970's study, flowered as feminist gender analysis developed during the 70's and 80's and has been brought into the mainstream literature largely through the work of micro-economists. The gender division of labour in rural African households is centrally implicated in forms and levels of production, responsiveness to market signals, uptake of technology, as well as to food security, the capacity to withstand shocks and individual welfare.

It is particularly surprising therefore that there is such a thin evidence base on which to start these discussions. National agricultural statistics are inadequate in a number of key respects, some of which stem from using either the individual holder, or the holding, as the unit of analysis, which means that the relationships between the farming of household members cannot be assessed. It also remains the case that accurate information about women's own account farming, which is ostensibly collected in national agricultural statistics, is rare, largely because of the techniques and methodologies of data collection. These are insensitive to the widespread way in