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DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND LIVELIHOODS IN AFRICA

Jeremy Seekings

Introduction

In country after country across Africa, over a single generation, the political landscape of one-party states, life presidents, authoritarian regimes and military coups has given way to a new world of competitive multi-party democracy, characterised by term limits, multi-party elections and even the reality of presidents and parties losing power through electoral defeat (Carbone, 2013). Both Ghana and Malawi have had their third turnover of power since redemocratisation (in 2016 and 2020 respectively). Whilst elections and democracy across much of Africa remain flawed in many respects, the institutionalisation of regular, multiparty elections represents a ‘major shift in African politics’ and a ‘political and institutional revolution’ (Bleck and van de Walle, 2019: 3–6). Even when incumbents hold onto power, as is usually the case, the possibility of defeat can push them to be more responsive to voters’ concerns and priorities.

Poverty persists in Africa despite these political changes – and in contrast to most other parts of the world. Between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of the global population in extreme income poverty fell by two-thirds, from 36% to 10%, whilst the estimated total number of people living in extreme income poverty fell from just under 1.9 billion people in 1990 to 735 million by 2015. In Africa, however, the overall income poverty rate declined much more modestly, from 55% to 41%, whilst the absolute number of people living in extreme income poverty in Africa actually rose from 280 million to 413 million.1 Poverty in Africa has persisted despite economic growth, because too few of the benefits of growth have trickled down to the poor. The growth elasticity of income poverty in Africa between 1990 and 2015 was only −0.7, compared with −2 for other regions, meaning that every 1% of economic growth in Africa reduced poverty by only 0.7%, whereas the same growth elsewhere reduced poverty by 2% (Bicaba et al., 2015: 10). Across Africa as a whole the income poverty gap had fallen (although only to 16%, using the extreme poverty line of US $1.90/day as of 2011),2 but even countries with strong economic growth such as Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia (until the 2010s) had failed to reduce poverty rates significantly (Arndt et al., 2016). Income poverty persisted amidst economic growth because income inequality rose. In the early 2000s, Africa overtook Latin America as the region with the highest overall income inequality.

The lived experience behind these cold statistics is one of constrained, vulnerable and insecure livelihoods for many people. Across much of East and Southern Africa (except South Africa
and its smaller neighbours), three-quarters of the working population is engaged in smallholder or peasant agriculture. Informal self-employment in ‘household enterprises’ accounts for much of the other quarter, with formal employment accounting for a very small percentage of the working population. Yet productivity in smallholder agriculture has rarely risen significantly. Economic growth has often been driven by mining, with weak linkages to other sectors. Africa has not experienced either the rise in agricultural productivity or the expansion of labour-intensive manufacturing that were integral to the much more rapid and inclusive economic growth in East Asia and parts of South-east and South Asia (Henley, 2012; Newman et al., 2016).

The persistence of low-productivity livelihoods and widespread income poverty may in part reflect environmental conditions (including the dependence on rainfall and production of only one crop per year across much of Africa) but it also reflects the policies pursued by governments and non-government organisations. Prior to redemocratisation in the 1990s, ‘distributional regimes’ across much of the region were ‘neo-patrimonial’, in that public office was used for private gain by political elites. Insofar as they needed to take into account broader constituencies, they either sought to deploy patronage or were biased towards urban minorities or rural elites at the expense of rural majorities. ‘Urban bias’ often entailed a specific bias towards skilled labour in the name of modernisation and development. By ‘distributional regime’, we mean the economic growth path that determines, in the first instance, who gets what, as well as the policies that shape this and whatever policies serve to redistribute resources, perhaps but not necessarily to poor people left behind as the economy grows along its particular pathway. Most African governments failed to steer their countries’ economies down a growth path that expanded opportunities for their poor, rural populations to improve their productivity, whether in agriculture or in other sectors (Seekings, 2019c; Williams, 1976). In their efforts to control peasant farmers (Scott, 1998), state elites perpetuated rural poverty (Hyden, 1980).

Has the expansion of representative democracy changed distributional regimes or ‘who gets what’ in Africa? Has it pushed political elites and states to provide more consequential support for their poorer citizens’ livelihoods? This chapter reviews how the institutionalisation of (qualified) democracy has affected the politics of livelihoods in Africa. The chapter examines whether and how contested elections have transformed governance and policy-making with respect to selected areas of public policy with direct implications for popular livelihoods: agricultural policies, policies towards formal and informal sectors, policies that substitute for livelihoods when people are unable to provide for themselves (including drought relief and social protection) and public services that underpin future livelihoods (especially schooling and health care). Most of the examples are drawn from Anglophone East and Southern Africa.

Flawed democracies and elite-oriented political settlements

The institutionalisation of regular, multiparty elections did not entail a complete break with the prior decades of undemocratic politics. Incumbents enjoy considerable advantages through their access to state resources both to strengthen their own campaigns and to inhibit and undermine their opponents’. If necessary, incumbents may subvert the electoral process. Only about one in six elections resulted in turnovers in government, compared to a global average of about one in three. In many countries, the ‘same political class’ continued to dominate politics and govern, with a limited circulation of elites (Bleck and van de Walle, 2019).

Such continuities in governance have fuelled a growing literature on ‘political settlements’ (Behuria et al., 2017). The underlying premise of the ‘political settlements’ approach is that formal political institutions themselves do not have general effects on development (or, therefore,
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distribution). The ways in which formal political institutions operate (and hence their consequences) depend on underlying power relations within the elite and between them and non-elite groups, i.e. on the underlying ‘political settlement’. This approach first examines how the ‘ruling coalition’ is constituted, i.e. how concentrated (or dispersed) is the ‘horizontal’ distribution of power within the elite. The political settlement approach then examines the ruling coalition’s social foundations, i.e. how power is distributed ‘vertically’ in terms of breadth and depth. This affects whether the ruling coalition can ensure that its preferences are implemented at lower levels. The approach also examines how the political settlement is financed, i.e. the relations between the ruling coalition and economic actors (especially capitalists/business) (Behuria et al., 2017; Kelsall, 2018a). Political settlements thus entail broadly stable and largely non-violent ‘rules of the game’ governing the distribution of resources, including especially rents. In the African context, the achievement of democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s represented the clearest case of a new political settlement in that the rules of the game after 1994 were fundamentally different to those under apartheid.

Political settlements in Africa have generally been characterised as ‘competitive-clientelist’. This points to the prevalence of political clientelism – i.e. political support is constructed through patron-client networks, with political elites competing to buy the support of local leaders. This has some similarities with previous work focused on neo-patrimonialism. The concept of competitive clientelism has been applied to the democratic cases of Ghana (Abdulai and Hickey, 2016; Whitfield, 2011) and Kenya (Tyce, 2019). More authoritarian regimes have been assessed to have ‘dominant party’ or ‘weak dominant’ political settlements. This allows governments in countries such as Uganda to adopt a longer time-horizon than their election-oriented democratic neighbours (see, for example, Hickey and Izama, 2017. Kelsall (2018b) prefers a more precise specification of political settlements according to the distribution of power vertically and horizontally. In the case of Tanzania, for example, the political settlement has shifted to and fro according to whether power was (a) broad-based (vertically) and dispersed (horizontally) or (b) narrowly based and concentrated. These two types of political settlement alternated both before and after the reintroduction of competitive, multi-party elections. Cammack and Kelsall (2011) provide a similar analysis for Malawi.

The political settlement literature pays little attention to elections. Pedersen and Jacob (2019), in their study of Tanzania, emphasise the role of elections in incentivising the ruling elite to deliver more to voters so as to legitimate their rule. The implication of Pedersen and Jacob’s (2019) account is that Tanzania’s settlement has been broadened across society even if power has become more concentrated within the elite. In their account, the political settlement was ‘reshaped’, moreover, not replaced. Similarly, in their study of Ghana, Abdulai and Hickey (2016) refer to changes in the ruling coalition – with successive NPP and NDC governments having different regional bases – operating within an apparently stable ‘competitive-clientelist’ political settlement.

The political settlement approach reminds us not to assume that elections ensure that governments are accountable or that elites compete by offering voters clear alternatives. The approach is a blunt tool for understanding precisely when, how and why governments adopt or implement policies that benefit particular groups of citizens (or voters), and specifically when, how and why they adopt policies that expand rather than restrict the opportunities for poorer citizens to shift into higher-productivity livelihoods. As Bleck and van de Walle (2019: 16–17) put it, elections open up ‘political moments’ with the possibility of change and ‘heightened citizenship’.

One reason why elections might not matter is that competing elites share similar beliefs and values about development. Mkandawire (2005) emphasised that developmentalism was the hegemonic ideology across most of Africa for most of the period from independence (see
Elites embraced an ideology of modernisation that tended to view rural smallholders as backward, serving as a brake on development that required forceful action by the state. As was clear in the case of ‘socialist’ Tanzania in the 1970s, peasants had to be forced to modernise, including through villagisation (Schneider, 2007; Scott, 1998). These beliefs remain widely held, including among more market-friendly elites. Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette (2014) document the deep prejudice against the poor among Malawian elites in the 2000s. Poverty was attributed (at least in part) to laziness and the preferred solution was hard work. Viewing the poor as ‘passive, dependent, and fatalistic’, Malawian elites worried that social cash transfers to the poor would not encourage self-reliance and entrepreneurial initiative but rather would encourage laziness and ‘dependency’ (Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette, 2014). At the same time, some conservative elites hold to an ideology of paternalistic responsibility. The ideology of the Botswana Democratic Party – which has won every multi-party election since independence – accepts inequality, emphasises self-help and denounces ‘dependency’, but also emphasises social justice. As the country’s first president, Seretse Khama (himself the country’s premier chief by birth and owner of many cattle) put it, quoting a Tswana proverb: ‘A lean cow cannot climb out of the mud, but a good cattleman does not leave it to perish’ (Seekings, 2016b: 24). Furthermore, electoral self-interest has often pushed political elites into adopting or implementing pro-poor policies, in Botswana (Seekings, 2019a) and elsewhere.

Agricultural policies

Poverty persists in Africa in part because productivity in smallholder agriculture has generally remained stagnant, in contrast to some other previously poor and agrarian societies across the world. Average output per worker was, in 2005, only just above the standard extreme poverty line (at the time, US $1/day) (McMillan and Headey, 2014). This was despite the shift, caused by population growth, from an abundance of land and labour constraints to a shortage of land and surplus labour.

Generally, stagnant productivity has not been primarily due to any lack of understanding of what works, but rather to political constraints on policymaking and implementation. ‘The experience has shown that policies that support small farms by correcting for the market failures inherent in smallholder agriculture, especially in the early phases of agricultural development, are a particularly promising strategy to achieve pro-poor growth’, write Birner and Resnick; ‘the empirical evidence also shows that it is politically difficult to implement such policies’ (Birner and Resnick, 2010: 1450). Bates, in his classic Markets and States in Tropical Africa (1981), contrasted the powerlessness of rural populations with the power of urban populations. The result, often, was the regulation of crop prices and management of exchange rates to ensure low consumer prices in towns but low producer prices for farmers. This urban bias was largely brought to an end by the combination of liberalisation that formed part of structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s and the enfranchisement of largely rural electorates under the restoration of multi-party democracy (Bates and Block, 2013). Incumbent parties are disproportionately likely to have rural strongholds (Boone and Wåhman, 2015).

Overall, democratisation reduced agricultural taxation and increased expenditure on agriculture (Bates and Block, 2013). The most dramatic change in agricultural policies was the proliferation of programmes that subsidise fertiliser and seeds for farmers (Jayne and Rashid, 2013; Poulton, 2014). Moreover, in the case of Ghana, subsidies that had previously been captured by wealthier farmers (mostly growing export crops) were diverted to smaller farmers (growing maize) (Banful, 2011).
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Rural politics typically continues to revolve around patronage (Booth, 2014, generally; Poulton and Kanyinga, 2014, on Kenya). National programmes such as fertiliser subsidies can sustain patronage on a massive scale at the same time as providing a party or president with a national brand that appears to transcend regional or ethnic appeals and thus helps to build broad support among voters. The outstanding example of this was in Malawi in the late 2000s. President Bingu wa Mutharika branded himself and his party in terms of their commitment to maize production, with the FISP as their flagship programme. In 2009, for the first and only time, the winner of the presidential election (Mutharika) won majorities in all regions (Ferree and Horowitz, 2010). Fertiliser subsidies appeal for another reason also. In Malawi, the Mutharika government used contracts to provide or transport fertilisers to recruit regional elites from opposition-supporting areas into the regional coalition (Chinsinga and Poulton, 2014). In Zambia, the Lungu government’s belated enthusiasm for fertiliser subsidies was reportedly linked to kickbacks from contractors to fund the ruling party’s election campaign (Africa Confidential, 2020).

Elected governments may direct expenditure towards districts where they enjoy solid support as a reward (e.g. Leiderer, 2014) or to ‘swing’ districts as an inducement (e.g. Banful, 2011). Districts or regions can sometimes be targeted through crop-specific price support or other policies as either reward or inducement. In Kenya, for example, governments allowed institutions supporting cotton farmers (most of whom are in opposition-supporting areas) to atrophy whilst dairy farmers (mostly in government-supporting areas) were strengthened (Poulton and Kanyinga, 2014).

Fertiliser subsidies may be popular but it is not clear that they are the best use of scarce public resources. Public investment in public goods – including agricultural extension and transport infrastructure – may be more consequential in terms of improving agricultural livelihoods (Poulton, 2014), but they may have little appeal to political leaders. Agricultural extension offers few opportunities for patronage or publicity. Governments do sometimes invest in roads, but tend to prefer high-profile, expensive projects rather than the more routine investment in improving and maintaining local roads that are of most benefit to poorer people (e.g. Whitworth, 2012). There is often too little of the technocratic support required to ensure that programmes are pro-poor (including through containing corruption). Some authoritarian regimes have demonstrated what can be achieved with well-designed programmes, but the objective might not simply be to support agricultural livelihoods. Ethiopia’s agricultural extension programme, for example, was the vehicle for the intensification of party-state power across the countryside, with party loyalists recruited as extension agents and using extension to reward loyal farmers and to promote the party (including during election campaigns) (Berhanu and Poulton, 2014).

Structural change and higher-productivity livelihoods

Improved livelihoods generally require structural economic change, with ‘surplus’ labour shifting into higher-productivity sectors. Typically this means that labour moves from subsistence agriculture into informal commerce, then into labour-intensive but more formal sectors such as clothing manufacturing, commercial agriculture and tourism services, and finally into higher-productivity manufacturing and service sectors. In practice, economic growth and development in Africa has often been driven by high-productivity economic enclaves (especially mining) without the kind of broad-based structural change that underpinned rapid economic growth in East Asia and elsewhere. Across much of Southern Africa, state support to formal sectors together with land dispossession resulted in the destruction of smallholder agriculture,
constrained informal commerce and widespread open unemployment – and hence severe income inequality and high levels of income poverty relative to GDP per capita.

Across much of Africa, informal employment provides a crucial safety net of opportunity for the poor. African cities and towns are worlds in which people hustle and jostle to earn their living (Simone, 2004), often in the face of repressive state regulation. State hostility to informal commerce is most evident across Southern Africa, where both colonial and post-colonial states tend to view the urban poor as posing a political threat. The solution both before and after independence was often to repatriate delinquent urban populations to rural areas. In Zimbabwe, in 2005, the government launched a military-style ‘Operation Murambatsvina’ (Operation Restore Order) against informal producers and street traders (as well as informal housing) in the country’s cities (Potts, 2006). Whilst the operation was no doubt politically instrumental, asserting the power of the ruling party in opposition-supporting areas, it also reflected a deep-rooted ideological antipathy towards the urban poor as unproductive and delinquent (Dorman, 2016) – an attitude reflected more widely in discussions of Africa’s ‘urban youth’ at the African Union. Traders lacked the capacity to resist the destruction of their livelihoods collectively and directly, but instead practiced ‘adaptive resistance’, resuming commercial activity in safer, less visible locations (Musoni, 2010). This Zimbabwean case was extreme, but its core features were common across African cities. Ruling elites and states sometimes tolerated informality – practising ‘forbearance’, as Holland (2017) has discussed in the Latin American context – but have often engaged in highly repressive episodes. Informal producers and traders can rarely organise effectively (Brown et al., 2010), but instead take advantage of the limits to everyday state power and quickly resume activity.

The urban poor have votes even if they lack collective organisation. In many areas, urban politics remains largely clientelistic. In some, opposition parties mobilise discontent among the urban poor and win municipal elections, although few municipalities across Africa have significant resources or power. More rarely, opposition parties win a national election and take state power. In Zambia, the Patriotic Front won the 2011 election on the basis of a populist appeal to urban voters (as well as a more ethnic or regional appeal to rural voters in the country’s northern provinces). The party promised ‘lower taxes, more jobs, more money in your pockets’, improved urban services and an end to state harassment (Resnick, 2013).

Faced with ‘backward’ smallholder farmers and the delinquent (and threatening) urban poor, political elites aspire to grow formal and ‘modern’ employment. Their track record has been poor. Unlike a series of countries in East, Southeast and South Asia, African countries failed to expand the contribution of manufacturing to GDP between the 1970s and 2010s. Africa’s share of global manufacturing actually declined over this period (Newman et al., 2016). Crucially, they failed to build substantial export-oriented manufacturing sectors such as clothing manufacturing. More capital- and skill-intensive sectors often rely on state subsidies or – like mining – have few linkages to the rest of the economy.

State-led import-substituting industrialisation allowed for rapid industrial growth in the 1960s but inefficient production for local markers meant that this strategy reached its limits by the 1980s. Structural adjustment programmes fuelled deindustrialisation. Manufacturing growth picked up in the 2000s, but slowly, with the notable exception of Nigeria (and, in North Africa, Tunisia). The continuing cause of stagnation in manufacturing was and remains the failure to export, itself in large part the result of public policies that directly and indirectly discouraged rather than facilitated export production (Newman et al., 2016).

African states have failed to set rules that allow or encourage private (capitalist) businesses to invest profits (or rents) productively and to ensure that state bureaucrats enforce these rules uniformly. African capitalists have in general remained too weak and dependent on the state
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to be able to push the government to adopt and implement such rules. At the same time, democratisation has strengthened somewhat their hands in that political parties required funding to compete in elections. Whitfield et al. (2015) employ the ‘political settlement’ framework to explain the equilibrium that results under ‘competitive clientelism’: politicians adopt short time horizons, preferring policies that strengthen their factional patronage structures in the short-term and neglect policies that would strengthen manufacturing in the longer-term, whilst individual businesses extend financial support to parties or factions in return for privileged access to government contracts and patronage. Rents are generated but are used to improve the prospects of short-term political survival rather than for economically productive investment.

An additional factor in some of the ‘surplus labour’ economies of Southern Africa – especially South Africa – is that labour costs in the more labour-intensive sectors are high relative to productivity. In the South African case, this is in part the consequence of the government choosing to regulate (i.e. raise) wages to promote ‘decent work’ at the cost of job destruction and the forestalling of job creation. This choice was framed by both ideological beliefs and pressure from both trade unions and larger, more capital- and skill-intensive employers (Nattrass and Seekings, 2019).

The economic crisis that followed the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 revealed the distributional politics of the most affected African countries. Whilst international agencies and commentators pointed out that the burden of economic crisis fell especially heavily on the urban poor – who lacked the safety net of subsistence agriculture – governments prioritised relief for employers and workers in the formal sector.

Famine relief and social protection

Given growing populations but stagnant agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods, African governments have faced intensified pressure to expand social protection as a substitute for independent livelihoods. Whilst social protection has expanded across much of Africa, the region remains a laggard in comparison to most other regions (ILO, 2017) with the very important exception of drought relief.

Perhaps the most prevalent risk facing rural African societies was and remains drought (and less often, flooding). On a continent where agriculture generally depends upon rainfall and rural populations depend on agriculture, droughts and flooding can lead to famine, impoverishment and death. Amartya Sen (2005: 188), reflecting primarily on the Indian and Chinese experiences, famously suggested that ‘major famines do not occur in democracies’ (see further Drèze and Sen, 1991). Sen argued that famines only occur if they are not prevented, and democracies prevent them because a free press publicised the problem and pluralist politics serves to hold governments to account for inaction. De Waal (2000) reframed this argument in terms of ‘anti-famine political contracts’ between society and state.

Drought relief policies in Africa were pioneered in Botswana, where independence coincided with terrible drought (see Box 17.1). Since the early 1960s, famine has been confined to countries with undemocratic governments. There has been only one clear exception: Malawi, in 2001–02. Devereux and Tiba (2007) suggest that an interconnected set of private maize traders, politicians and civil servants stood to gain from the rising food prices that resulted from shortage. Material interest outweighed political interest. Rubin (2008) argues that the famine was the result of a weak government that was dependent on foreign donors: ‘The strained relationship between international donors and the Malawi government led to famine responses that were belated and inadequate’ (Rubin, 2008: 61).
Box 17.1 Government response to drought in Botswana

At independence in 1966, Botswana was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a population divided between a small minority of cattle-owners and salaried workers, and a large number of very poor households dependent on agricultural production that was difficult even in years of good rains. But independence coincided with the worst drought in living memory. Whereas the colonial government had done little to mitigate the devastating effects of drought on either the human or cattle populations, Seretse Khama’s new independent government quickly moved to organise a massive drought relief operation, perhaps without precedent in Africa. Combining with the newly established World Food Programme, the new government organised relief food and even stockfeed across the entire country. The operation comprised three pillars: school and preschool feeding schemes; workfare, to support entire households; and food aid provided directly to individuals living in households unable to participate in workfare. These programmes continued not only through the 1970s and 1980s – when the country experienced further devastating droughts – but were thereafter slowly repackaged as regular social protection programmes (including pensions for the elderly). This expanding welfare state was required because of the high level of inequality in the distribution of incomes. Initially, the cattle-owning elite captured most of the benefits of public investments (in water supplies and education). Later, with the mining sector driving rapid economic growth, opportunities improved for many but not all citizens. Whilst agricultural livelihoods generally remained stagnant, non-agricultural livelihoods improved rapidly and social protection provided for those households and individuals who remained poor.

In Botswana, Ethiopia and elsewhere, ‘emergency’ drought relief policies evolved into permanent social protection programmes (Lavers, 2019; Seekings, 2019a). Social protection in Africa involves a distinctive emphasis on social assistance (i.e. tax- or donor-financed programmes) rather than social insurance (tied to formal employment and financed at least in part through contributions from employers and employees). Social assistance is most extensive in South Africa, where its origins lay in the country’s racial history. Elsewhere, most social assistance dates from the 2000s, when it was promoted strongly by international agencies and aid donors (von Gliszczynski and Leisering, 2016; Seekings, 2021; see also Chapter 40 in this volume).

The expansion of social assistance has been far from even. In general, national governments do far less than international organisations recommend, in part because national political elites do not share the enthusiasm for extending social assistance to the poor as a right. The prejudice against the poor and veneration of work documented in the case of Malawi by Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette (2014) leads to a widespread preference for workfare (i.e. public employment programmes), feeding schemes and supposedly ‘developmental’ programmes (such as microfinance) over cash transfers. In a number of countries – including Tanzania (Ulriksen, 2019) and Zambia (Siachiwena, 2020) – governments have allowed donors to initiate and largely operate social protection programmes as long as the donors contribute most or all of the funding.

Conservative elites have sometimes been pushed into reform by pressure from within the country. Civil society played an important role in South Africa’s expansion of social assistance in the 2000s, but this was an exception. Electoral competition has also provided an impetus to reform. In Botswana, welfare programmes were crucial to preserving support for the ruling
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party in rural areas (Gulbrandsen, 2012). The government’s political vulnerability led it later to extend programmes to urban areas also (Seekings, 2019a). It is not clear, however, that African voters favour social protection over other government programmes. In Malawi, the incumbent president campaigned in 2014 on the platform of expanding social protection but lost to the opposition candidate who championed maize subsidies instead (Hamer and Seekings, 2019). In South Africa, receipt of a grant seems to have little direct effect on voting behaviour (Graham et al., 2016; Seekings, 2019b); even unemployed young men prefer job creation to grants for people like themselves (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020).

The muted response of most African governments to the COVID-19 crisis reflected continuing ambivalence towards social protection. South Africa did expand its already broad social assistance system – at least temporarily – but most countries continued to drag their heels as they continued along the path of slow reform promoted by international organisations (Gronbach and Seekings, 2021).

Conclusion

The ‘political settlements’ literature emphasises the importance of factional competition and compromise within the political elite, the general political weaknesses of the poor and the continued semi-dependence of domestic capitalists on the government and state. The approach does, however, tend to underestimate the importance of political factors – including ideology and partisan competition – that are important to understanding both similarities and differences between African states in their policies towards the livelihoods of their poor populations. Elites’ beliefs about the causes of poverty (and success) sustain the status quo in many areas of public policy, whilst electoral competition has provided impetus to reform of some policies – especially fertiliser subsidies (and, in another policy area, the elimination of school fees – see Harding and Stasavage, 2013) – but not the more profound reforms that would restructure the economy and open up new opportunities for improved livelihoods.

Key points

• Redemocratisation in the 1990s meant that governments across much of Africa became more formally accountable to their citizens, but the quality of democracy remained uneven and poverty remains widespread even during periods of economic growth, prompting scholars to question how much the underlying ‘rules of the game’ have changed.

• Across most of Africa, a majority of households depend at least in part on smallholder or peasant agriculture, but political elites have generally either neglected small farmers or have actively inhibited any improvement in their livelihoods.

• Case-studies of policy ‘sectors’ suggest that redemocratisation contributed to some livelihood-improving public policies but not others.

• Livelihood-improving reforms include the provision of state-subsidised fertiliser and other ‘inputs’ to small farmers, drought relief (preventing famine) and some forms of social protection (mitigating poverty).

• At the same time, many governments have been hostile to the urban informal sector, unable to adopt the long-term time horizons that enables the kind of stable policy environment conducive to private investment, are especially reluctant to support (or even permit) labour-intensive industrialisation and oppose any large-scale expansion of social protection funded from their own domestic revenues.
Suggestions for further reading

The literature on the politics of livelihoods in Africa is generally fragmented between political dynamics on the one hand and public policy on the other, with the latter further fragmented into different areas of public policy. Bates (1981) was the classic study that combined both sides of this literature, prior to redemocratisation in the 1990s. For more recent integrations of the politics of policy and hence livelihoods, see: Poulton (2014) on agricultural extension; Whitfield et al. (2015), Newman et al. (2016) and Nattrass and Seekings (2019) on industrial policy; and Hickey et al. (2019) on social protection. The fast-growing political settlements literature attempts to link politics and policy, inspiring or informing many of the studies cited above. This literature has been usefully summarised by Behuria et al. (2017). Bleck and van de Walle (2019) provide the most recent review of parties, voters and elections in Africa. Simone (2004) is an outstanding ethnographic study of urban livelihood politics. Recent ethnographic studies of rural areas include Phillips (2018), on Tanzania. On the case of Botswana, see especially Peters (1994), Gulbrandsen (2012), Selolwane (2012) and Seekings (2016a, 2016b, 2019a).

Notes

2 Ibid.

References

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