



Agricultural policy making in Kenya: why must smallholder farmers' agency be made central?

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Smallholder farming in Kenya is key to the country's food security and economy. Small farms account for 75% of the total agricultural output. Yet smallholder farmers' agency has been largely neglected in the five decades of post-colonial agricultural policy-making in Kenya.

The same policies have attempted to heavily restructure smallholder production, marketing and livelihoods. Smallholders have therefore been the main target of the policy interventions. In this targeting, they have been approached primarily as 'objects' that lack agency, rather than as 'subjects' who possess a clear capacity to act.

Analysing the literature on Kenya's agricultural policy-making since the 1970s, we find that it has privileged the agency of modernising experts. These experts and the 'innovations' they champion are believed to be the drivers of agricultural development in Kenya. In sharp contrast, smallholder farmers are framed as having no innovations or insights to offer. Indeed, they are considered to have little agency beyond the adoption of modernising innovations that are believed to transform agriculture and build livelihoods.

Without accounting for smallholders as subjects with agency that is shaped by farm-ownership structures, cropping patterns, and land productivity, within different

regions of Kenya, we argue that policy interventions are unlikely to succeed. This lack of success takes two forms:

1. The stated objectives of policy, to reduce poverty by building smallholder livelihoods and increasing agricultural productivity, are not met;
2. Underpinned by modernising 'innovations' in crop production and marketing, which are often modelled on the Asian Green Revolutions (GRs), policies overlook diverse agricultural transformation pathways that are sustainable in local social/material conditions and based on smallholder farmers' knowledges.

Tackling these two lacks of success is critical for meeting the UN's (2015-2030) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 10 (reduced inequalities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), and 15 (life on land).

In this policy brief, apart from pointing out the glaring historical omission of smallholders agency in the Kenyan policy processes, we consider the pathways through which smallholder farmers' perspectives and knowledge can be included in policy going forward.



Agricultural policy-making in Kenya

A decade after independence, in the 1970s, Kenyan policy-makers focused on agricultural intensification practices that were modelled on the Asian Green Revolution. Indeed, following the ‘successes’ of Asian GR, Kenyan agricultural policy launched ‘Integrated Rural Development’ initiatives. The aim was to address what were believed to be technical constraints in smallholder production.

These constraints included poor access to farm-inputs and credit, as well as the lack of knowledge of agricultural production. To address these constraints, policy focused on top-down interventions, with the state providing key services such as credit, inputs, research and extension to smallholders.

These interventions produced short-lived impacts on some smallholder production, largely through increases in maize yields. For instance, in the 1970s, increased maize production allowed Kenya to become a net maize exporter. But, by the 1980s, maize production had declined, making Kenya a net maize importer¹.

The decline in maize production during the 1980s coincided with the adoption of liberalisation policies in the agricultural sector. A central component of these policies was a market-fix approach, which focused on reducing budget deficits and external debt by dismantling state-provisioned services in agriculture. Within a decade from the early 1980s, through the Agricultural Sector Adjustment Operation (ASAO) I and II, state services of agriculture extension, research, credit and input-provision were cut back. In addition, price-based support mechanisms were removed, and most agricultural subsidies were eradicated.

The ASAO aimed to replace the state with private firms driven by market incentives. This was expected

to generate ‘efficiency’ across the agricultural sector. Through efficient service provision and better access to functioning markets, smallholders were expected to increase the net value of their crop production, and achieve higher incomes to reduce poverty. Very little of this expectation was actually realised.

As a result, in the 1990s, policy-makers focused on reforming state agricultural institutions and parastatals that were viewed as distorting agricultural markets and hindering liberalisation. These institutional-fix plans were laid down in various policies including the Agricultural Sector Development Strategy formulated in 1997, and implemented through the Agricultural Sector Investment Programme^{2,3}.

Unfortunately, the institutional-fix plans met the same fate as the earlier market-fix approach. Evidence revealed that the major beneficiaries of these liberalising reforms were not smallholders, but rather large farmers operating in the already successful export sector that includes tea, coffee and horticulture⁴. In fact, smallholders became more vulnerable in the era of liberalisation, due to the dismantling of state provisioned services in marketing and production⁵.

The overall result was stagnation in smallholder production, leading to high levels of poverty among smallholders and agricultural workers⁶. However, rather than changing the direction of agricultural policy away from liberalization and privatization, in the new millennium, Kenya has deepened focus on commercial and market-oriented agricultural production. Despite the lack of past successes, justification for policies to deepen liberalization is still claimed to be central to poverty reduction and increased employment in agriculture (e.g., the 2003 Strategy for Revitalising Agriculture prioritises the role of private firms facilitated by the state).

How are smallholders framed in agricultural policy?

Throughout Kenyan agricultural policy documents and associated academic literature on poverty reduction, we find that smallholders are framed in generalised ways.

For instance, the Strategy for Revitalising Agriculture (SRA) frames Kenyan smallholder farming as a whole as problematic: **it is viewed as inadequately modernised, using inappropriate cropping practices and too few ‘externally-improved’ inputs and machinery/tools/technologies.**

Such a general problematization of smallholder production paves the way for ‘one-size-fits-all’ interventions geared towards promoting and selling ‘improved’ technologies as well as easing the access to markets (and information), to bring about an African Green Revolution⁷.

In all of this, **little consideration is given to the heterogeneity of smallholder production in Kenya**, differing across regional ecologies, land-ownership structures, soil qualities, water availability, gendered labouring patterns and so on.

Indeed, designing policy that does justice to this heterogeneity is a herculean task if smallholders are approached as objects lacking agency (as the capacity to act by making a difference in a situation).

Designing top-down policy promoting the agency of agronomic experts, private firms and state institutions that offer standardised ‘solutions’, cannot work for all smallholder farmers (and agricultural workers). In contrast, if smallholders are recognised as heterogeneous subjects who actively perform adaptive

learning and produce knowledge embedded in their socio-ecological contexts, policy can nurture multiple situation-specific pathways of agricultural development, to help build livelihoods and alleviate poverty.

Unfortunately however, even the latest Agriculture Sector Development Strategy (ASDS), published in 2010, depicts **smallholder farmers as homogenous, while the state and private sector actors are framed as heterogenous.** The latter actors have differentiated agency. Some of them are imagined to efficiently provide ‘improved’ farm-inputs. Others provide agricultural extension services. Yet others do research for developing agricultural ‘innovations’, or provide credit to smallholders.

Even when policy takes smallholders’ agency into account, **it is considered dependent on the agency of the state, donors and the private sector through extension, research, credit and input supply.** Because the state, donors and the private sector are prioritised as agents that modernise Kenyan agriculture through intensification, smallholders’ agency is considered to come into play as part of such modernisation. Smallholders’ agency is thus channelled by modernisation, emerging out of their embrace of the right technologies and market instruments.

To justify this channelling, **smallholder farmers’ knowledge is framed as ‘local’ and ‘backward’.** Smallholders are considered incapable of innovating. Their knowledges underpinning farming practices are considered deleterious. Their only redemption comes from ‘superior’ modern knowledge and materials developed by professional researchers, delivered by

Making smallholders’ agency matter

The evidence above suggests that Kenyan policy has misrepresented the ways that smallholders act and make decisions. What are some alternative ways to view smallholders’ agency in policy making?

Smallholders’ agency is multifaceted: Our review found that smallholders often act to produce knowledge, develop skills, adapt practices, and creatively conserve and transform resources such as soils and seeds.

Smallholders’ agency is relational: Smallholders work in surroundings that are simultaneously social, ecological and technical. It is these surroundings that enable and constrain smallholder agency.

For example, smallholders’ agency may be enabled or constrained with varying intensity, depending on their more or less marginalised positions in social structures of gender, ethnicity, land tenure, and governance (of resources). Gender, in particular, constrains women’s agency to control their own labour and manage resources at the household level.

extension services and private firms (that sell innovative farm-inputs including hybrid or genetically modified seeds). In this process, **smallholder farmers are framed just as adopters/users of modern technology.**

Beyond the adoption of modern technologies, if smallholders’ agency is accounted for, it is still considered universally ‘inferior’ to that of modernizing professionals. For instance, in the SRA, **smallholders are approached as mobilisers of other farmers to form cooperative bodies. However, their management skills are framed as weak and poor. The farmers’ organizations they develop are viewed as corrupt.** This self-harming corruption is claimed to sabotage their ability to access credit from the private sector, which constrains their ability to participate in modernising development through GR-style agricultural intensification.

Summary: how policy views small farmers

Overall, policy discourses represent smallholder farmers either as **objects lacking agency** or as **narrowly-channelled subjects whose agency is afforded by the adoption of modernising technologies and markets.** Beyond modernisation as agricultural intensification, smallholder farmers lack all agency.

This framing entrenches modern agricultural intensification as the only development pathway through which smallholders can improve their welfare and reduce poverty⁸. Beyond such modernisation, little consideration is given to smallholders’ agency of producing and nurturing knowledges, skills, situation-specific farming practices and productive resources.

Smallholders’ agency is diverse: Depending on the specific composition (in terms of social relations, ecological conditions and technical artefacts) of smallholders’ surroundings, their agency may be enabled along one (or more) of multiple possible pathways of agricultural development.

Policy must support these plural pathways for meeting the SDGs, rather than continuing to push only for the pathway of agricultural intensification driven by modern technologies such as toxic pesticides, industrial fertilizers, and hybrid or genetically-modified seed varieties.

Making policy relevant

Supporting plural pathways, based on farmers’ knowledges and rooted in specific socio-ecological situations, might also allow policymakers to reduce the divergence between their policies and the latter’s interpretation by smallholder farmers⁹. Smallholders may respond better to policies and interventions that directly address their diverse knowledges, priorities and interests¹⁰, to realise plural agricultural development pathways for achieving the SDGs.

Conclusions

Based on a review of agricultural policy discourses in Kenya, we have highlighted how smallholder farmers' agency is either obscured or channelled in the service of agricultural intensification driven by modern technologies and commercialisation.

Such a GR-style approach has been largely unsuccessful in alleviating rural poverty and in sustaining agricultural livelihoods. However, rather than moving beyond this unsuccessful approach, agricultural policy in Kenya is

geared towards its further entrenchment. It does so, for example, by supporting calls for a new African Green Revolution based on emerging modern technologies such as digital farming and use of big data¹¹.

Clearly, such technologies are no magic bullets to solve the complex problems of rural poverty and recurring food crises. New ways of doing agricultural policy are, therefore, urgently needed.

Ways forward and policy recommendations

- Agricultural problems are not only technical requiring standardized technical solutions. Instead, they should also be viewed as socially- and ecologically-situated, requiring a wide range of context-specific knowledges of smallholder farmers, adapted to their diverse realities of social structures, soils, rainfall patterns and other agro-ecological conditions.

To mobilize farmers' knowledges, for realising plural pathways of agricultural development, a bottom-up approach to agricultural policy-making is required. Such a bottom-up approach has recently been made possible by the creation of counties and devolution of agricultural services.

- Farmers' knowledge production is based on their experiences of working with ecological entities such as plants and soils, with techniques such as 'low-till farming' and rainwater harvesting, and with fellow workers on the farm.

Policy ought to nurture the diversity of such experiences that are critical for learning and innovation on the farm. This means that a wide range of farm-inputs should be promoted, rather than pushing the smallholders' to adopt modern 'improved' inputs (that often do not perform as expected by the 'experts' who develop them). Thus,

policy ought to support on-farm experimentation by smallholders using 'traditional' techniques and materials such as local seeds and animal manure, which many smallholders say are better suited to their soils and climate. We believe this is possible, given the devolution of agricultural services to the counties.

- **Realising the above requires policies for empowerment of smallholders, to tackle longstanding asymmetries of power.** Such empowerment is a complex task, in a reality structured around the state and donors framed as primary actors; NGOs, the private sector, scientists and other experts as secondary actors; and the farmers only as tertiary actors. Farmers' knowledges and skills have too often been disqualified from the space of development and progress by the 'primary' and 'secondary' actors.

To tackle such historical biases, **agricultural policy should accommodate the possibility of collective mobilisation by smallholder farmers who refuse to submit to the logic of one-size-fits-all agricultural modernisation.** Future pathways of agricultural development are plural. They build on many diverse practices alongside any modern technologies, to help Kenya meet its Sustainable Development Goals.

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