

Conference Report: Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa

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Abstract

This report offers a summary of the main findings of the international conference “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa”, held virtually from 26 May to 27 May 2020. The conference concluded the Interdisciplinary Fellow Group of the same name which operated between February and May 2020 at the Merian Center for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), located at the University of Ghana. Bringing together researchers from different countries, as well as different disciplines, the conference created a space for discussions beyond topical silos. The conference focused on the impacts of large-scale agricultural investments on socio-economic structures and rural livelihoods—also taking into account a water-energy-food nexus approach; resource-based conflicts as well as mobility and urbanization. While common patterns of rural transformations could be identified, the debates concluded that there is a need to be more cognizant of the ambiguities of change and nuances that call into question simplistic assumptions.

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Introduction

Rural livelihoods in Africa have been in a process of continuous and gradual structural change that has been accelerating over the past 30 years (Barrett et al. 2017). This process has not been uniform across the continent, but there are common elements of change, such as the commercialization of agriculture, the rise of non-farm activities, increased and changing patterns of internal mobility and the more recent interest of foreign and domestic investors in acquiring large tracts of farmland. These changes are inter-related with some of the key challenges of rural Africa, including persistent poverty, demographic pressure, rural conflict, an eroding resource base, and climatic change (e.g. International Fund for Agricultural Development 2019).

In this conference report, we present the main findings of the conference “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa” which took place between 26 and 27 May 2020 in a virtual format. The research presented mainly resulted from an Interdisciplinary Fellow Group (IFG) of the same name at the Maria Sibylla Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA). MIASA is the first Institute for Advanced Studies in sub-Saharan Africa outside of South Africa and is based at the University of Ghana in Accra. Being dedicated to the topic of “Sustainable Governance”, MIASA’s three research foci are sustainable environmental transformation, sustainable conflict management and sustainable democracy. At the same time, MIASA works towards a reduction of global asymmetries in knowledge production and bridging the cultural divide between anglophone and francophone Africa. IFGs bring together a group of fellows for a duration of four months, comprising both senior and junior fellows from Germany, Africa and the rest of the world. The IFG on “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa” was comprised of ten international Fellows, one guest researcher and numerous contributors and collaborators at MIASA (and virtually after the COVID-19-caused lockdown) between February and May 2020.

State of the art

Rural transformation, a rather vague catchword, is part of more general structural transformations, i.e. shifts from labor in the agricultural to the non-agricultural sector (Deudibe et al. 2020). As rural transformations come with a changed structure of landholdings, technologies, capabilities and labor (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2016), they have a large impact on rural people’s live. This includes how *“rural people change their occupations, invest, diversify livelihoods and relate differently to each other within their families, communities and social institutions”* (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2016). Depending on the discipline, research on rural transformation focuses on accelerating productivity (e.g. Barrett et al. 2017), newly emerging resource-based conflicts arising from conflicting use of land (e.g. Tonah 2002), rural-to-urban migration and urbanization (e.g. de Brauw, Mueller, and Lee 2014), gendered perspectives (e.g. Van den Broeck and Kilic 2019), the importance of institutions (e.g. Bulte, Richards, and Voors 2018), or uses a class-based lens (e.g. Bernstein 2010). In this conference, we brought together interdisciplinary scholars focusing on some of these dimensions as described below.

In their conference keynote speeches, Ruth Hall and Paris Yeros identified ten dimensions of rural transformation that merit particular attention: First, recent large-scale agricultural investments (LSAIs) have increased or revived a “big farm model” with large plantations mimicking colonial states and state farms from post-colonial developmentalism. Second, pro-smallholder policies are often neglected, while contract farming links producers into global value chains. Third, there is a rise of ‘middle farmers’, often civil servants and businesspeople, investing in rural areas who now account for a substantial

portion of all farms in several countries. Fourth, land reforms that have in many cases failed to secure customary and informal tenure rights in law and in practice, redistribute land at scale, making it necessary to establish robust and democratic forms of governance. Fifth, they observe deagrarianisation and rapid urbanisation, driven by combined push and pull factors, that are often complex, multidirectional, and intergenerational. Sixth, the forms of agricultural development have created only limited jobs—instead, we see the expansion of jobless and landless populations. Seventh is the rising importance and scale of the rural non-farm economy and the diversification out of agriculture. As eighth dimension, they identify the rise in “growth corridors” as ways for national governments to shape the inflow of private capital, especially along the eastern seaboard and potentially also around the west African bulge. Ninth, financialization has seen the entry of new actors, interests, and capital into rural areas, sometimes associated with farmland portfolios, linking sometimes remote areas with the global economy via private equity and derivatives. Tenth, technology and the ongoing mechanisation have not proceeded as widely predicted, with poor technology transfer alongside niche pockets of hi-tech agriculture. Ruth Hall concluded that combined with climate change and the impacts of COVID-19, the mentioned forces are complex, with intersecting drivers of change, the outcome of which is impossible to predict. She sees reasons for optimism and pessimism at the same time. Competing visions for sustainable rural development need to be explicitly articulated to make underlying assumptions and choices more explicit. Paris Yeros concluded that a sustainable rural transformation based on peasant production and cooperativism in agro-industrial development emerges as a clear priority.

These keynotes set the scene for the presentations of the research of MIASA’s IFG on “Sustainable Rural Transformation in Africa”. The group has worked on selected aspects of the pertinent issues of rural change that overlap with and extend those articulated by the keynote speakers: (1) large-scale land acquisitions and rural livelihoods, (2) the nexus between the environment and rural change, again with particular reference to large-scale land acquisitions, (3) resource-based conflicts, with a focus on conflict in the Sahel zone, and, (4) internal mobility and rural-urban interactions. The group’s work was not designed to provide a holistic analysis of rural transformation in Africa, but to dive deep into the respective topic while being exposed to research on other facets of rural change. Collaborations between different members of the groups emerged and the weekly meetings of the group altered and expanded the perspectives of the individual research agendas.

Introduction of the conference panels

The conference was organized around four panels dealing with different dimensions of rural transformations. Panel 1 focused on *mobility and urbanization*. The disproportionate focus in recent policy and academic debates on international mobility (Smith and Schapendonk 2018) suggests that migration mostly happens from the global South to the global North. However, the great majority of African migrants move within their country borders (Food and Agriculture Organization 2017) or region (United Nations 2017; UNDESA 2019). Rapid population growth in Africa goes along with internal mobility and fast urbanisation, youths being the most mobile social group. Migrants reshape both the physical and social environment by connecting people with changing rural, urban and peri urban environments, as well as by connecting people across translocal social networks. The panel interlinked the structural and the agential dimensions of mobility and urbanisation by exploring both the geographical transformations and migrants’ active engagement with their social network and environment applying two case studies from Ghana.

Panel 2 dealt with *resource-based conflict*. Conflicts amongst competing users of natural resources are common in Africa but recent pressures have intensified the frequency and scale of these clashes. These conflicts pose challenges to sustainable rural transformation processes. Affected states in the West African subregion have, at one point or the other, adopted both local and national measures to mitigate the conflicts and violence associated with these conflicts. So far, these efforts have only yielded modest gains as the conflicts and violence become protracted. These developments call on researchers to unearth the fundamental causes and dynamics of these conflicts and suggest better conflict resolution measures. The case studies presented in this panel come from Ghana and Burkina Faso. They investigate conflicts arising out of contestations over natural resource use between herders and farmers in Ghana, and conflict resolution and justice delivery through vigilantism in Burkina Faso.

The papers presented in Panel 3 discussed how *large-scale agricultural investments* (LSAIs) affect socio-economic structures and rural livelihoods. The increasing food demand of a growing world population has accelerated LSAIs in low and middle-income countries, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, millions of hectares of land are and may be transformed from smallholder production and community use into large-scale commercial farms. The advent of LSAIs can have large impacts on individuals and households in host and nearby villages. The investments often directly reduce the amount of land available for other agricultural activities and can be associated with numerous positive and negative spill overs – in terms of effects on employment, income, food security, the environment, and conflict (Baumgartner et al. 2015; Anseeuw et al. 2012; Schoneveld, German, and Nutakor 2011). Two studies examine the effects of LSAIs on (female) employment in Nigeria and one study investigates the effects of palm oil investments on social conflict in Liberia.

Panel 4 explored the nature and impacts of LSAIs on resource utilization and sustainability using a *water-energy-food nexus approach*. In rural places that are characterized by small-scale food and cash crop production, LSAIs do not only have socioeconomic impacts but are also associated with numerous spill overs in the forms of benefits and trade-offs on local water, energy, and food systems. The panel focused its discussions on how LSAIs and agricultural intensification affect water, energy and food systems, as well as social justice for farmers at the local scale with experiences from five predominantly rural districts in Ghana (Sene West, Banda, Bole, Denkyembour and Kwaebibirim Districts) and Kenya (Mumias).

The below account of the results of the concluding conference highlights the need to (1) recognize more explicitly the interactions and inter-relationships between the different aspects of rural transformation that are typically dealt with in disciplinary and topical silos, and (2) be more cognizant of the ambiguities of change and the empirical nuances and distinctions that call into question simplistic assumptions that often underlie analyses of rural transformation processes. Finally, the joint work also exposed the need to (3) understand and look for common patterns and drivers of the analysed processes of rural transformation including gender aspects.

Finding 1: Going beyond disciplinary and topical silos

One of the declared aims of the conference was to go beyond disciplinary and topical silos but to rather recognize more explicitly the interactions and inter-relationships between the different aspects of rural transformation. One example of the explicit consideration of the complex inter-relationships that drive rural change becomes evident in the application of the water-energy-food nexus approach to large-scale agricultural investments.

The water-energy-food (WEF) nexus is a conceptual framework that can serve to meet sustainable approaches for agricultural production. Simpson and Jewitt (2019) define the concept as, “*the study of the connections between these three resource sectors, together with the synergies, conflicts and trade-*

offs that arise from how they are managed, i.e., water for food and food for water, energy for water and water for energy, and food for energy and energy for food.” WEF systems are highly interdependent and, as such, social and environmental changes that threaten one of these systems (water, energy, or food) have repercussions through others. If system problems are not fully addressed at all necessary scales, interventions in one system may have significant unintended consequences on the others (Simpson and Jewitt 2019). One important distinction from other systems-based models is that WEF nexus approaches clearly provide a trade-offs framework in decision-making. There are numerous ways in which the three resource sectors of water, energy, and food overlap. For example, water is an essential component in energy production – for cooling, electricity from hydropower, some fossil fuel extraction and biofuels – and energy is used in numerous processes for supplying, treating and using water (particularly as water is heavy to lift and distribute and is energy-intensive to heat). In countries with very high freshwater use, most of the water is used for food production through irrigation, and the energy used in its abstraction and conveyance is often considerable.

Different collaborators of the IFG have applied the nexus approach to three LSAI cases in five predominantly rural districts in Ghana and an intensive sugarcane production in Mumias sugarcane belt in Kenya. These case studies follow a cross-sectional design with mixed methods approaches.

In their research, they find that generally, LSAIs and agricultural intensification occurring within rural areas present some opportunities and exhibit potentials for rural economic and social transformation if land investors prioritize and integrate local socio-economic development as part of their broad agenda for negotiating land acquisition agreements. However, often, local communities and households become worse off in the areas of food, energy and income securities. Specifically, agricultural intensification can result in negative outcomes for conservation of land, water, soils and energy resources when economic interests of powerful actors like agribusinesses over-dominate environmental integrity and equity in benefits. LSAIs in the Sene West District of Ghana were found to have produced intense pressure on land-related resources with consequential land-use and land cover changes (LULC) characterizing current state of affected local environment. This intense pressure on land-related resources manifests in the form of limited ‘preferred’ access to land for food crop production and fuelwood by local communities. In some cases, pressure on arable lands has led to reduced farm sizes of smallholder farmers, changes in farm locations and limited access to non-timber forest resource in affected communities due to competing interest for these resources between foreign investors and the farming households at the locality.

Thus, while LSAIs hold significant potentials for developing countries through pathways such as employment generation, transformation and diversification of rural economies, the presented case studies suggest that LSAIs and inequitable agricultural intensification have a tendency to undermine rural livelihood sustainability within the context water, energy and food systems. These experiences in the case study areas were primarily the outcomes of failure of investors to commit to and translate their local socio-economic development agenda into action on the ground after acquisition of large-scale community lands.

Finding 2: Avoiding simplistic assumptions by observing empirical nuances and distinctions

Rural transformation processes do neither occur at the same pace nor in the same way depending on the context. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to be more cognizant of the ambiguities of change and the empirical nuances and distinctions that call into question simplistic assumptions that often underlie analyses of rural transformation processes.

Many of the results presented at the conference challenge conventional wisdom and simplistic assumptions. For example, the research on mobility in Ghana – looking at the cases of Accra and Tamale – calls into question the common assumption of urban-rural dichotomies and empirically shows how rural and urban areas become more and more interlinked as cities grow: rural and urban spaces are increasingly overlapping both spatially and socio-economically—which may create new zones of frictions. The case study on Accra focuses on the motivations for internal migration in Ghana. While much of the previous literature takes a livelihood perspective and focuses on economic advantages at the destination as main motivation to migrate, the study finds that these approaches to migration fall too short. Instead, livelihood strategies are reflected and performed in culturally bound lifestyles of city-life by being exposed to a more varied reality as compared to village life. Social status is associated with both livelihood and lifestyle dimensions of mobility: on the one hand the economic empowerment that derives from increased income, on the other the USA-like imaginary associated with the capital city, e.g. the hope to turn into a “big boy” or a “big girl” by living in Accra. Evidence of success is bared in one’s clothes, hair style and even body weight: to say ‘you became fat’ is, in this context, synonym for success.

The research on conflict uncovers the multi-faceted role of ethnicity as an important driver or catalyst of violence. For example, the work on Fulani herders and “local” farmers in Northern Ghana shows that ethnicity re-emerges as a dividing line in resource conflicts – albeit no longer solely between nomadic herders and settled farmers, but between settled Fulani and indigenous populations: While the relations between settled Fulani and local farmers used to be good, recently, the settled Fulani are considered as strangers with limited participation rights in community discussions. A new sense of who is entitled to scarce resources among competing users emerges – based on ethnicity.

In contrast, the findings on the conflict implications of LSAs – here looking at two cases in Liberia – suggest that ethnic tension do not seem to be reinforcing social conflict that indeed results from the establishment of oil palm plantations: The study investigates whether and how LSAs influence the risk of social conflict, as measured by joy-of-destruction experiments in 73 villages in rural Liberia. It focuses on ethnic intergroup competition, which may be reinforced by discrimination in the distribution of gains and losses induced by LSAs. While LSAs accompany significantly higher levels of destructive behavior, this pattern cannot be explained by interethnic discrimination. Instead, there seems to be an association between LSAs, village-level labor sharing, and social conflict.

Thus, collecting empirical evidence and better understanding under what circumstances assumptions may or may not hold true, is crucial. But the research presented in the conference has also identified common patterns and drivers, as described in the following.

Finding 3: Identifying common patterns and drivers of rural transformation – the role of gender

All the research conducted by the group illustrates very forcefully the danger to “over-generalize” and thus the importance of taking – often very localized – context seriously. Yet, bringing together the different perspectives on rural transformation and different disciplines has also helped the group to bring out interesting commonalities that can, for example, provide guidance for further scientific inquiry.

One of the common patterns that have been identified across different studies is the role of gender in rural transformation processes. Although it is well understood that “gender matters” it is noteworthy that all the very different studies confirm this. Gender relations are key to understand the socio-economic implications of large-scale land acquisitions, they need consideration when analysing the

water-food-energy nexus, and they condition individual behaviour in conflict situations. In terms of substantive issues, the group's agenda and the work very clearly point to resource availability and environmental degradation as fundamental forces that drives rural change and conflict. This is of course not entirely new, but the research presented shows that the manifestations and ramifications require in-depth and context-specific inquiry to pave the way forward towards a "sustainable rural transformation". For example, case studies from Ghana show differences with regard to female and male access to and control over land and related resources in the study areas. Case studies on the effects of LSAs on employment outcomes of female households in Nigeria show that female-headed appear to have fewer employment opportunities resulting from LSAs than male-headed households; they also earn less.

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