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Prosperity in rural Africa? Insights into wealth, assets, and poverty from longitudinal studies in Tanzania, edited by Dan Brockington and Christine Noe, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, 464 pp., hardback, £90.00, ISBN 9780198865872; eBook, £70.02; Oxford Scholarship Online (open access).
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ABSTRACT

The reviewed book is a collection of studies of rural villages in Tanzania over periods of 20 years or more. Many of the villages changed dramatically in that period, and many of the villagers were able to improve their lives. However, the ways that assets in rural areas are treated in both Household Budget Surveys and GDP figures does not fully reflect these changes, leading, all too easily, to underestimations of the potentials for improvement in villages such as these in rural Africa.

KEYWORDS

Tanzania; villages; prosperity; assets; longitudinal studies

This book challenges views of rural development that are conventional in Tanzania, as well as in many institutions in Africa and elsewhere, that poverty in the rural areas is increasing while productivity is static or declining. It does so by taking a view of income and expenditure which, unlike the country's Household Budget Surveys, takes into consideration improvements in the assets controlled by small farmers and challenges the ways in which their incomes and contributions to growth are included in GDP and growth statistics. One way of doing this is through 'panel studies' which track the experiences of a group of people from birth onwards; but it is only recently that such panels have been created in Tanzania. Instead, Dan Brockington and Christine Noe found 16 researchers who had worked in Tanzanian villages 20 to 25 years ago, and who had kept the data from their interviews. The researchers reinterviewed those they had interviewed years before, or their direct successors, in 37 villages and let them explain how their households, and their villages, had changed. They tested and refined the resulting conclusions through focus groups and elite interviews. These 'longitudinal studies' approximate to panel studies. One researcher, Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, has been back to the same village every other year since 1995, so that her work can almost be seen as a panel study.

The enthusiasm of the researchers shines through what they have written, especially in an epilogue where they explain how their original research took place. For most, the

experiences were life changing. Several were shocked when, as part of the research, they went back to villages which 20 years ago had been sleepy, inaccessible and very poor, and were now connected with the wider world by better roads, minibuses, mobile phones and TV, and able to sell crops that were not previously grown, for good prices, in a range of markets.

At one level, the results are not a surprise. Improvements in the standards of rural housing, rural roads, transport along those roads by minibuses and away from them by *bodabodas* (motorbike taxis), a wide range of local businesses and shops, new schools and activities related to the coming of mobile phones are apparent even from casual visits. Some of the changes were forced by shortages, such as the increased use of iron sheets for roofing and burnt brick walls in villages in the Upororo mountains – caused by decline in production of the bamboo poles traditionally used.

An agricultural revolution had been reported much earlier in parts of the Southern Highlands (Rasmussen 1986). The researchers in this collection report similar innovations in many different places – new crops, more tractors and ox-ploughs, small-scale irrigation using plastic pipes, use of chemical fertilisers – leading to higher yields. Not everywhere: one village, 16 kilometres east of Moshi, has not moved forward; but this too provides interesting insights related to declines in agriculture on and near Mount Kilimanjaro, with less rain and lower fertility.¹

These changes have not been reflected in official reports and plans because two main sources of data ignore or underplay the importance of assets. Thus, if a family reduces its living standards in order to build a better house, or pay school fees, or even to purchase cattle, then in the Household Budget Surveys this family is recorded as getting poorer. It is only if and when the assets lead to higher production in subsequent years that they are reflected in GDP figures – but these are often little more than informed guesses and do not take account of factors such as the higher values of crops stored till shortly before the next harvest or sold unofficially (or, conversely, of crops that are successfully grown but not sold at all because markets are over-supplied); or short-term fluctuations, such as the very high prices achieved for sesame in one village, until the crop was destroyed by diseases. The use of administrative data, such as the costs of civil service salaries, as proxies for the contributions to growth of health facilities or schools, has always been a limitation of the application of GDP (and hence growth) statistics.

The book's contributors are anthropologists or geographers with an interest in rural development. None are agricultural economists (readers of this book are spared regression equations!) and few are political scientists. But their work needs to be taken seriously, as the starting point for an informed debate about change in rural Tanzania.²

The book is not without problems. The coverage of Tanzania is uneven – none of the villages are in the coastal cashew-growing areas, or the cotton-growing lands near Lake Victoria, and none appear to have lost banana plantations, and the associated culture, to diseases, as in many parts of western Tanzania and further north in Uganda. Pastoralism is only considered in passing, and only one of the villages has been subject to a land grab (to extend a national park), and there are no indications of disputes with central government or other villages, for example about access to water for small-scale irrigation. It was not possible to standardise the approaches to the different villages, so the studies cannot be directly compared.

It remains to be seen if the innovations are sustainable. Rainfall in Tanzania has been remarkably kind in the last 20 years or so, with only minor famines, and no signs of the cycles, first identified in the colonial period, where maize production increased for about 10 years till there was a famine, after which the importance of more drought-resistant crops was recognised. Who would have guessed that the areas around Kongwa, notorious as the main site of the notorious failed Groundnuts Scheme of 1946–47, should become one of Tanzania's main producing areas for maize and sunflower? But it is also possible that it could all be lost very quickly through severe soil erosion, as happened in the Ismani area east of Iringa in the 1970s (Raikes 1986, 112, drawing on the work of Rayah Feldman, 1974). And from a methodological perspective, it is just conceivable that the villages in these studies prospered more than other villages precisely because of the insights and ideas of the researchers who lived there more than 20 years ago.

But as a whole, this is a path-breaking book – an effective counter to the conventional wisdom that small-scale agriculture has no long-term future and that inequality is only reducing slowly, if at all, and a challenge to all future researchers in Tanzania.

Notes

1. The decline in production of coffee is recorded in the village on Mount Meru studied by Noe, Howland and Brockington – but the farmers managed to find new crops and most of the women interviewed were relieved not to have to undertake the drudgery associated with coffee or to have to walk long distances to find grass to feed stall-fed cattle. This chapter, pp.154–176, provides important insights into women's attitudes to small-scale agriculture.
2. It can be read alongside the work of Thomas Jayne and his associates (2016) who have shown that in a number of African countries, including Tanzania, there is unprecedented investment in rural areas by people living in cities who have made money as civil servants or company employees and decided to invest it in rural villages – often a form of internal land-grabbing far more significant than the attempts of foreign companies to grow biofuels or other crops.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

Andrew Coulson was employed in the Ministry of Agriculture in Dar es Salaam from 1967 to 1971 and lectured at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1972 to '76. During this time, his first article on Tanzanian agriculture was published in *ROAPE* (Coulson 1975). His book *Tanzania: a political economy* was published in 1982, with a second edition in 2013. He was awarded his PhD by the University of Cambridge for this work (Coulson 2013 [1982]). He maintains his links with the University of Birmingham, England, where he was employed from 1984 till he retired in 2010.

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