



Two approaches to the categorisation of dynamic conditions in African smallholder societies

Adapted from:

Wiesmann, Urs (1998): Sustainable Regional Development in Rural Africa: Conceptual Framework and Case Studies from Kenya. Berne, Institute of Geography, University of Berne, pp: 52-55.

In attempting to identify the above dynamic conditions of action that are particularly relevant to rural African contexts, and interpreting their influence against the background of our considerations on peasant strategies and the outlined features of African smallholder societies, we must first confront the **problem of selection and structuring** of dynamic conditions of action out of the wide range of factors that make up the socio-economic, political and ecological environments of peasant societies and peasant actors. Two approaches can be taken with regard to the required process of selection and categorisation: it can be carried out either with reference to the causes, origins and development of these conditions, or with reference to their concrete interactions and impacts at the local level. The **first approach** would shed light on global and national interactions, historical origins and development, and current dynamics related to these conditions, and categorise them accordingly. An approach of this sort is represented in macro-oriented positions, and their patterns of explanation which are related to the different variants of modernisation and dependency theories. Because these perspectives focus on dynamic interactions among frame conditions related to explanations of the general problems of development, they tend to interpret local reactions as residual (in the light of modernisation theories) or as inevitable consequences (in the light of dependency theories).¹ As result, little or no attention is given to the degree of indigenous potentials for development.²

The **second approach**, on the other hand, would concentrate on concrete regional manifestations (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document 'The relevance of an actor-oriented perspective on regional development' in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1'). of dynamic factors that make up the socio-economic, political and ecological environment of peasant societies and peasant actors, and that are of hypothetical importance in smallholder strategies. This approach, which attempts to assess dynamic conditions from the viewpoint of the actors affected, leads to a type of categorisation which makes it difficult to establish a link to theoretical explanations of the origins and development of these aspects. Given the actor-oriented perspective of this study, however, with its special emphasis on examining indigenous options for action in a dynamic environment, this second perspective represents a more realistic point of view. Actors do not take action on the basis of the global origins and development of particular conditions, but on the basis of concrete manifestations of dynamic conditions of action which are of relevance to them. An approach based on the second perspective could later be expanded to include some aspects of the first perspective. This would reduce the danger of ignoring the indigenous potentials for development in a context of development analyses focusing on external forces.³

From this brief discussion, it follows that the second approach is - for the time being - the appropriate one for this study. Therefore, particular aspects of the dynamic environment of smallholder societies will not be selected and classified according to the interactions between conditions, but according to the potential impact these conditions of action have on previously discussed characteristics of peasants and peasant societies.⁴ This raises the question of which **potential areas of influence** should be considered when selecting the dynamic aspects of economic, social, political and spatio-ecological conditions. We can distinguish at least nine areas that are relevant in this regard, as changes that eventually occur in these areas can describe

modifications and transformations in peasant strategies and the characteristics of peasant societies:

1. The degree to which peasant households pursue multi-faceted strategies as an expression of the previously discussed rationale of peasant action;
2. Priorities and shifts in priorities within spheres of action of multistrategies, and diversification and specialisation in these strategies;
3. The level and the composition of household production and income, with particular reference to the subsistence components;
4. The labour potential, the producer-consumer ratio, and the distribution of responsibilities for different spheres of action - especially among men and women;
5. The relation to and the valuation of natural resources, and the degree of access to these resources;
6. The composition of the land use system, and particularly its complexity, persistence and flexibility, as well as the ratio of productive to reproductive inputs;
7. The amount and types of mutual assistance within peasant societies;
8. Change, specialisation and ways of transmitting of knowledge systems and systems of social norms, particularly with regard to natural resources and the complex land use systems;
9. Persistence and change in socio-structural and socio-cultural characteristics of smallholder societies, and the degree of importance and binding force of these aspects for the constitution of the social relations and networks of peasants.

This brief outline of nine potential areas of influence illustrates that we are dealing with a generalised description of interrelated aspects of peasant actors and societies. They will therefore have to be further differentiated and their relative importance assessed when dealing with a specific context. However, with regard to our question about the influence of dynamic conditions of action, these areas of influence provide a **structural framework**: This allows us to make a problem-oriented selection from the dynamic factors in the peasants' environment, to interpret them as dynamic conditions of action for peasants, and to determine the potential impact of these conditions according to the nine areas of influence.

The establishment framework of interrelated areas of influence emphasises once more that a perspective which aims to provide a dynamic understanding of transformation in peasant societies, as well as an understanding of the related indigenous potentials for development, cannot be restricted to single lines of explanation.⁵ Rather, it implies that a problem-oriented understanding can only be achieved by considering the way how peasants and peasant societies deal and cope with the many specific manifestations of dynamic conditions of action in the nine potential areas of influence.⁶

Against this background we can now turn our attention to dynamic conditions of action, in order to consider how peasant societies and peasant actors deal with these variable social factors, and to hypothetically assess their effects in the nine potential areas of influence we have outlined. This poses an additional problem, however, since one feature of African peasant societies is the fact that they are subject to different dynamic conditions of action in varying degrees, depending on their particular situation, history, and the extent of their current integration into national states. For our purposes, this means that a consideration of dynamic conditions and their implications can

only be undertaken in a very generalised and therefore simplified form. Given this need to generalise, the following sections aim to develop a heuristic potential for examining specific regional contexts.

The dynamic conditions of action which are particularly important in modification and transformation of both the strategies of peasant actors and the characteristics of peasant societies can be grouped under the following headings: demographic change, changes in market conditions, changes in political frame conditions, large-scale socio-cultural dynamics, and changes in natural resources. The discussion of hypothetically important conditions of action and their impacts in the outlined areas of influence in peasant societies will accordingly follow this thematic classification.⁷

References

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¹ This basic structure of arguments also applies to further developments based on dependency theory, such as the theory of peripheral capitalism discussed earlier (see Wiesmann 1998 or the document “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” in GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientation 1’).

² This somewhat bluntly described perspective is interesting in terms of history of thought, because it is concerned with the logic of ‘feasibility’ and suggests an implicit cultural hierarchy, in that the North - which has long dominated discussions of development - almost invariably turned to theories which put emphasis on external forces, considering local societies at the most as victims with no relevant options. The two positions dominant in development policy and practice presented in Wiesmann (1998) or in the document “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” (GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientation 1’) can both be related to this line of thought.

³ It should be clear that this second perspective cannot be equated with a micro-level perspective on development policy and practice (see Wiesmann 1998 or the document “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” and “The relevance of an actor-oriented perspective on regional development” in GLOPP lesson ‘Actor Orientations 1’) as it does not anticipate whether development approaches have to relate to exogenous or indigenous dynamics. It is merely concerned with attempts to select an approach to problem analysis which would make it possible to base on indigenous development potentials if they exist in a concrete problem context.

⁴ Reference has already been made to some of these interactions Wiesmann (1998) or in the document “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” (GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientation 1’), especially on those between the global market, governing elites, and national agricultural policies.

⁵ This means that approaches frequently found in debates over development policy, which link developmental and environmental problems to single and predominantly demographic, economic or political problems, will be considered inadequate in light of the perspective adopted here.

⁶ This position is not only based on considerations of peasantry, but is a logical consequence of the theory of action which underlies the actor-oriented perspective (see Wiesmann 1998 or “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” in GLOPP lesson ‘Actor Orientations 1’).

⁷ The order in which these aspects are discussed has nothing to do with either their significance or their origins and interactions (see also Wiesmann 1998 or “The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa” in GLOPP lesson ‘Actor Orientations 1’), but instead follows a conventional thematic pattern.