

Book Reviews

Agricultural Development in Southern Africa: Farm Household Economics and the Food Crisis, Allan Low, James Currey, London, 1986 (217 pp, £19.50).

This book has been promoted as 'another landmark in the literature on African development'. It is undoubtedly an important contribution, drawing on 10 years work in rural agricultural development. Low presents a perspective on the causes of the poor agricultural productivity of farm households in the Southern African Region. Farm households are often not solely or primarily farmers, especially where wage employment and other non farm opportunities exist. In the absence of any landless households farm production suffers due to out-migration. For reasons of social security and the benefits of cheap non-market production in rural areas, overall household welfare is maximised by maintaining a rural base even though it may be associated with reduced farm production. The persistent food crisis in the region is explained by the inherent tendency for food production per person to decline under this system.

The book is structured in three parts. Low starts by developing a conceptual model of household economics in the Southern African context. Part two makes an analysis of evidence from the region, focusing on a number of contemporary development concerns, and part three concludes by drawing out some of the major implications for policy and research.

Low claims that his decision making model of the indigenous farm household provides a better explanation than conventional theory and analysis of the (non) development experience in the rural areas of the region. To those not initiated in the short-hand of algebraic utility functions, resource and income constraints and the impact of changing a log-log labour return curve to a sigmoid one, parts of the book will be obscure! Many may simply balk at the two critical chapters 2 and 4, which present the theory and elaboration of the model. Beyond any air of mystification, Low's book needs to be critically located as 'a perspective' within what is an open debate on the nature, dynamics and consequences of both planned and broader socioeconomic change in the rural economy of the Southern African region.

The model is based on an extension of neoclassical paradigms of the farm household as a decision making unit. His adaptation of the new household-economics theory of consumer choice to the indigenous farm household in the region, includes an account of both non-market production and of cyclical demographic processes. Based on results which Low himself freely recognises "cannot be said to be conclusive", the model none-the-less rejects the assumption of decreasing returns to labour on the family farm for an alternate assumption which is assumed to be universally applicable!

In the absence of an adequate data-base the model is not tested nor analysed rigorously (in an econometric sense) but is used to explore a number of issues affecting development. Evidence supporting the broad propositions of the model is selectively drawn from numerous reports and surveys of Swaziland and relevant documentation elsewhere in the region. Low's interpretation of issues such as the adoption of improved crop technology, non-market benefits of land-use rights and cattle ownership, labour migration and the broader aggregate implications of these and other features for development initiatives, are then explored at the household level through an elaboration of the relationship *between* market and non-market production.

This methodological approach includes three broad levels. The first is the level of the paradigm, the second concerns the details of the assumptions of the model itself and the third involves the choice of statistics and types of quantitative analyses used in support of the broad argument.

At the level of the paradigm - decision making models of indigenous farm households - the spotlight is on *decisions* at the household level. These tend to take place in a (less precisely specified) 'context' which none-the-less gives rise to certain constraints and opportunities. Despite the six page chapter on 'Historical developments re-examined and other historical references, the perspective is such that one aggregates up from farm household surveys. In this process a dangerous reversal of cause and effect can take place. The 'context' is seen as the aggregation of all (free?) decision making at the micro level rather than vice versa - ie the historically structured context being determinant in constrained household decision making. In this regard, the 'realities' of the Labour Reserves - land expropriations, forced location into ecologically marginal areas, and discriminatory labour laws etc, as portrayed in the political economy perspectives of white settler colonialism - are replaced with a rural household version of 'economic man' in the 1980s.

Secondly, modelling implies an analytical reduction of the immense diversity of reality into the 'typical' or by definition 'model' farm. Both conceptually and analytically the facts of a socially and economically differentiated rural economy tend to be eliminated from investigation or compressed into averages. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Low convincingly presents the similarities in economic opportunities and constraints faced by households across the region. His narrow typological approach to variations in household structure, and emphasis on the integrity of the household as a decision making unit tend to imply a greater homogeneity of material circumstances than is actually the case. Furthermore, there is no attempt to identify any clearly divergent gender or class-based interests, through analysis of relations *between* and *within* households.

Thirdly, while Low's analysis is richly illustrated with detailed disaggregated breakdowns of information, especially for Swaziland, the *ceteris paribus* proviso needs to be more loudly signalled (where 'evidence' is applied universally to the entire region. The use elsewhere of survey research tables (which present arithmetic means for broad groupings within relatively small samples) further contributes to the impression of homogeneous types of households and situations. It is now widely recognised that the very same evidence grouped and analysed differently might well suggest and support alternative hypotheses.

It would be truly surprising to find no linkages between economic and cyclical demographic processes within rural households in Southern Africa. Low's review of the literature and analysis is more than adequate proof that this broadly recognised phenomenon exists in the region. While one can sympathise with his reaction to the worst types of stultifying rural class analysis, understanding the basis of socioeconomic differentiation is not, as he infers, solely a function of 'ideological imperatives' and 'political leanings'. Low seems happy with the economic differentiation found in the indigenous rural sectors of Southern Africa. Some 'residual' inequalities are acknowledged but not considered worth explaining.

While purporting to be scientific, neutral and non political or ideological, Low ends up being precisely the opposite. His analysis clearly abstracts itself from examining many of the 'concrete' aspects of socioeconomic differentiation and thereby takes on more of an 'ideological' than 'scientific' value! He ends up implicitly affirming that in the social sciences the value free approach is at its very core value-laden, and reactionary at that. One wonders firstly, what degree of residual inequalities might attract his attention as being worthy of some alternative explanation, and secondly, whether he is willing to acknowledge that the cyclical basis of economic mobility, on which he places so much emphasis, is in part methodologically derived?

Clearly the demographic and socioeconomic dimensions of mobility interact - a point recognised by most scholars of Southern African studies. For those looking for a creative analysis of the dynamic relations between gender, socioeconomic differentiation, structural processes at the macro level, and at the level of household organisation and development cycle, the book falls short. The challenge of

separating out the causes and effects of these different dimensions of differentiation are not addressed. Not until Part III of the book does Low begin to hint at this dynamic. Specifically he advocates a broader implementation of farming systems research which would more fully account for gender and on and off-farm activities in assessment of the production and distribution impacts of technological developments.

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Popular Participation in Planning for Basic Needs. Concepts, Methods and Practices. Franklyn Lisk (ed), (ILO-WEP), Gower Publishing, Aldershot, 1985 (277pp, no price quoted).

Those readers familiar with the Basic Needs Approach (BNS) to development will be aware of the fact that this approach divides basic human needs into such categories as consumption goods, service goods, employment and mass participation. Thus the Basic Needs Approach to development, as endorsed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s World Employment Conference held in Geneva in 1976, assigns a key role to popular participation as a means of action for improving the human condition. This book is about the concept of popular participation within the general context of the Basic Needs Approach as endorsed by the International Labour Organisation. The publication is the outcome of a World Employment Programme (WEP) project and is based on research undertaken within the framework of the ILO - a major proponent of the idea.

The book is in three parts. Part one looks at definitions, concepts and typology. Judging by the tone of the book, there is no doubting that the authors are very much in favour of popular participation as a tool for development. Hence they argue, for instance, that popular participation is an important condition for achieving sustained economic growth and social progress and a fundamental goal of development in its own right. Thus, in a sense, they see popular participation not only as a means to an end but as an end in itself. As the authors put it, "Popular participation is therefore an end goal of development as well as a means of attaining more equitable development" (p17).

In this section of the book attempts are made to define various relevant words - terms salient in people-oriented development endeavours. The concept of participation is defined, as are other concepts such as employment, consultation, self reliance, decentralised planning, and decision making, to name the major ones. The concept of cooperation is also mentioned, and on this score the authors argue that popular participation can include cooperation between decision-makers and those affected by their actions, without any formal surrender of power to participants, although they may be allowed to modify decisions in order to retain their cooperation.

Part 2 of the publication is entitled 'Participatory Development: National Experiences' and it looks at specific country experiences in terms of efforts to incorporate popular participation in development activities. Countries looked at include China, Tanzania and Kenya, in that order. The China case study attempts, *inter alia*, to show how popular participation can be used to promote economic and social development among the entire population and how the Chinese government actually makes use of mass participation to achieve basic needs and other related socioeconomic objectives of development. The authors maintain that popular participation must be complemented by the provision of an appropriate institutional/administrative structure as well as a political system and socioeconomic framework that allows for the active involvement of the people in the decision-making process at all levels (p97).

Tanzania serves as an appropriate example since aspects of its experience are borrowed from the Chinese model. In Kenya, the Harambee (Self Help) movement is looked at, and provides some very useful lessons. The Kenyan experience, in a nutshell, shows that when there is a mismatch between the wider political system on the one hand and the administrative and institutional structures of the planning system on the other, serious problems are bound to occur.