

Economy, Environment and Exploitation (EEE)

The political economy of poverty and wealth in Africa

1. Background

Africa is “the land of our civilization and of rich natural resources” as well as the land of the most perplexing issues of our time: slavery, famine, refugees, ethnic conflict, repressive and lethargic systems of governance.” (Veit *et al.* 1998: 1). Both counts are true. The thinking behind so-called Afro-pessimism includes the perception of hopelessness and tragedy that seems to pervade the continent despite the years of international support. The spotlight has foremost been on natural and man-made disasters resulting in poverty, famine, civil strife and corrupt regimes.

However, a careful analysis of African countries destroys this myth of bankruptcy. Historical and micro-survey evidence as well as standard data from international organizations support less pessimistic conclusions (see Sender 1999). For example, in the areas of life expectancy, infancy death, female literacy, female secondary schooling, access to drinking water, access to communications infrastructure, production of electricity, and networks of transport and power, substantial improvements can be observed. Africa also realizes fast growth rates in the production of food crops, and growth rates for some of the newer, higher-value commodities produced in agricultural sector have even been faster. And the agricultural workforce in Africa has achieved significant productivity gains.

Thinking about development in Africa therefore requires holding at least two sets of ideas in one’s head at the same time. It is not sufficient to stress the ubiquity of failure, malnutrition, disease, predatory states and war, to become overwhelmed by revulsion in the face of misery still experienced by so many Africans. In addition, one must also recognize that some important aspects of the lives of millions of ordinary people have been transformed over the last five decades, which shows that Africa has great strengths, both human and material, that justifies a greater interest on the part of public and private investors in its economy and its people. It is on the basis of a clear perception of the complexity and unevenness of all these processes, as well as a critical analysis of the consequences of (economic) policies in the past, that politically realistic development strategies can be formulated (Bernstein 1990, Kilby 2003, Sender 1999).

In the period 2002-2006, the former ASC theme group Economy, Ecology and Exclusion (EEE) intended to contribute to a better perception on development processes in Sub-Saharan Africa by focussing on the question of ‘access’: access to resources (factors of production, products, services) and to institutions (in its broadest meaning) through which resources are allocated. The opportunities available to rural and urban people to command resources are a major determinant of poverty or wealth rates among people. Research questions that ‘guided’ many of the EEE research projects conducted from 2002 until 2006 were: Why do some actors have access to certain resources while others do not? Under what circumstances and conditions (economic, ecological, political, legal, social and cultural) and by what mechanisms (decision-making processes) do some actors become excluded from certain resources (lost access) whereas others do not or may even become better off (acquired access)? And what does this mean for people’s struggle for survival and their attempts to escape from poverty? Topics of research included the field of coastal ecology, fisheries, urban agriculture, livestock keeping, plantation economics, labour markets, eco-tourism, maize marketing, social security arrangements, and food insecurity. The research projects departed from different disciplinary backgrounds and have been conducted among different societies and communities in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Chad, Mali, South Africa and Mozambique. Both rural and urban studies have been conducted as well as studies on agricultural and non-

agricultural sectors. The results can be found in a wide range of publications¹ and a collaborative publication presents the main findings of the previous programme in one volume (Rutten, Leliveld & Foeken 2007).

Also for the period 2007-2011 the question of access will continue to be the main orientation in the EEE research programme. The above questions are as relevant in African daily realities today as they have been five years ago and need our continuous attention. However, lessons learnt from the previous programme and changing realities on the African continent create new challenges and ask for reorientation in relation to the central research theme. In the new EEE research programme *The Political Economy of Poverty and Wealth in Africa* this reorientation will be twofold: analytically and thematically. Analytically, the political economy paradigm will be adopted in research projects with the ambition to present a critical and integrated analysis of processes of impoverishment and accumulation in African societies and confront this analysis with those rooted in the sustainable livelihoods approach or neo-classical and neo-institutional economics (see Section 2). The thematic reorientation in the new research programme will be in line with new realities that can be observed in many African societies. Firstly, there will be more attention for the role of markets in the allocation of and access to resources. And secondly, new realities in Africa ask for a growing attention for water as the most crucial natural resource besides land.

The analytical and thematic reorientations have led to a new name for the Theme Group EEE: 'Economy, Environment and Exploitation', and to the formulation of three research domains (see Section 3). The central question of the new research programme is: how do the process of continued commoditization and the related changes in social relations of production affect people's access to resources and the institutions and relations through which these resources are provided, and how does this, in turn, define their constraints and opportunities for wealth accumulation? Therewith the research programme goes beyond an analysis of only the causes and consequences of poverty by also addressing the question how ordinary people in Africa become rich. In the sections below the research programme will be further explained.

¹ See the ASC website: <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Research/Researchers.aspx>