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Current trends and present economic, social and political conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that the region is confronted with a serious crisis of development. This acute crisis has far-reaching implications, as it threatens not only the welfare and existence of broad segments of the population but also the development base on which future generations will depend.

Without reference to specific causes or general background, the current crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa can be briefly characterised by the following features and indicators:

- Most African states south of the Sahara are among the Least Developed Countries of the world, with a GNP per capita of less than \$650.¹ By contrast with other developing countries such as India and China, however, rates of growth in GNP per capita have declined in Sub-Saharan Africa in the last ten years.² The poor countries of Africa are thus becoming even poorer.
- Because the rate of growth in food production cannot keep pace with population growth, the supplies of staple foods are shrinking in most African countries. As a result, daily calorie supply per capita has declined to approximately 75% of what it was in 1970, and the number of people suffering from undernutrition and malnutrition throughout Africa has risen to around 170 million. Net import requirements now stand at about 22 million tons of cereals, whereas in the early 1960s, Africa was not only self-sufficient in cereal production but even exported surpluses. (World Bank, 1994)
- At the same time, export patterns have remained virtually unchanged in most African countries, as agricultural products and/or other raw materials still account for the bulk of all exports.³ Declining prices for many basic commodities have worsened the terms of trade for most countries, with the result that the gap between foreign exchange income and expenditures for imports of industrial goods has become even wider - a fact which is reflected in rising indebtedness.⁴ By 1993 this situation had intensified to the point where almost 30 African countries could not pay for the food they imported, and were thus dependent on food aid.
- The economic structure in Sub-Saharan African countries is still heavily dominated by agriculture, and the number of people engaged in the agricultural sector has continued to rise in absolute terms. This implies that there has been virtually no increase in agricultural productivity (World Bank, 1994). At the same time, government industrial policies in the 1970s and 1980s⁵ met with widespread failure, owing to the lack of domestic markets and peripheral capitalistic structures.⁶ There has been a persistent dependence on imports of industrial goods as a result. The public sector has been the only area of growth in most countries in recent decades, and now supplies up to more than 50% of the jobs in the formal sector of the economy (Gordon, 1992). However, employment in this sector is also being threatened at present, both by the difficulties governments have in meeting payrolls and by structural adjustment programs.
- Against this background, a high rate of population growth - which still exceeds 3% in most Sub-Saharan countries - is producing greater population density in rural areas as well as

heavy flows of migrants to urban centres, where far too few jobs have been created to employ them. Owing to the selective nature of migration and distortion of the age pyramid associated with population growth, the dependency ratio is also rising.⁷ This leads to labour shortages in subsistence agricultural systems in rural areas despite population pressure,⁸ while at the same time unemployment remains very high in urban centres (DeLancey, 1992).

- Increased impoverishment among both rural and urban populations, as well as social change and changing values⁹ - which have not been accompanied by corresponding economic development - are combining to create a potentially explosive social and political situation. Against the background of the often centralised, autocratic and patrimonial regimes which have developed in post-colonial Africa,¹⁰ the lack of economic development, strong cliental systems, and the partial collapse of state services and institutions have made it virtually impossible for governments to control the potential for social conflicts. The increasing frequency of political unrest and a rising tide of violent social and ethnic conflicts further restrict the economic and social potential for development.¹¹

This brief outline should make it clear that African countries and populations are confronted with many problems which not only seem insoluble but are likely to become even worse: Poverty is threatening the welfare and existence of a growing portion of the population, economic, social and ethnic conflicts are on the increase, and government institutions and services are showing signs of collapse.

Development and environmental problems in rural peripheral areas of Africa

The present study is concerned with development and environmental problems in rural peripheral areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. It has already been stated that impoverishment is a growing threat to the lives and the welfare of people in rural Africa. Broadly speaking, the root cause of this impoverishment is the failure of agricultural production to increase at a rate that can keep pace with the high rate of population growth.

However, the central problem of rural impoverishment - including its economic, social and ecological consequences in rural peripheral areas of Africa - cannot be examined by starting from the premise that both the causes of and the solutions to this central problem should be sought only in rural areas and among rural societies. On the contrary, the problems of rural peripheral areas in Africa must be seen in the wider context of the grave crisis in development outlined above, which affects the entire continent.¹²

Steady declines in the prices of agricultural products on the world market continue to hamper innovation and prevent African agriculture from becoming more productive. Even more important, however, are the ways in which the development of an African governing class has become linked with the formulation of government agricultural policy and the course of rural development in post-colonial Africa.¹³ Building on colonial structures, newly independent states instituted strict control over markets, prices and distribution networks for agricultural products. But agricultural policy did not focus primarily on improving the situation of the smallholders who are responsible for most production, nor on increasing the level of their productivity. Instead, agricultural production was exploited to benefit the governing elites in urban centres, e.g. by keeping producer prices artificially low. Thus small-scale producers in effect subsidised the development of a governing elite and of urban centres as well (Gordon, 1992). These emerging national elites

did not pursue investment-oriented entrepreneurship, but instead used the resulting agricultural surplus primarily to purchase imported consumer goods and real estate, and finance transport and trade enterprises, with little overall effect on employment.¹⁴

As a result of policies which promoted the skimming off of agricultural surpluses but produced almost no substantial growth or employment, these elites became even more dependent on the indirect subsidies provided by small-scale producers in the agricultural sector. At the same time, the low price of staple foods in the cities, which had rapidly growing populations and high rates of unemployment, played the main role in solidifying the position of the elites, whose political and economic power was concentrated primarily in urban centres. By contrast with the situation in South American countries, however, there was no clear cultural and political division between the centre and the periphery in African societies. Instead, an extensive cliental system developed, which bound urban elites to rural populations.¹⁵ This system was based on forms of reciprocity traditionally found in African societies, and on the rural roots of the new urban elites. This cliental system secured the support of rural populations by providing protection and prestigious projects.¹⁶ This in turn made it possible to maintain the system of skimming off agricultural surpluses over the long term.

The reaction of small-scale producers¹⁷ to the system of control and exploitation by urban elites has been decisive in determining the dimensions of development and environmental problems in rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. Two elements of this reaction are of particular importance:¹⁸ (1) At least since the early 1970s, most small-scale producers have been unable to secure a livelihood from agricultural products whose prices and distribution were controlled by central governments. Consequently, there was a retreat to subsistence production,¹⁹ and grey and black markets developed at the local level. (2) Small-scale producers simultaneously tried to extricate themselves from unilateral dependence on primary production. This produced a heavy increase in the flow of migrants into urban centres (Gordon, 1992), whereby the impulse to migrate was frequently fuelled by the hope of taking advantage of cliental relationships to gain opportunities for advancement. Only a portion of the rural households - primarily the men - migrated, and this produced the phenomenon of households being divided between rural and urban locations.

These two levels of reaction had decisive impacts on rural areas: Divided households intensified the effect of skimming off agricultural surpluses, as many of the unemployed in cities depended on support from family members in rural areas. Selective migration to urban centres also meant that there was a negative change in the producer/consumer ratio in rural areas despite - or because of - a very high rate of population growth. Women, in particular, were confronted with an immense workload as a consequence.²⁰ At the individual farm level this development meant that there was a lack of the economic resources and the manpower necessary to take the risks associated with innovation and efforts to boost agricultural productivity. At the regional level, a situation arose which can be characterised in terms of two particular spatial aspects of smallholder production: (1) As a result of the increase in the number of small-scale farmers, land use became spatially concentrated without corresponding adjustments and innovations in land use systems.²¹ (2) The pressure of more dense land use caused subsistence systems to be expanded into areas where ecological conditions were different and often more marginal than those in former areas of production.

These processes of concentrated land use and expansion into marginal areas have had serious environmental consequences in rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa.²² The following developments are of particular importance in this regard, as they have intensified the problems of existence in rural areas of Africa: (1) Soil degradation, which is occurring in areas where land use is becoming increasingly concentrated and on croplands which are encroaching into marginal areas, is

responsible for a reduction in agricultural productivity per unit area.²³ (2) Reduction in the size of grazing areas owing to the expansion of croplands and the growing demand for fuelwood are destroying vegetative cover and provoking soil degradation, even in areas surrounding croplands.²⁴ (3) Water resources may be overused as a result of poorly adapted forms of land use practised by small-scale farmers who have advanced into drier areas. This not only threatens the survival of the farmers themselves but of other land users as well.²⁵

These briefly mentioned environmental problems are a consequence of the externally and internally generated development crisis in Africa described above, and of the resulting concentration and expansion processes affecting the land use systems of the growing rural populations struggling against poverty. These environmental developments indicate that the problem of ensuring survival in both the foreseeable and the distant future will become more acute for rural African populations,²⁶ given the current trends which illustrate the diminishing productivity of their resource base. In sum, the problems of survival currently faced by rural populations in Africa, which have been triggered by Africa's development crisis, are now threatening and destroying the foundations on which improvement could be based in the future.

The crisis in development policy and practice

Since the early 1960s, when most African states achieved independence, Sub-Saharan Africa, and its rural areas in particular, have become a central focus of activity for governmental, non-governmental, and international development organisations and agencies.²⁷ A wide range of approaches extending from local development projects to government programmes and international agreements²⁸ has been used to focus development efforts on raising agricultural production and alleviating poverty in rural areas.²⁹ By the early 1990s at the latest, however, it was clear that all such efforts had failed to alleviate Africa's development crisis or prevent further intensification of the rural development and environmental problems outlined above.

This realisation evoked a wide variety of reactions in the development community. In greatly oversimplified terms, these reactions eventually crystallised into three general trends:³⁰

- **Substitution of development co-operation by humanitarian aid.**

This approach can be seen as an expression of resignation about the potential for development in rural Africa, and is part of the prevailing view of Africa as the 'lost continent'.

- **Concentration on support for local initiatives while circumventing governmental institutions as much as possible.**

This grass-roots approach, which is linked with catchwords such as 'participation' and 'empowerment', represents an attempt to mobilise the most disadvantaged sectors of society, to articulate their needs through participatory initiatives, and to support and promote their interests even in the face of official opposition. This approach is based on the conviction that the governing elites, who profit directly by skimming off surplus agricultural production, represent the greatest obstacle to development that would meet basic needs, and that previous development efforts have not taken account of social realities at the local level.

- **Concentration on economic boundary conditions and governmental decision-making structures**

Like the grass-roots trend, this trend also employs a wide range of specific approaches. Examples include structural adjustment and debt relief programmes, as well as financial aid conditional on efforts to promote democracy. These approaches share the conviction that the protectionist economic measures and the autocratic and centralised governmental structures designed in recent decades are an obstacle to initiatives on economic modernisation.

These briefly described developmental and practical reactions reflect very different and partly contradictory conclusions about the causes and consequences of the development crisis in Africa. But common to all of them is a certain **resigned radicalism** with reference to economic and social realities. This radicalism can be interpreted as an expression of a deep crisis in development policy and practice.³¹ This crisis in development policy and practice is also evidence of a **crisis of understanding**, with regard to both the aims and the dynamics of development. The aim of the conceptual approach in the present study is therefore to contribute to a problem-oriented understanding of the dynamics of development in rural peripheral areas of Africa, and thereby eventually to help resolve the current crisis in development policy.

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¹ As defined by the World Bank's World Development Report, 1993.

² World Bank, World Development Report, 1994. See also DeLancey, 1992, Altvater, et al., 1988.

³ These categories account for over 70% of all exports; in more than half of the countries in Africa they account for over 90% of all exports (World Bank, 1994). See also Brown & Tiffen, 1992, Knall & Wagner, 1986.

⁴ The annual cost of servicing debt in many Sub-Saharan countries now amounts to over 20% of the total income from exports (World Bank, 1994). On the depth crisis see also Taake, 1997.

⁵ See DeLancey, 1992, Gordon, 1992 and Chazan, et al., 1992.

⁶ On the theory of peripheral capitalism, which is a further development of dependency theories, see e.g. Rauch, 1985.

⁷ The portion of the total population under age 15 is now higher than 45% in almost all Sub-Saharan countries (World Bank, 1994).

⁸ This development is related to the significance of the producer/consumer ratio in smallholder production systems first demonstrated by Tschayanow in 1923.

⁹ See e.g. Siegel, 1992.

¹⁰ Wunsch & Olowu, 1990, have demonstrated that the external influence on these structures was considerable, and that, along with aspects of political power, it was linked with the idea of promoting rational and long-term development planning. See also Gordon, 1992, Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, and Sandbrook, 1985.

¹¹ This can be seen, for example, in the tide of refugees within and between African states, who now number more than 10 million and pose an additional large burden on poor countries (UNHCR, 1993).

¹² This position implies a clear distancing from simple concepts of modernisation theory based on an ahistorical perspective, which treat problems in rural areas as a residual dimension of the process of modernisation and states that they will disappear when forces blocking development are overcome. For a thorough discussion, see e.g. Lachenmann, 1990, and Sottas, 1992.

¹³ Path-breaking work done by Bates, 1981, first demonstrated these connections in detail.

¹⁴ See e.g. Boone, 1990, who demonstrates how little effect the investment policies of the governing class in Senegal had on employment.

¹⁵ See, for example, Young, 1988, and Lachenmann, 1990.

¹⁶ Rauch, 1985 and 1986, demonstrates that these links between urban elites and rural populations should be seen as a close parallel to peripheral capitalistic structures.

¹⁷ On the change of agrarian structures see e.g. Bernstein, 1992.

¹⁸ See Bates, 1981, and Gordon, 1992.

¹⁹ Experts dispute whether there was an active strategy of retreat from the market, consciously directed against government control, or a passive, forced withdrawal. See Hyden, 1982 and 1986(a), Scott, 1985, and Rauch, 1986.

²⁰ See e.g. DeLancey, 1992. Dependence on female labour is rooted in African agricultural systems in which women had always had a significant role. This prompted Boserup, 1970, quoted in Wacker, 1996, to speak of a traditional 'female farming system'.

²¹ Lachenmann, 1990, demonstrates in this connection that exploitative governmental agricultural policies not only forced an innovation-stifling retreat from market-oriented production, but that this destroyed the potential for innovation inherent in the logic of traditional social and production systems.

²² See e.g. the summary presented in Nyang'oro, 1992. On the general relations between economic, social and political dynamics and the environment compare also Hurni, et al., 1996, Woodhouse, 1992, Ghai, 1992.

²³ See, for example, Hurni & Kebede, 1992, Kebede & Hurni, 1992, Douglas, 1994, Heiniger, 1994.

²⁴ See e.g. Oldeman, et al., 1990, UNEP, 1992, or Fones-Sundell, 1989.

²⁵ See, for example, Liniger, 1995.

²⁶ This will also lead to an increase in conflicts and violence related to scarce resources. See Bächler, et al., 1996.

²⁷ To cite the example of Swiss development co-operation: In 1995, 301 Mio. SFr. of public bilateral aid went to Africa - roughly the same amount as the sum of aid to Asia and Latin America (DEZA, 1995).

²⁸ See e.g. Hammer, 1995(a), who demonstrates this through the example of the different stages of the Lomé agreements.

²⁹ These two aims continue to predominate in most development programmes. They are, *for example, also* established in Swiss law as basic principles of development co-operation (see DEZA, 1991) and consequently also reflected in sectoral policies (see e.g. DEZA, 1993).

³⁰ For more thorough analyses of the development crisis and its consequences compare, in particular, Rauch, 1993, Fowler, 1992, Dirmoser, et al., 1991, Cassen, 1992, Riddell, 1987.

³¹ Against this background, it is not surprising that the vague concept of 'sustainable development', which appears to promise a new integration of development approaches, has found an enthusiastic response in the development community.