

BOOK REVIEWS – REVUE DES LIVRES

«*Economics of African Agriculture*» by John LEVI & Michael HAVINDEN; published by LONGMAN, 1982; 175 pp.

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The apparent failure of the development strategies of the 1960s and 1970s which tended to have neglected agriculture in Africa has led to the need for appraisals of development plans, as well as the sudden emphasis on agriculture. Partly because of colonial rule and partly because of faulty planning, Africa now experiences the greatest food crisis in its history. Most countries have to import food to supplement home production which continues to fall every year. The implications of a poor agricultural base have also dawned on the rulers: mass unemployment accompanied by a host of vices which threaten the very survival of the nations.

By re-examining the economics of African agriculture, LEVI and HAVINDEN have chosen a theme which cannot be over-flogged during this century. For as long as African agriculture remains underdeveloped so would scholars continue to devote their time to finding solutions.

This new book is good for three reasons. Firstly, it benefits from a considerable amount of literature written in the past three decades. Secondly, both authors have previously worked on micro-studies which enable them to grapple with case studies with a great deal of competence. Thirdly, the authors are able to appraise measures which had hitherto been taken to improve agriculture, and are thus privileged to examine and question old theories.

The main aim of this book is to «shed light on the problems of achieving economic development in agriculture» (p.2), and the methodology adopted is an analysis of «the economic behaviour of farm families and their response to the major forces that impinge on them, such as government policy, development strategies, population growth, etc.» (p.3). This methodology however ignores a chronological approach; consequently a large number of agricultural practices are presented with little regard for the time they occurred and their possible changes over time.

The major themes in the book are well treated. Chapter two deals with the oft-repeated technical aspects of African agriculture (i.e. factors which influence production e.g. climate and land). The chapter concludes with the place of agriculture in the African economy, a theme which the authors treat in a hurry. Nevertheless, they ask the basic questions: what are the results, in the aggregate, of African farming systems? What do they deliver to the people of Africa? How has agriculture been faring over the last few years? Using 1978 statistics of population, labour and agricultural production, the authors arrive at the following conclusions: a) agriculture

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generally contributes less than half the gross domestic product; b) agriculture is the main means of support for over 200 million people (out of a total population of 310 million); c) there is stagnation or decline in agricultural production.

Chapter three provides the major epochs in the agricultural history of Africa. The authors identify three: a) the origin of agriculture; b) changes brought about by contacts with Southeast Asia and the Americas; c) developments since the 19th century «when the rise of export crops brought African agriculture into a prominent position within the world trading system» (p. 27). Two features emerge in this evolution: stability and change. Though I thought the authors should have stressed the gradual impoverishment of the African peasants and the problems of food crises, the conclusions which the authors reach are still valid:

We have seen that the antiquity of African agriculture gives it a well – rounded ecological base. It has adapted to its environment over a very long period and its basic stock of crops and livestock are capable of sustained reproduction without ecological damage. On the other hand the systems are not unchanging and inflexible. They have developed, grown and adapted over time; in particular African agricultural exports have moved into a crucial position in the structure of world trade during the past century. Generally this has brought improvements in living standards, infrastructure and economic diversification, but there have also been disadvantages. Most African countries are too dependent on a narrow range of export crops. This puts them at the mercy of sudden changes in the international terms of trade and subjects them to de-stabilising shocks. Historical experience therefore suggests that in future, more attention should be given to obtaining a better balance between agricultural exports and domestic food production (p. 45).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the three major factors of production: labour, land and capital. A great deal of technical information on the behaviour of African farm and the factors that modify it are provided in these chapters. In terms of originality, chapter 4 is the best.

The export of agricultural products is discussed in chapter 7. This is a theme which has been treated in numerous literature, mainly because the developing countries (and their scholars, too) care more about exports than production. The authors discuss two main issues – the economic benefits of exports and the economics of the production of agricultural exports – both of which have been adequately discussed by previous authors.

Chapter 8 is most relevant since it focuses on agricultural policy which is very crucial to the aim of the book. The authors' approach in this chapter is to examine policies in Anglophone countries, Francophone countries and Portuguese – speaking countries. This approach is defective, since

the policies are not influenced by territorial location but by an ideology of development, mainly capitalist. From the previous policies, the authors identify the following lessons: a) the ineffectiveness of past policies sprang from lack of clarity and decisiveness; b) there is a need to break down the 'Balkanisation' of policy resulting from the colonial situation. Regional co-operation can save money and duplication of effort and needs to be encouraged; c) governments need to give far more financial support to the machinery for carrying out their agricultural policies; d) there is still a need to guard against the seductive temptations of the large-scale, capital intensive agricultural project.

The last chapter is on the ends and means of development rather than a conclusion to tidy up the work. Emphasis is placed on rural development and the various plans which African governments have adopted on it. The authors identify three broad features of the plans: a) the attempt at institutional changes, as in Tanzania's *ujamaa* and Ivory Coast's *animation rurale*; b) the communication of technical knowledge; and c) the attempted introduction of an agricultural technology different from that already in use.

On the whole, every chapter is treated with skill and competence. The authors do not, however, provide the necessary link for all the chapters. More importantly, they do not offer a strategy of agricultural development. Given the Western, orthodox economic values with which the authors operate, I doubt whether they could have offered a convincing answer.