



Rural Economy Transformation and Education Policy in Sub-Saharan African

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Abstract

Rural transformation is integrally linked with the wider processes of structural transformation taking place within a given country. Despite the recent upswing in growth within sub-Saharan Africa, economies are still narrowly based on the production and export of unprocessed agricultural products, renewable natural resources, minerals and crude oil. Even with optimistic scenarios on the growth of the manufacturing and services sectors, in formal job creation and agglomeration effects, it will take time to complete economic transformation. With some 80 percent of the labour force estimated to be engaged in the informal sector, including low-productivity agriculture and household enterprises, increasing agricultural productivity and expanding agribusiness must remain a priority. Complementary and new efforts to support household income diversification by enabling the growth and security of the household enterprise sector will also be central to the transformation process. The purpose of this review is to explore the rural economy and education policy in Sub-Saharan Africa. While continuing to place priority on economic and social sector investments, governments must seek to mainstream rural development within national strategies and commit to the long term. Rural and urban development policies and interventions should be brought together, ideally within a territorial or regional framework, to strengthen the market and service linkages between rural areas and small towns and secondary cities as drivers of local economic and social development. There remains a critical need to strengthen and make accessible the necessary evidence base to inform public policy on rural economic development. This should include increased investment in the production of quality agricultural and rural sector statistics and relevant social and economic research and its dissemination.

Subject Areas

Economic System

Keywords

Rural Economy, Transformation, Education, Policy, Sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction

Rural transformation is integrally linked with the wider processes of structural, economic and social transformation taking place within a country and should not be seen in isolation. There is general agreement, based on experiences from other regions, that structural transformation involves a falling share of agriculture in terms of economic output and employment and a rising share of economic activity in industry (manufacturing, mining and construction) and modern services. It also involves the migration of rural workers to urban settings and demographic transition, with a decrease in fertility and an increase in life expectancy leading to a decline in the population growth rate and a reduction in the dependency ratio. Despite these common trends, rural transformation within different countries has different outcomes in terms of economic growth, social inclusion, reduction in poverty and environmental sustainability. While global and regional forces influence this transformation, they are mediated by national and localised social structures and institutional frameworks, and by local societies themselves (Berdegúe *et al.*, 2023) [1].

As with all policy problems, policies and interventions relating to rural youth in SSA are built around narratives or stories (Jones & McBeth, 2020) [2]. Narratives are central to policy processes, serving as an important vehicle for organizing and communicating policy information. They set out the problem, explain why it has arisen and propose how it should be addressed. A successful policy narrative one that is memorable, taken up and integrated into policy and public discourse cuts through complexity and heterogeneity and sets nuance aside. In this way, it provides a compelling and powerful framing, a justification and a call to arms. It is particularly important to note that a successful narrative will foreground certain solutions or interventions (or development pathways), while explicitly or implicitly delegitimizing others.

Debate about, and actions to address, the challenges associated with youth in rural SSA are framed by a number of powerful and persistent, and in some cases, contradictory narratives. To a greater or lesser extent, they are linked together, and in some cases, they overlap: in both public and policy discourse they are often combined.

This is the central narrative that frames every aspect of the current discussion about African youth. It is particularly compelling because it portrays a potentially dangerous, “on-rushing future” (de Wilde, 2020) [3]. This view is premised on a conceptualization of youth, and in particular, unemployed male youth, as rebellious and a threat to domestic social and political stability, and to international relations through uncontrolled migration. Female youth are rarely cap-

tured in this narrative, except if they are seen to transgress sexual and moral boundaries voluntarily or through coercion. The link between the youth bulge, youth unemployment and security has been part of the academic narrative for almost two decades (Cole, 2021) [4] and was also highlighted in a speech by Ghana's President, John Mahama, in 2013.

However, within the narrative, the threat is neatly offset by the potential for a "beckoning future" that is prosperous and peaceful. For the beckoning future to become a reality, the "demographic dividend", a one-off economic windfall associated with the youth bulge generation successfully entering the labour market or becoming entrepreneurs, must be realized (Drummond *et al.*, 2023) [5].

Debates around this narrative address both the threat and the promise. There is, for example, disagreement about the potential size and uniqueness of Africa's youth bulge (Yazbeck *et al.*, 2021) [6]. There is also considerable contestation regarding the purported relationship between youth unemployment, civil unrest and radicalization (Brück *et al.*, 2023) [7], as well as the potential magnitude of and the likelihood of achieving the demographic dividend (Bloom *et al.*, 2022) [8]. Generally, this paper seeks to explore rural economy transformation and educational policy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Rural Economy in Perspective

The productive structure of an economy is understood as the level of diversification of the economy, the existence of inter-sectoral linkages including between agriculture and non-agriculture activity (industry including mining and manufacturing, services, tourism, and so on and the variety of types of enterprise, including formal and informal households, small and medium scale enterprises and business (by size and by linkages).

Sectoral growth linkages between agriculture and the non-farm economy are described by Haggblade *et al.* (2023) [9]. These are production linkages, which include forward links to agro-processors and backward links including farm equipment, seed, fertilizer, and so on. Consumption linkages, specifically household expenditure on goods and services and locally produced foods. Factor market linkages, including the impact of seasonal peaks and troughs on agricultural labour demands. Linkages between labour demand and rural and urban wage rates, and the linkages between farm cash surplus and non-farm investments and Productivity linkages associated with increased farm productivity including improved household food security and nutrition, workforce productivity, and two-way linkages between farm and non-farm economic activity and investment. Rural infrastructure plays a central role in agricultural growth linkages.

In general, rural areas with a more diversified economic base, a greater density of inter-sectoral linkages and a solid presence of small and medium-sized businesses in the economy will have greater options for building the dynamics of growth with social inclusion. Such dynamism may often be found where there are strong linkages between the rural hinterland and small markets and second-

ary towns and cities.

Employment data by country and sector of activity is scarce and is rarely spatially disaggregated, that is as rural, urban or regional. Where data are available, methodological problems result in data that are not comparable over time within countries or at one point in time between countries. Thus the current structure of employment in sub-Saharan Africa and the trends in employment creation are difficult to assess. The World Development Report 2023 (World Bank, 2022) [10] notes that in agrarian-based economies (that is, much of sub-Saharan Africa), formal employment, including wage labour in registered private enterprises and the entire public sector, typically accounts for less than 10 percent of total employment and the share of wage labour in manufacturing is typically much smaller. It notes that, if anything, employment in the formal sector has tended downwards over the past two decades as state-owned enterprises have been privatised and foreign trade liberalised.

Based on International Labour Organization (ILO) data there has been some percentage growth in employment in the industry and services sectors. However, agriculture overall, despite differences between countries and regions, remains by far the largest employer in sub-Saharan Africa at some 59 percent of the total number of people in employment in 2019. While overall, the share of workers is shifting slowly out of the sector, the actual number of people engaged in agriculture is rising.

Fox *et al.* (2023) [11] prepared estimates of the current and future structure of employment in sub-Saharan Africa (2015-2020) based on household surveys from 28 countries and an elasticity-type model that relates employment to economic growth and demographic outcomes. The derived baseline estimates of the labour force are given for the years 2015 and 2020. While these estimates imply lower levels of employment in the industry than those given by ILO, perhaps serving to highlight some of the methodological challenges in data collection, the study does provide insights into levels of labour force engagement in the household enterprise. While Fox *et al.* (2023) [11] report significant variations between low, middle and high-income and resource-rich countries, the work reaffirms that agriculture still employs the majority of the labour force and will likely remain the dominant employer among the low-income and resource-rich countries well into the 2020s. Taking household farms and household enterprises together often commonly termed the “informal sector” this makes up over 80 percent of the overall labour force occupation. Sub-Saharan Africa’s projected rapid labour force growth, combined with a low baseline level of private sector wage employment, means that even if sub-Saharan Africa realises another decade of strong growth, the share of the labour force employed in the industry is not expected to rise substantially.

Finally, it should be noted that, based on the ILO definition, unemployment is seen as very low in particular in low-income countries. The reason for this is that most working-age people in sub-Saharan Africa cannot afford to be unemployed (Fox *et al.*, 2023) [11] and thus occupy themselves as unpaid family labour or in

low productivity activities usually at high levels of underemployment. Exceptions to this are seen in middle-income countries such as South Africa, where reported unemployment rates are of the order of 25 percent and significantly higher for youth populations. This may reflect the presence of a formal public sector welfare and social safety net provisioning in middle-income countries and thus the willingness of people to express their employment status.

While there is country-to-country variation, farming, including crops and livestock, is seen to make up from 60 to nearly 80 percent of rural income. Agricultural and non-farm wage employment, non-farm household enterprise and social transfers together make up the remainder. This aligns with the estimates made by Haggblade *et al.* (2023) [9] based on some 23 citations for Africa from studies undertaken in the 1990s and 2000s, where the share of income from rural non-farm activities was estimated as 37 percent. Overall, this was seen as a lower percentage compared to other developing and emerging economy rural regions.

Employment data, however, generally only provides information about the main employment and thus misses the multiple income earning strategies adopted by rural households. Multiple sources of household income are, however, central to the livelihood strategy of rural households. This is illustrated in work undertaken in Uganda, which provides a comparison of multiple sources of household income in two periods 1992/93 and 2005/06 (Fox & Pimhidzai, 2021) [12]. The proportion of households with an income from non-farm sources increased dramatically over the period. Households with a private non-agricultural income almost doubled while households with non-farm household enterprises increased by 50 percent.

Drawing from the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Study Integrated Surveys on Agriculture (LSMS-ISA) for Ethiopia nagler and naudé (2021) [13] estimate that approximately 27 percent of rural households engaged in non-farm entrepreneurship and derive 50 percent or more of their income from nonfarm enterprises. Additionally, they estimate that about 5 percent of households derive all of their income from such non-farm enterprises (2010/2011). Further analysis of the LSMS-ISA (dataset on six countries Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda also broadly confirms earlier observations from the FAo RIgA project for some of the same countries thus reaffirming the high importance of agricultural income and agricultural wages in rural areas. The share of self-employment contributes less than 9 percent to total household income in Malawi and as much as 36 percent in Niger, 16 percent in Tanzania and almost 21 percent in Uganda. While the income share, for example in Tanzania, may not be seen as high, the National Bureau of Statistics, Tanzania (2012) notes that diversifying income sources by generating income from activities off the farm may increase the productivity of the farm and help reduce farmers' vulnerability to exogenous weather or price shocks. In Tanzania, around 65 percent of farm households had at least one member earning income outside of the farm during 2010/2011. This represents a 10 percent increase from

2008/2009.

While, overall, 42 percent of the rural households surveyed (LSMS-ISA six country) reported operating a non-farm enterprise, there was a significant country-to-country variation ranging from 17 percent in rural Malawi to almost 62 percent in rural Niger. Furthermore, there was evidence of portfolio entrepreneurship with, on average, 1.36 enterprises found per household, ranging from 1.07 in Malawi to 1.57 in Nigeria (Nagler & naudé, 2021) [13].

3. Changes in the Rural Economy in Africa

Problems of food and poverty are rife in rural Africa, where most peasants still refuse to adopt modern production techniques to get higher yields and improve their working conditions. This situation is the result of the agricultural and rural development policies applied, up to now, by African governments (Binswanger & Von Braun, 2023) [14]. These policies, whether of capitalist or socialist inspiration, are all based on a logic of surplus production in agriculture for the benefit of luxury consumption (consummation parasite) or industrialization that does not correspond to the need for agricultural rural development in general (Castro, 2022) [15].

Moreover, the World Bank and the IMF have, since the 1980s, forced liberal macroeconomic policies upon African states (Binswanger & Von Braun, 2023) [14]. However, these policies are not adapted to the conditions in the rural areas of Africa and are even in contrast with the economic approach of the peasants and those structural factors that keep the peasants from increasing their supply for the market (*i.e.* lack of transport, uneven weather conditions, lack of land resources, shortage of specialized labour and equipment, too expensive input supplies, lack of credit, weak demand, difficulties of peasants to deal with suppliers of production factors and middlemen) (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2023) [16].

The alternative is to break away from the usual methods applied to rural Africa by recognizing the peasants' right to define their own projects. This would also require the creation of a favourable environment to improve working conditions and increase production. It would mean transplanting or decentralizing those industries that support agriculture and would require improved relations between banks and the rural population, as well as non-official financing which is a popular means of saving in Africa (Lipton & Lipton, 2023) [17].

Such an environment would require land reform to provide for stable land distribution since it is important for peasants to feel secure. That is the price to pay in order to change peasants' conservative outlooks which is a major hindrance to lasting rural development (Jazairy *et al.*, 2022) [18].

The recent trends in land tenure policies have shifted from mainly efficiency-driven policy reforms toward more sustainable resource policies. This shift has been accompanied by a recognition of traditional resource management systems and the necessity to pass resource control to local communities. During the 1980s, many attempts were made by Sahelian governments and donor commun-

ities to organize and empower local communities in the management of their resources. These efforts, which were conceptually right, completely ignored local customary institutions and production strategies (CGIAR, 2022) [19].

The 1993 land and institutional laws in Niger are new attempts by the Nigerian government to bridge the gap of prior reform policies. The Principles of Orientation of the Rural Code (93-015 Law) recognizes that customary rights are equal to formal rights and the Status of the Chieftaincy (93-028 Law) empowers customary institutions to take over resource management and control. Accounting for local customary rules and institutions, wherever they continue to work efficiently, is essential. However, this land reform approach should not be viewed as a panacea, because rural communities in the Sahel went through many changes while living with colonial and post-colonial policies. Failure to account for such changes will increase conflicts in rural areas and impede the implementation of these laws (Lipton, 2023) [20].

Much of the rural sector in Africa remains in the pre-free enterprise economy, suffering low levels of investment, productivity and employment. The rural populations have seen development programmes pass by without much development coming their way in terms of improved standards of living, poverty alleviation and opportunities for meaningful participation in social and political life (Jazairy *et al.*, 2022) [18].

After decades of rural development programmes in Uganda, Kenya and Zimbabwe, from colonial through post-colonial days to present-day adjustment programmes, much still needs to be done to develop agriculture and the rural areas (Johnston & Kilby, 2022) [21]. Kenya is a country with a strong agricultural base. It made important land transfers in the post-independence period trying to achieve more equity in land distribution. However, the reforms served to develop a strong, now-entrenched middle-class elite in the countryside, engaged in small commodity production. With this development, the poorer sections of the peasantry were further impoverished (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2023) [16]. Giving title deeds in communal lands led to landlessness and squatting. Ethnic confrontations have arisen due to land conflicts. Kenya needs to evolve a more egalitarian, ethnic/traditional-sensitive and efficient system of land reform and development of the rural areas.

Uganda has gone through traumas at all levels of the social system. The political field is now relatively stabilized, though with armed conflicts in some regions. There is no land problem in Uganda as every citizen has access to good land. The reform programme which has been taken over by external elements has caused much suffering for many. However, some significant strides have been made in the economic field, particularly agriculture (CGIAR, 2022) [19]. Diversification of the coffee-export monoculture is underway, but the financial base is weak. A dire need for investment in social and economic infrastructure for rural development exists. The SAP makes this extremely difficult (Binswanger & Von Braun, 2023) [14].

The chief problem for Zimbabwe is land reform. This has progressed very slowly since independence and vast tracts of land remain in the hands of a few former colonial settlers. The reform programme has made it difficult to fund land redistribution and infrastructure-building programmes (CGIAR, 2022) [19]. Zimbabwe has tried a limited decentralization of rural administration and development planning and implementation, but it is limited and hampered by a lack of resources and capacity to raise them. The rural areas, particularly communal and small-scale commercial areas, remain locked in low productivity, low investment, low participation and high poverty (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2023) [16]. The strategy for rural development in Zimbabwe lies in more democratic participation and decentralization, radical land reform and injection of capital investment to build the required infrastructure.

4. Agriculture, the Rural Environment and the Development Gap

In a reference book that has today become compulsory reading in Southern Africa's social sciences, Ellis (2022) [22] divided the region into three sub-sets. In one group are South Africa, Zambia and Botswana with remarkable economic performance and a harsh concentration of income. At the other extreme, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where wealth is distributed more fairly but growth is limited. The other nations combine the worst of the other two with economic stagnation and persistent poverty. The absence of any significant historical experience with a system that balances fairness and growth has been responsible for this gap in Latin American development (Jazairy *et al.*, 2022) [18].

How can agriculture and the rural environment help to fill the gap? The aim of this text is to raise some of the main themes for consideration to help answer this question. First, information about demographics, economic trends and the past land system of large estates gives an overview of the particularities and the limits of agriculture in constructing a more integrated development model (Ellis, 2022) [22].

Next, the theme of agrarian reform as a way of combating rural poverty shows how the so-called "new wave" in agrarian reform can expand, but not replace, the old reformist viewpoints. However, rural development policy cannot be reduced to agrarian reform. Recent studies on existing family farming perhaps offer the most important contribution to the creation of new paradigms for development in the countryside. Finally, it is illustrated that family farming is not the same as small-scale production and that it can have fundamental social and economic roles in today's world (Johnston & Kilby, 2022) [21]. In particular, family farming may become the basis for building a civil society in the rural environment. It is clear that some of the questions and the examples raised here refer to Southern Africa as a whole. Nevertheless, the reader should be aware that the text is mainly centered on South Africa.

5. Toward a New Model of Agricultural Development

Less than 30 years ago, one of the great international development specialists stated that under-developed countries are agrarian societies (Stavenhagen, 2022) [23]. If this criterion were still valid, South Africa would already be a member of the rich countries' club. Globally, only one-fourth of South Africans were living in the countryside in 1995 compared to 58 percent in 1950. The vast majority of the population lives in small towns. In the comparative context of this workshop, it is important to stress two important aspects of this demographic situation.

1) The demographic weight of the rural population in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa creates a situation where agriculture (including non-farming activities in the rural environment) is the pole around which a joint campaign can be organized for economic growth and against poverty (Abramovay & Sachs, 2021) [24]. In this case, even if destitution strikes in these regions more violently than in our country, the road map with which the poor can join and benefit from the market economy can be drawn with some clarity. It is no coincidence that there is consensus among the international specialists working in these regions on two central points: the potential output of the rural poor, if put to good use, maybe the basis for a fairer agricultural development, the productive possibilities that the green revolution opens for the regions which until now have not been considered very suitable for agricultural development.

The fact that the poverty in these regions is found in the rural environment is perhaps a trump card rather than a handicap. In these cases, it seems possible that agricultural development (given that it tries to exploit the productive capacities that have been resting up to now) could be the basis for a system integrating growth and fairness. Many rural poor can become more successful as farmers and, in this way, become the key players in the market economy. This is why agriculture is of strategic importance in a perspective of growth with fairness, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa.

2) The situation is quite different in Latin America. Our continent has undergone a massive and rapid process of deruralization without really becoming urbanized. A large percentage of those who left the countryside are now living in "pre-towns" (Abramovay & Sachs, 2021) [24], without access to the basic conditions that characterize urban life -housing, health care, education, culture and, above all, employment. Most Latin American poverty is no longer in the rural environment (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2023) [16]. Agricultural development is obviously important but, in contrast to what is happening in sub-Saharan Africa, it cannot be the main thrust of a policy aiming to include the poor in economic life as a basis for their social emancipation for the simple reason that the poorest people no longer live in the country, nor will they return there.

6. Rural Poverty and Agrarian Reform

What sense is there in agrarian reform in these countries which, despite the poverty of their rural population, have dynamic agricultural sectors, are able to as-

simulate technical innovations and are highly integrated into national and international markets? Until now, agrarian reforms have been successful in those countries and regions where rural poverty and agricultural stagnation could be seen as the same problem. This is particularly the case for the most successful agrarian reforms, those of Japan, Korea and Taiwan area, where it has been possible to achieve agricultural growth and the integration of the poor into the economic system in one step (CGIAR, 2022) [19]. The development of the productive forces and the fight against poverty could be seen as one and the same challenge.

Latin America has lost its historic opportunity (which several Asiatic states have put to good use) to make agricultural modernization an instrument to integrate the poor into the dynamism of the market economy and, as a result, construct the bases of their economic and social emancipation. In this sense, growth has been disorganized, but it has not been blocked.

In these situations, the economic sense of the changes represented by agrarian reform tends to be in doubt. This is what is happening in South Africa and in Southern Africa in general, and in South America (Lipton & Lipton, 2023) [17] in particular, where agrarian reform is often seen either as a useless expense or, at most, as a purely social policy whose economic sense is simply that of waiting for the imminent urbanization to be completed in order to carry out its work of assimilation. However, it is important to discuss certain proposals about the sense of agrarian reform in today's situation.

Agrarian reform is not a panacea that will resolve the social problems of a region that has urbanized rapidly and has a population that is now three-fourths urban. However, it is still the only lasting way to address the problem of rural poverty and can have permanent effects on how the poor are introduced into the economic system. This is different from other social programmes, such as public work approaches or food distribution which are important in attenuating extreme poverty but are incapable of changing the matrix of income distribution.

Agrarian reform must be clearly targeted in two ways:

It must be concentrated in the poorest rural regions. In Brazil, this means mainly the northeast. The recent formation of scattered *assentamentos* (the settling of farmers under agrarian reform programmes) in the Southern region produced very good economic results, [14] a fact which is recognized even by opponents of agrarian reform (Castro, 2022) [15]. However, in the northeast, the practice of introducing these scattered *assentamentos*, *i.e.* not on a large scale nor in a selective way, produces mediocre results.

The explanation of this contrast is simple -in southern Brazil, the socio-economic conditions permit the development of family agriculture (roads, banks, cooperatives, competitive markets, and basic social infrastructure), while in the northeast, the new farmers fall prey to the traditional ways of obtaining credit and gaining access to the market which impedes their success. Therefore, agrarian reform must be limited regionally, but it should be on a large enough scale to change the socio-economic environment and, as a result, the relation-

ship of the farmer with all the institutions that define his entry into society.

I recently visited an assentamento in the state of Paraíba (in northeast Brazil) where the farmers were happy and proud of their productive performance. When I asked them about their children's education, I learned that the schoolmistress received one-fourth of the minimum salary each month and so she did not give any lessons. It is clear that if this assentamento were not isolated in this unproductive regional ocean of great estates, but inserted into a socially-significant experience, the bases would have been created immediately to change the relationship between the farmers and the public and private institutions.

It must also be targeted from a time angle. The practice of creating scattered assentamentos must be replaced by a vast programme to improve the rural environment in the poorest regions and to put an end to structures that allow patronage and personal dependency links with the great landowners.

In the regions which suffer from both extreme rural poverty and landowning concentration and absenteeism, alternative mechanisms to agrarian reform (land tax, land funds and the rental market, itself a land market) are unable to fulfil the distributive role which one might expect. De Janvry and Sadoulet (2023) [16] show that in Asia the land rental market can work, precisely because the structure of large estates was first broken up by agrarian reform, in contrast to what happens in our country. In their opinion, however, this is a road to be exploited, despite the lack of tradition. In relation to those regions where the weight of family farming is important, they are surely right. However, in relation to those regions with typical large estates, I admit to some scepticism in this regard, which a recent study by Carter and Galeano (2023) [25] seems to confirm.

7. Education Policies in Rural Africa

Since their independence, the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa have invested heavily in education and achieved impressive gains in a number of areas. Over 1960-83 the gross primary enrollment ratio in the region increased from 36 to 75 percent, and the secondary enrollment ratio rose from 3 to 20 percent (Ralph *et al.*, 2023) [26]. Adult literacy rates increased from around 10 to 42 percent, and the average number of years of education of the working-age population more than tripled from about 1 year in 1970 to 3.3 years in 1983 (Peter *et al.*, 2023) [27]. These remarkable advances in African education are now seriously threatened by the region's recent economic decline and explosive population growth (see article by Birds All and Sai, in this issue). Just to maintain school participation rates at their 1983 levels, primary school places would have to increase from 51.3 million to 90.7 million, and secondary school places from 11.1 million to 19.7million, by the year 2020 (Fukuda-Parr *et al.*, 2023) [28]. The need for rapid expansion of education, and for improvement of its quality, comes at a time when economic difficulties have led to significant reduction of public spending in most countries of the region. Recurrent public expenditure on education, for example, declined from \$10 billion in 1980 to \$8.9 billion in 1983. Yet, extensive experience from

Africa and elsewhere strongly indicates that increased investments in education and training at this stage in Africa's history would yield very broad economic benefits in terms of increased labor productivity, economic growth, and reduced fertility rates. A recent macroeconomic analysis, for example, found that investments in education account for more than 30 percent of GDP growth in 31 African countries studied over 1965-81 (Peter *et al.*, 2023) [27]. Moreover, there is a strong relationship between women's education and the number of children each woman has during her lifetime the higher the education level, the fewer the children. Thus, high economic returns can be expected from continued investments in Africa's education sector.

8. Relationship between Educational Policy and Rural Economy in Africa

Schultz (2021) [29] and Becker and Gary (2022) [30] have been the main advocates of human capital as a determinant of economic growth. Starting from the analysis of economic growth in several countries, Schultz identified the accumulation of human capital as the main factor explaining the difference between growth and accumulation of physical capital. According to him, human capital is a capital good whose value depends on five main categories of investments in human beings: 1) health, including also nutrition, 2) migration, enhancing job opportunities, 3) on-the-job training, 4) formal education, 5) study programs for adults, such as extension services in agriculture. However, most of the empirical studies within the endogenous growth theory operationalize the concept of human capital focusing on its educational component. The same occurs within studies that address the problem of agricultural productivity in rural areas of developing countries (Koffio-Tessio *et al.* 2021) [31]. Jamison, Lau and Lockheed (2021) [32], on the basis of the results derived from 18 studies conducted in several geographical areas, examined the contribution of education to agricultural development. Taking as a proxy of agricultural development the variation of productivity in this sector, the authors concluded that completing the first four years of formal schooling results in a 7.4% increase in agricultural productivity (Jamison, Lau and Lockheed, 2021) [32]. Most of the critics of this approach remain in the same line of thought (Phillips *et al.*, 2021) [33], proposing merely different ways to measure agricultural productivity or a wider idea of efficiency.

Following the previous critics, I start with the assumption that it is not economic growth the final goal of development, but there are other valuable ends, among which I study food security. The reason for this choice is that especially in developing countries, where a large part of the population faces constant deprivations, as Sen (2023) [34] claims, income is not a good indicator of the quality of life; the consistent elements of life include "being adequately nourished" (Sen, 2023) [34]. That is, food security is analyzed at the household level, which reflects the "sustainable access to safe food of sufficient quality and quantity...to ensure adequate intake and healthy life for all members of the family" (UNICEF,

2022) [35]. Analogous to the argument that Sen (2023) [34] uses to promote the value of longevity, I consider the value of freedom from starvation and hunger as a desire widely shared among people for its intrinsic value and for its capacity to promote other freedoms. Indeed, not being well-nourished affects the capacity of people to work, to participate in community life, to be respected, to concentrate in school, thus this problem should be urgently addressed. Furthermore, 70% of the world poor live in rural areas (World Bank 2023) [36]; therefore, proposing a theoretical model that stresses the instrumental role played by basic and higher education in tackling food insecurity among rural people. Here, using different kinds of literature as a reference, I identify the multiple mechanisms through which an educated person is more likely to be food secure. First, the impact of education can occur through social change. As Mukudi (2023) [37] claims, education has a key role in accessing public information, especially concerning health, nutrition, and hygiene. Acquiring knowledge about how to avoid and face illnesses is essential since people with diseases require more calories to be food secure. Furthermore, people need to have, where possible, a proper and diversified diet in order to build a stronger immune system and avoid morbidity and mortality. Finally, even following right hygienic practices is essential to prevent diseases like diarrhoea. Mass Media such as radio are widely spread in African countries, even among poor people living in rural areas; therefore, only people with a minimum level of education can properly capture and elaborate that information. Even more relevant is the role of basic education, *i.e.* literacy, in acquiring this type of information from written messages. This argument, indeed, should be extended in an inter-temporal dimension: “parental education has been found to invariably influence nutritional outcomes of the children. Children of less educated parents and those of parents with no educational exposure consistently score poorly on nutritional status indices” (Mukudi, 2023) [37]. Moreover, there is a gender aspect that does matter for ensuring long-term food security. In fact, the specific impact of women’s education is higher: girls who attend school and obtain at least the basic skills can even teach the right health and hygienic practices to their children once they become mothers. This means that female education should be at the center of the analysis because it has an additional direct effect on nutritional status. Schnell-Anzola, Rowe and LeVine (2021) [38] take as a reference an empirical research carried out by Glewwe (2021) [39] in Morocco, which showed that maternal “education improves child health primarily by increasing health knowledge” (Glewwe, 2021) [39] and that it does not depend prevalently on the subjects studied in class, but on the very general abilities to read, write, reflect, and process information. Education, then, is fundamental to promoting agency, which expresses the capacity of the rural poor to escape from poverty and hunger with their own power. Those who are educated are more likely to find a job, but have also, *ceteris paribus*, a capacity to use more rationally the resources or she owns. Educated and informed people have more probability to select valuable objectives in life,

such as having stable access to food for their household. Even in this argument, there is a gender factor. Mothers showed to assign a higher value to the well-being of their children, allocating more resources to health, and nutrition (Sen, 2023) [34]. Quoting still Sen (2023) [34], “female literacy is found to have an unambiguous and statistically significant reducing impact on under-five mortalities, even after controlling for male literacy.” Therefore, a more active role of women in the family is likely to lead to lower mortality rates, which, in developing countries, are mostly due to malnutrition. A third “social” benefit of education for food security and well-being in general, is enhanced through an improvement of social relations. In African rural regions, for instance, the role that community actions can play is impressive. Some authors defined “social capital” (Woolcock & Narayan 2020) [40] the social networks in which a person is included, arguing that the larger these nets the larger the possibility to find assistance in emergency situations. To make an example, man communities organize common meals, systems for common access to credit, labour division, and public participation to ceremony expenditures. This way the risk, even of becoming food insecure, is alleviated, making individuals less vulnerable. The next question is: how does education affect social relations? Lanzi (2022) [41] speaks about the “positional” value of education, with reference to the ability to relate well to others and to cooperate (OECD 2023) [42] achieved through education, even here conceived in its more general form rather than the specific topics studied in school. Finally, education provides a psychological contribution to food security, making people more ambitious and self-confident. Being educated is considered a relevant weapon against feelings like shame and lack of hope, whose overcoming is indispensable to promoting food security through the other mechanisms mentioned above. The second channel through which education influences food security is “economic production”. In rural areas, this is typically achieved through the increase of agricultural productivity and efficiency in that sector. However, another economic contribution of education to food security was neglected: the income obtained by crops different from the main one and nonfarm activities. Rural non-farm activities were not taken into adequate consideration; instead, they can be a fundamental direct source of food or income, and, even more, a resource for the long run. In fact, the diversification of income-generating activities is essential to reduce vulnerability and recover more rapidly from emergencies like natural disasters. The various contributions of education to food security can be viewed in the diagram, which is a slightly modified version of the UNICEF (2022) [35] model of the causes of malnutrition (2022), and its revision made by Mukudi (2023) [37].

9. Conclusion

Clearly, there is much room to improve education policy as it relates to rural SSA. For example, making primary and secondary education accessible to all remains an unfinished project, despite the great leap forward in primary enrol-

ment resulting from concerted action to address the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) extend the ambition that education should be “affordable” to all across the whole life course – including access to vocational and tertiary education. Gender equality is also a key element of these goals, and this is also far from being realized. The fact that the inability to meet the costs of attending school continues to stop many rural young people from continuing their formal education is nothing less than a catastrophic policy failure. Indeed, unless it is addressed, the more recent focus on quality in education, and how it should be measured and improved, will do little for rural children or the next generations of young people. The findings also point to a demand for vocational and technical training. However, given the desire and need of many rural young people to combine further training with the demands of ongoing economic and caring activities, this must be provided in flexible and/or part-time modes. More research may clarify the kinds of complementary interventions that would best enable rural young people to take advantage of existing or augmented educational resources. The call for attention to quality education is fully justified and the broad aims of the SDGs are to be applauded. However, the metrics of quality proposed in the SDGs remain too narrowly focused on attainment. Student assessment data is notoriously problematic and importantly, such measures do not speak to the broader ambitions of the SDGs. These broader ambitions can only be addressed with a much clearer recognition of the historical, ideological and patriarchal underpinnings of education policy and practice, that result in the promotion of ideals of life, transition and work that are alien to most rural settings. The assumption of a linear trajectory from schooling into work, and the devaluing of unpaid and domestic work are prime examples.

These underpinnings are also reflected in the discriminatory and disempowering dynamics that arise from the gendered landscape of education. Again, the focus on internationally comparable metrics of quality is misplaced as long as these underpinnings are left unexamined.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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