

Land and agriculture in Rwanda: EU support must focus on the needs of the most vulnerable rural actors

Rwanda is often hailed as one of the countries with the most successful results in terms of agricultural productivity and poverty reduction. Government statistics indicate a decline in poverty levels of 5.7% from 2011 to 2014¹, while agricultural productivity increased significantly for key crops during the period 2006 – 2016, as a result of the strong commitment to transform the Rwandan agricultural sector from one based on family farming and local markets to one oriented towards production for the regional and international markets. Such impressive results are partially born out of a strong commitment from the Rwandan government to effectively implement result-based agricultural transformation programmes such as the Crop Intensification Programme (CIP). However, scholars have questioned the validity of such data, as poverty in rural Rwanda seems to persist. In fact, in 2016 36.7% of all children between zero and five years of age were stunted², while mounting evidence shows that the poorest rural actors are still trapped in a cycle of poverty and food insecurity. Moreover, scholars have openly questioned the validity of the poverty reduction data provided by the government, both through a re-calculation of the poverty baseline used by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR)^{3 4} and by comparing official results with micro-level, in-depth qualitative research⁵. In 2016 the European Union (EU) committed an amount of 200 million EUR as budget support to be spent by the Rwandese government in improving food security and agriculture, the largest ever single EU financial grant to Rwanda⁶. EurAc believes that EU support to agriculture in Rwanda is crucial, but that both the EU and Rwanda must do more to support the rural poor, particularly the most marginal groups and the poorest smallholder farmers.

Food insecurity persists for the most vulnerable groups in Rwanda, despite government and donors' efforts

Agriculture is the backbone of the Rwandan economy, as 80% of the Rwandan population rely on agriculture as their main source of both food and income. The government of Rwanda launched in 2006 an ambitious Crop Intensification Programme (CIP) the first phase of which ended in 2017. The CIP aimed at increasing agricultural productivity through the distribution of improved inputs, the consolidation of individual land plots in collective arrangements, resulted in significant production gains and in a decline in food insecurity over the past ten years. This was also the result of an ambitious Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation (SPAT) which focused on public subventions to the agricultural sector, productivity increase, soil and erosion management as well as price control for agricultural inputs. Nonetheless, food security remains a crucial problem and mostly so for the least wealthy in rural settings. In fact, 39.1% of Rwandan households live below the poverty line, and of these most live in rural areas⁷. In fact, low-income agricultural producers make up 32% of all rural households. These producers are the most food-insecure in the country, second only to landless agricultural labourers and those who rely on the support of others for their food-security needs. Food insecurity seems also to be linked to the small size of plots on which most of Rwandan producers work, with an average plot size below 0.5 hectares.

As Rwanda implements its new agricultural strategy, EurAc looks at the past years in the sector and calls on the EU to focus its support on strengthening the economic position of the poorest farmers and the most vulnerable rural actors.

In 2015, 36.7% of children under five years of age in Rwanda were stunted. Although this is an improvement from the previous 40% of stunted children in the country, the levels remain worryingly high. Child malnutrition is typically higher in rural areas, where 40% of

¹ National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), [Fourth Integrated Household Survey](#)

² European Commission (2017), [Rwanda Country Profile on Nutrition](#)

³ Desire, Sam (2017), [The Evidence Mounts: Poverty, Inflation and Rwanda](#), Blog of the Review of African Political Economy;

⁴ Anonymous (2017), [Faking it: the Rwandan GDP Growth Myth](#), Blog of the Review of African Political Economy.

⁵ Ansoms, A. et alii. (2017), Statistics versus livelihoods: questioning Rwanda's pathway out of poverty, *Review of African Political Economy*, 44:151

⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS) (2016), [EU grants 200 budget support to Rwanda agriculture](#)

⁷ Rwandan Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI), National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), World Food Programme (WFP) (2016), Rwanda 2015, Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis.

children are stunted compared to the 27% in urban areas⁸. Such high levels are often due to inadequate nutrition, in fact, only 29% of all children aged between zero and five years are fed the minimum dietary diversity as per the World Health Organization (WHO) standards

Finally, also due to the tragic events of the 1994 genocide, a significant number of households in Rwanda is women-headed. Women-headed households are also the generally the poorest, and the ones scoring the worst results in terms of food security.

Beyond the statistics: land, agricultural policies and the rural poor in Rwanda

While the decrease in poverty reported in the EICV4 does little to explain the persisting challenges that are faced by the poorest and most marginalised rural actors, a growing body of research in the social sciences may provide likely explanations for the poor results in terms of food security revolving around agriculture and access to land.

In fact, researchers working on Rwanda have highlighted how statistics collected by the government may often neglect realities on the ground and the experience of those farmers who struggle with agricultural production⁹. In particular, in-depth field-research has shown that **participation to the CIP seemed to favour better-off farmers** and to negatively affect that of farmers who have very little access to land or capital¹⁰. A number of studies¹¹ have showed how when the poorest farmers are asked to participate in the CIP their level of food security seems to deteriorate. This is in part explained by the fact that rarely those producers have access to the inputs required to practice the kind of monoculture that the CIP calls for. Farmers' participation is also linked to the ability of rural producers to determine the terms of their own engagement in the policy. Although the CIP was presented by the government as a voluntary measure, researchers have reported that most farmers are given no choice on whether to participate or not. Furthermore, in more than one case the crop varieties chosen within the government's regionalization strategies were not suited to the local context, resulting in crop failures. Successive studies have shown that for agricultural programmes to succeed farmers' involvement must be mobilized¹². Moreover, their knowledge on local agricultural practices, agro-ecological conditions as well as crop patterns and preferences must be taken into account.

For agricultural programmes to succeed farmers' involvement, their knowledge on local agricultural practices, agro-ecological conditions as well as crop patterns and preferences must be factored in.

Land policies also make a crucial contribution to the success or failure of agriculture policies, as the way land is managed and distributed may either promote or hinder poverty reduction. In Rwanda, through a land law first approved in 2005 and revised in 2013, the government has chosen to favour land consolidation to allow for monoculture over land fragmentation and polyculture. The land law is exclusively geared towards increasing agricultural productivity for market-oriented agriculture, neglecting smallholders' pressing needs for food security and environmental stewardship of their productive resources. In fact, the law links land ownership to investments in productivity, posing a serious problem for the poorest smallholder farmers who are not able to align with the government productivity requirements. This dynamic may favour already better-off producers, while contributing to the increase of landless rural dwellers with few chances to find employment in non-agricultural sectors. Moreover, the land law introduces a cap of one hectare under which land may not be fragmented for purposes of sale or inheritance. As the Rwandan population works on average of 0.5 ha, this often constitutes an important source of conflicts within households and communities and it nullifies the economic value of land for the group of farmers who need it the most. While the new land laws ensures tenure security for the majority of Rwandans, **the poorest land users still find it difficult to register their land**, due to relatively high registration costs¹³. Moreover, despite being legally allowed to do so, women in Rwanda still find it difficult to access land. For those users having acquired land titles, challenges remain as to the degree to which they

⁸ MINAGRI, NISR, WFP (2016), [Rwanda 2015, Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis](#).

⁹ Cioffo, G., Ansoms, A. (2016), [Modernizing Agriculture Through a 'new' Green Revolution? The Limits of the Crop Intensification Programme in Rwanda](#)

¹⁰ Ansoms, An (2018), [Hunger in the Name of Development: Rwandan Farmers Under Stress](#), Blog of the Review of African Political Economy

¹¹ Cioffo, G. D. (2014), [Les Petits Agriculteurs Face à la Modernisation Rurale dans la Province du Nord du Rwanda : Consolidation de l'Usage des Terres, Distribution d'Intrants, et Sécurité Alimentaire](#), Annuaire de l'Afrique des Grands Lacs 2014-2015 ; USAID (2015), [Rwanda LAND Policy Research Brief: Starting from the Ground – Drawing the Links Between Land, Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition](#)

¹² With reference to Rwanda, see, for example: Nahayo, A. et al. (2017), [Factors' influencing participation in crop intensification program in Rwanda](#), Journal of Integrative Agriculture 16(0)

¹³ USAID (2015), [Rwanda LAND Report: Access to the Land Tenure Administration Systems and Outcomes](#)

may effectively enjoy their rights. A recent report from Human Rights Watch¹⁴ highlighted how **violation of land rights** by military and government elites are frequent in some parts of the country.

Agricultural intensification should not come at the cost of environmental sustainability

Failings in food security are not exclusively the consequence of government policy: climate patterns and farmers' capacity to react to them; soil erosion and farmers' access to input that can maintain and regenerate soil fertility, and the protection of local biodiversity, are crucial issues for Rwanda. While the government of Rwanda has introduced the concept of sustainability in its Strategic Plan for Agricultural Transformation (SPAT) 2018-2024, and in the previous SPAT 2012-2017, **few measures have been taken to tackle land degradation at the national level**. In fact, for farmers to be capable of responding effectively to the challenges of a changing climate, they must be able to rely on a variety of food-security crops and of agricultural strategies that maximise the productivity of land. Chemical and organic fertilizers are pivotal in this context: as monocultural practices tend to reduce the biomass available for the production of organic fertilizer, and as prices for chemical fertilizers increase, **the rural poor may find it nearly impossible to access**

As organic fertilizer becomes more and more difficult to access and as prices for chemical fertilizers increase, the rural poor may find it nearly impossible to restore soil fertility and to fight soil erosion.

improved inputs (i.e. fertilizer and improved seeds). In turn, this dynamic makes it harder and harder for these farmers to restore soil fertility and to fight the advancing erosion of land, their most important productive asset¹⁵. In short, **the protection of farms from land degradation should be mainstreamed within the agricultural practices** promoted by the government, and not as a fix to be applied after the soil has been damaged. Government should increase the availability of organic fertilizers to the poorest farmers, especially to those who are not able to produce it themselves and who depend on market access for purchasing it. This may be done through state

subsidies, but the increase of the number of crops grown by farmers and the adoption of agro-ecological techniques (including intercropping, agroforestry, integration of agriculture and animal husbandry) may also increase the amount of biomass available to farmers and facilitate their access to organic materials.

While the Rwandan government has so far focussed on the productivity of crops produced for the regional and international markets, **there is a growing need of government support for the production of food security crops** for local consumption such as sorghum, sweet potatoes and bananas, which had previously been excluded by the list of privileged crops promoted under the CIP. Not only would such crop provide a food-secure alternative to commercial crops such as wheat and maize, they would also help in provisioning the materials necessary for the on-farm production of organic fertilizers.

The EU must support agrarian policies that work for all Rwandans

As the EU renews its support to the reform of the Rwandan agricultural sector, questions remain on the effectiveness of Rwandan agriculture and land policies to lift the poorest rural actors out of poverty. As GDP and agricultural production raise, food insecurity and poverty are still persistent or increasing. Statistics may not tell the whole picture: the rural poor, and amongst them women in particular, remain in a position of economic marginalization. The EU should be coherent with its guiding objectives and policies in terms of poverty reduction and environmental sustainability and it should orient its contribution to the Rwandan land and agriculture sector accordingly.

EurAc calls on DEVCO and on the EU delegation in Kigali to use the policy dialogue with the Rwandan government to:

- Promote the **participation of the poorest farmers** in the agricultural sector, namely by setting preferential prices for agricultural inputs, linked to socio-economic categories;

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch (2017), Rwanda: Government Repression in Land Cases

¹⁵ Cioffo, G.D., Ansoms, A., Murisons, J. (2016), Modernizing Agriculture Through a 'new' Green Revolution. The Limits of the Crop Intensification Programme in Rwanda, Review of African Political Economy, 43:148

- Ensure that **farmers are involved from the early stage of programme design**, and in particular in the choice of the crops they will grow;
- Ensure that the poorest farmers, and women in particular, are able to produce, or have access to, cheap **organic fertilizer** so that they are capable of maintaining the productivity levels of their soils;
- Ensure that farmers knowledge of their own agro-ecological environment, **including crop patterns and seasonal variations**, is taken into account in programme design and implementation and in performance contracts (*imihigo*) at the local level;
- Ensure that **broad pedological assessment** of the different soil types are carried out at the national level, and that they feed into the designation of crops to regional areas;
- Increase **support to the cultivation of food-secure crops**, such as banana, sweet potatoes and sorghum for household consumption and exchange on the local market;
- Promote agricultural policies that serve **national food security needs and markets first**, before focussing on export-oriented production;
- **Promote agro-ecological practices** (such as intercropping, rotation, agro-forestry) as a way of boosting food security, increase production and improve soil stewardship as part and parcel of the agricultural intensification strategy;
- Provide **alternative mechanisms for land management** for those that own less than one hectare of land (i.e. facility for access to credit for smallholders, collective ownership and access, financial incentives not to fragment land).

EurAc calls on DEVCO and on the delegation of the EU to Rwanda to:

- Link any support, both technical and financial, to an open and **independent investigation on government and military abuse of land rights**;
- Support initiatives by the Rwandan government to vulgarise and secure **women's right to land**;
- Support initiatives by the Rwandan government to **support civil society and producers' organizations** allowing them to contribute actively and substantially to the design and implementation of agricultural policies;
- Carry out an **independent evaluation** of the effects of the CIP and of the land law on the livelihoods of the poorest rural farmers and share it with the Rwandan government and its development partners;
- Carry out a **food-security assessment** of rural households in Rwanda. This should be carried out by an **independent** organization, it should use internationally recognized indicators, and its results should be shared publicly with the Rwandan government and with the donor community.

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