

# Agrarian Transformation(s) in Africa: What's in it for Women in Rural Africa?

RUTH NYAMBURA

*ABSTRACT Africa is undergoing agrarian transformation(s) characterized primarily by policy formulations at both regional and national levels that are primarily pushing for large-scale commercial agriculture, fragmented and excessive individual property rights and Foreign Direct Investments from multi-national agri-business companies. While rural African women in particular are posited as the main beneficiaries of these policies, the picture emerging is that of the privatization of the commons, privileging international, and to some extent local, private commercial agri-business interests over those of smallholder farmers, mostly women, and promoting the rapid destruction of ecosystems and the increase in conflicts and displacements affecting the rural poor.*

*KEYWORDS* *ecofeminism; gender equality; women's empowerment; land grabs; seeds; smallholders*

## Introduction

The past decade has seen a substantial increase in the interest around 'agrarian transformation(s)' in Africa, with the focus lying on two main issues: how to feed the growing population in a time of rapid urbanization and climate change as well as the supposed urgent need to transform the agricultural systems from primarily subsistence production models into market-oriented production systems.

Africa's population is still primarily rural with a majority, around 70 percent of its poor people, still living in rural and peri-urban areas across the continent and depending on agriculture for their food and livelihoods.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, the continent's main food producers are small-scale subsistence farmers who also make up the largest socio-economic group and operate on less than 2 Hectares<sup>2</sup> of land on average, employing mostly agro-ecological methods to produce their food.

The majority of African farmers are women, making up about 50 percent of the combined continental agricultural workforce.<sup>3</sup> While the figures may vary from region to region, with sub-Saharan Africa figures standing at 55 percent, there is no denying that the face of food production in the continent is distinctly female, a phenomenon referred to as the 'feminization of agriculture'.

A key characteristic of the 'agrarian renaissance' in Africa over the past decade has been the formulation of policy frameworks encompassing different aspects of the agrarian debate within the continent with an obvious bias toward food production. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP)<sup>4</sup> is perhaps the most important agreed-upon development trajectory for agriculture in the continent.

The African Union's (AU) Maputo Declaration, better known as CAADP, was officially adopted by Member States in 2003 and stated that, within five years, each country would allocate at least 10 percent of their annual budgets to agriculture by 2015. A decade later, only 7 out of the 49 sub-Saharan African countries have met this target with the continental average standing at 5 percent. CAADP comprises four key pillars, namely extending the area under sustainable land and reliable water control systems, improving rural infrastructure and trade-related capacities for market access, increasing food supply and reducing hunger and finally agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption.

Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program is central to any analysis of Africa's modern agrarian transformation and absolutely critical to other policy and investment frameworks that have been pushed throughout the continent in the last decade. In continent where 223 Million people<sup>5</sup>—about a quarter of the population, mostly women and children, constantly face hunger, it is critical to determine whether these policy and investment frameworks deliver on the much needed agrarian transformation in the continent and promote food sovereignty and land tenure security to Africans and African women in particular, in a socially inclusive manner.

Africa's agrarian transformation is currently myopically centred on increasing yields at all costs and feeding people, and whatever attention is paid to land tenure systems is tied to a 'willing buyer, willing seller' approach. Conversely, very little attention is being paid to the political and economic conditions that determine access to and control not just of resources but most importantly, production models.

It is evident that small-scale producers are now firmly back in the limelight, but is it enough for agrarian policies to merely focus on the role of these producers and to direct interventions that are disconnected from the greater concerns around land, technology, labour, markets, climate change, feminization of agriculture and power relations (national, regional and international)? Whose transformation is it anyway if it replicates the same systems of oppression that keep Africans not only hungry but also poor?

### **The economic project**

Africa has witnessed high economic growth rates in the past decade but this growth has been situated mostly in the urban areas with changes in the retail, housing sector, financial services and the ICT arena. This growth has been capital intensive and distinctly different from the employment-intensive agricultural sector. There has been very little change in Africa's rural areas and, to a large extent, the growth witnessed in the urban areas has been heavily subsidized by the goods and services provided in the rural areas – another case of externalization of costs and privatization of profits.

The Africa Panel Progress report of 2012<sup>6</sup> brought to the fore the shocking reality that Africa still has the highest urban–rural inequality rates in the world:

- In Nigeria, the poorest 20 percent of people receive only 4 percent of national income, while the wealthiest 20 percent receive 53 percent;
- In Zambia, the 1.2 percent share in income of the poorest 10 percent has actually halved in the commodity boom years since 2000;
- Further to this, the majority of Africa's poorest, women forming the bulk of this group, live in rural areas, with two out of every three people depending on agriculture for their livelihood and incomes.

In a sea of data regarding the precarious nature of rural living and agriculture, there are still very limited disaggregated data: rural women 307

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are still homogenized in agricultural development policies and rarely there are specific budget lines in agriculture-related budgets targeting women. With little to no gender analysis in empirical and analytical work on agrarian transformation in rural Africa, greater analysis on gender inequalities, class-based relations, patriarchal relations at the household and community levels, and finally the inherent contradictions of women's important reproductive and productive roles, it is a little wonder then that an agrarian transformation that benefits only an elite is being aggressively promoted.

This leads us squarely to a deeper analysis of the development project of the agrarian transformation that Africa is currently witnessing and the implications on the lives of rural women and more so those engaged in agricultural activities and who are still excluded from the substantive decisions that affect their lives, from the personal to the political.

### Where are the women?

There is much to be said about the displacement of rural African women from productive activity by the expansion of a type of agrarian development rooted largely in projects that destroy the natural resources through which these women's ability to sustain life and livelihoods is based on. Vandana Shiva posits that,

'women in sustenance economies, producing and reproducing wealth with nature, have been experts in their own right of a holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to social benefits and sustenance needs, are not recognized by the reductionist (development) paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnect-edness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth' (Shiva, 1990).

If there is one thing that the current agricultural models being promoted within Africa have done is what Political Ecologist Douwe van der Ploeg refers to as, 'to rescue women from peasantiza-tion'. This has been done through biological

essentialism which, 'places women centrally in the realm of reproduction and the care economy while the sphere of production and income generating activities remain dominated by men' (van der Ploeg, 2009).

### Access to and control over resources

Land rights for women in Africa go beyond property rights and touch on often sensitive issues around different tenure systems (statutory, customary and religious), land-based wealth, power and social relations that give or take away their right to access and control resources. They also relate to the different ways in which diverse groups of women are affected by their incorporation into various corporate forms of agriculture. This is one of the most important sites of struggle in addressing inequalities and asymmetries of power in gender relations in the agrarian sphere.

Research shows that if women had the same access to productive resources as men do, then there would be a direct increase in yields in the range of 25–30 percent,<sup>7</sup> which would raise agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent as well as drastically reduce the number of hungry people in the World by up to 17 percent.

Land is one of the most important productive resources and it can be argued convincingly that it is impossible to achieve food sovereignty without comprehensive land redistribution. Africa does not fare well in this regard. While policies like CAADP and investment frameworks such the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition<sup>8</sup> attempt to explore the complex land dimension of food sovereignty, there is an overt promotion of re-concentration of land-based wealth and power from the state, community or small-family farm holders to landed classes and corporate entities, rather than a promotion of land redistribution from elite landed classes and the state to the landless and working poor.

Africa has been in the throes of one of the greatest 'land grabs' in history with many parallels being made between the 'scramble for

Africa' that ushered the continent into the age of colonization and this new wave of land acquisition being sponsored by foreign direct investments by multi-national agri-business companies based in the West, Middle-East, with the active contribution of a small local elite.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that land the size of Western Europe has been given/sold to investors across Africa in the last decade alone.

The global food crisis of 2006–2008 is largely attributed to the conversion of productive farmland in the South to grow industrial fuel crops in addition to the climate crisis, the aggressive promotion of an export-oriented agricultural system that is heavily reliant on chemicals, and the rise of commodities markets linked to agriculture, which priced millions of poor people out of the food market. In Africa, countries like Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Senegal and Mozambique experienced violent protests owing to the uncontrolled rise in the price of staple foods.

Billions of dollars in investments are going into farmland acquisitions throughout Africa in a move that was initially defined as a way to promote food security within the continent. Armed with development policies such as CAADP which speak to the condition of land in Africa, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and development agencies like USAID have been pushing for land programmes in Africa which aim to create commercial land markets<sup>10</sup> based on private property titles with hardly any safeguards available to protect the most vulnerable. The narrative goes, land titles—for women especially—always directly translates to security of tenure, which is a complete fallacy and a reductionist view of the complex land tenure systems and origins of historical injustices around land in Africa.

This is nothing short of the co-option of rural African women into the capitalist project, which rather than addressing the systemic and structural barriers around access and control over land relies on a 'reform' of the system. It is estimated that up to 90 percent of land in sub-Saharan Africa is untitled—forests, farmlands, woodlands and rangelands are often collectively

owned by communities for mostly food production and pasture for livestock with rural women being at the forefront of maintaining these activities. Titling of these lands automatically benefit men, further complicating the existing problems of land for rural women. Patriarchal power structures are inherent in not only customary laws but also modern land laws due to political and economic factors. The only difference is that we can argue that customary laws are alive to gendered asymmetries of power to a certain extent compared to 'modern land laws'.

The result of this market-based conception of land rights is that the continent is being carved open for an export-led agricultural model that requires large amounts of land for monoculture production. Africa is now firmly in the era of plantation farming because, more often than not, the way farmland is used is heavily influenced by the amount of land one possesses.

When rural agrarian policies encourage taking the most productive farmland away from cultivation for local consumption and converting that land to farming for export, they put local communities in a situation of dependence on a profit-motivated market over which they have absolutely no control. They also increase the vulnerability and dependence that rural women already face.

Africa will be the continent worst hit by the climate crisis and the impacts will be exacerbated by the fact that it has the least resources to adapt as well as the highest number of hungry people in the World. A study<sup>11</sup> by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) suggests that crop yields in sub-Saharan Africa alone may fall by between 5 and 22 percent by 2050.

The paradox around agriculture is such that while it will be adversely affected by climate change, it is also one of the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions—notably carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. When you factor in indirect contributions like land conversion to agriculture, the manufacture and use of chemical fertilizer as well as farm operations, then the total contribution of agriculture to global emissions may be as high as 32 percent (Bellarby *et al.*, 2008).

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African women's traditional agricultural knowledge is without a doubt at the heart of this continent's struggle for food sovereignty and climate change resilience and has been advanced primarily through protecting agro-biodiversity. Their knowledge and intimate relationship with land and seed (crop and livestock), as well as their understanding of the nutritional and medicinal needs of the family, offers so many clues as to how we must shape (or reshape) our approach to food and farming today. Acknowledging and re-dignifying the role of women in the agrarian transformation (s) in Africa is an important step to the re-imagining of a more just and democratic agrarian system.

African women farmers contribute half of the agricultural labour force in the continent, produce 70 percent of the food and are also responsible for 80–90 percent of all food processing activities. The inherent paradigm among the promoters of industrial farming system is that farmers are solely interested in yield. But yield concerns come secondary to the diverse needs of farmers who carefully select and breed for taste, cooking qualities, for the short- and longer term growing periods, for animal fodder, building materials and medicines. The greatest challenge for African farmers is to increase productivity without further jeopardizing the gene pool of all of these other characteristics.

Across the continent, laws pertaining to<sup>12</sup> plant variety protection (PVP) are being aligned and harmonized at various regional bodies such as COMESA and SADCC in order to fit UPOV91<sup>13</sup> and 91+ intellectual property rights (IPR) criteria as well as the World Trade Organization's Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights. These new PVP laws severely curtail the rights of farmers to save, sell and exchange their seeds. Kenya's Plant and Seed Varieties (Amendment) Act 2013, which is based on UPOV91, is a clear example of how African countries are changing their national legislation to make it easier for private seed companies to gain a monopoly over the production and distribution of seeds within the continent.

The harmonization of these seed laws can be directly traced to investment and policy frameworks such as the World Bank's Benchmarking the Business of Agriculture (BBA)<sup>14</sup> and recently renamed Enabling the Business of Agriculture. The narrative being pushed here is that increased IPR will automatically lead to the development of 'improved varieties', but nothing could be further from the truth. In Kenya,<sup>15</sup> only one variety out of the 136 applications filed and tested since 1997 has been on a food crop, while more than half were for roses and the rest went to other cash crops like Sugarcane. The changing of these seed laws is nothing more than an attempt to tie them to the dominant market value chains.

The typical UPOV criteria for plant variety protection are that of distinctiveness, uniformity, stability and novelty (DUSN). DUSN criteria are good for the seed/pesticide industry but extremely dangerous for African women farmers whose productivity depends on seed diversity rather than uniformity. Yet, this is the trajectory that the continent is boldly marching toward seemingly oblivious to the ramifications on seed sovereignty, which is the basis of food sovereignty.

### **Africa's Green Revolution**

At the heart of this kind of transformation is the call for a 'Green Revolution' that is uniquely African with the term being stripped off all historical and political context in its journey throughout Latin America and Asia in the last century.

'Initially, the Green Revolution failed to incorporate poor, middle peasants and rural women. This accentuated existing gender and socio-economic disparities in the countryside. The high cost of its purchased inputs deepened the divide between large farmers and smallholders because the latter could not afford the technology. Women also had less access to credit, inputs and extension services than their male counterparts, placing the Green Revolution's economies of scale out of reach for rural women.

An unspoken objective of the Green Revolution was to avoid implementing agrarian reforms. In this sense, the Green Revolution was less a campaign to feed the urban poor than a strategy to prevent the rural poor from seizing land to feed themselves. Rather than raise production through redistribution of land to smallholders, the Green Revolution favoured raising production through technological intensification'. (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009)

Proponents of Africa's Green Revolution speak of its success by simply pointing to the growing levels of investments in agriculture. Issues of justice and equity are however less prominent in these discussions. Farmers from low- and middle-income countries are said to invest three times as much as their governments in capital stock, every single year. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) describes capital stock as activities that are focused on future improvements: for these farmers, this includes expending time and energy on planting fruit trees, making provision for rearing animals, purchasing machinery or building materials. In general, these investments promote sustainable agricultural practices based on agro-ecological methods.

Contrast this with the investment focus of CAADP-aligned policies, which heavily favour gender-blind initiatives that promote strict IPR regimes, the use of external chemical inputs such as fertilizer and herbicides, hybrid seeds, in addition to the tying of the right to food to dominant commercial value chains.

A report released by ActionAid in 2013 entitled, 'Fair Shares; Is CAADP Working',<sup>16</sup> offers an eye-opening expose on what African governments, aid agencies and multi-national agribusiness companies are investing in and where rural African women stand.

To summarize some of the report's findings:

- In Kenya, only 5 percent of women access extension services, while only 2 percent have access to credit facilities. While Kenya has one of the highest agricultural budgetary allocations (25 percent) to extension services in Africa, they are extremely few women extension officers and the service is heavily skewed

toward agriculturally rich areas in the country thus benefiting wealthier farmers who are almost exclusively male.

- In Zambia, a third of its agricultural budget goes to fund the fertilizer subsidy programme, while only 5 percent of the budget is allocated to agricultural research and extensions services.
- Ghana, on the other hand, is one of the few African countries that have met its CAADP obligation with regard to investing 10 percent of its public expenditure on agriculture, but that is just one part of the story. A considerable amount of its agriculture budget goes to fund the tractor subsidy programme, which has little to no impact on smallholder farmers and most importantly women.

The elements emerging so far paint a picture which shows that, rather than African governments or foreign direct investments changing the rural landscape in Africa for the better, smallholder farmers made up mostly of women are actively working to promote sustainable agricultural practices, fight rural poverty as well as feed not only their households but the entire continent.

### What now for Africa's rural women?

'We women demand a comprehensive Agrarian Reform to redistribute land with our full participation and integration throughout the process, ensuring not only access to land, but to all the instruments and mechanisms on an equal footing, with a just appreciation of our productive and reproductive work, where rural areas guarantee a dignified fair life for us'.<sup>17</sup>

With respect to the vision for rural agrarian transformation in Africa, there is a huge disconnect between policymakers and the communities that are the forefront of the changing rural world. Agrarian transformation is necessarily a feminist project and many ecofeminists hold the view that linking agrarian transformation and feminism is the unavoidable challenge facing agrarian development policies.

For any agrarian transformations to be considered truly transformative, it is important that they factor in the following four main issues,

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which are in no way exhaustive nor should they be considered to adequately capture this complex matter. These transformations need to address gender-responsive agricultural research and financing; power relations, inequalities and asymmetries of power; sustainable agricultural methods and the care economy.

The 'Feminization of agriculture' speaks of the highly gendered nature of Africa's food systems and a reorientation of agricultural research and financing is therefore crucial to the integration of the perspective of women in order to ensure that they co-design the solutions that suit them best. This is certainly the best way to ensure that the results go beyond the realm of tokenism but also touch on social relations at the household and community levels. Promotion of gendered participatory plant breeding, research on the great diversity of smallholder agro-ecosystems in Africa and promotion of the fair shares concept are some of the ways in which this can be actualized.

Addressing power relations cannot just focus on the household level. The patriarchal barriers to access and control over resources and the greater political and economic discussions in the continental and international arena in the current context play a key role in not only entrenching but also redesigning the systems that keep rural African women oppressed. Now more than ever it is important to question, challenge and push forward concrete solutions

that call for redistributive land policies, food sovereignty and a de-linking of the right to food from the market.

An agrarian transformation that does not promote sustainable agricultural practices is not worth its salt; not when the continent is facing a climate crisis and certainly not when we know that the industrial food system is centred solely on profit making rather than feeding people. What Africa needs is a type of agriculture system that builds biological resilience through diversity, increases productivity without compromising the health of ecosystems and works with the continent's food producers to build its adaptive and mitigating capacity. Rural women's knowledge will be absolutely critical in this regard.

Finally, even as we acknowledge the productive and reproductive work of women, feminism faces the dilemma of rejecting gender-assigned roles that are derived from biological essentialism and the fixing of women into institutional structures that need to be broken down. At the same time, there is a need to stop furthering the reductionist views around women's production and reproduction. Agrarian transformations in Africa must cater for the different roles that rural women play at the household and within the economic spheres and recognize that it is impossible to separate the two.

The problems are larger, systemic and structural and the solutions they require demand a system change.

### Notes

- 1 <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/region/home/tags/africa>.
- 2 SMALL FARMS: CURRENT STATUS AND KEY TREND: <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/pubs/events/seminars/2005/smallfarms/sfbgpaper.pdf>.
- 3 [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/esw/esw\\_new/documents/Rural\\_Employment/RuralEmployment\\_leafletWEB.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/esw/esw_new/documents/Rural_Employment/RuralEmployment_leafletWEB.pdf).
- 4 <http://www.caadp.net/>.
- 5 Who are the Hungry? <http://thp.org.au/content/faq>.
- 6 <http://www.africaprogresspanel.org/publications/policy-papers/africa-progress-report-2012/>.
- 7 FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture (2010–11:5). If women farmers in Kenya had the same access to farm inputs and education as men food yields could increase by 22 percent and the GDP growth rate would have doubled in 2004 from 4.3 to 8.3 percent. It is estimated that in Ghana if women had equal access to land and fertilizer as men, farm profits per hectare would double and that in Burkina Faso and Tanzania, provision of equal inputs and education to women as men could increase business incomes by 20 percent. IFAD, FAO and World Bank, Gender in Agriculture sourcebook, 2009, p. 522; 'Women in agriculture: The critical food



- producers', 15 October 2008, <http://www.fao.org/Newsroom/en/news/2008/1000929/index.html>; <http://eudevdays.eu/sites/default/files/bp151-land-power-rights-acquisitions-220911-en.pdf>.
- 8 [http://www.misereor.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Whose\\_Alliance\\_The\\_G8\\_\\_the\\_Emergence\\_of\\_a\\_Global\\_Corporate\\_Regime\\_for\\_Agriculture\\_May\\_2013.pdf](http://www.misereor.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Whose_Alliance_The_G8__the_Emergence_of_a_Global_Corporate_Regime_for_Agriculture_May_2013.pdf).
- 9 <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp151-land-power-rights-acquisitions-220911-en.pdf>.
- 10 <http://afsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/AFSA-GRAIN-Report-Africas-land-and-seed-laws-under-attack-who-is-pushing-for-changes.pdf>.
- 11 <http://www.cosv.org/download/centrodocumentazione/climate%20change%20impacts%20on%20food%20security.pdf>.
- 12 <http://www.acbio.org.za/index.php/media/64-media-releases/413-harmonisation-of-africas-seed-laws-death-knell-for-african-seed-systems>.
- 13 UPOV is the French acronym for the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants, officially an intergovernmental body since 1961. The Convention was first drafted in 1961 and has been revised three times: in 1972, 1978 and 1991, hence the acronym UPOV91 to refer to the latest revision.
- 14 [http://ourlandourbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Brief\\_Eng\\_Final.pdf](http://ourlandourbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Brief_Eng_Final.pdf).
- 15 [http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OurBiz\\_Brief\\_Seedreport.pdf](http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OurBiz_Brief_Seedreport.pdf).
- 16 [http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/fair\\_shares\\_caadp\\_report.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/fair_shares_caadp_report.pdf).
- 17 <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/our-conferences-mainmenu-28/6-jakarta-2013/resolutions-and-declarations/1451-women-of-via-campesina-international-manifesto-2>.

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