

The Food and Financial Crises in Sub-Saharan Africa: Origins, Impacts and Policy Implications

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Although the causes of the global food crisis (2007–2008) and the subsequent financial crisis are complex, it is generally accepted that the roots of these crises cannot be found in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Nonetheless, the series of crises struck Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) hard during the late 2000s. This is explained by the increased interdependence between the SSA's economies and other economies and inaccurate response to the crises. An international conference was organised at the Cornell University (May 2009) on 'The food and financial crises and their impacts on achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Africa' to discuss the impact and consequences of the crises. This multi-authored book (which results in quality differences among the different chapters) builds upon the updated versions of the submitted conference papers.

The book collects a number of chapters focussing on a wide range of aspects of Africa's dual crises. In this manner, the book offers a comprehensive introduction to the causes and consequences of the crises. The different topics are approached in different ways. While some chapters describe selected cases to illustrate and analyse their research topic, other chapters use a more generic approach (e.g. sub-national analysis). A second distinction is based upon the timeframe of the analysis; some chapters mainly provide a reflective analysis of the late 2000s' situation, other parts of the book mainly look forward while describe (e.g.) future challenges and opportunities for SSA. Each chapter however results in a set of policy alternatives that could enable governments to better deal with crises' effects in the future.

As a starter, the first chapter thoroughly introduces the food and financial crises and their effects in SSA. Keeping in mind the good quality of this first chapter, it is a pity that both crises are unnecessarily re-introduced in the beginning of too many of the subsequent chapters. These repetitions make the reading of the entire book a bit wearisome (not an issue when only selected chapters are read). Second, the time and space assigned to these repetitions could have been used for additional and more useful contributions. The subsequent chapters go into detail on agricultural productivity, the situation of the poorest Africans, the role of policies, and food security in in SSA. Many subcategories of these topics are discussed. The political dimensions of food price increases, the role of the financial sector, FDI's, and infrastructure are just a few examples. Also climate change, and SSA's status as net-

importer of food, are often referred to as important factors. In addition, the book also contains some case studies that elaborate on the situation of urban consumers in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia; on nutritionally vulnerable households in South Africa; and on the impact of high food prices on poverty in Uganda.

Focussing on these specific cases allows useful and interesting insights in the specific situations of the poor. Generalising the conclusions based upon this limited set of cases is dangerous however. The overview in the book's last chapter even suggests highly heterogeneous country-level and local-level impacts. On top of this, the cases' conclusions must be threatened with caution since the data used for the case studies is often of questionable quality. In fact, the entire book is constrained by the limited availability of good-quality data in the region it is focusing on. The lack of trustworthy data and data gathering methods in SSA is even mentioned by some authors as one of the main constraints for good policy design and research in SSA.

Both crises and their aftereffects undeniably have impacted the African economic performance and the livelihoods of the Africans. Hence, the necessity and usefulness of the conference and the book remains unquestioned. It can be questioned whether some of the book's chapters have not been published too early. In 2008 the impact of the food crises was most visible. High food prices on the international markets were experienced all over the world. Questions on the poor's ability to cope with these high food prices obviously arose. In 2009 food prices (as one of the most visible indicators of the crises) again decreased but the global economic deadlock is even at present not entirely behind us. Whether all aspects and impacts of the financial and food crises can thus be fully analysed and identified can be doubted. The longitude of the economic downturn is great, the problems that policy makers have to deal with are still not resolved. New policy challenges arose in addition to the 2008-2009 situation. Recently, Abdolreza Abbassian (economist at the FAO) even warned of a repetition of the 2008 food crisis. He fears that this year's low grain yields (grain is logically often referred to in the book) could result in government-interference in grain trade flows. Hence, not all worries are behind us, and policy makers are still struggling with comparable issues. Indeed, the book presents updated versions of the presented papers, but its main focus is on the topics of the first years of the crises. In the meanwhile, additional lessons learned have been formulated and the structural aspects of the crises become more evident. Even at present, retrospective analysis might face difficulties. The value and quality of part of the contributions can only be assessed after the crises. The chapters focussing on future challenges and policy implications of course add to the on-going discussions.

In conclusion, this book provides good and useful insights in various aspects of the food and financial crises in SSA. In particular, readers looking for an

introduction to specific aspects of the crises in SSA will appreciate the effort made. While reading the chapters, one must realize however that the economic downturns described in the book are not completely behind us. Some aspects of the crises might also be seen in a

new perspective as the longitude and structural aspects of the crises have become more – but not entirely – clear.

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