

heavily subsidised by the government. Swaziland and Mauritius are other examples of countries which have maintained agricultural production systems inherited from their colonial past. In these and many other African countries, the pre-independence rhetoric about improving the living standards of the masses has not been matched with concrete actions to meet these goals.

On the other hand, Zambia typifies the confusion which assailed many newly independent countries in their efforts to bring about an equitable development pattern in rural areas, particularly with regard to agriculture and food production. The study shows that in many instances, political considerations tended to influence policy formulation to an unrealistic extent. In the case of Mali, Kary Dembele points out the discrepancies in policy rhetoric and implementation in that country's First Five Year National Development Plan. The study on Burkina Faso shows that the country's agricultural development programme failed due to ambiguous policies that were not supported by a coherent implementation strategy.

From these articles, it becomes evident that colonial attitudes and strategies which accorded priority to the production of so called industrial crops, such as cotton, tobacco, etc. at the expense of food crops (ie maize, sorghum) still remain widely prevalent in a majority of African states. The large scale commercial producer still enjoys preferential treatment in government support, while his peasant counterpart continues to eke out a precarious existence from the arid regions of his motherland. Indeed, while the manipulation of commodity prices and marketing structures are perceived by some African governments to be major incentives for commercial agricultural production, other elements such as credit facilities, input subsidies and infrastructural developments are seen as playing an increasingly important role by others.

Also worth noting is the fact that although the papers allude to an almost pervasive obsession by African countries to produce for export, at the expense of domestic food crops, it is not clear whether this is merely a colonial legacy or whether perpetuation of this practice is deliberate to an extent where it can be linked with the orchestrated ineptitude of emergent African states.

This is an extremely useful book for politicians, government officials and those whose responsibilities include the implementation of government policy in their countries.

Reviewed by Desmond Kumbuka, Agricultural and Rural Development Authority, Harare.

**Peasant Economics: Farm households and agrarian development**, Frank Ellis, Wye Studies in Agricultural and Rural Development, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988 (257pp, £11.95 pbk, £35 hbk).

This is an undergraduate's text on the economic analysis of peasant household agricultural production, although it could also be used as a graduate text in rural development and relevant social sciences. It would also be useful to natural scientists interested in developing commodities and technologies appropriate to the small farm sector. It gives a good basic understanding of the economic principles which govern decision-making in peasant households. There is, however, one serious flaw in the interpretation of comparative advantage which spoils an otherwise excellent book.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first giving the foundations of an economic definition of peasant farmers. This essentially establishes them as farm households with access to land using family labour characterised by partial engagement in imperfect markets. The first part also lays the foundations of the economic principles to be applied throughout the book, including a chapter on basic neo-classical economics of farm production and one giving a simple introduction to the Marxist approach to peasant political economy. The second part of the book considers microeconomic theories of peasant household behaviour: the efficient (profit-maximising) peasant; the risk-averse; the drudgery averse (Chayanov); farm household; and sharecropping. Part III is a detailed chapter on the role of women in the peasant household with respect to their economic activities. It examines the limitations of the single family utility function (which rules out the importance of interpersonal relationships within the home) as the basis for understanding allocative decisions. The final section, which does not follow directly on from the rest of the book, considers the impact of farm size and technical change on peasant agriculture and development. Having included some agricultural development, it would have been useful to have incorporated a chapter on the importance of increased and secure market access with fewer imperfections to encourage specialisation and surplus production.

The book which would be useful to practitioners, policy-makers and the students it is designed to serve, is clearly laid out. The principles and concepts of different approaches to understanding and predicting peasant production are simply described, and each chapter gives policy implications and is well summarised with a useful and current list of further readings. It is well-written and uses practical examples from empirical studies to illustrate the theoretical principles. The text fills a major gap in the current textbooks available and will probably become a standard text. Although there are inevitably some minor differences in interpretation, this is a book to be strongly recommended — except that the interpretation of the principle of comparative advantage is incomplete.

This does not have serious consequences for the interpretations given in the rest of the book, but it is this misunderstanding of the meaning of comparative advantage which has led to irrational pricing policies and misdirected research priorities in a number of countries including Zimbabwe. Ellis states that comparative advantage refers to the physical resources best suited to the production of different crops or livestock which exist in different locations, and goes on in the summary to state that "alternative farm activities should take place in those locations where the climate, soils, terrain, labour availability etc favour their lowest cost production compared to other locations" (p42). It says nothing about price or demand. The definition of comparative advantage which has led agriculturalists to recommend low prices for commodities such as maize in dry regions and/or to refuse to engage in research on maize production in dry regions. This interpretation forgets that if people in those areas have a demand for maize then it does not make sense to pay farmers in the area less than it costs to bring the maize in to the area. Furthermore technologies which increase the ability to produce preferred (higher-priced) commodities in resource-poor zones should not be ignored in favour of technologies for resource-rich zones. Equally, there is no point in paying farmers in dry areas higher prices for 'suitable' commodities such as millets if there is no demand for those commodities.

Comparative advantage is an economic term which is used to determine which commodity or commodities a country, region or individual farm should specialise in. The concept includes the impact of conditions which affect both supply and demand and is based on the premise that the efficient allocation of resources is determined where the prices are the same throughout the largest possible market area, the differences reflecting only transport costs. Thus the price to both the producers and consumers will be higher in deficit areas than the price for producers and consumers in surplus areas but the price ratios between commodities will be the same. According to the theory of comparative advantage it will pay to specialise in and exchange that commodity in which there is the least relative disadvantage up to the point where price differentials reflect only transport costs. The theory proves that it will pay both the well and poorly endowed area to specialise and exchange, even where the one has an absolute advantage in all commodities, provided that there is a difference in the relative prices.

Although it is not of major significance to this text, the omission is a serious one and the publishers should be requested to send out a correction to pages 36, 37 and 42. The book is nonetheless a very useful text and the author is to be congratulated for his original approach and simple explanations. I would still recommend it as a most useful text for agricultural economists, anthropologists, geographers, rural planners, crop and animal scientists working with small farmers, and all those associated with development generally, including environmentalists and extension agents.

Reviewed by Kay Muir-Leresche, University of Zimbabwe.

**Review of the African Poor: a History**, by John Illife, African Studies Series 58, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987 (387pp, price not stated).

This is a very sophisticated, and maybe even compelling, apologia for market forces (alias capitalism) applied to very inappropriate contexts, from Christian Ethiopia to 'the transformation of poverty in Southern Africa'. From the monasteries of Ethiopia in the thirteenth century to resettlement sites in colonial South Africa, the author has marshalled an impressive array of so-called empirical data from a diverse range of primary and secondary sources.

The methodological section, ie Chapter 1, which grapples with some of the nettles besetting 'comparative history', does not manage to convince the reader that social science categories that have been applied to the history of the poor in Europe in the middle ages can be mechanically transferred to the African continent in the 20th century. At another level the book is an attempt to offer a sentimental but historicised justification of 'aid' and other Band-Aid solutions to the pressing problems of poverty.

There is also a remarkable failure to blend social and economic historiography into the very graphic descriptions of poor Africans cited in the book — from "palsied, leprous and scrofulous" beggars in Ethiopia in 1520 to recollections by a widow in the Ciskei bantustan, that her husband had been "a good, brave man . . . he never gave in . . . (But) Here in Elukhanyweni he just gave in and stayed in bed the whole time and then he died. . . . I can understand why my husband died. He died of shame and sorrow".

A prominent thesis that runs throughout the book is that the growth of the 'town'