

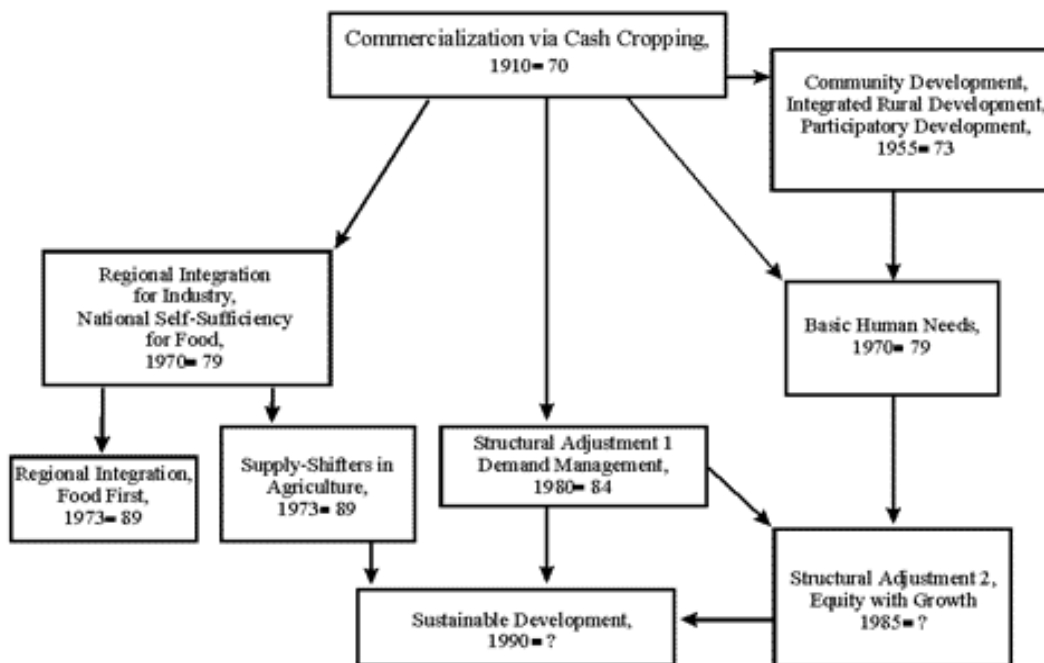
Africa's Changing Agricultural Development Strategies

by Christopher L. Delgado

Sub-Saharan Africa has often been viewed by the development field as a homogenous entity with common problems requiring common strategies. Most countries in the region gained independence from European colonial rule in the early 1960s, but the process of forming agricultural strategies began much earlier. Agricultural strategies are perhaps the most important component of overall development strategies in a continent where on average agriculture still accounts for 70 percent of employment, 40 percent of exports, and 33 percent of GDP.

During the last 25 years, African policymakers have been bombarded with often conflicting advice on agricultural development strategy from an increasing array of international development agencies. This advice has been motivated by frequently divergent theoretical views of how agricultural development works and how it affects overall economic welfare. More than anywhere else in the world, most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been heavily influenced by a relatively small group of donor agencies and expatriate thinkers in the allocation of public goods investments (including those affecting agriculture) and in the elaboration of development strategies. During this time, the presence of local agricultural specialists has been limited, local institutional development has been weak, and strong government has often been absent. This has led to at least nine qualitatively different dominant agricultural paradigms since the 1960s, all heavily influenced by actors outside Africa. Generally sequential in time, these paradigms have been applied evenly across the region, taking little note of country-specific conditions (Figure 1).

Figure 1—Dominant paradigms of agricultural development in Africa



The Chronology of Agricultural Paradigms

The first coherent strategy, *commercialization via cash cropping* (1910-70), began under colonial rule and took off in earnest after the Second World War, during times of improving world commodity prices. This was primarily a growth strategy, focusing on raising productivity in areas of comparative advantage through technical assistance, extension, and capital transfers from abroad. Under this paradigm, agriculture was viewed as a source of resources for industrialization.

While cash cropping benefited both rich and poor, the numbers of absolutely poor people still grew, so in the 1970s the goals of equity and poverty alleviation entered explicitly into the agricultural equation. The concepts of *community development* (1955-73) and *participatory development* (and later *integrated rural development*) that had entered development ideology in Africa around the time of preparation for decolonization began to take a stronger hold. Community development placed increased emphasis on the schooling, skills, and health of agricultural laborers and promoted cottage industry. These schemes were still financed, however, through the old agricultural paradigm of export and cash cropping.

The basic *human needs* (1970-79) paradigm took these ideas further to argue for a direct approach to meeting the basic needs of the poor. Cash cropping had failed to stop the growth of poverty, urbanization and urban poverty were on the rise, and Africa was suffering from a major drought and also experiencing a major expansion in development assistance. The basic human needs strategy emphasized smallholder farmers and food production rather than export cropping, more for distributive than for growth objectives. In fact the limitation of the basic human needs paradigm was the absence of any strategy for achieving short- and medium-run growth. Agriculture became a passive supplier of food and capital to other sectors.

Concurrent with the basic human needs strategy was the *regional integration in industry, national self-sufficiency in food* paradigm (1970-79). The post-1973 deceleration in growth of world trade and appreciating real exchange rates discouraged export production and resulted in increased food imports. Nontradable traditional foods became costlier relative to imported grains. All these factors led to the shift of focus from export agriculture to industrial imports and regional integration. Although the main thrust of this paradigm was toward industry, within agriculture the focus was the same as that of basic human needs, advocating a shift from cash cropping to food production and to smallholders. These paradigms of the 1970s viewed agriculture as a resource pool, much as the cash croppers did, but provided no new incentives for increased production.

Export agriculture and emphasis on indirect economic mechanisms reentered the limelight of the strategy debate with the *structural adjustment 1--demand management* paradigm (1980-84), based on World Bank structural adjustment programs. A reaction to the unsustainable budget deficits and foreign exchange shortages of the 1970s, the structural adjustment programs typically focused on correcting the artificially distorted price incentives in favor of producers and on devaluation and fiscal austerity measures. Hotly debated, structural adjustment was an internally consistent and theoretically based paradigm that could be implemented by policy reform rather than expensive investment. As an agricultural paradigm, however, it was essentially passive and failed to result in clear, politically legitimate expressions of agricultural and other development strategies in most African countries. It was also vehemently denounced by organizations such as the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank. However, no paradigm since structural adjustment has questioned the need for macroeconomic change to bring about successful agricultural development.

The reaction to structural adjustment led to the emergence of three different paradigms in the mid- to late 1980s. *Supply shifters in agriculture* (1973-89) reemerged, focusing on boosting food production (which made it fit in with the basic human needs-type strategies) after the style of the Asian Green Revolution. This paradigm emphasized public investment in research, extension, and infrastructure (in contrast to structural adjustment), but it also supported the market liberalization promoted by the structural adjustment paradigm. Unlike the old supply-based paradigms, the emphasis here was on institutional and human capacity building, in addition to technology development. Like its intellectual precursors, however, it did not offer much assistance to the lower-potential areas, which are particularly numerous in Africa.

Although the supply shifters paradigm is the dominant development paradigm for agriculture in much of the world, in Africa donor agencies have begun to move away from this paradigm because of concerns about poverty and sustainability.

Another paradigm, *regional integration 2, with food first* (1973-89), a reinvention of regional integration in industry, came as a reaction to the rising world agricultural prices and continuing growth of food imports. This paradigm not only stressed food self-sufficiency, but also extended to food the arguments used to protect industry in the earlier paradigm and attempted to bring food production under regional protection arrangements. This was an unrealistic paradigm based on a vague vision of the European Community transported to Africa and was never implemented, despite heavy promotion by some donors.

Increasing rural poverty and suffering led several international agencies to seek alternatives to the mainly macroeconomic adjustment promoted by structural adjustment programs and led to *structural adjustment--equity with growth* (1985-?): macroeconomic adjustment with programs to mitigate the impact on the poor. Along with emphasizing the supply shifters in agriculture, structural adjustment 2 focuses on the potential for labor-intensive growth in rural areas, where most of the poor are still concentrated.

The current post-cold war paradigm is *sustainable development* (1990-?), and it is still developing. Sustainable development subscribes to the policy reforms of structural adjustment 1 but also focuses on the widespread degradation of the agricultural resource base in Africa, participatory mobilization of rural people, and the need to support nongovernmental organizations to reduce transaction costs in rural areas. Followers of the emerging sustainable development paradigm believe that rapid population growth, agricultural income stagnation, and environmental degradation constitute a nexus of problems that must be resolved in an integrated manner. Agricultural research, human capital formation, investment policies, and sustainable intensification are again being emphasized. Controversies and divergent views abound as always, and there is no reason to believe that this paradigm is the final one.

Leading into the Future

Agricultural development paradigms have gone back and forth between defining agriculture as the engine for growth through cash and export cropping, and emphasizing food production, import substitution, and food self-sufficiency. Each paradigm has left an intellectual heritage, and today there is some consensus on the issues of importance. Development practitioners now generally agree on the need to increase agricultural productivity, lower high transportation and rural transfer costs, increase rural employment, integrate remote and lower-potential areas (about 80 percent of cropped area) into the national growth strategies, and ensure that Africans design and implement future strategies.

The degree of African intellectual input in constructing the dominant paradigms since the 1960s has been distressingly low, although it is growing rapidly. This fact is undoubtedly important in explaining such radical shifts in dominant development paradigms over just 25 years. Another factor is the weak legitimacy of many African governments until fairly recently, which has hindered them in formulating and implementing rural strategies.

The elaboration of viable paradigms of agricultural development in different parts of Africa that can address the complex issues raised here will require local ownership, broad knowledge, and unwavering commitment within the region. Perhaps the most critical need today is investment in local human capital and the institutional capacity of agricultural research and policy groups, so that they can become equal partners in formulating appropriate agricultural development strategies for their countries.

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“A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment” is an initiative of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to develop a shared vision and a consensus for action on how to meet future world food needs while reducing poverty and protecting the environment. Through the 2020 Vision initiative, IFPRI is bringing together divergent schools of thought on these issues, generating research, and identifying recommendations. The *2020 Briefs* present information on various aspects of the issues.