

Review of: "A Socio-Historical Look at Agricultural Policy Reform in Benin (West Africa) since 1960: A Literature Review"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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To the authors

It is unclear what the paper is about, as you do not introduce a research question, go to some length to collect and categorize the literature you could find, but actually do not use the categories or the volume of literature during the different decades to inform a conclusion. My comments reflect the uncertainty of your interest and purpose of writing the paper.

It would help the reader (and yourself) to have a research question. E.g. "Can Benin formulate its own agricultural policy, or does International Trade Rules and International monetary Institutions and lenders, dictate policies" (I'm here thinking of France's interest in continued import, IMF's conditionalities), or some other questions you are interested in.

The title and the abstract indicate that you are going to look at agricultural policies and their implementation from 1960-2023. You are going to use existing literature. It is not clear to the reader why you choose a literature review (rather than evidence based), or how a categorizing and analysis of the existing literature is going to inform you about implementation and outcomes. But you can not analyse the implementation and outcomes of agricultural policies without economic and household well-being evidence.

But you have not structured the paper to measure this:

You have accessed various publication, then you analyse the:

3.1 Scientific interest in public policies and reforms in the agricultural sector

3.2 The trajectory of reforms in the agricultural sector in Benin from the independence period till the date. Here you say 3 major events, (but 5 is listed?) – and you do not argue how and why the 3 events were determining. One could argue for 2 – before and after IMF conditionalities??

1960 - 1972: A "forced" quest for economic growth

From 1972 to 1990: Benin's agricultural sector in a revolutionary period

From 1990 to 2006: Agricultural policies with visions

2006 to 2016: Resurgence of the Green Revolution

From 2016 to the present: the era of rationalization of the agricultural sector

If you intended for the paper to be a review of the existing literature, you need a research question that has to do with scientific publications e.g Does the Scientific interest in Benin's public policies and reforms in the agricultural sector increase with growth in GDP? (you say the majority of publications are after 2001 - or Is growth in GDP (production for export) a good indicator of good agricultural policies? did it create good nutritional food security during COVID-19? Are the publications financed by international organizations? Or are they academic (from Universities?) – so are we talking about an institutional interest?

A scientific paper has to contribute to the general understanding and debate on a research question and subject matter; here the formulation and implementation Agricultural Policies in Benin, and a conclusion can not be “the use of agricultural policies is inconclusive”, (you do say that the policies were poorly formulated and implemented???? – or is the case that the agricultural policies did work, but was geared towards export production and cotton and vegetable oils prices declined, so even production increased the economic benefit did materialize?)

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Your need a research question, give the reader a context, present your evidence, and draw a conclusion . Since your conclusion is about Agricultural Policies in Benin, I presume that

what you wanted to research. Hence the following comments.

Your abstract is good, and certainly piqued my interest. But I think that your paper needs a framework e.g.

a political and economic framework that suggest that agricultural production can be an economic growth engine. That growth in the agricultural sector (land and labour productivity) can lead to growth in the non-farm economy, via the backward and forward linkages to agriculture. But many underlying infrastructures and institutions are needed. Was this understood ?and was the investment forthcoming? What is a reasonable timeframe for a policy to work? Were there feedback loops during the process policies could be adjusted. Or was part of the problem that it is all top down announcements, that might or might not be known by many – let alone understood by the public sector who was going to implement and support these policies.

In your abstract you promise a historical socio-economic context. How did agricultural production look in Benin, post colonial 1960s? How was the supply chain organized and who benefitted? what were the issues? Were there any knowledgeable extension officers” Export vs domestic production? Dependency on 2 export crops to a single market? Are

there any examples of such a economic dependency have let to economic growth? The US cotton subsidies suppressed cotton prices – little domestic textile industry meaning little value adding

Was the intention to mechanize cotton production, in order to increase export earnings? of to improve domestic food production? Two very different things

Transforming an agricultural food production require a multitude of institutions, access to market, marketing and connectivity and understanding of markets, and value adding – but also that consumers have spending money. Paid jobs and services (eg road infrastructure projects such as improving dirt roads and tracks given all communities access to transport and markets).

You do not list any specific agricultural policies, and what they were intended to achieve – how they were implemented, what they did achieve, how long did these policies have a chance to work?

I recommend that you use economic terms rather than political terms to describe events, (democratic governments that use elections, does not by itself create a democratic society where producers issues are heard? Collectives or corporations are not Marxist institutions, they are used in capitalist economies) as the same economic instruments can be used by different interests, depending on implemented power structure. E.g. cooperatives exists both in a market economy and in a demand economy, and can be an institutions for growth, see the history of the dairy industry in Gujarat, India.

Agriculture systems are complex systems. Agriculture production is deeply ingrained in households' welfare, foremost to produce ample nutritional food and sustain livelihoods for the people. Trade and surplus production have evolved in a myriad of ways, to facilitate lives and livelihoods in many different environments. These systems were profoundly changed by colonialism, but has subsequently been difficult to change, because of vested interest and the globalization processes that have been very economically biased. Hence, former colonies have broken agricultural production systems, and since national economies were never build they do not have national food delivery and trade systems, and formulation and implementation are often set in mition by people who does not understand, or even have an interest in small scale producers.

1. To use Agricultural policies is a very complex and evolving web of governmental interventions in:
 - a) output markets, input markets,
 - b) trade,
 - c) public-good investments,
 - d) renewable and exhaustible natural resources,
 - e) regulation of externalities, education, and
 - f) the marketing and distribution of food products
2. Agricultural policies are implemented through five kinds of instruments: (1) new legislation, (2) executive decrees,

(3) investment projects, and (4) programs, which usually require significant numbers of field staff working with farmers, input supplies, processors and the like, and (5) voluntary collaboration by the public and private sector.

Instruments may be combined; a program may have an investment component or may require an executive decree before it can be carried out. Legislation and decrees define the rules of the game and establish programs, such as guarantee funds, subsidies for e.g. inputs, transport and crop insurance, and the formation of stakeholder institutions such as marketing boards - water user associations, among many other examples.

3. Agricultural policies need to be formulated in communication with the farming communities and responding to their needs, improvements addressing their particular issues.

Land and labour productivity

The driver of increasing productivity is economic opportunities for

- a) A producer can sell more produce if she/he can produce it
- b) A producer could get a better price for the produce if it a better quality. This presumes that the produce can get to a market where more money is spent on food (urban market)
- c) These are cost/benefit questions. Your paper does not address any economic issues. And if an agricultural policy is introduced without a very clear understanding of the economic conditions in the villages, and create opportunities for producers to respond in ways that are “doable” under their own steam, very few can respond. E.G. if farmers are using fertilizer, you need a good delivery and distribution system, because its uptake by plants is time-dependent. Wrong time and it is wasted.
- E.g. make sure that there is more money in the villages from off-farm work (like labour in the community is paid for improving their road infrastructure which was part of the Chinese transformed production from self-provisioning to gradually becoming more market oriented = meaning commercial.
- Give communities opportunities to supply food for public works etc. etc.
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I have not worked on agricultural issues in Benin in particular, (we work in southern Africa on a research project called: Transforming small-scale irrigation in southern Africa. See International Journal of Water Resources Development, vol. 36 no SI 2020). Hence I googled a bit to understand the context of economics of ag-production in Benin. It looks like 1990 is a benchmark for IMF conditionalities of opening the economy for foreign investors, increase export of commodities and import of food? Did Benin have economic autonomy following Independence, or did France retain economic powers?

Food imports as the figure shows, is partly commercial and partly part of World Bank loans (the US had grains surpluses they were desperate to ‘put to gainful use’, and hence grain was delivered in lieu of money. That is a problem for domestic food producers. The road network was small in 1960, the French currency zone did not facilitate interstate trade, a list of

both internal and external issues would influence the outcome of domestic agricultural policies. The issue of domestic agricultural policies being nullified or overturned by global institutions (IMF), seems a relevant issue to talk about.

- Food import for Benin 1970-2001 <https://www.fao.org/3/y5109e/y5109e0q.htm#TopOfPage>

Global commodity prices for Cotton. 1970-2023 (macro trends <https://www.macrotrends.net/2533/cotton-prices-historical-chart-data>)

Such a fluctuation in prices, is very difficult for small scale farmers to manage – were there any income stabilizing programmes?

The palm oil industry might not be to the benefit of all producers according to the below web side:

The current program for the development of the oil palm sector, based on the distribution of selected oil palm seedlings and infrastructure, benefits only the new private plantation owners. These planters enjoy a competitive advantage over women small-scale producers on several levels (ARISE Integrated Industrial platforms

<https://www.ariseiip.com/homepage/major-industries-in-benin/benin-oil-industry/>)

My concluding remarks:

You need to have a research question, and then structure the paper as an investigation of the question, and you need to analyse your results and reach a conclusion. In-conclusive is not an option. It does not need to be a black and white conclusion, if your finding shows a tendency to reflect the value of export commodities, or if you continue to analyse the published literature, an increase or decrease in academic publications vs funded reports or some