

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Prosperity in Rural Africa?**

#### **Insights into Wealth, Assets, and Poverty from Longitudinal Studies in Tanzania**

Edited by DAN BROCKINGTON AND CHRISTINE NOE

It is somewhat difficult to review an already favourably endorsed book by experts of rural social change and livelihoods analysis including Ruth Hall, Issa Shivji, Benno Ndulu, Mats Widgren, Kathy Homewood, Camilla Toulmin, and Steve Wiggins, who aptly describe it as: “refreshing book disrupts old narratives”, “offer rich empirical material”, “a must read for any researcher and practitioner”, “central, long-lived part of the development economics canon”, and “cogent and compelling”. The editors provide a carefully compiled and structurally coherent book that moves an argument along the historical, conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives. This all-round comprehensive book does not only educate students of rural change on Tanzania but also on rural Africa generally on the role of assets as complementary indices for understanding poverty and prosperity in the context of establishing wellbeing. The book provides the findings of a large collaborative project that explored a long-term change in a variety of sites in rural Tanzania.

The authors argue that ‘to understand poverty dynamics in rural African societies then we must examine changes to the assets that people control’. They define assets broadly as things which provide revenue streams and constitute the sources of income and consumption in rural areas. Wealth in rural Africa is described by people in terms of assets which are crucial to local perceptions of what a good life is. The authors point to the bias in the use of consumption data in measuring poverty to the relative neglect of assets. The general observations of the case studies for different regions with diverse conditions show that rural people tended to be better off than they had been as measured by their assets, now compared to the past. This positive assertion confirms the conclusions of the mainstream literature, although the authors are careful to point to the fact that not all domestic units had experienced the positive transformation.

The book is divided into an introductory part that details the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of social change in Africa and Tanzania, specifically laying out the literature systematically from different ideological perspectives. This is followed by the crucial chapter on the role of assets in understanding social change, which is convincingly executed. To prosecute these arguments and set of ideas outlined, the methodological chapter does an

excellent job of criticising the old narratives and methods of measuring poverty and wealth in rural Africa. It proposes a new canon based on existing cries from the past on the need to find indices for asset measurements. Thereafter, the empirical chapters follow with beautiful stories of change, the reasons, the outcomes and implications for wealth, prosperity, and poverty for different social groups. These empirical chapters provide a rich basis for policy interventions. The concluding chapter provides an excellent synthesis of the theoretical, methodological, and empirical findings. It is a difficult chapter to write given the diversity of findings and the different theoretical positions that empirical findings lend themselves to supporting. This is important though, as it enables the reader some room for debate and interpretation with diverse lenses.

The historical explanation of changes in African agriculture located within broader social change discourses provides students of agrarian change a synopsis of the debates on agrarian change from both Marxist and neoliberal perspectives. A balanced position taken by the authors allows us to appreciate the best of the two debates which have often been considered in a polarised fashion. Introducing the main drivers of change in rural social formation in the context of Tanzania, which I argue rhymes with the rest of Africa, captures the processes and milestones of achievements since the 1980s. By sounding a note of caution on the diverse implication of these postmodern processes following neoliberal policy adoption across Africa, for different domestic units, geographical regions, and individuals, is an important departure from conventional narratives which are overly optimistic or pessimistic. The stress on context and the acknowledgment of broader patterns is well done by many of the authors.

The book beautifully navigates the methodological challenges of understanding and measuring poverty, prosperity, and well-being. Although their approach does not solve the bigger methodological challenge, it helps in making analysis of wellbeing more real by assessing the perspectives of the poor themselves, in the same fashion as Deepa Narayan (2000) and those several voices have argued for decades ago. As Ruth Hall states - what really matters from the point of view of rural people themselves is agency and assets. The combination of ethnographic and survey methods provide the longitudinal studies more credibility in measurement and comparative analysis of change in wellbeing involving the use of assets to understand poverty, wealth, and prosperity. They provided a very good interrogation of the existing data from conventional methodologies including standardized asset indices which had no cultural relevance to the societies that are being measured. By presenting a very good critique of current accepted measurements of poverty via consumption and expenditure surveys, they show how critical the exclusion of all cost entailed in creating any income by peasants.

The different empirical chapters present a rich diversity of themes with compelling new insights into past theories and arguments. Due to this diversity which is complicated by geographical, historical, and cultural factors, the findings and conclusions may sometimes sound debatable and controversial. This is good as the authors have different shades of lenses through which they view 'reality' in these different contexts. It is also good that they all agree on some general patterns for these regions and Africa as a whole. A common thread is the importance of assets in understanding differentiated outcomes alongside rising prosperity across rural Tanzania. Domestic units changed farming methods and crops, diversified into non-farm activities, and emigrated, which enabled investments in better housing, more consumer goods, more education, productive assets, and stores. Thanks to public investments in infrastructure especially communication and transport, and increasing opportunities provided by expanding markets for food products, farmers have responded well to benefit from these. Rural Africa is moving out of the stagnation narrative, but unable to avoid the negative externalities of inequality and poverty caused by displacements and modern expropriation mechanisms.

In chapter 4, the authors explore the challenges of using assets to understand dynamics of poverty and prosperity within and across domestic units over time, which should not be attributed to individuals alone but rather the domestic unit. Many researchers including my research note a gradual individualisation in African societies even in villages. We need to reflect on the following questions: What is common family wealth and what belongs to the individual? How do we track changes in assets over time since assets have collective connotations build from several individual efforts? The fragmentation of assets over time as domestic units expand and breakaway is dynamic thereby posing serious methodological challenges to any longitudinal study of assets.

Chapter 13 presents a story of the greatest transformation with extreme levels of poverty giving way to landscapes and societies which have become wealthy through emigration and tree planting. By stressing the role of emigration which arguably led to the adoption of commercial farming subsequently, I find this chapter exciting since many of the others seem silent on the role of migration/remittances in rural transformation. Migration and remittances should be considered carefully in any analysis of asset accumulation in rural landscapes.

Taking a cue from Ben White (2014), the researchers try to write a rural social history that focuses on processes and mechanisms rather than just facts and outcomes of rural change that state what was and what is today. This analytical strength is commendable even if not perfectly done across the cases. Also, the book explores what assets mean to different definitions of wealth and poverty, and how local understandings of poverty and wealth vary geographically. I am happy with the adoption of Johnston and Abreu's (2016) recommendation on asset indices construction as these are well grounded.

I agree with the conclusions by the authors on the apparent general rise in prosperity in rural Africa but certainly with variations as some families and individuals have achieved less prosperity and reduced poverty much slower than the rest. Taking advantage of the new opportunities and being able to escape from pre-existing poverty traps explains the emerging patterns. Geographically, the role of state investments and the potential of the physical environment to produce cash crops and livestock for urban and export markets are critical considerations. Diversity is key in understanding poverty and prosperity in rural Africa, but the norms, perceptions and aspirations may be converging over time with modernisation of these societies.

Sight should not be lost of the important role of China, and cheap Chinese productive and consumer goods in the transformation of rural Africa. For instance, motorbikes, tractors, tricycles, agro-inputs, and machinery which may be less durable compared to the western expensive counterparts which limited asset accumulation and prosperity to a privileged select few in the past.

Finally, this book has presented a conceptually, theoretically, and empirically rich combination of material for the student of rural development. The ability to combine old relevant discourses with contemporary narratives while developing common grounds for understanding current changes in rural landscapes is unparalleled. The authors questions every possible methodological flaw in the extant literature showing the implications for adoption and subsequent analysis. They make realistic choices of methods deemed geographically and temporally appropriate and admit their shortcomings. They strive for the best data and conceptualisation for explaining rural change through the lens of assets while humbly cautioning the reader about the relativity of representing the 'truth'. I highly recommend this book as a compendium for Tanzanian and East African Institutions of higher learning for both undergraduate and graduate levels. Development studies students and practitioners globally would benefit a great deal from the theoretical, methodological, and empirical experiences delineated in this book. This book is a must-read for all who want to understand rural social change in Africa.

BY JOSEPH A. YARO