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Rethinking “food security” in Africa

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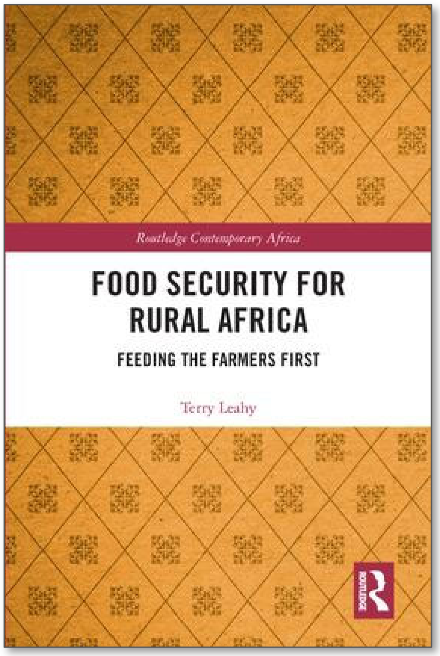

Review of *Food Security for Rural Africa: Feeding the Farmers First,* by Terry Leahy. (2018). Routledge. Available as paperback, hardcover, and eBook; 246 pages. Publisher’s book page: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781351134156; permanent link: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351134156

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In *Food Security for Rural Africa: Feeding the Farmers First,* Terry Leahy makes what he knows is an unpopular argument: that subsistence—not commercial—agriculture is the surest path to food security. Since the colonial era, government officials—and, later, development agencies—have sought to convert African smallholder farmers into industrial producers. Today, certain proponents of a “new” Green Revolution for Africa are guided by the theory of the *agricultural exit,* the idea that agricultural consolidation is essential for economic growth, and that such consolidation requires a majority of farmers to find off-farm employment.

It is in this context that Leahy intervenes and warns that a hypothetical agricultural exit would lead to a population of landless peasants. As an alternative, Leahy argues for reinvestment into subsistence agriculture, what he defines as when “food being produced is distributed without money changing hands” (2019, p. xii). This definition is purposely broad, as it allows Leahy to consider a variety of strategies to strengthen food production at the household level first and to plan for the market second. Such a model, Leahy argues, is not “a traditional relic of past practices,” as some detractors of the phrase "subsistence" often suggest, but rather, "a response to current problems" embedded in the current capitalist moment (2019, p. 132).

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Leahy builds his argument over nine chapters and eight vignettes. In the first half of the book (Chapters 1 to 5), he provides examples of past projects and policies that he considers failed. Leahy rightfully argues that markets are risky end-goals, as they are not only difficult to tap into (especially for small producers at the global scale), but also are constantly in flux. In response to these risks, Leahy argues that donors have over-relied on requiring farmers to organize into cooperatives to farm collectively, establish savings groups, or jointly market their product. Leahy asks why these sorts of models—along with entrepreneurial-styled projects centered around the notion of "teaching a man to fish"—continue to hold such prominence in development thinking when there is little proof they actually work.

In Chapters 6 to 9, Leahy details a number of initiatives that he believes offer promising strategies. One example is a permaculture project in eastern Zimbabwe, which Leahy argues has been successful for a number of reasons, including that residents both participate and manage the project, giving them ownership in the project. Leahy uses lessons learned from Zimbabwe and other case studies to build a set of criteria for his "winning formula" for projects to follow. These include requiring few inputs, having individuals or households (not collectives) as beneficiaries, and ensuring that the project's funder and managers are engaged in the communities they serve (2019, p. 199).

The book concludes on a much-welcomed positive note, and one is left with a feeling that alternatives to commercial agriculture might very well be possible. However, while Leahy offers findings from his studies throughout southern Africa, largely missing from the book is an insight into how African farmers themselves are organizing for political and agricultural change. This omission is apparent in the manuscript's introduction, where Leahy explains that the phrase featured in the book's subtitle, "feeding the farmers first," comes from a Filipino farmers organization. While this point no doubt could provide a rich pathway for a discussion on south-south solidarity, the author does not do so, leaving the reader to wonder whether there are equivalent farming organizations on the African continent (there are).

I found myself coming back to this point throughout the book, especially in the chapters that build a case for low-input agriculture. Though he does not name it as such, the ways in which Leahy describes "subsistence" are closely aligned with that of agroecology, a movement and agricultural framework gaining traction worldwide. Agroecology is not mentioned in the book, and perhaps Leahy is not a proponent of the framework—I do not know. Regardless, Leahy's argument would have been strengthened had he integrated any of the ample evidence from agroecological studies on the viability of low-input, biodiverse farms. This is also a missed opportunity to provide insight into how African farming organizations are already doing the hard work of advocating frameworks similar to that which Leahy proposes. For instance, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, an umbrella group of 30 organizations across the continent, has released a number of field studies, policy recommendations, and research notes on the possibilities of agroecology across the continent.

Relatedly, a more focused historical analysis would have also strengthened the book's contributions. Throughout the book's case studies in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia, the impacts of colonial and apartheid rule on agriculture, foodways, and food availability are mostly absent. Without this context, the reader is left with an incomplete picture of how and why certain communities face challenges related to food and farming. Leahy, no doubt, writes from a place of deep interest and commitment to improving food security in the countries in which he works. However, the absence of historical context and insight into farmer organizing, coupled with certain author descriptions (Leahy describes the goal of the manuscript as presenting "approaches to . . . problems . . . firmly rooted in the particularities of the African situation" [2019, p. 19]), reinforce the pernicious idea that agricultural practice on the African continent is homogenous, somehow unique, and in need of solving. As scholars such as

Kojo Amanor, activists like Bridget Mugambe, and civil society groups such as the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa remind us, this sort of narrative obscures political-economic contexts as well as the agency, creativity, and diversity of African farmers and agricultural practice.

With that said, professionals working in the fields of rural development and agricultural policy may well benefit from Leahy's analysis of project design. Indeed, one of the book's strongest contributions comes in its concluding chapter. Leahy flips the gaze and calls on practitioners and academics in the Global North to consider the possibilities subsistence farming has to offer. He calls for a "cultural change" in how food security is framed in the Global North and for a reclamation of the term "subsistence" not as something outdated, but rather, "as the latest scientific advance" (2019, p. 212). I am sure his counterparts in the agroecology movement would agree.