

Food Security in Africa and Asia: Strategies for Small-scale Agricultural Development

Henk Bakker, Cabi, Oxfordshire, 2011, 236 pp., ISBN 978 – 1- 84593- 841-3 Hardback

Reviewed by Franklin Obeng-Odoom*

The global food crisis that hit us a couple of years ago was typified by a rise in food prices. The prices of cereals went through the roof. The price of wheat and maize doubled in the space of two years while for rice, prices tripled in the space of a few months (Headey, 2011). Africa and Asia were the worst hit continents. There, some 105 million people were added to the category of people usually labelled poor – as a result of the crisis (Agarwal, 2011). Experts predict that the situation will worsen in the future. In South Asia alone, an estimated 50 per cent decline in the production of wheat is anticipated around 2050 (Hanjra and Qureshe, 2010). A political economic analysis of the situation is useful, not only to understand causes and consequences, but also to appreciate distribution over space and time, across regions and between genders.

Food Security in Africa and Asia attempts to look at some of these issues in its 10 chapters. The focus is on small-scale agricultural development. It identifies population pressure, poverty, land degradation and climate change as the principal causes of food insecurity in the world development regions of Africa and Asia (p.2). A key argument of the book is that it is possible to attain food security through empowering subsistence farmers (p.3). It is the small family farm that holds the key to attaining food security. There is an explicit urban focus too (pp. 26-27): Food security in the countryside makes it possible for industrial workers in cities to attain food supplies easily and at reasonable prices. In turn, their productivity is enhanced and potential for exports improved, as urban industrial workers become ‘healthy’ and ‘energetic’. Consequently economic growth can expand in the country as a whole.

The book considers several strategies for improving food security, including a blue-print, expert led approaches (pp. 33-72). The preferred approach of Bakker is bottom up and farmer-led approach or what the author calls a ‘participatory learning and action (PLA)’ model (pp.15-17). It is only when farmers lead that technocrats can support through a process called ‘reverse learning’ (p.30). Within this model, the author makes specific suggestions about how to improve the different farming systems (e.g., multiple cropping and shifting cultivation), including how to avert problems of erosion.

Also, there are suggestions on how to allocate land among different competing uses. The book puts the case for using marginal land for the growth of biofuels in order to reserve the best land for food production (p.3). The role of government is to support – not lead - these local efforts. Quite apart from its authoritarian features, Bakker argues, a government-led centralised approach is likely to fail because of the great variation in soil types and other local conditions which bureaucrats do not know. Thus, farmers are at the core of solving the food security crisis. They should lead and

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governments and other actors should follow. However, Bakker acknowledges that there are areas where governments can take more active roles. The book recognises the need to keep food prices low to support urban workers but simultaneously notes that prices must be reasonably high to incentivise local farmers to produce. That tension, according to the author, could be resolved by the governments in Africa and Asia through a system of producer and consumer subsidies (pp. 195-196).

This practical, local character of the book is both an asset and a liability. As an example, the book's stance on supporting small scale farmers is consistent with research findings in Africa about the high productivity levels of small scale farmers, but does not go far enough to consider the politics about the use of subsidies in the Doha Round of the WTO and the position of African countries. In what ways will increasing subsidies influence the use of retaliatory measures by some of the developed countries that subsidise their farmers and what strategies can be considered by countries in Africa? Another liability of the 'local perspective' is the talk of effective land management. Without doing a careful political economic analysis of the resurgence in global land grabs and how that, in turn, affects small farmers' ability to sustain their work, as Walden Bello does in his book *The Food Wars*, pro-poor land management looks like a mirage.

There are other minor problems. For a book that is aimed at policy makers as the primary audience (p.1), it is too jargony with frequent advice to readers to 'see glossary' (e.g., pp. 6, 8, 9, 138) and resort to the dictionary to explain 'terms' such as 'insight' (p.15). Most of the definitions are helpful, but a few, such as 'maize' is 'a tall plant' (p.112), are vague. The HDI definition that uses GDP/capita and enrolment rate (p.207) is no longer valid, as the UNDP now uses GNP/capita and the completion rate for its calculations. In the opinion of this reviewer, chapter 8 should have come much earlier because it is in this chapter that specific characteristics of the farming systems and food situation in sub Saharan Africa and South East Asia are more carefully analysed.

Otherwise, this book is interesting. It is well-written and carefully presented. The author's use of 'conceptual maps' and annotated diagrams to explain complex problems is helpful, as are the photos that accompany the various chapters. The glossary provides a quick overview of some of the ideas in the food security literature. The author draws on his experience as a field agriculturalist in Africa and Asia and other places in the world developing regions to consider the growing and pervasive problem of food insecurity, its consequences, and strategies for reform.

How to make those strategies relevant to cities to collapse the duality that the book talks about - urban areas as consumers and rural areas as producers - remains a challenge that readers of this journal, especially this special issue, need to take up.

References

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