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Should Africa Protect its Farmers to Revitalise its Economy?

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Executive Summary

All is not well in Africa south of the Sahara. Western experts are looking for the causes in bad governance and insufficient social capital. At present, donors only support those administrations that endorse governmental and market-oriented reform. Results however are disappointing. In this paper I argue that domestic liberalisation is not enough to revitalise the economies of Sub-Saharan Africa. Farmers must also be protected from cheap imports. To explain why, I refer to the historical interaction between Africa and the world economy.

The emergence of the European world trade system in the 15th century stimulated export agriculture in America and Asia. But in Africa high internal transport costs, malaria and the iron weapons of indigenous societies kept colonial plantation economies away. In the late 19th century, quinine and machine guns allowed Europeans to penetrate Africa, and the internal transport barrier was reduced. By that time, however, the Industrial Revolution had led to global agricultural overproduction and a fall in international prices. Western countries resorted to protection to safeguard farm progress. But African farmers were not protected. The prices they faced were further depressed as Western countries shifted their overproduction on to world markets.

During the European population booms of the 16th and 18th centuries, the obstacles to sustainable agricultural intensification were hardly less than in Africa today. But overcoming them was simpler because population growth raised the prices of agricultural products, encouraging farmer investment and innovation. The new dynamics of international agriculture complicated this picture in 20th century Africa. Other than in a few places with sufficient market demand or during the rare times that world market prices improved, prices were too low to allow farmers to invest. Rather than leading to sustainable intensification, therefore, population growth led to vicious cycles of impoverishment and soil degradation.

Agrarian malaise dragged the rest of society with it. Low rural incomes restricted the domestic market for industries and services, also depriving them of opportunities for warming up for competition on the world market. Rural poverty also bred conflict and distrust, which spread to the rest of society, plaguing modern enterprises with high transaction costs. Agrarian malaise caused a massive flight from the land. With no strong non-farm sector to flee to, this led to a proliferation of marginal activities and a jostling for jobs in the public sector, encouraging bad governance and further complicating the situation for farmers.

The only way forward is to revitalise agriculture. Besides public investment in infrastructure, this requires better prices for farmers. Domestic reform will not achieve this as long as world market prices are too low. Trade policy reform in the World Trade Organisation will have little effect while Western countries continue to subsidise their farmers and reject a balanced system of managed agricultural trade. African policy-makers would be well-advised to consider the example of successful Asian countries like South Korea or Taiwan. There tariff protection against cheap imports was an important element in supportive policies that allowed agriculture to develop and become the driver for overall economic growth.

SHOULD AFRICA PROTECT ITS FARMERS TO REVITALISE ITS ECONOMY?[1]

Niek Koning

Introduction

All is not well in Africa south of the Sahara. Per capita income has fallen, infant mortality remains high, war and AIDS are taking their toll. Western experts are looking for the causes in bad governance and insufficient social capital (eg. Collier and Gunning, 1999). At present, donors only support those administrations that endorse governmental and market-oriented reform. Results however are disappointing. Ghana, the best in the class in the 1980s, is once more struggling with economic difficulties (Devarajan *et al*., 2001). Uganda, donor-darling of the 1990s, is again threatened by corruption (Hodess, 2001). Experts blame the persistence of socio-political problems. They point to the primitive phase of state formation in the region, or to the slave trade that has bred local rulers who manipulate their subjects (de Kadt, 2001; Bayart, 1999). The conclusion often reached is that more pressure should be put on governments to reform. Whether such reforms will be effective is not often questioned, but it certainly should be.

In this paper I advocate a reinterpretation of the African problem. Central to this is the interaction between the evolution of Africa and the world economy, which has led to agrarian malaise, dragging with it the rest of society. Market-oriented reforms alone cannot bring this to an end, so I suggest that the current treatment should be injected with a remedy that is taboo for many Western experts, even though it is commonly applied in their own countries; ie. import duty on agricultural products.

The agrarian malaise

Seventy percent of Africans live in rural areas. Traditionally, Africa has always had extensive farming systems, but due to rapid population growth the land now has to be used much more intensively. This can be sustainable if farmers invest in fertilising and in soil and water conservation. But this does not happen to a sufficient degree. As a consequence, the intensification of land use leads to downward vicious spirals of natural resource degradation and impoverishment, and to stagnation of agricultural growth (Cleaver and Schreiber, 1994).[2]

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1 I wish to thank Jan-Willem Gunning, Nico Heerink, Frans Huijzendveld, Ruerd Ruben and Carin Vijfhuizen for their comments on a previous version of this paper. I remain wholly responsible for the contents.
2There is discussion about the extent of this decline. Agronomic analyses are alarming, but have been criticised by researchers who point to local diversity and the complex relationships between economic activities and soil quality. But the general trend gives little reason for optimism (Koning and Smaling, 2002.)

This stagnation has also been blamed on bad governance. Post-colonial regimes would have milked agriculture dry in their efforts to pay for expanding government apparatuses and to keep food prices low for the modern sector. Farmers were paid much less than world market prices for their products, leaving hardly anything over for investment (Bates, 1981). But this does not explain everything. Even before independence, soil degradation and impoverishment already plagued many regions (Koning and Smaling, 2002). In addition, market-oriented reform, also intended to reduce the pressure on agriculture, has not resulted in much improvement. The abolition of input subsidies has led to even further reduction in fertilising, whereas an increase is needed to prevent soil degradation (Koning *et al*., 2001; Reardon *et al*., 1999).[3]

Other explanations are similarly flawed. Some experts think that the traditional, semi-collective ownership rights that have characterised much of rural Africa automatically lead to a *tragedy of the commons*. But this is not always the case. Moreover, population growth tends to lead to a spontaneous shift towards more individual rights (Platteau, 1996). Neither is the high rate of population growth – three percent per annum before the AIDS epidemic – in itself an obstacle. In places with favourable market conditions (for example Machakos District near Nairobi), or in times of favourable prices (for example in the 1950s), dynamic and sustainable agricultural development went hand in hand with rapid population growth (Tiffen *et al*., 1994; Munro, 1976). Indeed, price ratios can significantly influence the degree to which farmers invest in sustainable land management (Ruben *et al*., 1997).

I believe that the deeper roots of the problems lie in the long-term dynamics of agricultural markets. Europe has also known long periods when population pressure on the land increased: in particular 1100-1300, 1450-1650 and 1750-1875. Here too, investment in sustainable land management was hindered by all sorts of institutional obstacles. However, overcoming the problem was simplified by an endogenous relationship between population and prices (Boserup, 1987). Population growth increased the demand for food and farm-produced materials, so agricultural prices rose. This enhanced the profitability of farm production and stimulated the rise of larger farms, promoting investment and innovation (Abel, 1978; Slicher van Bath, 1963).

From the 16th century onwards, the expansion phases in Europe also gave an impetus to agricultural development in other regions. The American stone-age societies were overrun and replaced by colonial sugar plantations. In the more developed Asia, an indigenous export production of spices, luxury goods and natural fibres expanded. In Africa, however, Europeans were confronted with iron-age farmers with extensive farming systems.[4] These had too much military power and endemic disease to be overpowered like stone-age foragers and farmers in the Americas, but population growth

3 The reduced use of inorganic fertiliser is not compensated for by organic fertility measures, which are likewise hindered by unfavourable returns to farmers.

4 This situation can probably be explained by the influence of geographic and biophysical conditions on social evolution (Diamond, 1998).

was too low and the infrastructure too limited to allow the development of an indigenous export agriculture like in Asia. Africa's 'comparative advantage' lay in the export of slaves, which contributed little to economic development. Only in the second half of the 19th century was there some increase in export-oriented agriculture: palm-oil in West Africa, wool in South Africa, cloves from Pemba and Zanzibar. But expansion continued to be hampered by high internal transport costs (Munro, 1976). As a consequence, African societies in the 19th century looked much more like those in the 15th century than American or Asian societies did.

After 1875, European penetration of the interior was made possible by quinine and machine guns, and the transport barrier was reduced. But by that time the dynamics of international agricultural markets had drastically changed. Railway lines and steam-ships led to massive reclamation in America and Oceania; chemical fertilisers increased yields; electricity, petro-chemicals and the internal combustion engine led to a progressive substitution of mineral resources for farm-produced raw materials. As a consequence, in agrarian world markets, supply was being increased more rapidly than demand (Koning, 1994; Schultz, 1945). For the first time in history, agricultural prices fell, not because demand was reduced by demographic crisis, but because the new industrial dynamics generated chronic global overproduction. Developed countries responded to this situation by protecting their farmers. Without this, farm progress would mostly have come to a halt. The protracted agricultural malaise in Britain between 1880 and 1930, when this country still stuck to free market policies, belies the textbook theory that agriculture could have recovered without farm income supports (Koning, 1994; Ó Gráda, 1981).

Whereas farmers in developed countries were protected, however, African farmers were not. As developed countries, failing to combine protection with sufficient supply management, shifted their overproduction on to the world market, international agricultural prices were further depressed. Indeed, the price signals that African farmers received from world markets resembled those that European farmers had received in the 14th and 17th centuries, when low prices had forced them to invest as little as possible and fall back on production methods that were only sustainable within extensive agricultural systems. In Europe at the time this was an adjustment to a fall in population by Malthusian crisis and the Black Death. But Africa was exposed to similar price signals now that its population began to increase significantly. In this situation, only a sharp increase in both scale and innovation could have kept agricultural development on a sustainable pathway. But this was complicated because the specific evolution of Africa within the European dominated world system had reproduced traditional characteristics that hampered any sudden changes. Egalitarian inheritance norms, property rights in people rather than non-human assets, and fluid and personalist local political structures only allowed gradual adjustment (Goody, 1976; Platteau and Baland, 2001). The weight of these characteristics was reinforced because falling prices in international agricultural markets limited the proliferation of European settler farms or the evolution of larger African farms that could have enforced a more rapid modernisation. Africa's agriculture became even more of a smallholder agriculture than it already was.

The first consequences became noticeable around 1900 in places where population pressure was increased by land expropriation for white settlers. In parts of South Africa, ranching and commercial grain cultivation by black farmers fell into decline (Bundy, 1972). In parts of Tanzania, irrigated banana plantations made way for an exhaustive production of maize and cassava (Huijzendveld, 1997). After 1905, in some places the partial recovery of international agricultural prices led to dynamic development by black farmers. In Ghana they captured half the world cocoa market, in Uganda they launched into cotton, in Tanzania into cotton and coffee, in Shaba (Democratic Republic of Congo) into food crops for the mining centres (Munro, 1976). This development was coupled with the emergence of capitalist entrepreneurs and commercial mentalities (Iliffe, 1983). Some Ghanaian farmers hired European construction firms to build bridges to facilitate transport of their cocoa (Hill, 1986). However, from the end of the 1920s, prices dropped again and this development fell into decline. Many smaller farmers continued to expand production, but were forced to choose less sustainable farming methods.[5] Colonial government officials sounded the alarm about the increase in soil degradation in African smallholder agriculture. In the meantime, the price falls led to fierce rural protests.[6] But while Western governments reacted to such protests with protective measures, colonial governments in Africa gave scant support to farmers, and then mainly to the white settlers. After a boycott by Ghanaian cocoa farmers in 1938, a British government committee advised protection, but the opposite happened. Colonial authorities taxed export crops to finance projects that tried (mostly in vain) to make African farmers improve their agricultural practices (Munro, 1976).

There was another price recovery in the world market after the Second World War, which stimulated investment by the farmers. A well-known example was the spontaneous terracing in Machakos District in Kenya, where the farmers had previously resisted enforced terracing (Tiffen *et al.*, 1994). Also the degradation of natural resources at this time was still compensated for by expansion into hitherto unfarmed lands. At the end of the 1950s, Africa seemed to be in control: per capita income was higher than in Southern Asia. But international agricultural prices fell again while the room for new reclamation diminished.[7] Decolonisation brought no fundamental change in agricultural policy. The farmers were still saddled with a bureaucratic development policy, the costs of which rose when European officials were replaced by black intellectuals with even more ambitious plans. Moreover, the new officials were obliged to remain on good terms with their personal clientele, which encouraged nepotism and inefficient government services. The exclusive rights of white settlers to important cash crops were done away with and the mid-1970s saw once more a brief recovery in international agricultural prices. Even so, because of the increasing taxation of cash crops and rising energy prices most farmers hardly noticed. Only in Kenya, where the polit-

5 See for example Amanor, 1989, for Krobo district in Ghana; and Mackenzie, 1998 for wattle production in central Kenya.

6 See for example Miles, 1978, for Ghana; and Hyden, 1980, for Tanzania.

7 The space still available for extensive growth is often overestimated (Kauffman et al., 2000). Only in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern Sudan are there still large stretches of unused suitable soils.

ical class had its own interest in coffee and in keeping its prices closer to the world market level, did agricultural development receive a new stimulus. At the end of the 1970s international agricultural prices dropped once again. This was followed by a new rise in energy prices that raised fuel and fertiliser prices, a dip in the price of copper that drove thousands of mine workers in Southern Africa back to rural areas, and a debt crisis that caused further neglect of agricultural research and infrastructure. All this hampered on-farm investment in sustainable land management, so that ever more rural regions were sucked into a spiral of impoverishment and resource degradation.

The agrarian malaise thus arose from an interaction of endogenous dynamics in Africa and evolution of the world economy. On the one hand this resulted in the reproduction of inheritance rules and other local institutions that hindered any radical changes. On the other, a more gradual adjustment was blocked because international development had broken the traditional relationship between population growth and rising agricultural prices. In such circumstances only a supportive and protective policy could ensure the sustainable intensification of agriculture. In fact, the very opposite occurred: agriculture was milked dry for the benefit of an ineffective bureaucratic development policy, a process that had already begun in the colonial period. The post-colonial political make-up was important in that it did not correct this development but made it worse. Here, Africa differed from Asia, where agricultural development had also been complicated by low agricultural prices. But Asia's long history of demographic growth and agricultural intensification had produced more differentiated social structures and more ascetic and commercially oriented cultures, which encouraged strong farmer movements and governments that were more sensitive to longer-term objectives of national development. Several of Asia's post-colonial governments consciously supported and protected their agricultural sectors.[8]

Agrarian malaise and general development

To what extent is the agrarian malaise responsible for the general difficulties in Africa? Forty years ago Johnston and Mellor (1961) argued that an agricultural revolution was needed to boost general development in a country. Agriculture was required to supply the savings, labour, raw material and effective demand for the growth of industry and services. Johnston and Mellor's theory was supported by history: trade and industry have almost always developed in the wake of accelerated agricultural growth. The industrial revolution in both Europe and the US was also borne along by an upsurge in agricultural growth (Kuznets, 1966).

Subsequent research corroborated the Johnston-Mellor thesis. In particular, increase in farm household demand for locally produced non-tradables proved a major booster of non-agricultural growth (eg. Delgado *et al.*, 1999; Hazell and Roell, 1983). Unfortu-

8 The special instability of international rice markets may also have stimulated Asian governments to stabilise the domestic prices and encourage the production of their major food crop.

nately, in recent years many Western development experts have tended to ignore these findings. They believe that the theory is no longer applicable. Thanks to globalisation, they think, the demand impetus for development can also come from abroad. As a consequence, agriculture would no longer be essential for generating enough demand for industry and services to develop. The sector which would be the starting engine of modern economic growth would therefore depend on the comparative advantages available to a country.[9]

Within a standard economic model this argument cannot easily be disputed. Even so, it does not find much empirical support. The recent rise of the Asian Tigers was once more heralded by successful agricultural development. On the other hand, agricultural stagnation in developing countries goes hand in hand with sluggish general growth (Binswanger and Landell-Mills, 1995). The situation in Africa makes that painfully obvious. Instead of ignoring this empirical connection because the theory has not as yet found a place for it, it seems better to search for an explanation. Personally, I can see two possible causes: the importance of the home market as a breeding ground for export activities, and the positive external effects of agricultural development on the social capital of other sectors.

In the first place, Michael Porter has shown that successful export industries almost always begin in the home market, which serves as a school for businesses to gain experience and develop the contacts and know-how necessary to compete in the international market (Porter, 1990). One consequence of this is that successful export sectors will only emerge after sufficient demand for their products on the home market has developed. Where the majority of the population in the country earns from the land, this is only possible if agriculture grows.

In the second place, industry and services are sensitive to transaction costs, which makes them vulnerable to the lack of *social capital*: mutual trust, social relations and the norms that are required to lower transaction costs (Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000). Getting agricultural development going makes fewer demands on social capital, because it is less dependent on transactions with those outside the circle of family and neighbours. In its turn, successful agricultural development helps to widen social relations and mutual trust between people, and to breed management skills that can mitigate problems between workers, employers and business partners. Via transactions with non-farmers and the mobility between sectors, this has positive impacts for social capital in the wider economy.[10]

In the context of agrarian malaise these positive effects are absent, and negative effects arise. The malaise leads to the breakdown of social capital. African villages have many kinds of social networks that support their members and reduce risks. But such networks do not always play a positive role. They are often a source of conflict, nepo-

9 For more on this discussion, see Timmer, 1988.
10 A similar argument is made by Dawe in Timmer, 1995.

tism and uncontrollable exercising of power (Berry, 1993; Ikelegbe, 2001; Patterson, 1998). The possible connection with the agrarian malaise can be explained by insights from game theory. This shows that the outcomes of evolutionary co-operation games are often dependent on the pay-off structure. A downward spiral of impoverishment and degradation of natural resources can reduce the pay-off from co-operation. As a consequence, prisoners' dilemma-type problems (where self-interested behaviour locks people into a mutually harmful equilibrium) in social intercourse and the management of natural resources are not so easily resolved. Networking strategies can then easily become battles over resources between rival groups, which can lead to nepotism and client favouritism, and to vicious cycles of mistrust and conflicts that can undermine social capital (cf. Ostrom, 1998). This in turn leads to negative external effects in the rest of the economy via intersectorial transactions, mobility and the close connections that African peasants maintain with their fellow villagers in the city.

One indication of the growth of conflict and mistrust in African village society is the increasing allegations of witchcraft. In the 1960s, anthropologists saw belief in witches as a rather innocent phenomenon that was slowly disappearing. But many recent studies indicate that witch-hunting in rural areas of Africa is flaring up again (eg. Douglas, 1999; Geschiere, 1995). If allegations of witchcraft are an indicator of social tensions, as is often thought, this would seem to indicate an erosion of social capital.

The effects of agrarian malaise on the demand for products and social capital in other sectors hinder the development of industry and services for the home market. Because of this there is no domestic breeding ground for businesses that could eventually compete on the world market. Moreover, such businesses are even more sensitive to transaction costs, and thus to the negative external effects of agrarian malaise on their social capital. Agrarian malaise leads to mass exodus from agriculture. But because robust non-agricultural growth is lacking this leads to a proliferation of marginal activities, a jostling for jobs in the public sector, and an uncontrolled growth of mega-cities rather than a balanced pattern of urbanisation. As a result, network battles extend to the city, leading to corruption, inefficient government services, and the undermining of democracy. This, in turn, reverberates in agriculture where deterioration of roads and the extension infrastructure, coupled with armed conflict, further hinder sustainable intensification.

Is there a way out?

Some see agrarian malaise as a reality that should be accepted. They look for the solution in the development of services and trade in order to absorb the mass exodus from agriculture. In this way they see the informal sector as a breeding ground, and the network skills of many Africans as important human capital for this development. This vision ignores the depressing effect of agrarian malaise on the markets for non-agricultural trade, the marginal character of many informal activities and the group selfinterest behind many networking activities. It is true that communication skills and small-scale trade and industry could play an important role in positive development. But to make that a reality, the direction of social dynamics must be changed.

If my argument in the preceding sections is correct, a primary requirement is to revitalise agriculture. This demands sharp U-turns in policy. Public investment is needed in roads, schools, health centres and agricultural extension services. The effectiveness of agricultural research and agricultural education must be enlarged by participatory co-operation of farmers and experts. But by far the most important condition is the improvement of price ratios for farmers. The structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s pursued such improvement by normalising exchange rates, privatising state-owned companies and liberalising internal markets. But because farmers were not better protected from low world market prices, this approach remained inadequate. The experiences of the former model country, Ghana, illustrate this (Box 1).

Box 1. The Case of Ghana

At first, structural adjustment seemed to be working very well for Ghana. Prior to the reforms, in 1983, the cocoa farmers were only being paid one-seventh of world market prices. Due to devaluation of the cedi and reductions in export taxation, this was raised to more than half. The collapsed cocoa production recovered almost to the level it had reached in the mid-seventies, with positive effects for the rest of the economy. But further growth was hindered by a fall in international cocoa prices. New export products such as fruit were unable to compensate for this. In the meantime, import duty on food was lowered and fertiliser subsidies abandoned, so that the majority of farmers were still struggling with unfavourable prices. This, in turn, caused stagnation in most agricultural activities, and thus industry. The only growth was in mini-businesses, trade and services, but that was coupled with a fall in productivity and incomes as a result of crowding. In such conditions, further retrenchment in the public sector proved infeasible, resulting in new government shortages, inflation and a general slump in growth in the 1990s.

Sources: Leechor, 1994; Pearce, 1992; Bentsi-Enchill, 1998; ISSER, 2000; CEPA, 2001

The Ghanaian example shows that market reforms can pep up a collapsed economy, but that real development is not possible without more improvement of price ratios for farmers. Many Western experts believe that such improvement must come from further liberalisation of international agricultural trade within the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which must broaden entry to Western markets and end dumping by Western countries. They forget that, in a liberalised world market, the inexorable influence of modern technology will continue to generate oversupply and low prices. This will still hamper agricultural development in Africa where limited productivity makes the cost price of agricultural products, in spite of cheap labour and land, usually higher than that in developed countries (Mazoyer and Roudart, 1998). Moreover, these Western experts ignore the actual trend in international trade policy. Beneath the surface of the trade conflict between the US and the European Union (EU) a *de facto* compromise is emerging, which materialises in the blue and green boxes of the WTO agreement on agriculture and in the way these are used by both super powers.[11] The bottom line is the substitution of direct income subsidies for price supports as a way of escaping production restraints that would otherwise be unavoidable by the elimination of export subsidies. This is not liberalisation, but a shift from open to disguised dumping. Both blocks export huge amounts of agricultural products against world market prices below their own cost prices, and use subsidies to bridge the difference. In the US, in spite of the liberal rhetoric, a quarter of farmers' incomes comes directly from the treasury, and the EU is moving in the same direction. The new $160 billion US farm bill has dashed any naïve hopes that this situation was a transitional stage on the way to real liberalisation.

Not too much should be expected of widening entry to Western markets. Many African countries already have preferential entry to the EU market under the Cotonou (formerly Lomé) treaty. The EU has announced that it will expand this policy and extend it to all the least developed countries ('Everything-but-Arms' initiative).[12] But replacing price support with income subsidies within the Union will significantly erode the value of this preferential entry. Instead of a market with protected prices, African countries will soon have entry to a market where they will receive little more than world market prices (Meijl and van Tongeren, 2001). In addition, the rise in consumer incomes in Western countries will induce increasingly stricter food safety requirements. This development corresponds to fundamental economic mechanisms (Engel's law), and is therefore unlikely to be stopped. Food safety requirements can raise significant obstacles for farmers in developing countries. Chain formation and public-private co-operation could be an answer to this problem, but only a small number of farmers will be able to become involved. For the others entry to Western markets will remain limited.

Much more is required to improve the price ratios for African farmers. The simplest way is to introduce or raise protective import duty on agricultural imports.

Because of their stagnating agriculture, most African countries have become net-importers of food. Protective import duty is therefore an effective way of raising domestic agricultural prices. Two birds can thus be killed with one stone. As a direct effect, prices for products at farm level will rise. Contrary to popular belief, the internal market for food products is reasonably competitive. In addition, domestic agriculture will become more competitive in relation to imports, so that public and private investment in roads, storage and domestic agro-industries will become more attractive. Such investment will gradually

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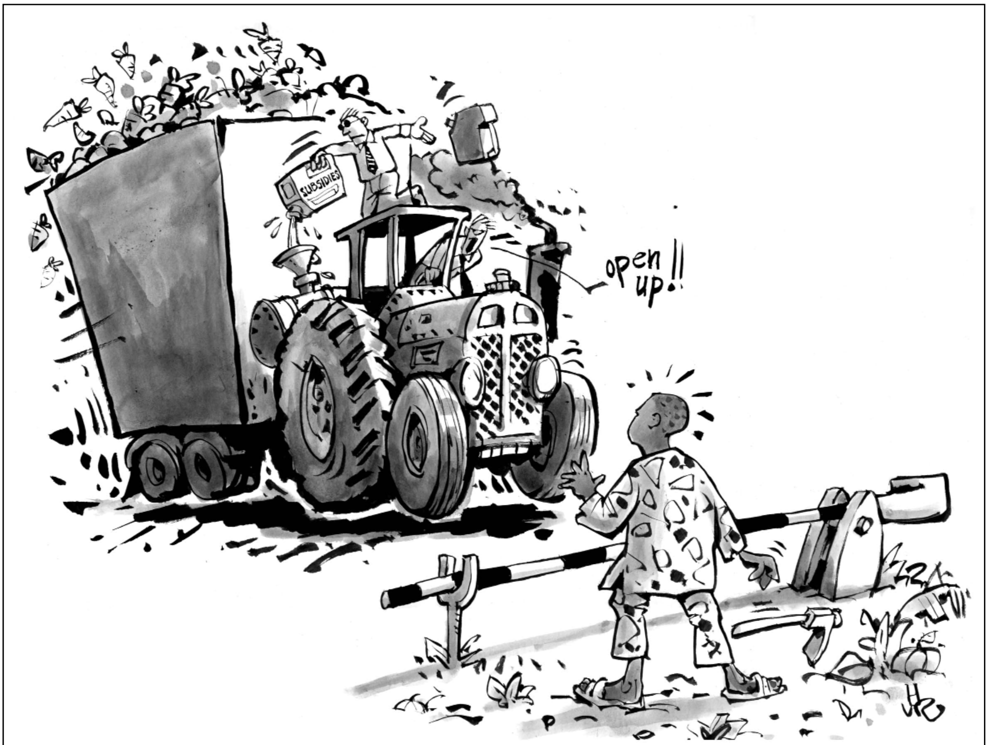
11 The 'green box' contains the domestic support measures that are allowed by the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, including the 'decoupled' allowances that are widely used by the US to support its farm incomes. The 'blue box' contains domestic support measures that are still allowed if coupled to supply management, and include the hectare and livestock payments that are used by the EU.

12 The original proposal by the European Commission in 2000 envisaged the elimination of tariffs on all imports (excepting arms) from all least-developed countries. Meanwhile, economic interests in Europe have enforced transitional regulations for various products, including sugar.

increase and further improve price ratios for farmers. In addition, import duty provides government revenue, which, in theory at least because this requires political will, can be used to pay for public investment and to compensate poor net-buyers of food. By investing in roads as employment projects, both things can be combined, and the purchasing demand for agricultural products will be given an extra stimulus.

Support of agricultural prices has been an important element in the policy mix of successful East Asian countries like South Korea and Taiwan. This policy has been represented as a result of industrial growth, but there are good reasons to believe that the causation also goes in the opposite direction (Timmer, 1995). African leaders would be well advised to study these Asian examples. Indeed, African delegations at the WTO are beginning to plead for more flexibility to protect their agriculture against cheap imports. Mozambique has successfully resisted the demands of the International Monetary Fund to do away with protective import duty on sugar. On the other hand, many Western development economists continue to advise against protective import duty, because it would lead to higher costs for poor consumers and fewer stimuli for innovation, and divert labour and capital that could be better used for other sectors. Besides, these experts fear that import duty would breed pressure groups that use scarce resources for defending privileges instead of for productive objectives. Arguments for tariff protection are therefore more or less taboo in the international development discussion. This is fair enough where industry is concerned, where tariffs have often protected inefficient businesses.



Indeed, expert aversion is partly explained by the role that (industrial) protection has played in trade policies that hurt agriculture. Nevertheless, in agriculture itself many objections to import duties do not apply. There, better prices do not lead to less but to *more* efficiency: more innovation, less over-exploitation of soil, and better use of labour – certainly as long as the development of manufacturing remains disappointing (Timmer, 1995). Studies which suggest that countries with a restrictive trade policy generally develop less quickly fail to examine the difference in effects of industrial and agricultural protection. Besides, powerful lobbies are not to be feared in the agricultural sector of poor developing countries. As Mancur Olson has pointed out, the farmers are too far removed from political power (Olson, 1985).

The drawbacks of agricultural import duty for poor consumers should also not be exaggerated. According to international trade theory, protecting a labour-intensive sector such as agriculture will lead to higher incomes for workers. For many poor consumers this will compensate for higher food prices. This is the more true when protective import duty helps agriculture to play a role in boosting economic development. Analysis of household surveys suggests that by raising agricultural prices, poverty may be significantly reduced within a short period of time (Appleton, 1998). This is partly because the poor are disproportionately concentrated in the rural areas where they benefit directly from the employment effect of agricultural growth. Besides, rural growth has more impact on urban poverty reduction than urban growth has (Mellor, 2001).

On closer inspection, most of the objections of Western development economists hold no water. Historical experiences in Western countries themselves (eg. Germany before World War One) suggest that tariff protection against cheap agricultural imports can sometimes contribute to successful development (Bairoch, 1989; Koning, 1994). In any case, there can be little justification for declaring import duty in Africa as taboo as long as the European Union and the United States continue the disguised dumping of agricultural products by means of direct payments.

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