

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION - ESCAPE FROM DESPAIR

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Most families in Africa are poorer and hungrier than they were fifty years ago. Those living in poverty will probably rise well above half of the total population by 2020. The number of underweight children is increasing as food becomes scarcer, and life is shorter and harder than ever before.

Africa is a very diverse place. It has many problems to which there is no single solution. The data and the evidence which form the core of this book derive from the particular ecological, historical, and institutional problems of southern Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. The real world situations portrayed provide fundamental lessons in terms of approach and understanding that can be widely applied throughout the continent. The limited geographic focus enables an in-depth analysis of the development process. It permits the interactions between the various actors to be examined and for the lessons of time and experience to be learned.

The book is not a catalogue of “success” stories. It is a story of teamwork and initiative. The key players are seen as ‘termites’, working down in the engine room of development, creating change out of sight of the international conferences and ‘touch and vanish’ development experts – hence ‘the termite strategy’. The termite mounds can be large, impressive and extensive, or they can be broken down, undermined and insignificant. Africa needs to establish a strong working ethos which supports the ‘termites’ and encourages investment, production and creativity in the rural areas. The first section provides some of the examples of the termites at work and the second section provides some insight into the policy environment which would help to achieve this. Throughout the book there are case studies and the “voices” of some of the farmers and traders most involved and affected.

Too much of what passes as development literature for Africa is poorly rooted in reality. The story told here is one of long term commitment to agricultural development. It is told by Africans. All have devoted their careers to creating change in agriculture in Africa. There are so few models in Africa (although they exist widely elsewhere) of successful smallholder development. Since most elite Africans regard subsistence agriculture as the fate they have escaped from, few have a sense of the unlocked potential in smallholder agriculture. Too few educated Africans, escapees from the ghetto of rural impoverishment, are convinced that agricultural change can really be a key to sustainable development.

Outside support for African development is falling - not because the problems are solved, not because funds are being diverted elsewhere, but because of a growing recognition that existing models have failed, and new strategies are slow in coming forward. National development resources, modest from the outset, are increasingly scarce as treasuries struggle to reconcile demands for debt repayment, recurrent costs, and political expectations. There is a growing consensus amongst development agencies in Africa that a “new way” must be found to help Africa. There is little agreement as to what that new way is, or how it should be implemented in an environment of weak national governments, a flawed national policy formulation process, and conflicting priorities – between African governments and their peoples, between donors and African governments, and amongst the donor community itself.

A new way is indeed possible. The talent to drive change in Africa is there. This book draws on the experience of a critical mass of southern Africans with “can do”, initiative, and enthusiasm. They show that, given the opportunity, they can create change - not driven by outsiders but by Africans themselves. All have established track records in their fields and understand the complexities of development in southern Africa. Separately, their work spans institutional reform, improving farm level productivity through practical innovations with a clear and reliable pay off, to starting their own business in the teeth of strong competition and resistance from established organisations. All have faced indifference (at best) from their own bureaucracies - and, at worst, active opposition. None would regard themselves as development “experts”. This book provides them a platform to exhibit their knowledge and experience in becoming a powerful engine for change. The frustrations of current political realities do not detract from the potential of Africans to create change if they have the governance structures which ensure transparency, accountability and the security to invest in rural areas.

Smallholder Agriculture: centre stage for equitable development

In subSaharan Africa, 60-90% of the population is in the rural sector. Growth in agriculture must provide most of the food and most of the jobs if there is to be adequate and equitable growth in incomes, food consumption, health, and education. Even the most highly industrialised country on the continent, South Africa, has seen non-agricultural employment decline steadily and consistently since 1980. 20-30% of the labour force in South Africa is presently out of work despite a rapid improvement in GDP since 1992. The punishment of agriculture through over-valued exchange rates, poor state marketing systems, and inadequate public infrastructure - from rural roads to information services – is being addressed but too slowly and too reluctantly.

Importantly, the role of a productive smallholder agriculture was (and arguably still is) not central to the vision of most African countries. A productive and vigorous smallholder agriculture is central to improving the welfare of the peoples of the continent. In several nations, large-scale agriculture has been the engine for growth and a significant contributor to foreign exchange earnings and urban food supplies. It, most notably in southern Africa, has been remarkably successful in the better ecologies, and where there is adequate market access. In southern Africa, the contrast between a

dynamic and well organised commercial farm sector (in areas of favoured soils and rainfall) and large areas of smallholder farming in evident social and ecological decline is stark.

But large scale agriculture that is too capital intensive cannot be the only way forward. It is important to have both a successful, viable commercial farm sector and a vibrant smallholder sector which is able to generate more employment. The change needed in Africa is fraught with pitfalls in the absence of a vigorous smallholder sector which can quickly adjust and expand in the new circumstances. External agencies, with poor direct contacts with smallholder communities, are unable to understand fully the interplay of policy on the ground. There are strong vested interests to maintain the status quo and these interests continue to dominate the policy process. Recent land reform in Zimbabwe holds very little promise for smallholder development and, for the most part, replaces one elite for another.

The destruction of smallholder agriculture

Over centuries of experience, African farmers evolved a system of shifting low productivity agriculture, combined with livestock, which enabled them to produce food for themselves and their families reliably and with modest labour requirements. This proved a remarkably resilient and adaptable system of agriculture, which served the continent well through to the present century.

African farmers face a very different reality today. Traditional farming systems have proved inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the rapid population growth of the last half century. Low per hectare agricultural productivity, combined with burgeoning rural populations, have resulted in severe pressure on soil, water, forest, and grazing resources - and the consequent deterioration in the quality and availability of these resources. In those countries which still have abundant land, Angola in particular, the model is still appropriate.

In the late 19th century, the slow pattern of change that had characterised the continent in earlier times altered dramatically with the arrival of widespread European occupation and settlement of African lands. This colonial period was traumatic and brief - but it produced significant long term effects which continue to play out today. Not all were negative - many were profound. Three concern us here:

- mainly as a result of the introduction of the modern medicine and hygiene necessary to make the region habitable by its most recent settlers, populations grew at an unprecedented rate throughout the continent¹,

¹ The most rapid growth in Africa's population occurred after 1950, with modern family planning little used before the 1980s. "Until then, the inherited attitudes of an underpopulated continent joined with modern medicine to produce the most sudden and rapid population growth the world is ever likely to see" (J.Iliffe, 1995, *Africans: the history of a continent*, Cambridge Univ. Press)

- new markets, (local, regional, and international), together with improved, long distance transport and communications, opened up a whole new range of possibilities to Africa's farmers, and,
- European settlement meant that the power to shape the economies of the emerging 20th century nations of Africa passed from Africans to outsiders.

As a result of increased access to markets, agricultural production from African smallholders boomed in the early part of this century. Cocoa, coffee, cotton, and groundnuts became major smallholder export crops. Agricultural change and experimentation blossomed. Farmers diversified into new crops, and new varieties were readily accepted and tested.

But at the same time, populations were growing fast. Farmers found it harder to move to new lands. Soon, over large parts of the more densely populated countries of Africa, the traditional long rotations were no longer possible. In the search for new areas to live, farmers found themselves forced into areas clearly marginal for agricultural production. This trend, in several countries, was accelerated by European settlement. The long decline, today associated so strongly with Africa, had begun.

Why southern Africa?

Policy and politics are difficult and interwoven. Most of the countries of southern Africa face significant issues of income and land redistribution. Before independence in several countries of southern Africa, competition between European settlers and African smallholders was intense. Smallholders were excluded from some markets, their access to other markets was restricted, and, in the worst cases, they were prohibited from farming in the most favourable environments. The colonial period (whose demise spanned roughly from the 1960s to the arrival of majority rule in South Africa in 1994) left smallholder agriculture in the region in poor shape. The promise of the smallholder boom of the turn of the century had been snuffed out by, at best, neglect, and at worst, destruction of viable smallholder farming systems. Driven by fast population growth and stagnant or declining productivity, *per capita* output fell steadily just as nations gained their freedom from colonial rule.

Malawi and Zimbabwe illustrate the interplay of the technical and the policy dilemmas well. Malawi was regarded until very recently as one of the success stories of African agricultural development. Today, the consequences of policies which ignored the need for balanced and widespread smallholder development are now becoming painfully evident. Malnutrition is rife and becoming worse. Ecological decline is threatening the very limited productive base of the nation. Infrastructure is neglected and steadily becoming worthless.

Zimbabwe is a country that should have worked much better than it did.. It has a diversified resource base, good infrastructure, and a work force that is educated to levels

the envy of most of the rest of Africa. But economic growth lags behind that of population, the young unemployed litter the streets of the main cities, dissatisfaction with the unkept promises of the politicians pervades much conversation, and there is a growing disenchantment with the status quo. The struggle to find a sensible path for land and income redistribution has resulted in seriously undermining the productive base of the country. It is essential for a new approach to be put in place for the future. There is a real danger that the current political appointees granted the land, will retain their stranglehold on land and capital resources and even further undermine the smallholder sector.

Breaking out

Three main stories emerge:

- the sorry state of the technology on offer to smallholders,
- the gap between policy and reality, and,
- the flight of the most talented from the countryside.

The technology gap

There is a significant technical challenge. The soils of southern Africa are ancient and of poor inherent fertility. Rainfall is highly unreliable. The cold Benguela current running up the west coast of southern Africa shields the region from the reliable moist westerly winds. Rainfall is dependent upon much less predictable cyclonic air movements drawing in rain from the Mozambique Channel, and driven by the seasonal movement of the sun down the continent. The fundamental productivity issues faced by most farmers (who are smallholders) are often those for which agricultural experts have few, if any, realistic answers. Nor can the farmer turn elsewhere for counsel. In a period of unprecedented change, farmers find that their traditional wisdom provides limited guidance.

Some argue that the technological components required for a Green Revolution in Africa are already available, and that the main constraints are institutional and policy related. But this ignores the central dilemma facing policy makers – that an increasing proportion of smallholder farm families in subSaharan Africa is unable to feed itself through the year. In Malawi, the proportion unable to do so in even a normal growing season is around 60% (some 40% of the total population of the country).

Pricing food at a level that makes modern Green Revolution inputs economically attractive by smallholders at their present levels of productivity means that many consumers (of which a significant proportion is rural) cannot afford to purchase them. Thus a growing number of smallholders can neither afford Green Revolution inputs to

improve their cropping nor the food necessary to fill in the gap between their inadequate harvests. The end point is, at best, a steady decline in already unsatisfactory nutrition and living standards, and, at worst, widespread starvation.

The answer is not simply to take the necessary technologies off the shelf through the introduction of the appropriate policies. There simply is no policy which renders key Green Revolution technologies reliably viable in many countries in subSaharan Africa, under present levels of agricultural productivity. Furthermore, access to the limited range of suitable technologies is problematic to all but a minority of smallholders. Southern Africa today is struggling with this fundamental barrier to development.

Development fashions and illusions

In the early years of post independence Africa, countries with a Marxist bent favoured building an industrial base on the back of primary commodity production. State farms and producer collectives were assumed to generate economies of scale and provide the nucleus around which services such as schools and clinics could be built. Those who sought advice from Western nations used plantation agriculture to generate the foreign exchange necessary for infrastructural development. Tanzania, with its disastrous Ujama'a programme illustrates the first; neighbouring Malawi, with its pervasive malnutrition, high infant mortality, and widespread poverty, illustrates the second.

The state, in either orientation, was seen as the guiding force for development. Farmers were to be led to improved living standards through the actions of a highly interventionist government. Ambitious and far reaching plans were developed on the basis of cheerful assumptions rarely grounded in hard fact. But African governments were poor and few of these efforts would have moved much beyond the drawing board in the absence of substantial external investment. This investment came, not as capital from hard headed financiers, but from public sector development agencies in the developed world. Local analytic capacity was (and remains) scarce and usually overwhelmed by the power of external development agencies. The intellectual bias against smallholder agriculture emanating from the industrial countries severely damaged Africa's agriculture and its capacity to feed itself in the years following independence. In southern Africa particularly, a widespread failure to comprehend the importance of a viable and vigorous smallholder agriculture to Africa, and the discouragement of its evolution, is one of the darkest legacies of the colonial period.

It is true that the choices available to create change in the marginalised smallholder sectors of southern Africa at independence were difficult, and the results uncertain and distant. It is also true that much has been invested in smallholder development in the region. But it is evident that too few of these investments have produced the sought for change in agricultural productivity. A large part of the reason is that new development fads and ideologies continue to drive the policy process. Too few development initiatives have a consistent and long term perspective. Projects are driven remote from the field. Conflicting conditions on the use of funds cuts the flow of resources at critical periods. Big, remote government in the developed world works with big, remote government in

Africa, and the voice of the farmer and the experienced field worker gets lost in the discussion.

At the same time, the real options available for development narrow further. Recent ideologies favouring market led solutions cannot fulfil their promise unless the potential for market development is nurtured at all levels in the economy. There is a continuing failure to comprehend the effects of market liberalisation over a range of income and geographic strata. There are few effective strategies to provide for a more level playing field for business development at the village or community level. The result is a fundamental misinterpretation of the effects of change as played out on the ground. Frighteningly, there is little evidence of humility at the policy level despite the results.

The flight from the countryside

Technical and policy changes are important but they are not sufficient in themselves. The challenge of changing Africa is dependent on creating opportunities in smallholder agriculture. New institutions designed to serve the real needs of smallholders are urgently required. Smallholder agriculture is not necessarily (and should not be) the ecological, social, and economic backwater that it appears to be in much of Africa. Smallholder development will not take place in an environment in which the most talented individuals forsake the villages for opportunities (real or perceived) in the towns or in other countries. Individual Africans retain strong links to their home villages. Most continue to support their families back home with remittances of cash or gifts - but these serve mainly to delay the continuing impoverishment of the countryside. While many young professional Africans are deeply concerned at the evident decline of their home areas, the problem of addressing the deep rooted problems are beyond the capacity of any one individual.

African countries reached independence often with a tiny minority of experienced and qualified professionals. The immediate solution was to expand learning opportunities for Africans on as large a scale as possible – which inevitably meant taking Africans to where such training was already well established. This had an important disadvantage. The African development specialists who gained advanced training in the developed world too often failed to gain experience of their own village level problems. Consequently, on their return home, they lacked the confidence and the breadth of knowledge needed to create the institutional environment through which appropriate policies and technologies could develop. Importantly, the interventionist stance of both African governments and their financial supporters created an environment in which private entrepreneurship struggled to develop. Smallholder farming areas were perceived as sources of labour for large scale farms, or of taxes to finance urban industrial development. Projects and programmes for rural development were often viewed by the implementers as a means to obtain economic and political rents.

The focus on structural adjustment and economic liberalisation that is the predominant wisdom today has provided a more encouraging atmosphere for business development. But too frequently the playing field is still uphill from the perspective of the emergent businessman. In Zimbabwe, removing the monopoly of the state Grain Marketing Board

has enabled some 70% of the national maize milling market to pass into the hands of small hammer mill operators. But the legislation under which these operators run their businesses leaves a substantial number of them unprotected by the law. Health and safety regulations designed for industrial millers apply equally to village grinders. Although the legislation is, in fact, currently ignored in practice for small millers, these operators are constantly at risk from a change in interpretation by the authorities. Small traders are discouraged by licensing regulations or capital requirements dating from, or influenced by, a period in which state or private monopolies were dominant in agricultural marketing. Consequently liberalisation does not produce the expected flush of competitive businesses from which the farmer can select the most appropriate service provider.

In conclusion

Africa requires well-trained, creative nationals to contribute actively to the work of the many international, regional, and national agricultural support and development organisations on the continent. It also needs enthusiastic young entrepreneurs to create the marketing and trading enterprises that will widen the choices open to smallholders, both as producers and as consumers. There is a growing consensus amongst development agencies in Africa that Africans themselves need to play a greater role in defining and implementing development policies. Achieving such “ownership” of the African problem needs more than simply bringing Africans more directly into the policy process, it means drawing on a greater range of African skills and knowledge than has conventionally been used. Innovative ways are needed to widen participation in the development process in Africa. It means finding ways to work directly with those most affected and providing the opportunities for them to hold their national governments and implementing agencies accountable.

Africa has many talented and committed individuals. Their despair at the collapse of their continent is palpable. But Africa is a continent of vast distances, poor communications, and weak institutions. The power and the reach of the present elite is such that it is difficult, and too often impossible, for concerned Africans to play their role in creating and directing policy change. The best often leave Africa or take up jobs in multilateral agencies. For Africans to truly take ownership of their continent’s problems, they need help in creating the networks and building the institutions through which change can be promoted and nurtured.

Human capital development, institutional strengthening, and capacity development all have formed important components in donor support to Africa. But what has not been achieved is the development of a critical mass of individuals who, jointly and separately, have the potential:

- to communicate effectively across institutional and disciplinary divides,

- to generate visions of viable and challenging options for addressing priority problems, and,
- to nurture ambitious ideas in a tough environment through the long and difficult process of implementation.

A process is needed to recruit and expand the reach of those with the vision to make more visionaries, to avert the attrition of team members, and to create a climate of stability in which experience can flourish and be rewarded. A start has been made in addressing this challenge – this book is a contribution towards strengthening this trend through letting those involved speak for themselves.

Their voices are the core of this book and are included directly and through case studies.. A sample of the material covered includes the Zimbabwe soyabean taskforce which brings together professionals from the university, the extension service, farmers unions, seed suppliers, and marketing agencies to encourage and promote the incorporation of nitrogen fixing and nutritious soya in maize based cropping systems. A collaboration between CIMMYT (International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre), the national research and extension services, and the university is helping farmers use the best available technology to rehabilitate lands abandoned as a result of fertility decline. The Malawi Maize Productivity Task Force has provided a “fast track” for technology transfer to smallholders and a powerful link between national policy and technical options. There has been the emergence of small-scale processing and trading in Zimbabwe with many individuals investing in small-scale oil-presses, hammer mills and agricultural machinery. Some of these new players have evolved into large companies as can be seen in the ATA (Appropriate Technology Africa) and Reapers examples in section two. These and other team efforts aimed at creating change at the policy level are also providing a challenging and exciting work environment for young Africans to become engaged effectively in addressing the problems of smallholder agriculture. In Malawi and in Zimbabwe, young graduate students are learning to work with villagers to come up with practical solutions to intractable production problems. Their field experience is giving them the confidence to operate in the difficult world of smallholder agriculture. They are gaining invaluable opportunities to learn how policy plays out in practice at the farm level. And they are becoming the new generation of young professionals who will provide real guidance to development in Africa. More support needs to be given to efforts which promote close work between students and villagers, between agriculture and business and between policy-makers and researchers.

Smallholder farmers can achieve much if they are given the chance.

[Insert Voice: Lesotho voices here](#)