

The Forgotten Farmer: Redefining Africa's Future through Ecological Transition and Endogenous Solutions

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Abstract: Africa is at a critical juncture, needing proactive social policies to drive both ecological and economic transitions. Farmers are the hardest hit by climate change, with global warming diminishing soil productivity by 20% since 1980. Urban centres have reached saturation, unable to absorb the influx from rural areas. The resultant population pressures and resource constraints escalate internal conflicts and stimulate migrations out of the continent. Moreover, modern “development” policies have weakened African economies and exacerbated dependence on external entities. An alternate path suggests embracing Africa’s inherent “commons,” which lie between the inefficient market and weak state governance. Leveraging local solidarity and the creativity of the youth, especially in harnessing digital technology, can offer localized solutions. Sustainable energy access and modern agroecological techniques can revitalize the rural landscape. Protectionism, prioritizing local resources and massive public investment, can invigorate the agro-ecological revolution. Remunerating Africa fairly for its environmental services is pivotal. A shift is essential, with policies focusing on holistic human development and international “rational solidarity.”

Keywords: Africa, Climate Change, Economic development, Rural Development, Farmers, Migrations

Africa is at a crossroads: without proactive social policies to improve people’s well-being, there will be no economic development and no ecological revolution. If such a fork in the road is not taken, we will be heading, slowly or rapidly, towards chaos - and this will extend far beyond Africa’s borders.

In Africa, as elsewhere, the ecological transition must be accompanied by a social transition towards greater justice. The most disadvantaged, although they are the least responsible, are the most vulnerable to climate change, because they lack the resources to adapt to it.

Farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are among the first to be affected by climate

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change, which is first and foremost attacking soil activity: according to the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, global warming has already reduced their productivity by 20 per cent since 1980, particularly in the tropics where conditions are more extreme and soils more fragile. This affects three-quarters of the world's farmers, who still produce nearly 80 per cent of what we consume in sub-Saharan Africa (B. Schmitt and al.2021).

Africa is, therefore, one of the regions where the challenges pile up: while its population is set to double again in the next twenty-five years, despite the demographic transition that is underway, the deterioration in productivity and fertility over the last 40 years has reached the limits that can be tolerated by African peasant farmers, who are among the continent's most forgotten. The countryside has been abandoned. Cities have been preferred in the name of political stability and progress without peasants, but they have reached the limits of their capacity and can no longer absorb the rural exodus. These efforts had led to improved techniques - agrochemicals, but also a combination of agriculture and livestock farming - and to an increase in the population since 1960, through the extension of crops onto the pastures of livestock farmers and forests (C. d'Alessandro and al. 2016).

For those left behind, whose numbers are set to grow, the future will be one of migration out of the continent - since internal migration has already taken place towards the cities or the richest countries - which has so far been contained as best it can. For those who remain, the future will be one of conflicts over resources degenerating into 'inter-ethnic', regional

and intercontinental conflicts, in the shadow of terrorism. Such conflicts have already begun between farmers and herders in the Sahel and Central Africa - or between rivals over mines, as in the DRC and Rwanda.

To darken the picture still further, we are witnessing an increase in resentment and identity-based divisions, sometimes exploited by populists. They are the flip side of a lack of prospects for the future and the demand for a better life.

Young people - who did not experience the African independence of the 1960s, but rather long authoritarian regimes - are revolting today, not only in the cities but also in the countryside. If the democratic impetus is broken and concrete responses are not found, the unstable balance of the continent's geopolitics will be threatened - and conflicts could even be exported beyond the continent.

Yet these two areas of public policy are complementary rather than antagonistic. Particularly in Africa, where social practices and collective imaginations have to some extent resisted the commodification of human relations and the damage caused in the wake of the liberalisation of trade flows (K. Nubukpo 2022).

Failure of Development Policies

Let's go back to the cities and the failures of "development": African economies, agricultures and institutions are now at a point of extreme weakness, which it is hard to imagine getting any worse: just think of the explosion in small-scale informal jobs, the non-existence of industrial jobs, and the income from rents captured by the political elite and the administrative class, who share less

and less with the impoverished rural population from which they come.

What's more, the extraversion of economies and the predation of resources continued under independence, despite attempts - often nipped in the bud - by a handful of African executives trained at the time. Later, a new world economic order increased the openness of trade on the pretext of a perfect and unsurpassable theory: under unbearable competition - high agricultural and industrial productivity, subsidies - it asphyxiated any desire for endogenous development, without ensuring a livable satellite position. Africa has found itself in a situation of dependence that is only getting worse.

Theories in favour of the liberalisation of flows nevertheless left the free movement of people in the shade. This unthinkable fact was managed a posteriori by Western countries as part of an "every man for himself" policy in Africa; they had no hesitation in supporting authoritarian regimes - gendarmes of upstream flows. By way of comparison, no fewer than 60 million Europeans migrated between 1850 and 1930 to bridge the divide created by industrialisation and demographic growth (K. Nubukpo 2019).

Method that Needs to be Revived: Provoking Solidarity through the Commons

What kind of future, and even more so, what kind of ecological revolution, what kind of "economic and social progress" and what kind of environmental protection, is conceivable for the continent when we can no longer cover Africa with 2 billion

tractors, cars and air conditioners, and when the impoverishment of the people, particularly the peasants, is accelerating - without access to water, without toilet facilities, without electricity, without motorisation, and without industry either?

Providing answers - from the local to the global - to the major issues that threaten the survival of populations and world peace today is our main challenge. The human community is no longer blind: with a third transition, digital technology, everything is known, all the time. And misery is becoming unbearable for those who have nothing compared to those who have everything. Because rich countries are not stingy with their misery and miserable people, clearly not knowing how to share abundance so well.

We need more jobs and a more dignified life for all, in other words, civil human rights, and this will require a redefinition of priorities and public policies based on the endogenous strengths of a continent that has no shortage of them. To achieve this, it is imperative to bring about a change that makes development, environmental sustainability and well-being for all not only compatible but above all complementary: it would then be a question of a truly "sustainable" future, i.e. one that is bearable for all - and capable of being "supported", in Africa as in the West.

It's not a question of renouncing so-called modern well-being - although this has been aided by colonisation, exploitation and a quasi-religious hold on minds - but, in order to base public

policies on a long-term strategy rather than a headlong rush, we need to redefine human well-being in terms of a different relationship with the living world. To do this, we need to recapture the best of ancient times when human beings knew themselves to be living beings among others, an ideal now lost in our materialistic universe. In the face of the dreaded collapses, the stakes are high: we need to restore an enviable and desirable future, in the South as in the North.

In Africa, endogenous forces exist to channel these new impulses. I have called them the commons or the commons to be developed. These forces bring into full play the different levels of democratic subsidiarity adapted to each of the issues at stake. The commons to be promoted lie between the market, which is too inefficient, and the State, which is too weak and all the more weakened by structural adjustment and its dependence on the interests of multinationals and major powers.

In some places, life continues to be based on the common good. This is illustrated by social practices, collective symbolism and dynamic family solidarity - the current perversion of which is tribal solidarity. This local solidarity could be used as part of a bottom-up democracy committed to the inclusiveness of people and the reproducibility of local practices.

What's more, we need to make the most of the inventiveness and creativity of young people, who, with limited resources, are reinventing African low-tech every day. Digital technology and mobile phones have proved to be powerful tools for accessing information:

we need to cultivate economically and socially useful applications.

On the economic side, the economic needs of large-scale public policies should be financed by common currencies - freed from the comfortable but counterproductive parity of the euro - and by the unused savings of the middle classes, guaranteed by international public funding and backed by regional integration processes. The latter would be more relevant than integration on the scale of inherited colonial borders alone. Access for all to decentralised sustainable energy - solar, wind, geothermal, hydro - is an entirely achievable objective in this context, and a clear factor in sustainable endogenous development, combined with the well-being of populations. The ability of peasant farmers to move towards more productive techniques without motorisation or aggressive agrochemicals, based on ancient agricultural practices and still diverse land use patterns, is no longer in question - although these practices are threatened by private appropriation and international land grabbing. These techniques could develop a plant heritage that is more resistant to climatic variability than the standard technical packages of the "green revolution", but also a heritage that is less dependent on energy-intensive inputs from multinationals.

At the same time, the richness of the continent's biodiversity and the environmental services provided to the world by its vast primary forests and its peasantry of small-scale producers are still undervalued; today's farmers are too poor to degrade their land using agrochemicals

and mechanical means. The continent, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, is virtually carbon neutral, although it is under greater attack from climate change - but it is also under pressure to remain so, because of poverty and global environmental constraints.

Implementing African Solutions: New Public Policies for the Continent through International “rational solidarity”

In my last book (K. Nubukpo 2022, op.cit.) I developed the main lines of an African solution in the current context, based on the strengths mentioned above. Firstly, the only significant source of employment is in the countryside: the agricultural sector is the only way to reconcile the growing scarcity of fossil fuels with the well-being of all - in other words, it would make it possible to achieve social justice. This involves the agro-ecological intensification of small farmers' land, in order to double current low yields and enable them to feed the population and themselves. Through agroecological and agroforestry science, the combination of low-tech and high-tech knowledge and techniques makes it possible to make infinite use of the sun's energy and the nitrogen in the air, to maximise water and the resistance of biodiversity to climatic hazards and parasites, to make sustainable use of the mineral elements in the soil via the roots, and to improve organic fertility and carbon-fixing capacity.

Secondly, on this basis, in the south as in the north, short supply chains and local consumption should become the

rule, encouraging the processing of local resources by craftsmen and industrialists. The growth of multiple dependencies must therefore be curbed.

This far-reaching programme has its conditions: it's what I call neo-protectionism, or rather “fair trade” - not dogmatism, but economic pragmatism. On these crucial issues, we need to protect African farmers and processors from unsustainable competition from developed countries, by taking advantage of a protectionist tax system. We also need to encourage consumers - who are already well-aculturated - to give priority to the general interest and help the poorest people in the cities to cope with soaring food prices.

Finally, there needs to be massive public investment in the modernisation of the countryside and the agro-ecological revolution in peasant farming - in short, a “doubly green” revolution. Life in the countryside must finally mean education, health and sustainable electrification; it will also come at the price of a rapid demographic transition, progress in education coupled with progress in women's rights - through education for girls and boys, at least up to secondary school level and in good conditions.

To contribute to this huge ecological investment, the environmental services provided by the continent, in particular by its farmers, must be remunerated at their fair value: by not deforesting its soils any more, but by practising reforestation; but also by massively storing carbon in soils and vegetation and by developing sustainable energies. Let's not forget the commitments reiterated by developed

countries at the UN since 1970, which have hardly been respected: 0.7 per cent of public development aid, the use of Green Funds, Loss and Damage Funds or Biodiversity Funds.

In my view, this is the solution for Africa, at a time when the 2030 development goals - an end to food insecurity and an end to poverty - which remain non-binding, will probably not be met by the set date. What we need is a far-reaching change, a transition of the kind called for by the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Global crises – banking (M. Amato and K. Nubukpo 2020, K. Nubukpo ed.2021), health, war-related - have shown the vulnerability of the global system, and that of African countries in particular. The spread of conflict in the Sahel and Central Africa is hardly cause for optimism: critical thresholds have been crossed. The West's support for authoritarian regimes considered to be stable and complacent does not help matters - because young people are hungry and ideas are circulating.

More generally, it's a battle of ideas. We need to convince people against the pervasive illusions of "development" without human development, fostered by the multinationals; and also against the general ignorance of the daily lives of half the African population, which is considered backwards - a lack of knowledge that has been cultivated by decades of praise for agribusiness. Finally, we must defend ourselves against

the bashing of ecology, defeatism and withdrawal.

If the right of every individual to a dignified life were not already a sufficient argument for change; if the responsibility of each and every one of us for the fate of a billion human beings still on a survival diet were not enough, we should be hammering home the fact that such a change must be made, at the very least, in the name of international "rational solidarity".

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