



Prosperity in Rural Africa?: Insights into Wealth, Assets, and Poverty from Longitudinal Studies in Tanzania

Patrick Kilby

To cite this article: Patrick Kilby (2021): Prosperity in Rural Africa?: Insights into Wealth, Assets, and Poverty from Longitudinal Studies in Tanzania, *Development in Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2021.2013776](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2021.2013776)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2021.2013776>



Published online: 29 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Prosperity in Rural Africa?: Insights into Wealth, Assets, and Poverty from Longitudinal Studies in Tanzania, Dan Brockington and Christine Noe, Oxford, Oxford University Press (open access), 2021. DOI:[10.1093/oso/9780198865872.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198865872.001.0001)

This edited volume is more than a collection of papers around a theme, but rather represents 30 years of longitudinal case study work in Tanzania. The book opens with a case study from rural Mtowisa and how a village transformed itself over 20 years from being a poor, run-down community “lifting itself” out of poverty, as the World Bank would put it, to having the trappings of modernity such as sealed roads, new schools, hospitals, and telecommunication towers. Of course, the story is not a simple one of a moving out of poverty, and not necessarily a one-dimensional “good one” either.

This book explains the complexity of poverty measurement and definitions through a series of longitudinal studies across a number of districts in Tanzania. In all, the study looks at 1500 households and their changes over time in 37 villages in 21 districts. The authors revisited one-off surveys from the 1980s through to the 2000s where researchers had kept their data – which, not surprisingly to many of us, many had; but nevertheless, this is no small feat. The focus of these studies is on agrarian change looking at “well-being and prosperity” rather than poverty per se (23). The book raises some basic questions of what growth means and whether we are measuring the right things, and challenges the assumptions out there of the “backward peasant”. The central argument is that in order to explain rural poverty and prosperity, we must examine the change in assets that people control, as that is what people talk about most, but these are excluded from most measures of poverty, which tend to focus on consumption.

Tanzania is a good case study, as it has been flagged as the success story of Africa with per capita incomes up 50 per cent and growth at seven per cent per annum. But the argument is that these excellent growth figures haven’t reached rural areas. It here that the traditional measures of poverty are called into question. Indicators of prosperity such as better housing are increasing at a faster rate than poverty is declining, which suggests something else is happening or we are measuring the wrong things. This raises the point that being frugal is not the same as being poor (32), but also that “scrimping and saving to conserve assets is [also] an aspect of poverty” (26). Assets are often a reserve store of wealth to be sold for cash in times of need, or simply when the price is right.

Landlessness was not an issue to survey respondents so much as “... the inability of poor families to make their land productive” (55), which was to do with access to productive assets such as draft power for cultivation and harvesting, better seeds, fertilisers, etc., or having to “invest their labour into other people’s farms rather than on their own farms” – but interestingly, “income was rarely mentioned” as a factor in how respondents saw poverty (62). Not only that, but the assets most indices are constructed with are not used by rural Tanzanians – televisions, clothes irons, fridges, etc. – nor were they seen as relevant. There is also a gender dimension here when women focus on the quality of the house and livestock more so than men (63). Similarly, focussing on one or two assets leads to distortions as well: “... changes to the roofing of a dwelling can conceal all sorts of changes in the social lives of those living in it, and may not be linked to the ‘prosperity’ of the individuals living under it” (79).

The second part of the book tracks 12 case studies across a range of locations and themes including how “... economic growth reflects experience in the lives of villagers living in south-western Tanzania” (Borgerhoff Mulder, Chapt, 5, 87); Snyder et al.’s investigation of the relationship

between national trends, policy, and local farming practices and outcomes at the local level in Mbulu District (129); the commodity effects including coffee (Noe et al., Chapt 7, 154), sesame (Brockington, Chapt 8, 177), and paddy (Djurfeldt et al., Chapt 11, 237); and many other case studies from across the country, which serve to flesh out the diversity of the poverty/asset nexus. One thing the authors make clear is not that asset accumulation is a proxy for moving out of poverty, but that the story is much more complex and context specific “... in another respect one of the most salient points across these different case studies is their diversity. The proximate driver of rural transformation, and its timing, has varied in every single location” (364). The book concludes:

To repeat, we have not found, in this research, that Tanzanian rural areas have been mistakenly labelled as “poor” when they should be considered to be relatively wealthy. Rather, perhaps in keeping with our varied disciplinary backgrounds, we have found there are forms of locally valuable prosperity which have thrived in a variety of circumstances. (370)

This book is an important and, in many ways, a unique contribution to understanding rural poverty and its many facets. By tracking households over 20–30 years, the authors have been able to move away from static measures of consumption to look at how households themselves have viewed prosperity and what is important for them for the “good life” – and, more often than not, this has been to do with assets, and how they are accumulated and managed. A gap in the book for this reviewer is a broader gender analysis. In one place, we see that women see household assets differently from men, and in Chapter 7, Noe et al. look at the gendered impacts of the collapse in coffee prices. How broader gender issues have or have not changed over 20–30 years as seen by the women themselves would have been an important element to explore further.

This book is an essential read for understanding small-scale peasant agriculture and its role in national economies, as well as giving us a more nuanced understanding of rural poverty and prosperity, the role of assets, and most importantly how these measures are not readily able to be translated into indices or models.

Patrick Kilby

 patrick.kilby@anu.edu.au  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2850-4473>

© 2021 Patrick Kilby

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2021.2013776>

