

# GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

## Lost in Translation: Pro-Poor Development in The Green Revolution for Africa

“We must think differently: grow agriculture as a business, to become a wealth-creating sector, not one for managing poverty.” (Akinwumi Adesina: inaugural speech as President of the African Development Bank, Abidjan, September 1, 2015)

### Introduction

Following years of neglect by development donors and governments, African agriculture has over the past two decades received a dramatic increase in attention and resources. An expanding network of donors, development agencies, and states has launched a panoply of development strategies to improve the productivity and market engagement of smallholder farmers. While the immediate objective of these initiatives is to generate the economic growth they perceive as necessary to solve rural poverty and food insecurity, their larger goal is the structural transformation of national economies. Deeply influenced by the neoliberal development thinking of the late twentieth century, this market-based approach—which we call the Green Revolution for Africa (GR4A)—prioritizes private sector investments in agricultural value chains as the route to economic growth. At its heart lies the dual assumption that what is good for business—commercial production—is also good for poor farmers; and what is good for poor farmers is also good for business.

The articles in this Forum engage with these assumptions, examining how their promoters have built an extensive institutional architecture to implement the various approaches and how that implementation has played

---

*African Studies Review*, Volume 65, Number 1 (March 2022), pp. 8–15

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

doi:10.1017/asr.2021.99

out on the ground. Collectively, the articles highlight tensions in the GR4A's approach to agricultural development and suggest that it is unlikely to have a substantive positive impact on the livelihoods and food security of Africa's rural poor. Two broad issues with GR4A implementation stand out. First, projects and policies formulated at the transnational level get translated, re-negotiated, and re-assembled by participants as they travel along the policy chain, with the end results often being something quite different than what was originally intended. Second, building markets and generating desired responses among small-scale farmers require an enormous amount of sustained work on the part of development actors. Under these circumstances, in which development agents are trying to both improve farming practices and build markets, there is substantial space for agency at various points in the value chain that can complicate, and sometimes confound, the implementation of GR4A projects. Each of the case studies in this Forum explores a different aspect of such agency, offering several viewpoints on how the demands of the GR4A approach are translated and re-assembled in specific socio-cultural and spatial locales.

## Background

As a development framework, the GR4A approach was constructed around the intensification and commercialization of poor peoples' crops, for which its proponents sought to create new markets. As such, the approach rests on two main strategic imperatives. One is to increase yields by making productivity-enhancing technologies available to smallholder farmers (Toennissen et al. 2008; Pingali 2012). The other is to improve smallholder access to newly structured agricultural value chains (Conway et al. 2019:6). Achieving these goals would purportedly help to close urban-rural income gaps while also creating employment opportunities, reducing food prices, and diversifying rural economies (Dorward et al. 2004; Diao et al. 2008).

In addition, proponents employ a rhetoric of gender-sensitive development and empowering women farmers. Recognizing that women do the bulk of agricultural work in Africa, and that gender inequity entails a substantial cost to agricultural output, all the major GR4A players have well-articulated plans for supporting women farmers and "closing the gender gap." Policy-makers' push to integrate women into agricultural value chains is also informed by research indicating a close relationship between women's improved socio-economic standing and household nutritional status (FAO 2011; Smith et al. 2003). Women farmers are thus seen as a crucial vector for pro-poor agricultural growth and food security.

Scholars have noted strong continuities between this productivist approach and earlier top-down and technocratic development strategies. Africa's history is replete with efforts to re-make the socio-economic worlds of farmers and their communities in the interests of larger political-economic objectives (Bernstein 1977; Berry 1984; Richards 1986; Watts 1986). Such efforts have generally been swaddled in paradigms of "modernization" or

“development,” and historically have tended to be imposed on rural populations (Decker & McMahon 2020). To some observers, the GR4A represents the latest iteration in a long history of dispossession, in which the resources of smallholder farmers are bent to the will of global capital (Patel 2013; Amanor 2012). Some studies have shown how the GR4A development framework crowds out alternative perspectives (IDS 2011). What is clear is that the GR4A represents the most ambitious effort to integrate smallholders into formal markets, both as consumers of commercialized inputs (such as improved seed, fertilizer, and pesticides) and as producers of commercialized food crops. A closer look at its core organizational features is thus warranted.

A substantial literature has been produced which examines the input side, in particular the development of seed systems and the increasing efforts of global agribusiness corporations and their allies to shape the smallholder sector by promoting biotechnology and biofortification (e.g., IDS 2011; Schnurr 2013; Schurman 2017). But the participation of smallholders in output markets is equally important and provides the focus for the articles in this Forum. Producer markets in the GR4A model take the form of agricultural value chains in which public-private partnerships are the driving forces. Aid donors and African states provide incentives to agribusiness firms to organize rural producers to provision their agro-industries with their basic primary materials (for example, rice, cassava, cashews); non-governmental development organizations deliver services such as training and extension. The proponents of pro-poor development view farmers as benefiting socially and economically from participation in shorter and more tightly structured value chains. They view the integration of smallholders into these new market relations as an improvement on pre-GR4A rural economies, which are commonly described as poorly organized and subsistence-oriented.

Yet, as the articles in this Forum demonstrate, the GR4A model fails to take adequate account of market relationships that have influenced smallholder farmer behavior in the past as well as in the present. In the first place, the assumption that farmers' livelihoods are not embedded in well-organized market relations is faulty; rural Africans have long histories of participating in agricultural markets as strategies for subsistence as well as accumulation (Gengenbach, this issue), though the logics of risk and incentive inherent in those market structures may not be readily apparent to a modern capitalist optic (Guyer & Tranberg Hansen 2001). There is, therefore, a risk that GR4A proponents will misconstrue the incentive and risk matrix that orients smallholders toward markets. These misconceptions can complicate and undermine the “effective operation” of the proposed value chains.

In the second place, since the construction of GR4A value chains depends on the influx of investment from private donors and investors, market structures must be attractive to those parties, even when their interests are at odds with those of the smallholders. This need to attract private capital results in incentive structures that favor private investors over smallholders. These incentives seek to reduce the risks to business as opposed to those of smallholders. In doing so, as the articles in this Forum demonstrate,

the weight of the dual assumptions underpinning the GR4A framework has moved in recent years away from the idea that what is good for the poor is good for business toward the idea that what is good for business is good for the poor. In consequence, the likelihood that the GR4A will achieve its pro-poor development goal by triggering an inclusive agricultural transformation at the continental scale remains questionable.

## Case Studies

The studies featured in this Forum are drawn from an interdisciplinary research project, funded by the National Science Foundation from 2016 to 2021, which examined the constitution of the GR4A at multiple scales, focusing particularly on how GR4A-inspired value chains operate, as well as on their potential for reducing rural poverty and food insecurity. In their scene-setting essay, William Munro and Rachel Schurman demonstrate how the institutional and ideational architecture of the GR4A was constructed at the transnational level through an increasingly expansive process of network-building and idea-sharing by key political actors and policy entrepreneurs with salient international contacts. Their account highlights two important trends. One is the increasing engagement of diverse types of development agents beyond the usual “development community,” including philanthropic foundations, management consultants, and private companies, each bringing particular skills, interests, and epistemes to the table. The other is the increasingly prominent role played by newly created African organizations such as NEPAD’s Planning and Coordinating Agency, the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), and Grow Africa. Over time, as Munro and Schurman show, the emphasis of GR4A strategies has shifted progressively outward from concentrating on smallholder farmers to embracing the role and interests of agribusiness in driving African agricultural transformation. Increasingly, the work of pushing the GR4A emphasizes reducing investor risk in order to leverage private investment via high-level multi-stakeholder initiatives.

The other three articles in the Forum focus on value chain projects in three different countries: rice in Burkina Faso; cashew in Côte d’Ivoire; and cassava in Mozambique. Taken together, these studies offer a rich and detailed set of insights into the translation of GR4A ideas and strategies at the national as well as the local scales. The articles on rice development in Burkina Faso and cassava development in Mozambique directly engage the place of gender in the GR4A framework, albeit from different vantage points. As noted, proponents of the GR4A foreground women as key players in the agricultural transformation envisioned for Africa, and in both these cases great emphasis is placed on empowering women by including them in project activities. William Moseley and Melanie Ouedraogo’s research shows that pre-existing conditions, notably the uneven ability of women of different ethnic groups to mobilize labor and other productive resources (such as land and agro-inputs) imperils their participation. In some cases, women sign up to participate in rice

intensification schemes but, in fact, it is men who control the rice plots. Their research also shows that the bulk of AGRA's investment is channeled to seed breeders, to the detriment of producers and millers. Moseley and Ouedraogo find that the commitment of producers to selling rice within the value chain is weak, and the project's emphasis on gender and nutrition is largely rhetorical. Malnutrition remains widespread in the project area.

In the case of Mozambican cassava, Heidi Gengenbach, Justino Nhabinde, and Alcino Comé take a different analytical tack, presenting a long *durée* historical analysis of how the roles and gendered meanings of cassava in the context of Mozambican farmers' livelihoods have changed over time. In particular, they challenge Western donor narratives that frame cassava as a lowly "subsistence" crop fated to disappear from rural foodways in the course of dietary "development." Demonstrating that women farmers have long imbued cassava with commercial value, they argue that "subsistence" narratives not only make little sense to farmers, they also overlook the nutritional risks of GR4A projects aimed at improving food security by diverting cassava from home consumption to industrial use. Their article thus illustrates how farmers' responses to the GR4A are filtered through the long experience of women with this crop.

In the final article of the Forum, Thomas Bassett, Moussa Koné, and William Munro bring a critical eye to bear on a key weight-bearing beam in the GR4A platform: that agricultural value chains can and should be "scaled up" to consolidate formal markets and drive income growth. Their analysis of OLAM's Sustainable Cashew Growers' Program in Côte d'Ivoire shows that the anticipated benefits to farmers rest on an unwarranted assumption of sustained demand for raw cashew nuts. Their research demonstrates that fluctuating demand and prices lead buyers and producers to engage in risk-reducing behaviors that impede the functional operation of the cashew value chain. As each value chain actor hedges against risk, the cohesive form of the value chain evaporates, and the "scaling up" of farmer participation in cashew markets does not take place as expected.

## Findings

Taken together, these analyses expose specific vulnerabilities inherent in the GR4A project. First, all the case studies demonstrate that relations and commitments among value chain actors tend to be indeterminate and contingent. Chain actors engage in lateral networks and relationships that enable them to manage risk within the context of uncertainty. In Burkina Faso, women rice growers sell to traders outside the value chain to meet their immediate cash needs. Farmer groups in Côte d'Ivoire have no choice but to sell cashews to local and regional traders when OLAM stops buying nuts. In Mozambique, women farmers market their crop to buyers outside the DADTCO value chain to maintain the measure of autonomy that is essential to survival when DADTCO cannot absorb their crop. Moreover, it is not only farmers who seek recourse to relations external or peripheral to the value

chain in order to mitigate perceived market risk. Chain drivers such as OLAM or DADTCO are themselves quick to drop suppliers, activate parallel market chains, or even shift commodities when markets appear to weaken. In effect, all value chain actors maintain and draw on pre-existing or external market relationships in order to ensure some flexibility under the conditions of uncertainty that are associated with the new market relationships.

Under these conditions, efforts to build stable formal markets for smallholders through GR4A value chain projects have not mitigated the producers' risks of participating in pre-existing "informal" markets, as reflected in the donor narratives. Instead, they have generated new, and perhaps more challenging, market risks for actors along the value chain. One ironic effect is that the contingent nature of markets leads not to the cohesive and efficient value chains characterized by clear sequential chain linkages but rather to non-linear value chain structures driven by risk-management considerations. Collectively, the case studies presented here affirm Bassett, Koné, and Munro's finding that "agricultural value chains themselves are best understood not as linearly coordinated chain-like structures between value-adding actors but as assemblages of multivalent, multi-directional, and power-infused relationships."


A final overarching finding to emerge from these case studies speaks to the gender and nutritional security dimensions of the GR4A. The three case studies in this Forum illustrate the challenges to achieving the win-win goal of agricultural and nutritional transformation through smallholder marketization. The first challenge pivots on the project planners' limited understanding of women's unequal access to productive resources. Through deep historical research, intersectional analysis, and feminist political ecology approaches, these studies demonstrate the importance of a woman's ethnicity, age, income status, and geographical location as key to understanding her capacity to participate in and benefit from a particular value chain. Second, planners commonly conflate participation in agricultural value chains with improved food security and nutritional outcomes. However, dietary diversity surveys conducted for households and among women of reproductive age (WRA) in Burkina and Mozambique do not support this claim. These data show that the diets of WRA have become qualitatively poorer (less micronutrient rich) as a result of the women's participation in GR4A-style projects, a trend that points to declining household nutrition security as well (Chakona & Shackleton 2017). This finding supports the point made in these articles that the focus on women in the GR4A literature has not translated well into development outcomes, as evidenced by their un-situated and ahistorical representation of women in the rice and cassava value chains.

## Conclusion

In their essay, Munro and Schurman conclude that "what happens on the ground" and particularly "who controls the income earned from participation in the continent's new agricultural value chains" are critical indicators for assessing the success of agribusiness development policies in reducing poverty

and food insecurity in Africa's rural economies. The case studies in this Forum demonstrate that African smallholders are interested in participating in the newly fashioned value chains. They are drawn to new markets, extension services, and professional development opportunities offered by the GR4A approach. Yet, farmers in all three cases expressed disillusionment with the promise of higher prices from selling their commodities in shorter value chains. In each case, they expressed frustration at the low prices offered by agro-processors and noted instances in which prices were higher in adjacent markets. Thus, while farmers in all three cases are interested in participating in the proposed value chain initiatives, they recognize that the economic benefits are most often captured by more powerful actors, and their producer risks are unalleviated. Their trust in value chain development agents remains low.

The Forum articles show that the GR4A initiative to remake African agricultural markets and communities is built upon the assumption that all actors share a common goal of making markets work for all participants, particularly the poor. But the functioning of so-called pro-poor agricultural value chains is frequently disrupted by pre-existing commitments, multi-stakeholder risks, conflict, and the uneven distribution of power. In the end, the case studies presented here demonstrate that "making markets work" means different things to different actors. They show that in the translation of the GR4A to the local level, the pro-poor development goals of policy makers are easily lost. In their place, new priorities have emerged, such as the structural transformation of national economies, in which the goal of improving smallholder livelihoods loses its prominence. The priority given in the GR4A to private sector investments in agriculture assumes that what is good for business is also good for the poor. The articles in this Forum suggest that this vision of an "inclusive agricultural transformation" (Kalibata 2018:viii) is difficult to see in the rough-and-tumble operations of GR4A-inspired agricultural value chains in Africa today.

Thomas J. Bassett 

[bassett@illinois.edu](mailto:bassett@illinois.edu)

William Munro 

[wmunro@iwu.edu](mailto:wmunro@iwu.edu)

## Acknowledgments

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1539833.

## References

- Amanor, Kojo. 2012. "Global Resource Grabs, Agribusiness Concentration and the Smallholder: Two West African Case Studies." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (3-4): 731-49.



- Bernstein, Henry. 1977. "Notes on Capital and Peasantry." *Review of African Political Economy* 4 (10): 60–73.
- Berry, Sara. 1984. "The Food Crisis and Agrarian Change in Africa: A Review Essay." *African Studies Review* 27 (2): 59–112.
- Chakona, Gamuchirai, and Charlie Shackleton. 2017. "Minimum Dietary Diversity Scores for Women Indicate Micronutrient Adequacy and Food Insecurity Status in South African Towns." *Nutrients* 9 (812): 1–16.
- Conway, Gordon, Ousmane Badiane, and Katrin Glatzel. 2019. *Food for All in Africa: Sustainable Intensification for African Farmers*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Decker, Corrie, and Elisabeth McMahon. 2020. *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diao, Xinshen, Derek Headey, and Michael Johnson. 2008. "Toward a Green Revolution in Africa: What would it Achieve, and What would it Require?" *Agricultural Economics* 39 (supplement): 539–50.
- Dorward, Andrew, Jonathan Kydd, Jamie Morrison, and Ian Urey. 2004. "A Policy Agenda for Pro-Poor Agricultural Growth." *World Development* 32 (1): 73–89.
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11: Women in Agriculture – Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization.
- Guyer, Jane I., and Karen Tranberg Hansen. 2001. "Introduction: Markets in Africa in a New Era." *Africa* 71 (2): 197–201.
- IDS. 2011. *Special Issue: The Politics of Seed in Africa's Green Revolution*. Institute for Development Studies IDS Bulletin 42 (4): iii–iv, 1–120.
- Kalibata, Agnes. 2018. "Preface." In *Africa Agriculture Status Report 2018: Catalyzing Government Capacity to Drive Agricultural Transformation*. (Issue 6). Nairobi. Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).
- Pingali, Prabhu L. 2012. "Green Revolution: Impacts, Limits, and the Path Ahead." *PNAS* 109 (31), July 31: 12302–12308.
- Patel, Raj. 2013. "The Long Green Revolution." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40 (1): 1–63.
- Richards, Paul. 1986. *Coping with Hunger: Hazard and Experiment in an African Rice-farming System*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Schnurr, Matthew. 2013. "Biotechnology and Bio-Hegemony in Uganda: Unravelling the Social Relations Underpinning the Promotion of Genetically Modified Crops in New African Markets." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40 (4): 639–58.
- Schurman, Rachel. 2017. "Building an Alliance for Biotechnology in Africa." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17 (3): 441–58.
- Smith, Lisa C., Usha Ramakrishnan, Aida Ndiaye, Lawrence Haddad, and Reynaldo Martorell. 2003. *The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries*. Research Report No. 131. Washington, DC, IFPRI.
- Toenniessen, Gary, Akinwumi Adesina, and Joseph DeVries. 2008. "Building an Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1136 233–42.
- Watts, Michael. 1986. *Silent Violence: Food, Peasantry, and Capital in Northern Nigeria*. Berkeley: University of California Press.