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Sources of developmental ambition in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa

David Henley¹ and Ahmad Helmy Fuady²

Over the last half century, Southeast Asia has been the most consistently successful region of the developing world. In 1960 its people were, on average, much poorer than Africans; today they are two and a half times richer. As their economies took off, some Southeast Asian countries recorded rates of poverty reduction that were unprecedented in human history. In Africa, poverty has been much more intractable, even in the face of strong aggregate growth.

According to DRA Policy Brief 01, Southeast Asian countries could reduce poverty fast because their governments prioritised pro-poor agricultural and rural development in both political and budgetary terms, as well as providing sound macroeconomic management and conditions of economic freedom (especially for peasant farmers). Public investments – in irrigation, research, input subsidies, agricultural extension, price stabilisation, and rural infrastructure, education and health care – raised the productivity and profitability of smallholder farms. This brought about the kind of development the World Bank calls shared growth. In Africa, by contrast, few countries have ever combined economic freedom and sound macroeconomic management with pro-poor, pro-rural public spending.

This brief aims to explain these different policy orientations, looking at eight countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda.³

Systemic threat versus learned assumptions

According to one influential interpretation, success in Southeast Asia has been spurred by its systemic vulnerability to impending peasant revolution and/or foreign invasion – an intriguing and partly convincing argument.⁴ But the impact of such threats on the political interests of decision-making elites does not fully explain the differences in policy stance between



Indonesia's Suharto and Nigeria's Obasanjo viewed rural life very differently. Photos: Government of Republic of Indonesia (l), Public domain (r)

and among African and Southeast Asian countries. Differences in assumptions about the nature of the development process are just as important.

This has major policy implications. It means priority should be given to changing the mindsets of African leaders by stressing that successful development elsewhere in the world has been achieved with strategies that are inclusive, pro-poor and pro-rural.

Systemic threat?

According to the first argument, systemic threat had two salutary effects on political elites:

- It forced fractious elements of the political establishment to unite behind an (often military-led) regime that could protect their common interests.
- It forced them to consider the interests of the non-elite masses and therefore to adopt pro-poor policies.

In their origins, the most successful developmental regimes of Southeast Asia were either counter-revolutionary states that had faced a serious

communist threat (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand), or post-revolutionary states needing to appease their mass support base (Vietnam).

In **Indonesia**, Suharto's New Order emerged from the violent destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, and its pro-rural, pro-poor development strategy aimed to prevent a resurgence of agrarian radicalism.⁵ In **Malaysia**, the fight against rural poverty was seen by national leaders as a direct continuation of the anti-communist struggle known as the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). In 1959 the government vowed, in its pursuit of poverty reduction, 'to marshal all available resources, and to deploy them with such determination and energy as were used to free the country from the menace of Communist terrorism'.⁶ In **Thailand**, the communist challenge was part of the rationale for rural development efforts in the 1960s. As one deputy prime minister stated in 1966: 'If stomachs are full people do not turn to communism'.⁷ In **Vietnam**, communist governments have felt obliged to deliver some of the benefits they had promised the poor, even if this meant abandoning much of their original anti-capitalist ideology.⁸

Looking closer

These factors provide a useful first take on the issue, given that rural threats to incumbent elites were not a major factor in the political histories of **Kenya**, **Nigeria** or **Tanzania**, with **Rwanda** a possible exception.⁹ However, elite political interests dictated by forces of revolution and counter-revolution cannot have been the only drivers of the pro-poor intent of Southeast Asian developmental regimes:

- In **Indonesia**, by the time the New Order adopted its pro-poor policies in the late 1960s, the Indonesian Communist Party had already been destroyed. The technocrats of the time deny that they were motivated by anti-communism, insisting that their choices were dictated by economic logic and common sense.¹⁰
- In **Malaysia**, communism was concentrated almost entirely within the ethnic Chinese minority. Yet the beneficiaries of the rural development effort of the 1960s were ethnic Malays, who showed little enthusiasm for communism.¹¹
- In **Thailand** the communist insurgency did not become a serious threat until the mid-1960s, and

peaked in the 1970s. Yet most pro-poor public investments (particularly in irrigation) had been initiated in the 1950s, when the Thai communist party was minuscule, and the country was peaceful and orderly.¹²

- In the case of **Vietnam** we must ask whether, given the almost total absence of organised political opposition, self-preservation is the communist party's sole incentive to deliver inclusive development – or whether its leaders are holding *themselves* to account for their performance.

If the interpretation in terms of self-accountability is even partly correct, we must look beyond political incentives to understand the Asia-Africa development divergence.

Learned assumptions about development

The second explanation for greater pro-poor developmental ambition in Southeast Asia is that it results from learned assumptions about the nature of the development process. A starting point here is the observation that regardless of political interests and calculations, even African leaders of rural origin tend to see rural life and rural people less positively than their Southeast Asian counterparts.

- In **Indonesia**, Suharto (president 1967-1998) recalled fondly how a boyhood spent 'playing in the fields among the farmers' had aroused in him 'a distinct feeling of sympathy for them'. From his uncle, an agricultural extension officer, he had learned 'not only about the theory of agriculture but also about the practical aspects of farming'.¹³ Like his chief technocrat, Widjojo Nitisastro, he had 'great faith' in the wisdom of farmers and in their receptivity to new ideas.¹⁴
- Olusegun Obasanjo, twice president of **Nigeria** (1976-1979 and 1999-2007), is also the son of a farmer. But in his biography, Obasanjo shows little nostalgia for his rural roots and describes how his father encouraged him above all 'to escape the drudgery that was peasant farming in Africa'.¹⁵
- Tun Abdul Razak, the driving force behind **Malaysia's** rural development efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, was raised by farming grandparents. His biography records happy memories of village life, and links his concern for rural welfare to the fact that 'his early years had been spent working with the ordinary village people in the rice fields'.¹⁶
- As a boy, **Kenya's** first president Jomo Kenyatta 'had no intention of taking up farming life'. Having 'left home to escape all that', he spent almost 15 years studying in Europe. His anthropological treatise on his own (Kikuyu) people was criticised by one of his teachers for showing 'perhaps a little too much in some passages of European bias'.¹⁷



*systemic threats
do not fully explain
policy differences.*

- Although Marxism did not encourage the leaders of independent **Vietnam** to idealise all things rural, most were also influenced by Confucianism, in which farmers were second only to scholars in status. Political leaders saw peasants as embodying national virtues. Rural-born soldier-intellectual and deputy prime minister (1955-1976) Vo Nguyen Giap reminded ‘satiated and snobbish’ city people that it was the ‘peasant spirit’ that had enabled Vietnam to resist foreign aggression.¹⁸
- Julius Nyerere of **Tanzania** had a rural and traditional African upbringing, but was converted to Christianity by European missionaries after being ‘convinced by their arguments’.¹⁹ As president (1962-1985) he believed strongly in rural development, but doubted the ability of the peasantry to recognise and exploit development opportunities without intensive education and supervision by the state.²⁰
- In **Thailand**, the success of the rice harvest is believed to depend on royal blessing. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, crowned in 1946, has styled himself as a champion of the small farmer in the face of change and urbanisation, touring the countryside to promote village development projects. In 1984 the country’s National Identity Office dubbed him the ‘Farmer King’.²¹
- Current leader of **Rwanda** Paul Kagame is the son of an aristocrat driven into exile in Uganda, where he relied on education to avoid descent into landless poverty.²² As president he would search for a ‘short cut’ to development, based on information technology, bypassing agriculture entirely.²³

On their own, each of these individual cameos might not mean much. Taken together, however, they suggest a rather consistent difference between Africa and Asia in terms of culturally or educationally implanted ideas about the rural world and its relation to modernity. In Southeast Asia the attitudes of urban elites to farming and farmers, although condescending, are coloured by nostalgia and some admiration. In Africa the divide between town and country appears wider, with a lesser tendency to admire rural life.

These different attitudes have historical roots, the contrast between city and countryside having been sharper in Africa than in Asia. In Southeast Asia there is a long tradition of indigenous urbanism. In Africa, many of today’s cities are colonial in origin, and were seen as alien European enclaves for generations. An African who moved from the countryside to the city in the early twentieth century was crossing a cultural divide.

African attitudes to development have been shaped by experiences in which the encounter with the advanced economies of Europe was linked to a dramatic and comprehensive *transformation*. All areas of life were affected: society and communication, knowledge and



give priority to changing the mindsets of African elites.

belief, material culture and even eating habits, as urban elites switched from indigenous African food crops and maize to imported wheat and rice. One legacy of this transformation has been a collective assumption of developmental *dualism*: a conviction that progress can only be achieved by a quantum leap from (rural) backwardness to (urban) modernity. In Southeast Asia the colonial experience involved less of a rupture with the past.

Unlike their Southeast Asian counterparts, African elites were impatient for a structural economic transformation in which peasant farming would make way for modern life. Their development models focused on the technological and cultural modernity found in already rich countries. These models led them to elitist policies based on education, industry and urbanisation, rather than on raising the productivity and profitability of smallholders. Table 1 summarises these divergent visions.

Table 1: Differences in elite visions of development

Southeast Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa
incremental (but potentially rapid)	transformative
poor people become richer	poor countries acquire the things rich countries have (technologies, industries, goods, rights, institutions)
growth	modernisation
productivity	knowledge
inclusive	elitist
oriented to the undesired starting point of development: mass poverty	oriented to the desired end point of development: industrial or post-industrial modernity
concerned with establishing immediate priorities	concerned with making comprehensive plans

Policy implications

Today, as in the past, even African leaders of rural origin shy away from strategies to improve rural life *in situ*, and favour accelerating a transition to urban modernity that reflects their own personal journey. How can they be encouraged to prioritise agricultural and rural development, in accordance with Declaration

7 of the 2003 Maputo assembly of the African Union, and ensure that those who benefit are poor peasant farmers rather than large landowners? We see six elements to be considered.

1. Clearly, international actors cannot create the kind of revolutionary threat that helped to inspire such policies in Asia.
2. There is little evidence that electoral democracy can generate the same salutary political pressure on African (or indeed Asian) governments.²⁴
3. Nor is it possible to alter colonial history or the cultural factors that have shaped the attitudes of Africa's leaders and intellectuals towards rural and agricultural development.
4. However, persuading people to change learned attitudes is still easier than trying to reconfigure the national political forces that constrain their actions.
5. Given the common perception among African leaders that policy guidance by international actors has neocolonial overtones, such guidance must be sensitive and support national policy ownership.

6. Nevertheless the success of international actors in promoting market reforms and better macroeconomic policy in Africa suggests that such actors can achieve something similar on pro-poor, pro-rural public spending.

The most promising approach, therefore, is to help change the mindsets of African elites by drawing their attention to the fact that successful development elsewhere in the world has been achieved largely through inclusive, pro-poor, pro-rural strategies. This should take precedence over historically less well founded finger-wagging on the importance of good governance, democracy or even free trade.

A crucial lesson is that pro-poor development not only relieves poverty, but also initiates processes that can bring prosperity to whole countries, putting them on course for the kind of industrial and urban modernity long admired by African elites.

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