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**Demographic changes as conditions of action for peasants and peasant societies**

Heavy **population growth** is often cited as the key factor in problems of African development, because population growth neutralises the effects of economic growth, and particularly because it outpaces growth in the primary sector (see also Wiesmann 1998 or "The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa" in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1'). However, if we interpret population increase as a dynamic condition of action in peasant societies,<sup>1</sup> then the above position is an oversimplification, as the potential areas of influence with which we are concerned here are not affected a priori by a larger population. Population increase has an effect only when expansion of the land use systems cannot keep pace with population growth. In many areas of Africa such expansion has been restricted not primarily by natural conditions but by the integration of peasant societies in a larger social and national context.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, only when population growth is reflected in a **per capita decline in the availability of natural resources** does it become a key dynamic condition of action, with corresponding impacts that affect most of the potential areas of influence. This decline especially puts pressure on the established balance between the spheres of action of peasant multistrategies - such as the balance between crop farming and livestock husbandry - and therefore has long-term impacts on the orientation of land use systems. The resulting problems of distribution can also lead to increased stratification in peasant societies, with potential consequences for their social organisation and the constitution of social relationships. If the increased land use pressure further leads to a **spatial and ecological shift** of the land use systems, the natural resources as key dynamic conditions of action of peasants are changing. This implies that one of the foundations of the process of harmonisation and optimisation between the social system and the land use system is changing, and therefore all the areas of influence previously mentioned would potentially be affected.

Along with population increase, which may indirectly become a relevant dynamic condition of action, heavy population growth has additional effects which are of more direct significance to peasant actors: High population growth rates produce **changes in the age pyramid** in peasant societies, reflected in the rapid rise in the number of children and adolescents in the overall population.<sup>3</sup> This is an important dynamic condition of action,<sup>4</sup> because it alters the producer-consumer ratio in peasant societies and within the individual peasant households. The labour potential may therefore become a limiting factor in peasant strategies - despite, or rather, because of population growth. This has far-reaching consequences for both the land use systems and the systems of reciprocal support, which even become sharper if the impacts of selective migration and public education) are further taken into account.

**Changes in market conditions and their relevance to the transformation of peasant strategies and societies**

Partial integration of smallholder producers into the market economy is a significant characteristic of peasantry, and the features of the markets involved become important conditions of action. In this regard, the primary factor in the transformation of African smallholder societies is their **integration into agricultural markets**. We have already seen that these markets are characterised by a high degree of imperfection, in terms of price structure, availability of market information, and means of

production, as well as virtually non-existent capital markets.<sup>5</sup> For peasants, this means that the characteristics of agricultural markets constitute dynamic conditions of action which are not only bound to high risks and uncertainties but also represent few opportunities. In this light, integration into agricultural markets is less an opportunity than a necessity which results from the subordinate relationship of peasant societies to their socioeconomic and political environment.<sup>6</sup> Peasant households are thus continually forced to strike a new balance between production for the market and subsistence production. The process of trying to strike such a balance - which can be seen in the interplay between heavy pressure and low opportunities - is reflected in changing orientation and composition of peasant multistrategies and land use systems. In addition, gender roles, internal household decision-making processes, and solidarity structures may be affected by tensions that develop between the different areas of responsibility and interest among men and women.<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to the peasants' subordinate form of integration in the agricultural market is the emergence of a **market for resources, particularly agricultural land**, which is combined with a simplification of the concept of ownership. This implies that the balancing regulations which ensured access to resources for all members of the smallholder society come under pressure, and that economic stratification of peasant societies increases.<sup>8</sup> Through these potential processes of individualisation and stratification not only solidarity and dependency structures tend to be altered, but also the bases for possible collective and individual reactive measures in the land use system. Moreover, the market in land offers a chance for elites to put their hands on natural resources, thereby diminishing the peasants' resource base and possibly affecting culturally transmitted forms of balance between different land use zones.

Along with the development of an agricultural market, the emergence of a labour market constitutes a key dynamic condition for peasant households and societies. In rural areas this labour market is concentrated primarily on farm labour and is closely linked with processes of monetisation and social stratification. However, the labour market is primarily centred in urban areas, where it consists of a limited formal sector dominated by patron-client relationships<sup>9</sup> and a highly variable informal sector. Like the agricultural market, therefore, it is bound to risks and uncertainty for peasants. Against the background of the subordinate relationship of peasant societies to their broader socio-political environment, the attempt to gain cash income through wage labour becomes an important component in the multistrategies of peasant households. Involvement in both the agricultural and the labour markets results in household-internal competition especially for the household labour resources.<sup>10</sup> The uncertain labour market therefore constitutes a dynamic condition of action which decisively affects both the potential labour force and decision-making structures in the agricultural sector, with potential impacts on land use and especially on the ratio of productive and reproductive inputs. This labour market also has the potential to affect the conditions of social organisation, social networks and social support systems, because it tends to split households between rural and urban areas.<sup>11</sup> As a result, knowledge systems and systems of social norms may also be affected.

### **Political frame conditions and socio-political change relevant to the transformation of peasant strategies and societies**

The integration and subordination of peasant societies within a broader - usually nationally organised - social and political context is a prominent feature of the peasantry, and accounts for an entire range of dynamic conditions of action. When we first address political frame conditions we will - according to the discussion in Wiesmann (1998) (or in the document "Two approaches to the categorisation of dynamic conditions in African smallholder societies" in the GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientations 3') - not be concerned with the important indirect impacts of political integration,<sup>12</sup> but with those governmental interventions which appear to peasant actors as direct political conditions of action.<sup>13</sup>

Of primary significance in this regard are state regulations and forms of state intervention which have the effect of changing the conditions of access to natural resources. Two aspects are of key

importance here. First, establishment and implementation of a national and Western-oriented legal system is accompanied by **changes in the concept of land ownership**. These changes occur in the sense of a simplification as both the new individual and collective forms of ownership are robbed of the complex structures they originally contained for regulating access to natural resources for all members of smallholder societies. The effect of changed and more selective access to natural resources is additionally supported by subsuming most resources under the simplified territorially-oriented ownership concept which diminishes the traditional overlying rights of access.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, **partial prevention of access to resources by the state and by elites** has an important influence: Because the state sets aside certain areas or zones for specific functions or imposes regulations of use,<sup>15</sup> and because members of the elite secure land for themselves on the basis of the new concept of ownership, the area available for use by peasant societies is diminished. These types of intervention by the state and by elites usually affect zones with particular ecological features, thereby causing shifts in the ratio between different land use zones and functions of peasant resource use systems. The above two types of policy-induced changes in access to resources constitute key conditions of action, because they can not only have far-reaching consequences in land use systems, but they may also influence the possibilities of risk-reactive measures, as well as the stratification within peasant societies.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, by providing **infrastructure, technologies, and services**, state institutions form an entire range of dynamic conditions of action relevant to the transformation of African peasant societies. Besides infrastructural development in the areas of transport, water, energy, communication, media, etc., agricultural extension, distribution and marketing services and organisations are of particular importance here. These infrastructures and services, however, are often established and provided according to the principles of peripheral capitalism,<sup>17</sup> are influenced by the tenets of modernisation theory<sup>18</sup>, and are related to the system of skimming off agricultural surpluses (see Wiesmann 1998 or the document "The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa" in GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientation 1').. Coupled with the financial crisis and the debt crisis faced by many African countries, this implies that government services appear to many peasant actors as fortuitous, sporadic and not very reliable. The potential opportunities represented by these services are therefore linked with considerable uncertainties, meaning that mainly those peasant actors who are in more favourable economic positions can take advantage of them. Aside from their impacts on transformation of land use systems, government services may therefore also have effects in terms of increased stratification in peasant societies, with accompanying impacts on systems of social relationships and social values. Because governmental institutions are primarily oriented towards the interests and the areas of responsibility of men, they have the further potential effect of intensifying tensions related to gender roles.

Government **education and health services**, and the **primacy of the state with regard to systems of control, security and sanctions**, are other areas of service and regulation that constitute important conditions of action. They not only produce change in knowledge systems and systems of social norms, but can also be seen to have impacts that affect the cohesiveness of different forms of organisation in peasant societies, with a consequent effect on ways these societies have of coping with risks. In addition, the removal of children from the peasant labour potential by the education system may intensify the problems related to labour.

Aside from specific relations to political frame conditions, ways of relating to the overall social environment also constitute significant dynamic conditions of action for peasants and peasant societies. We have already seen that social relations are frequently characterised by **cliential relationships** within a larger pattern of social hierarchy. The absorption of peasant actors into patron-client relationships with local and national elites and decision-makers has a dual impact: it is reflected in the ways that strategies of action are influenced by these relationships,<sup>19</sup> and it changes social networks within peasant societies. Accordingly, it is possible to speak of a general shift from

somewhat egalitarian support systems<sup>20</sup> towards more hierarchically structured and obligation-driven social networks.

Partial subordination to higher-level structures means that **social norms and value systems as a part of the overall social context** also become conditions of action for peasants. In individual peasant households, and within a peasant society, these conditions of action may be reflected in a conflict-laden interplay between local, traditional values and external, modern values, and in accompanying social representation. This situation, which is often linked with an individualised notion of the utility concept, presents peasants with a source of uncertainty as well as an opportunity for creativity and innovation. This may be expressed by the fact that actors who have succeeded in accommodating themselves to both traditional and modern systems of values and norms are frequently at the top of the local social and economic hierarchy.

### **Changes in natural resources as dynamic conditions of peasant action**

As the basis of production and sustenance for peasant actors, natural resources as such constitute crucial conditions of action, and because peasant land use systems have multiple functions, the availability and the condition of a **wide range of biotic and non-biotic resources** is thereby of great importance. As peasant strategies and social structures are directed to ensure complex multi-functional land use systems, it can be assumed that changes in natural resources would have significant impacts in all the potential areas of influence mentioned above (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document “Two approaches to the categorisation of dynamic conditions in African smallholder societies” in GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientations 3’). These considerations could lead to the simplified conclusion that environmental problems and resource degradation would directly be reflected in changes of peasant action and strategies. However, one has to consider that peasant actors experience **changes in natural resources** as dynamic conditions of action in three forms:

1. **Recurring changes in natural resources:** Natural resources are subject to periodic and non-periodic variations over which smallholder actors have virtually no control, and which they perceive as representing risk. Accordingly, dealing with such risk is a key element in the constitution of peasant strategies and social structures (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document “Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy” in GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientation 1’). This suggests that although this form of change in natural resources is a central condition of action, it is not dynamic in the sense that it produces transformation in smallholder societies.
2. **Permanent changes in natural resources:** Changes in the condition of resources may appear to peasant actors as permanent or long-lasting. In this case they become dynamic conditions of action with potential impacts on the land use system and on other areas of influence (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document “Two approaches to the categorisation of dynamic conditions in African smallholder societies” in GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientations 3’). Aside from externally influenced changes,<sup>21</sup> this form of dynamics of natural resources also includes environmental degradation triggered by peasant land use systems. The extent to which environmental degradation provokes reactions in peasant strategies and social structures depends to a high degree on its relative significance as a risk compared to the risks constituted by the recurring changes in natural resources (see point 1 above).
3. **Changes in the access to and the availability of resources:** In interpreting natural resources as dynamic conditions of action for peasant actors, it must also be considered that aside from the condition and change of these resources, their actual availability to peasants is a crucial factor. It was pointed out in Wiesmann (1998) or in the document “Two approaches to the categorisation of dynamic conditions in African smallholder societies” (GLOPP Lesson ‘Actor Orientations 3’) that the conditions under which natural resources are available are

changing considerably - mainly due to changed conditions of accessibility - with consequent impacts in the potential areas of influence we have outlined.

These three types of change in natural resources and their specific combination determine the dynamics of resource-related conditions for peasant action. This consideration has decisive consequences on how to deal with environmental problems in smallholder areas of Africa. It implies that the type of resource change which is the most dynamic, and which hence represents the greatest potential risks or eventual opportunities, is the type which will be mainly reflected in changes of peasant strategies and action. Given the dynamics and impacts of population change, markets and political frame conditions (see above), the most dynamic resource-related conditions of peasant action are likely to be those that relate to resource availability rather than to comparatively slower processes of degradation.<sup>22</sup> Thus we can hypothesise that the impact of natural resource changes on the transformation of peasant strategies and societies is more likely to be a result of risk related to changes in the conditions of access to resources than of risk related to changes in natural resources as such. This suggests that impacts in the potential areas of influence are especially important in the context of changes in natural resources. At the same time it appears that processes of degradation are only reflected to a limited extent in modifications of peasant action, as a result of which the potential for indigenous management of environmental problems also appears to be limited.

The brief discussion of important dynamic conditions of action and potential areas of influence presented in the preceding sections can be regarded as constituting a generalised set of hypotheses on the dynamics of peasants' environment and the process of transformation in African peasant societies. Because the significance and the influence of these conditions of action and the settings in which they have an effect will vary considerably according to the particular local context, this set of hypotheses must be modified and differentiated with regard to specific sets of problems.

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<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of peasant actors, population growth must be seen as an externally determined dynamic condition, as external causes are primarily responsible for increasing life expectancy. On the other hand, the fertility rate, the key factor in population growth which is determined indigenously, has declined greatly within a few generations (see e.g. Price, 1995). This must be seen as a major cultural adaptation. N.B. these changes are much faster than they were in the demographic transition of the North.

<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, some authors consider population densities in sub-Saharan Africa to be fairly low. Tiffen, et al., 1994, take up this position through the title 'more people, less erosion' of their study in Kenya.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the main reasons why the declining fertility rate will only be reflected with significant time lag in the rate of population growth. See Hauser, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Here we must once again note that population growth has to appear to peasant actors as externally driven dynamic condition of action, as only fertility rates - whose effects on population growth are bound to time lag - are significantly within reach of indigenous influence.

<sup>5</sup> For additional discussion of the reasons for these features of agricultural markets and their implications, see Wiesmann (1998) or the documents "The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa" and "Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy" in GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientation 1'

<sup>6</sup> In this context it is possible to speak of forced integration into markets controlled by outsiders (Wolf, 1966; Shanin, 1971; Ellis, 1993), which results especially from the forced need to have financial means to get access to governmental services and infrastructure. Given this subordination, the argument proposed that peasant societies have the power to ignore the market and rely again more on subsistence production - must be regarded critically, even though resistance against uncertain market conditions appears to be a prominent feature of smallholder strategies (see Wiesmann, 1998 or the document "Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy" in GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientation 1').

<sup>7</sup> Here it is decisive that women are more likely to be concerned with basic household security, while the men are interested in cash income, owing to their external social contacts and their embedment into patron-client relationships. This tension is likely to have negative effects on the position and the work load of women. See e.g. Njiro, 1990 and 1994, Evans, 1991, Carney & Watts, 1990, Davison (ed.), 1988, and on its relevance in development approaches Tekülve, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> On stratification processes in peasant societies see e.g. Currie & Roy, 1985, or Roseberry, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Fattouh, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> The household economy models of Barnum & Squire, 1979, and Low, 1986, illustrate these competing claims and show that the logic that underlies Tschayanov's model is decisively modified with the development of a labour markets. On the basis of the opportunity costs of time for each family member, Low, 1986, demonstrates in addition that it is primarily the men who are involved in the labour market, while women assume greater responsibility for market and subsistence-oriented farm production.

<sup>11</sup> See Evans & Ngau, 1991, on migrant labour Stichter, 1982, and on migrant women Vorlaufer, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Government agricultural and price policies, for example, have a great influence on market conditions. Despite this causal relationship (see Wiesmann 1998 or "The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa" in GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1'), these policies do not appear to peasants as dynamic governmental conditions of action but rather as market conditions. Based on the actor-oriented perspective they are therefore treated as changes in market conditions.

<sup>13</sup> On the peasant - state relationship see Wiesmann 1998 or the document "The Development Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa" (GLOPP lesson 'Actor Orientations 1'). With special reference to Kenya see also Nab, 1995, Hebink, 1990, and Hyden, 1987, and on agrarian law development Okoth-Ogendo, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> These rights of access, which could overlap with territorial regulations, were concerned with resources such as trees, medicinal plants, wildlife, water resources, etc. (see e.g. Anamosa, 1995, Berry, 1989, Amborn, 1987, Cheater, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Among other things, these may include the establishment of protection zones which could deprive smallholder land use systems e.g. of forests and their many functions.

<sup>16</sup> Against this background, measures which aim to deal with processes of ecological degradation by consolidating individual land ownership must at least be evaluated in differential fashion. See Wachter, 1992, Wachter & North, 1996, Berry, 1989, Ngugi, 1996, Haugerud, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> In terms of the theory of peripheral capitalism the services of national elites in rural areas are based on the assumed legitimacy and support of patron-client relationships, which frequently produces high-profile projects which have little relation to actual needs (see Rauch, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> As you can see in Wiesmann (1998) or in the document "Peasant rationale of action: two theoretical approaches important in development policy" (GLOPP Lesson 'Actor Orientation 1'), modernisation theory



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strongly suggests that peasant systems and logics are transitional phenomena which will diminish and disappear as development progresses (see the detailed discussion presented in Sottas, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> See Sottas, 1992, Sottas, et al., 1997, Fatton, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Wacker, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Aside from supra-regional (e.g. climate change) and trans-regional changes (e.g. changes in the water balance in a highland-lowland system), which can have either natural or man-made causes, the special case of spatial shifts of smallholder systems into areas with different ecological conditions can also be regarded as a form of externally caused change in natural resources.

<sup>22</sup> In this regard it is also important to note that most processes of degradation which affect natural resources are characterised by changing rates which are lower than the amplitude of recurring variations of resources (see point 1), and that peasant strategies are especially focused on dealing with these variations.