

BOOK REVIEW

The African Food Crisis: Lessons from the Asian Green Revolution.

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This book is a very topical contribution, coming at a time when the world community is increasingly shifting its attention from the agricultural development of Asia to that of Africa. A rapid growth in food production in Asia, in the wake of the Green Revolution, has increased the overall food availability and reduced the incidence of hunger and famine that were of major concerns in Asia four to five decades ago. Agricultural growth in most parts of Africa is, however, still too slow and sporadic to address the food problems adequately and to prevent the resulting major human catastrophes that fill up television screens around the world all too frequently. Are there any lessons that can be drawn from the Asian success that may be applicable to addressing the food crisis in Africa? *“If Asia can do it, why not Africa?”* This is the theme of this edited volume consisting of 14 chapters.

In Chapter 1, the editors set the stage by providing a broader discussion of the Green Revolution and the African food crisis. The narrow but more common conceptualization of the Green Revolution is junked in favor of a broader process that is state-driven, market-mediated and small-farmer-based. It is argued that while specific technology packages may not be transferable from Asia to Africa, the broader process that led to the Green Revolution in Asia could be equally applicable to Africa. An elaboration of this process in the context of Asia, along with the conceptual framework, is provided in Chapter 2.

Chapters 3 through 5 provide an overview of the process of the Green Revolution in Asia and the conditions that facilitated it. In all cases, the three components – viz., the leadership of the state, market-mediation and small farmer orientation—were found to be an important part of the Asian experience. States spearheaded the initiative of attaining the goal of food self-sufficiency and invested heavily in the development of technologies and infrastructures. In addition, states also took responsibility for facilitating the provision of inputs and the marketing of outputs through various subsidies and other incentives. Although administratively regulated markets were a common feature in Asia, private commercial activities, were nevertheless, significant. Finally, the unimodal strategy for agricultural growth focusing on small farmers was almost universally adopted in Asia. Not surprisingly, the pace and the timing of change across countries were found to be conditioned by geopolitical and institutional factors.

Moving from the analysis of the Asian experience, the next eight chapters focus on the historical context and the current agricultural development issues in sub-Saharan Africa. The broader analyses and the case study presented provide convincing arguments that despite the substantial potential for growth in food production, the limited success that has occurred in the past has been sporadic and largely transient. The three components of the process that were the hallmarks of the Asian Green Revolution were

seen as largely missing in the case of Africa. A number of historical, economic, and geopolitical factors contributing to this situation in Africa were identified and discussed. One of the key factors pinpointed was the resource squeeze in the public sector resulting from the Structural Adjustment Policies implemented in several African countries. This compromised the ability of the public sector to invest in agricultural research and the development of infrastructures, which are the key factors to food productivity growth.

The final two Chapters provide a synthesis, with Chapter 13 (Otsuka and Yamano) focusing on agricultural research and technology development, and Chapter 14 summarizing the broader issues. Otsuka and Yamano dwell on the controversial topic of the returns to research investments in favorable versus less favorable areas. They suggest that in the Asian model, the less favorable areas derived considerable benefits from the spillover of the Green Revolution that took place in the more favorable areas. In the case of Africa, a large part of which is characterized by less favorable conditions, such spillovers are unlikely to be significant. Hence, Otsuka and Yamano suggest that the investment in agricultural research with a farming systems focus be increased, and that the capacity of national systems for adaptive research be strengthened. The final chapter reinforces the findings of the earlier chapters that lessons from the Green Revolution of Asia can indeed be helpful in designing an agricultural development strategy for Africa.

Overall, this book is an excellent reading material for scholars and policymakers interested in a comparative analysis of agricultural developments in Asia and Africa. It provides an excellent overview of the process of the Green Revolution in Asia and some of the consequences. It also provides in-depth analyses of the current pattern of food production growth in Africa and the various factors that have slowed down the progress.

Although the book is aimed at drawing the lessons from Asia for Africa, this reviewer believes that the sputtering pattern of food production growth in some parts of Africa also has a clear relevance to current issues in Asia. The African case studies point out that low and reduced funding for agricultural research, low investments in infrastructures, and weak institutional setup are some of the major causes for the inability to sustain productivity growth in areas where conditions were favorable initially. Concerns are being expressed in Asia that the productivity growth in recent years has been decreasing due to reduced government expenditures in agricultural research, and the failure to adequately maintain rural infrastructures. Asian countries must guard against such trends to prevent the momentum of the Green Revolution from faltering.