

# Development through Positive Deviance and its Implications for Economic Policy Making and Public Administration in Africa: The Case of Kenyan Agricultural Development, 1930–2005

COSMAS MILTON OBOTE OCHIENG \*

*International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC, USA*

*International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

**Summary.** — Positive internal innovation has long been a central element of African agricultural development, even if modern efforts to stimulate technical, institutional, and policy innovations in African agriculture have tended to look outwards. This paper examines the role of positive deviance in Kenyan agriculture over the last 75 years to cast doubt on the alleged authoritative sources of policy advice and mandates from the outside. Positive deviance and appreciative inquiry are suggested as organizing frameworks for identifying and amplifying the generation and uptake of internal African innovations.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“I think that one of the reasons why the African development scene has altered, I’m afraid not for the better, especially in the field of agriculture, is that so much of the multinational development projects or whatever you like to call them, are being pushed out from the centre by people who really don’t know Africa. How the hell do you expect it to work. . .this is one of the problems that we have in the world today, including this estimable organization at which I work, that so much of this is not brought up from the grassroots, and that is why we have all the problems. It does not respect the views of the people on the ground.” A. Storrar, former Senior Agricultural Adviser, the World Bank, 1987 (quoted in Thurston, 1987, p. 137).

Positive indigenous innovation has long been a central element of African agricultural development. Indigenous knowledge literature attests to the successes of African innovators in crop breeding, pest control, natural resource management, institutional, and organizational development in both pre and postcolonial periods (Brokensha & Warren, 1980; Kuyek, 2002; Mackenzie, 1998; Ndoum, 2001; Reij &

Waters-Bayer, 2001; Warren & Titilula, 1989). Despite these successes, modern efforts to stimulate technical, institutional, organizational, and policy innovations in African agriculture have tended to look outwards, mostly driven, in the mainstream, by external forces starting with the colonial administration in the 19th century, and continuing in the postcolonial period, after a brief interlude in the early decades of independence (1960s–70s), through policy conditionality. As a recent World Bank (2006, p. 1) paper put it, African indigenous innovators are often overlooked on the basis that “the innovations and discoveries they produce are mostly incremental, meaning they do not carry high income gains.”

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This paper will demonstrate that this position is seriously mistaken. Despite the relegation of indigenous/internal innovation (by mainstream/externally driven approaches) to the periphery or informal sector, it shall be shown that some of the most fundamental innovations in Kenyan agriculture over the last 75 years—private property rights in land, smallholder cultivation of commercial cash crops, contract farming, significant pressures toward market-led approaches—were pioneered and pushed into the “mainstream” (from the “fringes”) by a handful of internal innovators (here referred to us “positive deviants” see definition in Section 2) in spite of prevailing official or mainstream policy. The case studies presented here suggest that the constant turn outward in search of solutions to national problems has tended to bury possibilities and to dampen national innovation. For example, although the [World Bank \(2006\)](#) estimates that informal agriculture in Nigeria which mostly uses indigenous methods and techniques has an estimated worth of US 12 billion, it also finds an “indifference trap” where a majority of indigenous innovators no longer share potentially efficiency and productivity enhancing innovations because public policy, laws and institutions do not recognize or create a conducive environment for the uptake of their innovations.

This paper examines the role of positive deviance in Kenyan agriculture over the last 75 years to cast doubt on the alleged authoritative sources of policy advice and mandates from the outside. It shall be shown that positive national innovation does not require external ideas, aid, or “technocratic” approaches. Innovative ideas can come from a wide spectrum of stakeholders—the key challenge lies in the early recognition of such efforts by public authorities and institutions, and in building effective coalitions to mobilize for their development and uptake. Section 3 shows that positively deviant smallholders, agricultural, and administration field officers were instrumental in the formulation and implementation of the Swynnerton Plan (1954–59), making a generational impact on postcolonial Kenya’s agrarian development through fundamental institutional, organizational, technical, and policy innovations. At firm level, Section 4 credits positively deviant farmers and members of staff of the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) with the transformation of the organization from a vulnerable, top-down, and authoritarian public corporation catering for few thousand small-

holders in the early 1960s into a lucrative multi-million dollar private enterprise fully owned and managed by over 300,000 smallholder farmers at the beginning of the 21st century, while Section 5 demonstrates that positive deviance among smallholders and elements within the bureaucracy played significant roles in the pursuit of potentially more efficient and equitable organizational, institutional, and policy arrangements in the sugar sub-sector throughout the Kenyatta and Moi regimes. These case studies will also show that positive deviance in Kenyan agriculture was constrained by a number of factors, most notably, policy conditionality, internal political constraints, and interest group pressures. This paper suggests positive deviance and appreciative inquiry approaches as organizing frameworks for identifying and amplifying the work of African innovators, thereby solving the problem of “indifference trap.”

(a) *Why Kenyan agriculture?*

Many African governments briefly attempted homegrown<sup>1</sup> solutions to their development problems during the early postcolonial period before being forced by policy conditionality to cede this role to external agents/cies from the early 1980s. This came about amidst claims that governments were part of the development problem rather than its solution ([Bhagwati, 1982](#); [Datta-Chaudhuri, 1990](#); [Krueger, 1990](#)). Limitations of “before and after” evaluations of the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) notwithstanding ([Sahn, 1996](#)), externally imposed solutions have in many cases fared no better than preceding homegrown ones ([Cornia, Jolly, & Stewart, 1987](#); [Ghai, 1991](#); [Kohsaka, 2004](#)). Paradoxically, countries like Mauritius and Botswana<sup>2</sup> that refrained from much foreign aid and advice have emerged as two of Africa’s most successful economies and democracies (see for instance, [Subramanian & Roy, 2001](#); [UNDP, 2003](#)). This should not be totally surprising as some of the global economic miracles of the last century—the “East Asian Tigers” also underwent economic transformation by largely ignoring “mainstream” development policy advice ([Amsden, 1989](#); [Chang, 1993](#); [Rodrik, 2001](#)).

Kenya presents an interesting case for different reasons. Its economy grew much faster under homegrown institutional, organizational, and policy innovations (embedded in “African Socialism” in the 1960s and early 1970s), some

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