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Draft document: comments are welcome

Nordic Africa Institute research cluster: Rural and Agrarian Change, Property and Resources¹

1. Overview: Conceptualising the Research Framework

Agriculture and rural life remain the backbone of African societies, despite increasing urbanisation. The majority of the continent's population still live in, or are closely connected to, rural areas and rely on agricultural production, often in combination with the production and management of other natural resources, both for domestic food consumption and as a source of income. Furthermore, agricultural production forms the basis of the export economies for most African countries. In terms of area, agricultural land dwarfs that which is taken up by urban and peri-urban settlements. Agriculture and rural areas are not only linked to physical production, but also constitute vital aspects of people's lives and livelihoods in terms of culture, identity, and senses of belonging. In that regard, 'the rural' is an important and complex space of social, economic, cultural and political relations, production and inter-linkages.

In most African countries, there are wide discrepancies between urban and rural poverty. These result in increasing migration from rural to urban areas, even though people remain dependent on their relationships and connections to rural and natural resources environments and assets in multiple ways. Access to land and other natural resources, the nature of tenure regimes, the absence or availability and character of infrastructure, financial and social services, the framework of multiple and different rural institutions, and the dynamics of power relations, are critical dimensions of rural lives and livelihoods.

People who experience poverty in rural settings should not be seen as objects and passive victims of situations beyond their control, but as subjects and actors who struggle and strategize to put their limited resources to use in ways that they judge will minimize risks and maximize the outcome of their choices and efforts for improved livelihoods, or at least for not falling deeper into poverty. From a local perspective, the nature of poverty is invariably multidimensional, situation-specific and dynamic. Furthermore, poverty and chances to escaping poverty are strongly influenced by factors such as sex, age, ethnic or other cultural origin as well as where and how people earn a living. Economic diversification is a key characteristic of poor people's efforts to secure their livelihoods in rural areas. The strategies and outcomes are bound to differ depending on the

¹ The NAI Rural and Agrarian research cluster is one of four research clusters being developed, the others being the Urban-, Conflict- and Global research clusters. This cluster document, when finalized in early 2011, is expected to guide NAI research related to rural and agrarian studies for the next half decade or so. Comments and ideas for its improvement are welcome.

combination of resources at hand, the specific features of and interactions between internal and external process of change and the options and capabilities available for the individual, family, household and community striving to maintain or improve their livelihoods.

In most parts of the continent, agriculture and rural livelihoods are dominated by small-holder production regimes which are characterised by (i) a focus on subsistence production, (ii) a significant role played by women, (iii) low levels of productivity and high levels of poverty, (iv) deepening environmental and natural resource degradation and (v) a high degree of uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability including lack of legal empowerment. Agriculture – and rural life more generally – is both informed by these aspects and generates different forms of exclusion and inequality that include gendered divisions of labour and resource control, as well as unjust resource regimes.

The range of rural and agrarian settings and the patterns of property, production and power are highly diverse across the continent and even within individual countries. In addition, rural forms of production and livelihood systems are gradually changing in response to a combination of national policy environments (e.g. economic liberalisation) and local processes of change on the one hand, and features of globalisation on the other. These changes tend to go in the direction of non-agricultural diversification, linkages with vertical production and trading systems, as well as different forms of mobility that connect with urban dynamics and domains beyond national borders.

The situation is furthermore compounded by various state-, multinational- and private enterprise projects that accelerate large-scale displacements that alter the conditions of livelihood security and production in different rural environments. People's limited exit options from rural contexts contribute to an intensification of informal urban settlements and livelihoods that often characterise complex urban-rural linkages.

Agrarian processes of change and the deepening of rural-urban linkages are also affected by new trends in rural markets and mobility of people, and by the openings and closures of international trade regimes. On a national scale, African states are increasingly made to subscribe to conditions of trade, exchange and labour demands that provide benefits for external stakeholders, but that are not matched by what is accruing to support broader processes of rural and national poverty reduction and development. Support for domestic agricultural markets needs to consider how these markets function in relation to weakening social embeddedness and intensified formalisation processes.

Indigenous institutions play an important role for the dynamics unfolding in rural areas. Such institutions are flexible in character and have developed over time to guide division of labour, provide access to and ensure sustainable management of natural resources and promote social cohesion, as well as define ways to manage land and other resources. Redistribution, reciprocity, and non-monetary forms of exchange are central for safeguarding survival and providing security, but also for reinforcing specific forms of exclusion. At the same time, promotion of new institutions and pressures towards commercialisation, formalisation, and modernisation raise multiple challenges for local communities and often contradicts or competes with indigenous institutions and norms. Rural people therefore often attempt to secure their livelihoods and survival in the interface between indigenous and modern or formalised institutions. This interface is characterised by ambiguity, negotiations and struggles that are manifested in vulnerability and insecurity, but also in opportunities. The outcomes are, however, uncertain, thus requiring empirical investigations. Land and water are among the central features of this

interface. The understanding of their multiple roles, production and symbolism, and the complexity under which these and other natural resources are accessed, is central for insights into rural societal dynamics, potentials for poverty reduction and productivity enhancements.

2. Research Themes/Domains

The African agrarian question(s)

Rural livelihoods and production in Sub-Saharan Africa are currently facing major structural changes. Food- and energy security have emerged as top political priority worldwide due to rising food and oil prices. The demand for African land for food and energy production by Asian and Western countries has risen rapidly over the last few years. This development undermines land tenure- and food security of rural people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Rising food prices cause increased poverty and malnutrition, but also lead to protests and demonstrations that threaten the political stability of weak African states. New global governance regimes for food and agrofuel production are emerging that have important implications for African governments and rural people.

Rising food and agrofuel prices, however, also represent opportunities for African agriculture. However, the opportunities associated with such structural changes tend to be capitalised on by large-scale producers and their value chains. Why have smallholder producers not been able to enhance their productivity and reduce their poverty, in response to these structural changes? Why have the strategies of national governments and international financial institutions and donors failed to alleviate the situation of African smallholders and African agriculture? Why do global food and energy value chains tend to weaken the lower end, African governments and rural people? There is a need to deepen our understanding of the current context and the role and challenges facing African agriculture and smallholders. But in a context of rapidly shifting global structural changes, what theoretical perspectives can assist in attaining such an understanding? What are the critical Agrarian question(s) in the current African context and to what extent do they depend on or relate to the global, national or local contexts and how are these contexts interrelated? Are international trade, agricultural protection and global vertical value chains major constraints for African agricultural development or are primary obstacles located at national and local levels? Is the character of the African states and the emerging governance regimes blocking African agricultural development? Or do African rural institutions and cultures, and indigenous production regimes in themselves constitute constraints for African agricultural and smallholder development? What rural institutions can promote broad based agricultural and rural development and hence help to reduce poverty? And what knowledge and resources are required for external interventions to support such broad based development?

Resource competition and power – implications for African smallholders

Changing physical, social, economic and political conditions that are linked to global, regional, national, and local dynamics affect competition for land, water, energy, and other natural resources.

At local levels, subsistence and survival processes are undermined by a number of potential and real resource conflicts. These resource and property contestations variously

involve competition and conflicts between local and statutory logics, between pastoralists and agriculturalists, between food and energy, between natural reserves and surrounding populations, between healthy and sick, between generations, between women and men and between rural, national, and international interests. The spread and deepening of HIV/AIDS across a range of agricultural, ecological and social systems undermines local forms of organisation, authority and experienced-based knowledge, it challenges the labour available for agriculture, as well as increases the costs and time required for care within rural households. The combined effects represent severe challenges for the rural conditions of production, as well as for social, cultural and political stability. Deterioration of health and the need for care disproportionately affect rural women. What role do power structures play in generating rural resource competition and conflicts? What are the typologies, sources and vehicles of power affecting rural production and relations, internally and beyond? Under what conditions can African smallholders and rural communities secure command of their own situation?

Land, life and ownership

At the heart of many dynamics and processes of agrarian change are questions of land. The agrarian question(s) has tended to overshadow the arrangements, relations, and meanings that pertain to land in different parts of the continent. A focus on the presence or absence of surplus value, and the inputs and services that are required to ensure and increase such a surplus, tends to eclipse both local tenure arrangements and the wider significance land constitutes for rural people. Research is therefore needed into the manner in which ownership of land is organised and subject to change in the absence of formal property rights. Such research is particularly important in light of the various formalisation programmes that are currently taking place in many African countries. The impact these programmes may have on existing arrangements (including arrangements based on gender) in specific rural contexts is one important issue. Furthermore, the significance of land beyond being an economic resource must also be researched. The manner in which material property relations are embedded in, and part of, wider social relations is another important issue.

Instead of operating with a singular 'Land Question' or 'Agrarian Question', our approach is thus to emphasise and consider a more diverse and de-centred plurality of issues that affect land and agrarian relations. This does not undermine the need for redressing historically entrenched tenure and production systems, and inequalities in land distribution and use. The reversal of such inequalities constitutes a political and moral project of urgent and extensive proportions across the continent. However, the concern here is to promote an inclusive understanding of the salient particularities of land, and its politics, at given times, places and scales. It remains critical in this regard to explore the differential experiences of land in diverse settings (e.g. in arid, semi-arid, highland, riverbasin and coastal settings), and to investigate the diversity of struggles occurring over, on and through land and related resources. At the very least, this will help to inform more adequately what gets prioritised in national land debates, how policies are conceived, how rights are defined, and how resources are distributed and secured.

Regimes of authority, exclusion and belonging

Knowledge and understanding of complex and uneven resource and property regimes have led to different responses to prevent and alleviate conflict. These include community-based initiatives such as co-management of forests, game, water and marine reserves, and national parks. However, the options for resolving resource competition in sustainable ways are linked to the existence of, and possible competition between, multiple authorities. These might include formal state-based institutions and more or less indigenous forms of local leadership, but also development agencies and a range of informal and non-state forms of authority (such as charismatic religious or political leaders, indigenous guardians of natural resources, militias, and so on). It is also important to remain open to the manners in which these may further distort resource access and deepening competition. These different authorities and the dynamics of competition or collaboration between them, may be limited within specific rural settings, but may also cut across rural and urban settings, as well as across local and global scales. The opportunities for differentiated rural people (based on e.g. gender, ethnicity and religion) and agricultural producers to voice their interests and needs within competing spaces, and their various resource claiming practices, constitute an important sphere of investigation.

African rural and agricultural settings are characterised by complex processes of social differentiation, changing conditions of material access and transformations of social relations both within rural arenas and across rural-urban and national-global interfaces. These processes generate multiple forms of exclusion, as well as new modes of belonging. The corresponding struggles over identity and relationships, combined with the subversion and modifications of rural institutions, and the emergence of new property systems and markets, all affect social and cultural meanings and dynamics. In such contexts, one crucial question is what kinds of conditions and paths of development exist, and how do these combine rural material and economic surplus generation and redistribution with meaningful processes of social and cultural change. What role do different social forces and multiple authorities play in defining and intervening in the direction of agrarian change?

The diversity of livelihood strategies and management of natural resource regimes

The diversity of natural resources, impact of globalization and the high prevalence of, multiple reasons for and complex manifestations of poverty, make smallholder production and livelihoods in the coastal zone an important area of research that has so far attracted limited attention by social scientists. Rural coastal dwellers typically combine elements of terrestrial and aquatic resources, e.g. agriculture, fishing and collecting in shallow waters, trees, livestock and increasingly also induced aqua farming (e.g. fish, shrimp and seaweed). The production is characterized by low levels of technology and productivity, dependency on informal economic and social arrangements, recurrent exposure to vulnerability and uncertainty and difficulty to predict the outcome of labour and other investments. The high influx of people, increased competition for resources and exposure to the effects of climate change and other globalization processes are some factors beyond the high incidences of poverty in coastal areas.

A research focus on the coastal zone thus brings in a number of features that are central for our understanding of rural life and livelihoods, e.g. the importance of experience-based knowledge and practice with regard to specific natural resources and processes, social relations of production (such as tenure regimes involving land, trees, intertidal

waters and estuaries and a gender-based division of labour and control of resources), social capital and social cohesion, power relations and inequality, and the impact of globalization on e.g. fish stocks and agriculture (climate), investments and tourism (economic recession), trade and migration.

Some of the critical research questions with regard to livelihoods among smallholder producers in coastal areas are: What characterizes coastal and marine production regimes, including social and institutional arrangements for access to, and use and management of terrestrial as well as marine resources? What are the manifestations of multidimensional poverty, from the perspectives of women and men who experience poverty, in situations of external as well as internal processes of social, economic and environmental change? What coping strategies are applied by women and men, by the young and elderly, etc., and to what effects? What factors are instrumental for poor people's movement out of poverty or for falling into poverty? To what extent are current economic activities informed and guided by experienced-based knowledge of natural resources and processes and what are the consequences of multiple, perhaps contradictory, resource management directives and tenure regimes? How are conflicts over scarce resources addressed and managed, considering the coexistence of formal and informal arrangements and institutions?

Fresh water resources

Water is the basis for all agricultural practices. In many regions water is a scarce resource for the majority of the people concerned, and the importance of which type of water and for what purposes it is used for depends upon a wide range of industrial, economic, energy, cultural and religious practices. The absence and presence of different types of water sources structure all societies whether it is rain, river or lakes or a combination of different water bodies at a certain place, which is used and needed. Too much water at the wrong time of the year such as unpredictable and devastating floods is as bad as too little water when it is really needed, which results in droughts. The life-giving water is in a special category because it highlights human's essential and vital need for a specific type of water at a particular time for agriculture and successful harvests. This is the right amount of water arriving for instance during the annual flood or the rain season.

The water world changes according to seasonal rhythms, human modifications such as dam building and irrigation schemes, and consequences of globalisation and climate change. Climate change as experienced by people is to a large extent changes in water systems resulting in more droughts or more floods and unpredictable weather, directly impacting on agrarian practices. Agricultural societies have, on the one hand, adapted to and been restricted by the types of water which occur at a given time, but on the other hand, changing water worlds have also given new possibilities for developing societies and social structures. Thus, understanding the water world and how different types of bodies of water create possibilities and limitations for livelihood and agriculture is fundamental for understanding current agricultural practices and future development uniting economy, culture and religion.

Some of the crucial questions are therefore: How do different water environments put limitations to but also create possibilities for agrarian societies to develop? How do local societies adapt to climate changes with more devastating floods or prolonged droughts? With increasing demographic growth, will access to water resources be a source to conflict or cooperation in the future? How does external water resource management

such as dam building and irrigation schemes influence local traditions, agrarian practices and belief systems? What roles do traditional culture and religion play in implementing or limiting agrarian changes in the face of modernity and globalisation?

Fields of intervention

The complexities of agricultural and rural smallholder production and livelihoods systems represent profound challenges for interventions and support that aim at enhancing agricultural productivity, improved natural resource management and broad based development. Over the last three decades, strategies of nation states, international financial institutions and donors have failed to unlock the potential of Sub-Saharan agricultural and rural production and resources, and/or have worsened conditions and deepened exclusions, marginalisation and poverty. The conceptualisation of the fields of intervention has changed over time (redistribution with growth, 'getting the prices right', creating an 'enabling environment', debt reduction, participation and empowerment, trade vs aid, etc.), however, without being able to connect with agricultural and rural production and societal systems that could generate continuous and sustained processes of change. Why are strategies and policies in the fields of intervention to reduce rural poverty and enhance agricultural productivity failing? Are they constrained by lack of knowledge or undue emphasis on certain interests or factions related to the fields of intervention, or are the capacities to conceptualise and the methods at hand, unable to correspond to the complexities being faced (such as the coexistence of informal and formal structures and arrangements)? How can the fields of interventions and their effects be productively analysed and conceptualised?

Reflections on the representations of "Africa" and the "African" - the role, responsibilities and place of researchers

One major reason for the poor understanding of African rural and agricultural development may relate to the tendency of external researchers and interests, such as international financial institutions and donors, to conceptualise Africa and Africans in stereotypes. According to some philosophers, such stereotypes may constitute the first step in the chain towards violence. Addressing such stereotypes, understanding their sources and outcomes may thus help improve our understanding of Africa and the African as well as ourselves. By doing so a better foundation may also be laid for external interventions to attain their objectives.

What is the responsibility of researchers and others who document and support Africa when they attempt to represent Africa and the Africans? Can reflection about the role, place and responsibilities of researchers help avoid stereotypes and make us move beyond 'business as usual'? Is 'listening to' or 'giving voice' to Africa and Africans a first step towards improving the conceptualization of African issues and images so that they better reflect the complexity on the ground, e.g. of rural Africa, rural poverty and the different and complementary roles of women and men? But who represents Africa and Africans? Researchers whose perspectives reflect the ideas of the colonizers or by contemporary western policy discourse on development? Or the smallholders (women and men, young and elderly) who have been subjected to exploitation by governments and global value chains? How can arenas be established where different perspectives on rural life and conditions can be presented and discussed so that stereotypes can be avoided? And does genuine discussions require the possibility of 'the other', the African

woman and man, to question the development paths and choices of the Nordic and industrialized countries?

3. Rural cluster researchers , associate researchers, networks and institutional cooperation

NAI cluster researchers

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Tea Virtanen, NAI Finnish researcher, from early 2010

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Cooperation with Networks and Institutions

Norwegian Africa research network, NTNU, Trondheim

Swedish interdisciplinary research network on livelihoods and natural resource governance in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sida/SAREC funded 2009-2011)

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