Agriculture
The impact of slavery and colonialism
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Collectively, the Arab, European and Transatlantic slave trades, from the mid-7th century to the 19th century, had a devastating impact on the African continent. Slavery meant that African societies remained more dispersed and mobile than others. Farming was challenging in a situation of low population density, lawlessness and violence where people were constantly moving to avoid capture, often avoiding areas that offered easy access such as along larger rivers. Once slaves had been captured and violently removed, it was the young, elderly or disabled who were left behind. In the process, large parts of Africa were denuded of its productive labour force. Farming and herding could therefore not develop in a systematic manner, nor could social, political and economic systems mature to allow for technological and productivity improvements to track development seen in other regions of the world. [5]

Despite the continuous drain of labour formally ending with the abolition of slavery by the mid-19th century, other forced labour schemes under the guise of imperialism and colonialism soon followed. In the decades that followed the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, where Africa was formally divided between various European states, the continent became an increasingly important source of raw materials to feed the factories in Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, linking and shaping Africa’s agricultural exports to the demands of its colonisers. Imperial economics demanded that commodity exports be supplied at the lowest possible price. As labour costs were the most critical cost consideration, Africans generally received poverty wages.

Chart 1 shows Africa’s terms of trade — the ratio of export prices to import prices — from 1800 to 1940.

Chart 1: Africa’s terms of trade

In the aftermath of the Berlin Conference (indicated by the grey bar), colonised Africa saw an increase in exports and a
deterioration of trade terms, primarily in the form of reduced prices. Effectively, Africa exported more commodities of which the values declined as the terms of trade steadily declined. According to one estimate, by 1940, Africa’s terms of trade had reverted to the levels it experienced in 1800 as the continent became poorer compared to all other regions. [6]

Elsewhere, the introduction of crops such as peanuts and sesame replaced dietary staples such as millet and sorghum. The result was declining food reserves, chronic malnutrition and famine despite the development of a sizable commercial cash crop system dominated by settler farmers.

In many colonies, settlers often designated large areas terra nullius (unoccupied land) and formal property rights were reserved for settlers and European firms. European settlers steadily established themselves and land was subsequently dispossessed through political measures, most notably the Native Land Act of 1913 in South Africa, which restricted ownership of land by black South Africans in the newly established Union of South Africa to a small portion of the available agricultural land. Much of the rest of the agricultural land not allocated to settlers, here and elsewhere, was given ‘customary’ tenure, meaning it could be used but not owned, and that it was always subject to seizure by the state with the colonists ruling indirectly by co-opting pliable ‘tribal’ leaders who exercised control over the land.

Investment in road and rail infrastructure followed to allow raw materials to be transported from productive areas to the coast, from where products were shipped to Europe. Consequently, the rural and domestic agricultural sector and regional trade were either destroyed or remained economically marginal. In this way, slavery, imperialism and colonialism fundamentally altered the development of agriculture on the continent. It effectively destroyed Africa’s burgeoning trade in food and displaced indigenous crops with commodities beneficial for the industrialising economies in Europe, which undermined food security at home.
Endnotes


5. T Lewis, *Transatlantic slave trade*, 2018


14. World Bank, *Aggregated LPI*

15. World Bank, *Aggregated LPI*

16. Embassy of the DR Congo, *Invest in DRC, Agriculture*


19. In 2003, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (now called the African Union Development Agency) published its Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, with ambitious goals, namely to: allocate at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture; reach rural growth rates of 6% annually by 2015; integrate and invigorate regional and national agricultural markets; significantly increase agricultural exports; transform Africa into a ‘strategic player’ in global agricultural science and technology; practise sound environmental and land management techniques; and reduce rural poverty (see: M Fleshman, *Boosting African farm yields*, 2014).

20. The commitment to devote at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture and rural development was also included in the 2003 Maputo Declaration by African heads of state and reiterated in the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation in Africa.

21. On aggregate, Africa spends only 5–7% of national budgets on agriculture, although a 2018 study found that 11 African countries did manage to allocate 10% or more of their budgets to agriculture in some years since 2005, with Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Sierra Leone achieving 6% agricultural

22. AllAfrica, *Communique: Africa food security leadership dialogue*, August 5, 2019

23. IPPMedia, *Value add in Africa: First steps in a long journey*, 2019; also see: African Cashew Alliance, *About us*

24. The world cocoa industry is worth more than US$100 billion annually; also see: Y Adegoke, *Why Europe dominates the global chocolate market while Africa produces all the cocoa*, 2018; D Philling, The African farmers taking on big chocolate, *Financial Mail*, 16 December 2019; H Fofack, *Overcoming the colonial development model of resource extraction for sustainable development in Africa*, 2019


31. World Bank, *Agriculture in Africa: Telling facts from myths*


33. World Bank, *Agriculture in Africa: Telling facts from myths*

34. In contrast to the tripling in growth cited earlier, this was an improvement across the entire country, so the growth is understandably much smaller; see: JY Lin, The Household Responsibility System in China’s Agricultural Reform: A Theoretical and Empirical Study, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 36:53, 1988, S199–S224

35. China-Africa Project, Chinese and African agriculture have a lot more in common that most people think: *Interview with Xinqing Lu, Associate Programme Officer for Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa*, 3 December 2019

36. OEC, Brazil


38. L Abboud, *The robot revolution down on the farm*, 2018


40. R Kimani and P Bosire, *FarmDrive*, 2019

41. In most of rural Africa, precise location of a farm is objectively unknown so the location is determined via a series of SMS questions (e.g. time to walk to different primary schools). The more schools a farmer is familiar with in their area, the easier it is to hone in on their specific location.

42. J Bird, *‘Smart’ insurance helps poor farmers to cut risk*, *Financial Times*, 5 December 2018; also see, for example, https://agrocenta.com/ and https://www.zenvus.com/.

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44. S Gebre, AGRA plans to invest $500 million in African seed companies, Bloomberg, 7 September 2016

45. The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and its allied organisations argue that ‘AGRA has unequivocally failed in its mission to increase productivity and incomes and reduce food insecurity, and has in fact harmed broader efforts to support African farmers.’ See: Various co-signatories, Open letter: The Green Revolution in Africa has unequivocally failed, 15 September 2021


47. Ammonia manufacturing contributes 1% of worldwide carbon dioxide emissions. See LK Boerner, Industrial ammonia production emits more CO₂ than any other chemical-making reaction. Chemists want to change that, Chemical & Engineering News, 15 June 2019


49. Indorama Petrochemicals, About IEPL, Port Harcourt


54. Food and Agriculture Organization, Food wastage: Key facts and figures

55. InspiraFarms, Our team

56. The improvements in yields are similar in magnitude to the improvements seen in South Asia between 1980 and 2020, and in a similar timeframe. Indeed, South America achieved a much more rapid increase between 2000 and 2010, moving from roughly 7.8 tons per hectare to about 11.8 tons.

57. Chart 14 presents the reduction in extreme poverty in African countries across the low- and middle-income categories. The reduction in extreme poverty in Seychelles, Africa’s only high-income country, is negligible.

58. The contribution of agriculture as a proportion of the Seychelles’ economy, the continent’s only high-income island state, was about 4% in 2019.

59. Some of these constraints can be overcome through technology, such as the use of precision irrigation and application of precise amounts of fertiliser exactly where they are required. Then there is also the potential of vertical farming, which could produce 180 m tons of food globally, according to some analysts.


61. Food and Agriculture Organization, Government expenditure on agriculture, 2019


63. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Working Group II: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability, 2018


65. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture does particularly impressive work in this regard. See: https://www.iita.org/
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