



Inclusive agribusiness models in the Global South: the impact on local food security

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Private business is increasingly presented as a leading agent of development in policy, also in the pursuit of developmental goals beyond business, such as food security (SDG2 in particular). It is argued that the private sector is more effective and efficient in raising investment capital and targeting goals than entities of the public sector and civil society. This has spawned inclusive business models — ways of doing business that benefit the poor as producers or consumers. Inclusive agribusiness improves the livelihoods of poor farmers by integrating them in commercial value chains and thus gaining access to markets, inputs, and services like finance and training, in ways that are commercially viable. This contribution seeks to position this inclusive agribusiness approach in its political-economy context and assess its merits in pursuing food security through impact pathways such as availability and access (income). While there is literature on inclusive business and food security, its scope tends to be limited to participating smallholders while overlooking other community members. The main argument the present paper makes is that while there is evidence for positive income effects among participating farmers, there are few indications that this actually translates into improved food and nutrition security for the many. Shortcomings are briefly reviewed.

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Private business is increasingly presented as a leading agent of development in policy [1,2]. This not just in its traditional role as creator of wealth and economic transformation, but also in the pursuit of development goals

beyond business performance — such as attaining food and nutrition security (FNS; SDG2 in particular) [1]. It is argued that the private sector is more effective and efficient in raising investment capital and targeting goals than entities of the public sector and civil society [4,5]. Putting the private sector in a leading position in attaining societal goals implies that businesses assume perspectives that look beyond their immediate bottom line. This has spawned inclusive business models — ways of doing business that benefit the poor as producers or consumers [6]. Inclusive agribusiness aims to improve the livelihoods of smallholders by integrating them in commercial value chains and thus gaining access to markets, inputs, and services like finance and training, in commercially viable ways [7,8,9]. This contribution seeks to understand this inclusive agribusiness approach by positioning it in its political-economy context and assess its merits in pursuing developmental goals such as FNS through impacts on food availability and access. Relatively little literature is available on this subject, and its scope tends to be limited to participating farmers while overlooking other community members. The main argument of the present paper is that there is evidence for positive income effects among participating farmers, but few indications that this actually translates into improved FNS for the many.

Neo-liberalism renewed

The background against which this unfolds is that of neoliberalism, dominant since the 1980s, entering a new phase labelled ‘retro-liberalism’ in the context of development cooperation by Murray and Overton [10]. The key difference is that instead of aiming at opening markets and unshackling business from constraints deemed restrictive — ‘rolling back the state’, the new policy and aid paradigm actually calls for active state involvement in fostering business opportunities for domestic firms — ‘rolling the state back in’ so to say, as an instrument in support of business. This may result from two seminal shifts in the global economy. One is geo-political change linked to the waning of Western dominance and corresponding weakening of Western business positions globally, prompting them to more aggressively pursue their economic interests around the globe [11,12,13]. The second phenomenon is the rise of state capitalisms, that in one way or another is typical for several rising economic powers. Their political-economic regimes feature a close alignment of state and business

([14–17], nuanced by [18]). This is clearly the case in China, but with variations also applies to Russia, India and many oil states, and is now partly copied by Western countries in defense of their global commercial positions [19].

Inclusive agribusiness approaches to FNS

In this context of engaging private sector *for* development [20], food security is pursued through private business investment promotion [21,22]. A key feature of the strategy is that donor countries — and increasingly Southern governments [23[•]] — actively support companies to reach out and include smallholders and communities in their business operations — that is, inclusive business models [13]. For donors this has the advantage of combining supposedly pro-poor development interventions with supporting ‘own’ businesses in ways that avoid the negative connotations (‘land grabbing’) associated with foreign firms directly involved in land-based investment in developing countries [24–26]. Positive impacts on FNS is expected to result from the investment in food production (availability), while generating jobs and income will enable households to access nutritious food [27,28[•]]. As business-led food security policies aim to integrate small-scale operators in corporate value chains, aid is often needed to accomplish this. Expanding supply chains to large numbers of smallholders incurs higher transaction costs for food companies [29[•]]. Moreover, poor producers may need training, inputs, credit and so on, to meet market requirements and improve productivity [30,31,32^{••},33], especially when taking up higher-value cash crops [13]. Value chain integration also exposes smallholders to market volatility [34,35]. Thus, business-led FNS approaches usually involve (temporary) support packages administered by buying company, state agencies or NGOs. In fact, the failure of traditional extension services may induce small farmers to engage in contract farming to gain access to knowledge, inputs and credit more than the attractiveness of the inclusive business model *per se* [36]. Inclusive agribusiness by means of a variety of contract farming approaches is often reported to yield positive income effects for participating smallholders. This finding appears relatively robust in spite of the difficulty to control for intervening variables [32^{••},27,4,37,13,38], and the fact that some studies show less positive results [39,40,41[•],42]. The generally positive income effects suggest that secondary objectives, like FNS, may also materialize. How does the evidence hold up?

Effects of inclusive agribusiness approaches on local FNS

Indeed, positive impacts on food availability, access and utilization have been reported, also in cases of cash crops for distant markets [13,37,33]. In Ethiopia for instance, farmers adopting coffee in Oromia and SNNP regions [43[•]] and castor oil [44] production improved their food

security in terms of quantity consumed and length of food insecure periods. This is due especially to a more steady flow of income. A regular income, rather than a lump sum at harvest time, is positively associated with FNS, while the latter may favour purchase of consumer durables but also investment [45]. As a logical corollary inclusive business schemes boosting farmers’ income in single shots likely have less impact on FNS. It is difficult to save money and food for the lean season as other priorities present themselves [44,46].

While cash crops may offer opportunities, they can also increase risk at different levels. At the farm level, they require more investment and imply exposure to market (price) fluctuations [34,47,48]. Thus, many smallholders balance the production of cash crops and food [37]. This may result in a mismatch between policy and farmer strategies. A case in Kenya details donor-sponsored efforts encouraging vegetable production for export on the assumption that land scarcity is best countered by specialization in valuable crops. Yet smallholders proved reluctant to adopt the crop as they considered their land holdings sufficient only for securing their own basic food needs [42]. They may well be wiser than the policy makers pushing for market-dependent cash cropping.

At the community level, local food availability can be affected with increased specialization in cash cropping, while increasing exposure to food price levels [49] and fluctuations [48]. In Northern Ghana, for instance, the successful organization of the commercial maize chain resulted in near mono-cropping in the project area. This makes the local farming system vulnerable in an increasingly fragile ecosystem, while foods that used to be widely grown and consumed locally have virtually disappeared [28[•]]. Also in Northern Ethiopia, efforts to promote market-oriented vegetable production increased farmers’ income but lowered food variety and decreased diet diversity [50]. Efforts to boost local sourcing of malt barley for foreign-owned beer breweries in Ethiopia successfully increased incomes of participating farmers, but did not improve food security. Both in Northern and in Central Ethiopia, the availability of local staples was affected, increasing consumer prices in the Arsi highlands [35,51].

At the national level, the capacity of the host country to absorb technology and create knowledge spillovers is a factor shaping food security outcomes [52[•]]. Also, the institutional setting of the country of origin of investors and their match with the host country reportedly plays a role [53[•]].

While the results of inclusive agribusiness in pursuing FNS for participants is checkered at best [8[•]], unintended side effects are not even considered yet. Increased cash cropping may affect local consumption patterns towards

less nutritious food, not just for farmers but also for others purchasing their food, and facing lesser availability and higher prices for traditional foods [49]. Moreover, within the household, food access can be affected when the distribution of income shifts in line with, for instance, a gendered division of labour with respect to commercial opportunities [50]. In Northern Ghana, the successful organization of the commercial maize chain by a foreign investor resulted in near mono-cropping in the project area. This makes the local farming system vulnerable in an increasingly fragile ecosystem, while foods that used to be widely grown and consumed have virtually disappeared from local diets [28^{*}]. Unintended side effects further limit the effectiveness of the approach and call for a closer look at the strategy itself.

Limitations of the inclusive agribusiness approach

First is the fact that increasing income does not translate automatically in better FNS. The mechanisms are as yet not well understood and likely involve food environment issues [54] and household priorities, as observed in Kenya [42].

Second is the selective nature of inclusive business. Positive reviews tend to limit themselves to those included in the business model. Yet it is generally accepted that inclusive business models are selective in favour of resource-rich farmers. Smaller farms are less able to meet participation criteria (product and process standards, cost of certification) [35,50,33]. The effects on these and other community members are usually not considered in evaluations. The current predilection of framing local economic development in terms of value chains exacerbates the problem, as it obfuscates comprehensive ‘landscape’ or food systems perspectives.

A third issue concerns the sustainability of the model [6^{*}]. Most inclusive business programmes are set up with donor resources that run out once the startup period is over. Then, a shakeout may occur, weeding out marginal participants. Thus, the approach tends to increase inequality in the community [55^{**},41^{*}]. Inclusive agribusiness models are fraught with drop-outs and others unable to meet the terms of inclusion. Hurdles vary from size of land holding, the investments needed to conform to standards, access to irrigation water, and so on. The implication is clear: if inclusive agribusiness is the designated way out of food insecurity, then the poorest are less likely to benefit from the strategy, especially in terms of access.

The partial scope of inclusive agribusiness would be fine if alternative sources of income and employment opportunities were available — it would amount to a classical development trajectory of increasing specialization and productivity, echoing historical experiences of the OECD

countries [56]. The problem is that such alternatives are rare in much of today’s Global South. In such conditions a development strategy based on an ‘inclusive business approach’ risks to marginalize the poor by unrealistic expectations. Paradoxically, inclusive business, if successful, implies selection, hence exclusion. This implies that inclusive business promotion can only be a partial answer in overcoming food insecurity.

Underlying these shortcomings is the preference of the prevailing political economy model for private business in solving much of society’s problems. Without belittling their contributions, entrepreneurs like others work within bounded rationalities and market pressures may actually limit their horizon. A vegetable canning firm asked to help solving food insecurity will come up with answers in terms of canning vegetables — even if the context is marginally suited for this. As Blowfield and Dolan [3] assert, business ideas often imply adapting the poor to the needs of business, rather than adapting the economy to meet people’s needs. It would be unreasonable to expect much else.

To be sure, an inclusive agribusiness approach is much more desirable than a corporate approach favouring large-scale plantations. Even if smallholder income is not always higher [57], a family farm encompasses a degree of autonomy and dignity that eludes the plantation worker [29^{*},58^{**}]. And there is much to be said for promoting the development of efficient commercial smallholders in Africa. The point is not that inclusive agribusiness is wrong; it is not sufficient to move from mere growth to development objectives such as FNS for the many. Any such strategy based on promoting inclusive agribusiness should be accompanied by policies targeting the poor in both social services (health, education, skills training) and alternative employment opportunities beyond farming.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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