Rural social movements and sustainable agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa: towards a collaborative research agenda

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Abstract

Agriculture is key to sustainable development globally – particularly in countries where agriculture both accounts for most of the land use and provides a livelihood for most of the population. We map out a collaborative research agenda aimed at tackling the urgent but poorly understood issue of the role of farmer organisations in overcoming political barriers to sustainable and inclusive agricultural development, with particular attention to sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Building on a critical and collaborative dialogue between a diversity of small-scale farmer-led organisations, local activist groups, transnational civil society networks, and heterogeneous academic institutions, our agenda is organized around two key objectives: 1) understanding the conditions for, development of and outcomes from farmer-based political mobilisation in rural areas; and 2) strengthening participatory, action-oriented research capacity for critically engaged research on agrarian questions in SSA. The approach we advocate emphasises the scientific and societal benefits of combining theoretically informed cross-country comparison of farmer-based rural social movements, with deepening of academic-civil society collaboration.

Keywords: farmer-based organisations, peasant movements, agrarian reform, rural development, land struggles, agroecology, food sovereignty, sustainability, science-movement interface, sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

The persistence of deep social inequalities and a worsening global environmental crisis make the concept of sustainable development, long theorised in academia, more relevant to society than ever before. At the same time, many researchers and promoters of sustainability are only recently recognising social movements as a collective force for change capable of pursuing sustainable development (e.g. Bluwstein et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2020). In this article we outline a mode of collaborative interaction and a set of probing questions that can provide a foundation for further bridging the gap between sustainability, agrarian change and social movement research and practice, with a primary focus on the relatively understudied region of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The action-oriented research agenda we present is informed by an interactive, bottom-up and needs-based planning process involving partners from Ghana, Kenya, Sweden, Uganda and Zimbabwe which represent a diversity of small-scale farmer-led organisations, local activist groups, transnational civil society networks, and heterogeneous academic institutions.[1] We here present and reflect on our joint process, in hopes that others will be inspired to contribute to our dual research agenda: to advance our understanding of when, why, and how rural social movements facilitate changes conducive to sustainable development, and to support the application of these insights in the ongoing strategizing of active farmer-based movements in SSA and beyond.

Our rationale and starting point: The centrality of agriculture in sustainable development

There has long been overwhelming evidence that policies which prioritise the needs and interests of small-scale farmers[2] are crucial for broad-based poverty reduction and economic development in predominantly agriculture-based economies. As noted by Birner and Resnick (2010) over a decade ago, "there is virtually no example of mass poverty reduction in modern history that did not start with sharp increases in… productivity among small family farms". Yet, major challenges remain for implementing such policies. According to the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), fluctuating food prices and unequal trade relations 'handicap' millions of small-scale farmers, and 'business as usual' will leave an estimated 637 million people undernourished in 2050

[1] This article is the outcome of a year-long scoping study, aimed at developing a collaborative research platform and research project, which culminated in a multi-day workshop in Nairobi, October 2019. The author team consist of workshop participants and contributors to the subsequent project proposal.

[2] "Small-scale" farmer is a generic concept which overlaps with other terms such as "smallholder", "peasant" and "family" farmer, and definitions variously focus on inter alia farm size or relative contribution to social food production. We conceptualize "small-scale" farms, following Moyo (2016, p. 2), as "small-scale family farms that mainly depend on family labour and produce a significant share of their own food. Some of the family farm labour also applies to non-farm activities and wage labour". This accurately characterizes the member base of many farmer organisations, and the majority of farmers in Africa more generally.

(Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the UN Secretary-General 2019). Women small-scale farmers face particularly strong marginalisation both materially and politically (Mukasa and Salami 2016; World Bank 2009). In addition to these socio-economic challenges, scaling up currently dominant agricultural production practices would, in the words of the GSDR, "eliminate any chance" of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals due to various environmental impacts including inefficient use of natural resources, contributions to climate change, and continued degradation of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. There are also growing concerns about human health impacts of increasing agrochemical use, including in Africa (Isgren and Andersson 2020; Sheahan, Barrett, and Goldvale 2017).

While research-based policy recommendations have long emphasised the need to foster small-scale farmer-centred development and sustainable trajectories of agricultural change, existing policies often fall short of doing so (Moyo 2016; Yengoh, Armah, and Svensson 2010; Ellis 2006). This is particularly apparent in SSA, where abject poverty was worsening already before the COVID-19 pandemic hit (World Bank 2018). One concrete example, amongst many, is that governments have promoted types of large-scale land acquisitions that clearly marginalise local land users, create few employment opportunities, and drive environmental degradation (Davis, D'Odorico, and Rulli 2014; Borras Jr and Franco 2012). These policies directly contradict global initiatives like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2018. Proponents of large-scale agricultural projects typically pose them as necessary to promote agriculture-led growth, but there are strong reasons to believe this goal is more effectively and sustainably achieved through a small-scale farmer focus (Hazell et al. 2010). Such development can be facilitated with support from the state; however, in the present era many African governments effectively cede policy decisions to the neoliberal policy prescriptions emanating from Bretton Woods institutions, which have often eroded the basic social rights of African citizens (Moyo 2005).

In the face of this, as Sam Moyo in Romdhane and Moyo (2002) has argued, "Peasant organisations are re-emerging on the continent as one of the rural responses to protect people from economic and political crises, and as a potential force in a possible endogenous movement for alternative forms of development". The major barrier presented by limited political and institutional support (both in terms of political will and shrinking civic space) indeed renders the capacity of farmers, farmer-led organisations, and various interest coalitions to affect political processes a key research area for advancing sustainable development (Bizikova et al. 2020; Birner and Resnick 2010).

Rural social movements for inclusive and sustainable agricultural development: present knowledge gaps

In many parts of the world, recent decades have seen the emergence of vibrant rural social movements challenging policies and trade regimes that propel unjust and unsustainable agricultural change (Borras Jr, Edelman, and Kay 2008; Woods 2008). These often involve novel alliances between various groups calling for protection of small-scale farmers' rights, promotion of agroecology, and safeguarding of global commons (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the UN Secretary-General 2019; Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). The most prominent example is the transnational network La Vía Campesina, which today has members in several African countries.

Social movements can be powerful agents of social change by allowing "people who lack regular access to representative institutions" to collectively confront power-holders (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). They can place issues on the political agenda that currently are neglected – such as sustainable, small-scale farmer-inclusive agricultural development. The ability of citizens to do so, however, is shaped by a multitude of factors (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). In SSA, linkages are growing stronger between civil society organisations and movements like LVC, and there have been several notable campaigns for example around GMOs (Rock 2019) and instances of localised mobilisation against land acquisitions (Ossome 2021; Martiniello 2013). However, are we seeing a growth of rural social movements, understood as "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations" (Diani 1992) that engage in *sustained* interaction with elites (Tarrow 2011)?

Using the Web of Science (WoS) database, representing predominantly 'mainstream' scholarship, we reviewed academic literature on the political role of farmer organisations/associations, and in the process noted that research on contemporary rural social movements and farmers' political mobilisation in Africa is scant compared to literature on the same subjects in Latin America (see Table 1; note that other regions such as Asia reflect similar tendency).[3] Beyond the slanted coverage, within the politically focused literature captured by the WoS there is an almost complete absence of social movement theory application on questions of agricultural change and the achievement of sustainable rural development in SSA. Indeed, while farmer organisations of various kinds are widely acknowledged to play numerous important roles in development

[3] The literature review was conducted in 2019 using the search string: "farmer organi*" OR "peasant organi* OR "rural social movement*" OR "rural organi* OR "agricultural organi* OR "farmer association*" OR "farmer cooperat*" OR "farmer co-operat*", refined the results by "poli*" or "mobili*". Noting the geographical disparities, we categorised the 240 articles remaining after initial screening with attention to how the role of farmer organisations in development was conceptualised; as political (e.g. advocacy, political participation, social movement mobilization), economic (e.g. collective bargaining, market information) or technical (e.g. training, knowledge sharing, access to extension). These are of course not mutually exclusive, but table 1 designates all articles that included a political conceptualization of farmer organisations as 'political'.

(Bizikova et al. 2020), in the African context, they seem to rarely be studied through a political lens. Rather, they are more often considered for their role in knowledge dissemination and technology uptake; and/or in facilitating small-scale farmers' value chain access and economic empowerment (similar trends were observed regarding Asia, which deserves ample attention as well). Thus, contemporary African small-scale farmers' efforts to mobilise for the sake of political advocacy, voice, and influence remain relatively poorly conceptualized and understood within mainstream agrarian research.

Of course there are notable exceptions to these trends within the WoS, for example Martiniello (2017) and McKeon (2013), and more so if we expand our horizon beyond WoS, e.g. Romdhane and Moyo (2002); Moyo and Yeros (2005); Ossome (2021); Chambati and Mazwi (2022). Given the limitations of the WoS database, we followed up with an exploratory search in the two largest social movement studies journals (*Social Movement Studies* and *Mobilization*). Still, even here we identified very few studies of agrarian social movements set in SSA, and none specifically on mobilisation around inclusion and sustainability in agricultural development. Pilati (2011) noted over a decade ago that Africa is "by far the region least studied by researchers of protest dynamics" (Pilati 2011, 351), and this seems to remain the case. The most fruitful source of academic insight on this subject appears to be networks and journals based in and specialised on the region, such as *Review of African Political Economy*, *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, or the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. The conclusion we draw from our exploration of the literature is thus that, while certainly not wholly neglected by academics and important work is being done, the (potential) political role and nature of farmers' collective action in SSA is relatively marginal both in academic work on rural development, and in social movement studies.

Table 1 *Comparison of foci of peer-reviewed research on farmer organisations' role in development, in different regions (geographically unspecific oriented articles excluded). We noted a large contrast between the literature from Latin America, where there is a strong tradition of analysing farmer organisations' role in policy and politics, with that of Africa (and similarly Asia) where, despite our search orientation, we found a tendency to primarily study farmer organisations as market actors or as vehicles for knowledge and technology transfer. Note the methodological limitations discussed above; the main point is to demonstrate the differences between the geographic regions.*

Focal region	**N**	**Political dimension included**	**Economic and/ or technical only**
Africa	58	22%	78%
Asia	46	24%	76%
Europe	24	58%	43%
Latin America	79	86%	14%
Middle East	3	0%	100%
North America	6	20%	80%
Oceania	2	50%	50%
Total	218	50%	50%

We ask, is this geographic divergence due to farmer organisations in SSA being comparatively 'apolitical', or only due to differences in academic traditions? The answer likely lies somewhere in between. Undoubtedly, the rich and more visible literature on farmers' political mobilisation in Latin America in great part results from the de facto notable presence and influence of rural social movements in this region, historically and presently (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017; Welch and Mançano Fernandes 2009). However, on the reverse, limited documentation and analysis of cases from the SSA context does not necessarily accurately reflect reality. Nor does it say much about ongoing (or even less about future) developments. We do know there are numerous complex and historically contingent barriers to farmer collective mobilisation in SSA. These are by no means homogenous across the region, but include fragmentation of peasant organisations (Martiniello 2013), lack of fora for critical engagement (Wilson and Holt-Giménez 2010), and 'NGO-isation' of civil society development (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). There may be government silencing and/or co-optation of critical voices, and division along class, gender, ethnic and commodity lines which complicate the development of shared goals and identities (Isgren 2018). However, that these barriers should not discourage efforts to understand instances of and conditions for rural mobilisation in SSA; on the contrary, we suggest such efforts ought to be intensified through interdisciplinary, collaborative and participatory efforts.

The emergence, development and outcomes of rural social movements in SSA: collaborative constellations and key questions for comparative analysis

As noted above, the research agenda we propose here is informed by an interactive and needs-based planning process for collaborative research involving partners from Sweden, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ghana, representing a diversity of small-scale farmer-led organisations, transnational civil society networks, and diverse academic institutions. The collaboration was made possible by funding from a Swedish research council (Formas), which meant initial steps for building the constellation of partners were necessarily decided by Global North researchers, a fact reflecting the highly uneven distribution of research funding globally (Skupien and Rüffin 2020). For academics based in the Global North, identifying relevant collaborators for this type of work can be daunting. We – speaking now from the perspective of these academics – approached this issue in two main ways. First, our search for collaborators was driven by their relevance to understanding a set of fundamental questions derived from our preliminary evaluation of the state of knowledge on farmer-led rural social movements:

- Who can contribute contextual, theoretical and practical knowledge and information towards this research?
- Who stand to be affected by, and benefit from, research on rural social movements?

- What will the potential impacts of the research be, at different levels – local, national or international?
- Who have capacity to spread and implement the outcome of our research, beyond those actors who are directly involved?
- Whose voices/interests are currently not heard/adequately considered, and what organisations represent these groups?
- What coalitions might build around the research issues/questions of interest?
- Who are potential allies or opponents, and who can facilitate or impede the research outcome through their participation, non-participation or opposition?

Second, with the above in mind, we identified collaborators based on predefined categories, namely representative farmer-based organisations and NGOs, and research organisations/academic institutions in partner countries. Regarding the former, there was need for substantial contextual analysis and dialogue in order to identify the most appropriate collaborators, as any given country is likely to host a number of different farmer organisations/associations with different characteristics and agendas (as can be said for NGOs). An important criterion here was that partner farmer organisations should be explicitly engaged in agricultural policy advocacy. Further, we had to be cognizant of the phenomenon of 'NGO-isation' – that civil society organisations may have weak grassroots links and in practice speak and act more on behalf of donors (Wilson and Holt-Giménez 2010; Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Isgren 2018). Indeed, this was a key reason why the farmer organisations represented in our team were formed in the first place. Regarding the latter, we built on existing professional relationships and reached out to research institutions that were actively involved in studying these issues, with the intention to combine well-established, new-comer and independent research institutions with diverse, complementary knowledge competencies.

Given the specific nature of the available funding in our case, we were limited in the number of countries we could cover and the number of academic and farmer organisation partners that could participate. After organising a planning workshop in Nairobi in 2019, we collectively agreed on a research structure involving three SSA countries for comparative analysis, with Lund University as project host. Within each country, the research consortium involves funded partners from one academic institution and one farmer-based organisation. These partners are involved in all stages of the research process, from research question formulation, field data collection, analysis and cross-case comparison and write-up and dissemination of results. This ensures that the research process is transparent, truly collaborative and, importantly, useful to the farmer organisations themselves. In addition to these participating research partners, the consortium is further strengthened with three doctoral candidates,

originally from the partner countries. These doctoral candidates are hosted at Lund University and co-supervised by SSA research institutions, as part of the aim to build long-term research capacity within each country. The research process is also monitored by an advisory panel consisting of senior academics and SSA-based transnational civil society representatives.

Comparative analysis is important because it helps disentangle the consistent and contingent factors influencing farmer organisation success and failure, and can even help identify the common roots of problems experience across a variety of contexts (McMichael 1990). That said, motivating cases for comparative research is never easy, especially in a context like SSA with such a vibrant diversity in experiences. One thing to consider is that cases for comparative analysis should be strategically selected based on important similarities and differences which will facilitate fruitful comparison – of course, in combination with various practical considerations, like a shared language. These similarities/differences include for example the contextual differences around colonial, political and economic histories. Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe, for example, are all presidential republics and parliamentary democracies, English speaking, and characterized by dominance of agricultural livelihoods and predominantly rural poverty challenges. Being located in different parts of the continent, however, they simultaneously have different regional dynamics, historical experiences (e.g. colonial and post-independence political development and agrarian reforms), and agro-climatic conditions, with significant implications for the lived experiences of present-day farmers (Chambati, 2011).

Theoretically, our collaborative dialogue has been guided by the field of social movement studies. Being a consortium of practitioners and researchers with diverse backgrounds, the degree of familiarity with social movement theory was uneven and relatively limited at the outset of our collaboration. Because of this, we found the synthesis originally advanced by McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (McAdam et al. 1996) to be highly useful in structuring our discussions and planning our research agenda. We found it useful in particular because it brings together aspects from resource mobilisation theory, political process approaches, and cultural perspectives on social movements, into three broad sets of factors that have been consistently shown to be important for understanding the emergence and development of social movements: framing processes, mobilising structures and political opportunity.

Framing processes are the cultural, cognitive and ideational dimensions of collective action. Drawing on McAdam et al. (1996) but also other scholars who call for more dynamic, less mechanistic understanding of these dimensions (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Polletta and Jasper 2001), we specify framing as the complex processes through which people develop shared meanings and understandings which motivate, legitimate and communicate their joint actions (and the associated challenges). Important issues identified through our initial dialogues include:

- Social groups and identities within the wider category 'small-scale farmer' (e.g. women, youth, indigenous communities, class differentiation) and associated tensions
- Relationships between small-scale farmers and other marginalised rural groups (e.g. pastoralists, forest communities, fisher folks, farm workers)
- The role of discourse, language and symbols (e.g. the mobilising power of concepts like agroecology, food sovereignty and sustainability; the use of art, music, theatre and other cultural expressions)

Mobilising structures are "collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action"(McAdam et al. 1996, 3). This concept draws attention to the context-specific "organisational infrastructure" which shapes movement emergence, and the capacity to build enduring structures to sustain action despite numerous challenges, risks and threats. Here, our dialogues highlighted the following three issues as particularly pertinent:

- Existing groups, organisations and networks which may provide a basis for mobilisation and movement building (e.g. local farmer groups, women's groups, cooperatives)
- Resource mobilization challenges and strategies, and impacts on the movement (e.g. dependence on project-based funding from foreign donors)
- Strategic alliances within and beyond the rural setting (e.g. with urban consumer and environmental groups, international NGOs, sympathetic politicians, cultural/religious institutions, legal experts)

Political opportunity, finally, calls for attention to ways that the broader political system structures the opportunities for collective action. Important aspects include 1) the relative openness of the political system, 2) stability/instability of elite alignments, 3) the presence of elite allies, and 4) the state's capacity and propensity for repression (Meyer and Minkoff 2004; McAdam et al. 1996). Our dialogues emphasized:

- The influence of the political system – e.g. regime stability, strength of the opposition – on mobilisation and outcomes
- Openness to/repression of critical voices in the context of agriculture and rural development (e.g. on land rights, GMOs and other contentious issues)
- Decentralization and autonomy of local levels of government

- Sensitivity of the political elite to outside pressure (e.g. from donors)

While the framework has been fruitfully applied to understand how, when and why collective action occurs and translates into outcomes e.g. at the state policy level (Gaventa, Hawes, and McGee 2010), there are a few necessary caveats. First, we recognize that dedicated social movements scholars with more knowledge of the field's cutting edge might find the framework somewhat outdated – thus, while we found it very useful for structuring our dialogue and research agenda, we also recognise the need to complement our analysis with other important and more recent advances in the field, for example scholarship on "contentious politics". Furthermore, we recognize that the framework is inevitably shaped by the 'Northern-centric' nature of social movement studies of past decades, and there is need for sensitivity to common characteristics of Southern movement dynamics, including the role of post-coloniality, political regime types, state-civil society relations, and links to democratisation processes (Fadaee 2017).

Bringing together our analysis of the literature and discussions among academic and civil society partners, we propose a list of research questions which we hope can inspire further research endeavours in SSA and beyond (Box 1). These questions consistently call for analysis that is sensitive to the inherently problematic and heterogeneous nature of social categories such as 'small-scale farmer', including gendered analysis and attention to relationships and intersections between farmers and other rural groups and identities. Likewise, cross-cutting attention must be given to how emerging movements relate to the question of sustainability, in their ideational and material practices alike. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic that took off only months after our dialogues began also raises an array of questions, which can be fruitfully approached through this framework. Has the pandemic brought about political opportunities for restructuring agri-food systems, and of if so, how might those be utilized? Promisingly, both civil society actors and scholars have already begun to raise and tackle such questions (Nyéléni newsletter, n.d.; Pattenden et al. 2021; Chukunzira 2020; IPES Food 2020; Loker and Francis 2020).

Box 1: Research questions for research on rural social movements in sub-Saharan Africa

To achieve understanding of the emergence, development and outcomes of farmer mobilisation for sustainable and equitable agricultural development in SSA, we developed research questions which are informed by social movement theory and reflect current academic knowledge gaps. The questions were further discussed and revised in collaboration with SSA researchers and civil society representatives, and thus simultaneously reflect knowledge needs of farmers and farmer-led organisations.

1. How do small-scale farmers develop shared identities and goals?
    a. Why do farmers see collective mobilisation as necessary in the first place, and through which processes (interactions, learning processes, risk sharing)?
    b. Which collective identities, goals and action frames are emerging, and how can differences be explained?
    c. How can challenges to formation of shared identities and goals (e.g. gender biases, ethnic differences) be overcome?
2. How do small-scale farmers build formal and informal organisational structures that can strengthen their political influence, and how do they mobilise resources to do so?
    a. When and how does resource mobilisation occur, and why?
    b. What role do formal and informal institutions play in the evolution of farmer organisations?
    c. How can mobilisation be sustained, and how do different types of resources (funding, knowledge, practices) influence its development?
3. What shapes the opening and closing of political opportunity, and how can small-scale farmer organisations build capacity to utilise openings?
    a. When has farmer organisations' mobilisation resulted in outcomes, and why? And what do successful cases have in common?
    b. What concrete measures can farmer organisations take to better anticipate changes in political opportunity?
    c. How are external conditions (beyond agriculture and agricultural policies) affecting farmers' capacity to organise and mobilise?

Finally, due to the interacting nature of the above factors, in our synthesis we also ask:

4. How can farmer organisations assess the dynamic interactions between framing processes, mobilising structures and political opportunities, and thus determine which activities to prioritise at a given time?

A call for deepened collaboration and critical engagement

We now turn to some equally important considerations regarding how to conduct collaborative research in rural social movement settings. The issue of whether and how scientific knowledge should relate to social movements remains highly contested terrain. At a time when scientists are being held up by some as oracles, exemplified by climate activists' calls to "listen to the scientists", some scientists have advocated that researchers join movements as activists, for example in acts of civil disobedience (Gardner and Wordley 2019). Others have argued that scientists should be bound by political goals, such as the SDGs, in order to preserve science's credibility (Castree 2019). Others yet, have long recognized a third option. Scientific knowledge producers (e.g. university researchers, civil society representatives, peasant intellectuals, etc.) can study, and study with, movements in an interactive yet scientifically rigorous manner, to develop knowledge that can improve movements' effectiveness in pushing for sustainability. We acknowledge that science has only a bounded role to play in social movements, just as in public policy-making. Nonetheless, we hold that scientific analysis – of problem drivers, possible solutions, and pathways for change – has an important and unique contribution to make (Drake and Henderson 2022; Bluwstein et al. 2021; Isgren et al. 2019). While we recognize that these themes have long been explored and debated in action-oriented research circles, for example the diverse approaches captured under the term "participatory action research", we here refrain from making generalised prescriptions for how individuals should realize this potential – for example, that academics should strive to be 'scholar-activists' (cf. Borras Jr 2016; Dawson and Sinwell 2012). While this is certainly a legitimate route, our heterogeneous team has found the level of appropriate 'distance' between academics and movements to be context-dependent. There are benefits and draw-backs with 'insider' and 'outsider' positionalities alike (see Edelman 2009), and our diverse characteristics and backgrounds create very different prerequisites for engagement. What is always required is careful "*recognition of our location within the broader dynamics of society*" (Gillan and Pickerill 2012).

As scientists become increasingly concerned with the social use of science, various proposals have been put forth for how to ensure scientific integrity in the process of making science 'useful'. Here we can broadly categorize attempts into two approaches. There is the more traditional end-of-pipe approach (Lowe, Phillipson, and Wilkinson 2013) and the co-production approach (Turnhout et al. 2020). The former has been criticized for its lack of social relevance. The co-production approach, while promising in many ways, has been questioned in terms of both relevance and scientific integrity. Critics argue for example that it often relies on simplistic ideas of consensus and knowledge integration (Koskinen and Mäki 2016; Klenk and Meehan 2015), and that it can become socially ineffectual by glossing over the political dimensions of knowledge production (Turnhout et al. 2020) or by producing results that are removed

from the needs of existing organisations (Polk 2014). Similar concerns to these were also echoed in our introductory dialogues between academic and civil society partners, where activists often highlighted the risks of research becoming 'extractive' (especially once the fieldwork phase ends) and the results detached from the needs of intended social groups (Box 2). There is a need for the continued development of models of collaborative research that are able to produce useful scientific knowledge while learning from the lessons of the past.

A crucial part of this is to recognise that the production of scientific knowledge is not solely an academic process conducted within the confines of research institutions. For example, social movement organisers and activists routinely engage in deep reflection over their practices, strategies, successes and failures and are often "fully capable of developing and elaborating sophisticated theory relevant to the movements in which they are engaged" (Bevington and Dixon 2005). Similarly, farmers are often scientists in themselves, conducting research throughout the process of food production, with their farms functioning as real-world labs for development of knowledge through practice, as has been done for generations. What tends to be lacking, both at the farm-level and the level of farmer organisations, is the capability to systematically document the processes and the results they get. The research agenda we propose aims to ensure that all facets of actionable scientific knowledge production are respected and included as contributions to the development of our understanding of farmer-based political mobilisation.

Box 2: Principles for effective science-civil society collaboration

Through small group discussions between academic and civil society actors, we identified criteria for desirable interactions in the research process, given the specific needs of the research and its primary non-academic partners (small-scale farmer organisations).

What to actively work to *encourage*:

- Functioning as a team with clear and legitimate leadership and terms of reference, rather than as a collection of individuals
- Equality in how needs are addressed and responsibilities divided between partners in the team – including treating all participants as *researchers*
- Respect for, and valuing of, differences (e.g. age, ethnic, gender, political, professional etc.) while striving for a common vision and collective leadership
- Transparency in how decisions are prepared, taken, and documented

What to actively work to *avoid*:

- Closed/narrowmindedness and selfishness in team interactions
- Non-transparency and inequality in decision-making
- Unrealistic expectations, empty promises and research-fatigue, especially when interacting with farmer communities
- All forms of exploitation, extractive research practices or abuse of trust, for example through unduly excluding some collaborators from participating in knowledge production processes or co-authorship

Following from these discussions, our collaborative research process rests on the principle that participation by representatives for small-scale farmer-led organisations in all phases of research is essential for posing salient questions, including relevant perspectives in data analysis, and effectively generating and communicating findings to key agents of change. Still, notions like 'participation' can easily become black boxes (Batterbury 2018; Popa, Guillermin, and Dedeurwaerdere 2015), as has long been recognised by those reflecting on the history 'participatory research' in the global South (Rocheleau 1994). Thus, it is important to clarify what philosophy underpins our understanding of these collaborative interactions more specifically.

Inspired by discussions around politically engaged and 'useful' scholarship in social movement studies (e.g. Rucht 2019; Gillan and Pickerill 2012; Bevington and Dixon 2005) we encourage a 'critically engaged' approach (Lyons 2014). This means that academic researchers seek to contribute to sustainable development by identifying actors who have the political potential to challenge unsustainable or otherwise problematic social, political and economic structures, and then actively involve these actors in research. Rather than selectively developing and communicating research on the basis of the strategic agendas of specific organisations, all research participants stay committed to a scientific knowledge production based on objectively justifiable criteria, theoretical grounding and systematic methodology. We thereby strive for a relationship characterized by 'reflective sympathy' (Popa, Guillermin, and Dedeurwaerdere 2015; Lyons 2014) based on the shared normative goal of sustainable and small-scale farmer-inclusive development, but not unconditional support for specific framings, tactics or strategies. The latter is crucial, as rural social movements, for example, do not per definition promote sustainability or infallibly follow principles of inclusivity (Claeys and Delgado Pugley 2017). Like most social groupings, they can even turn reactionary or sectarian, become co-opted by powerful actors (Tarrow 2011) or for other reasons make poorly justified claims. At the same time, due to the lack of on-the-ground experience, some career academics may overlook or exclude crucial value-based or material concerns of movements and their members, which need to be checked and corrected in dialogue with movement participants. Thus, for the benefit of all involved parties, research must be capable of encouraging critical reflection amongst academics and civil society actors alike, through earnest dialogue between the two.

Beyond any set of research collaborators, the issues we raise above have important implications for research funders. To reduce the chasm between long-term funding available for research collaborations with public actors and the corporate sector compared to civil society, funding agencies must open up more opportunities for critical collaborations with a diversity of civil society actors, including social movements. Given the widespread tendency of 'NGO-isation', careful consideration must here be given to the choice of collaborators, as not all civil society organisations have strong grassroots links, as mentioned above. Importantly, funders ought to also recognise that identifying 'stakeholders' as end-of-pipe recipients of research findings is not necessarily

effective, and that deepened forms of academic-civil society interactions may call for critically revisiting who can and cannot qualify as fully-fledged members of research project teams. Finally, as noted previously, collaborative efforts are in our experience greatly enhanced by the availability of 'seed' or planning grants which can enable researchers to build collaborative relationships across the global North and South, facilitate broader access to unevenly distributed research funding, and truly engage in participatory problem identification and solution development.

Conclusion

Rural social movements have a central role to play for achieving sustainable and equitable development, by amplifying the voices of small-scale farmers and other marginalised groups in the contentious debate around Africa's agrarian future (see Peters 2013; Mbilinyi 2012; Shilomboleni 2017). We propose a research agenda built around two key objectives: 1) analysing the conditions for, development of and outcomes from farmer-based political mobilisation in rural areas; and 2) strengthening action-oriented research capacity for critically engaged research in SSA. Bringing together a consortium of diverse sustainability and agrarian change researchers with leaders and members of active farmer-based movements in SSA, and informed by a theoretical synthesis from social movement studies, we provide research questions and principles for collaboration that we hope can be both inspiring and useful to those interested in advancing farmer-centric sustainable development in SSA and beyond.

The research agenda we propose aims at more than academic publishing and theoretical advancement. It also serves to develop proposals and interventions that offer political potential to farmer organisations to attain different outcomes than is evident by the current situation. This requires deliberate forms of collaboration in action-oriented research which 1) recognizes the diversity of contexts where scientific knowledge is or can be rigorously produced, 2) emphasize equity, respect and transparency in the production of useful scientific knowledge, and 3) actively avoids narrowmindedness, empty promises and all forms of exploitation. Challenging discussions and thorny trade-offs inevitably still arise along the way – for example, academics, activists and organisational staff have different groups they are accountable to, and different metrics that they are assessed by (e.g. Cancian 1993). However, we argue that an explicit, agreed-upon philosophy and concrete guiding principles for collaborative engagement provide a crucial first step.

Given the virtues of comparative analysis, and the necessity to share insights and experiences between organisations and countries, there is a great need for South-South collaboration around the research agenda we have presented. Also, reflexive North-South-South collaborations like our own will continue to be necessary, particularly because global inequality in terms of availability of research funding and other knowledge resources remains considerable (Skupien and Rüffin 2020). A key task is creating deep and lasting partnerships for

critical engagement between academia-based researchers and farmer organisation-based researchers. We have promoted the idea that such collaborative research should be structured in a way that involves, as far as possible, all partners collectively engaging in all stages of the research, to ensure responsiveness to the needs of the participants and target groups. This will require greatly expanding the funding support for platforms for civil society-academia interaction, including re-defining the traditional notion of who can formally qualify as a research team member.

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