

## **Poor Going Poorer: Commercialization of Rice Farming and Food Shortage in the Usangu Plains, Tanzania: 1986–2010s**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the impact of commercial rice farming on peasants' food security in the Usangu Plains between 1986 and the 2010s. It specifically analyses how commercialisation of rice farming has affected peasant's food sovereignty/self-sufficiency from the mid-1980s. The study uses the political economy approach in explaining this relationship. Drawing from archival, oral and secondary sources, it examines how commercial rice farming affected food provision and security in the Usangu Plains. Besides, it provides an historical account of the commercialisation of rice farming, which was seen by the state as a viable strategy to agricultural development, and therefore food security to the nation and peasants. The study argues that the commercialisation of rice farming has not only negatively affected the food security of peasants—especially the poor—but has also led to their impoverishment and aggravated poverty. Impliedly, the feudal-capitalist system that geminated from this form of commercialisation has benefited few rich farmers and traders, leaving the majority poor into miseries.

**Key words:** *commercialization, feudal-capitalist system, food shortage and Usangu Plains*

### **1. Introduction**

One of the striking changes in African agriculture during the last hundred and thirty years has been its progressive integration into the cash economy. This has led to the creation of large commercial farms, and the transformation of small self-sufficient cultivators into market-oriented farmers. There may have been some pre-requisites created by the Arab and Portuguese coastal trade. For instance, the entry of merchant capital accelerated commodity production and exchange relations along the caravan routes and town centres (Ambindwile, 2017; 2021). The trade drew people on the coastal hinterland, around trading towns, and along caravan routes. People sold food crops as commodities, hence subjecting them to relations of exploitation. Yet, the main impetus toward exchange relations was given by European colonial powers. Colonialism transformed the exchange system from barter to a monetary exchange system. The intrusion of money was achieved coercively at both political and economic levels. They included taxation payable in cash, forced labour on communal farms, and forced cultivation of cash crops in certain areas, such as cotton in Mwanza in the early days (Malekela, 1994; Mishambi, 1992). Indeed, peasants adopted cash crop production so that they could get money to pay taxes and buy other consumption items, which were necessary. These included salt, soap, cooking

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oil, and clothes (ibid.). The emergence of peasantry in some areas, and further development of peasantry in others, was the beginning of the gradual weakening of the subsistence economy hitherto carried out by most of the societies in the interior of Mainland Tanzania, and a shift to a market-oriented economy.

The colonial government promoted the commercial sector since agricultural development and commercialization were seen as one and the same. Political measures and agricultural extension work were concentrated on commercial crops, while the traditional crops were often neglected. Bernstein, showing how the colonial government facilitated commodity production, noted that due to commodity production, the peasants' status as independent producers was undermined in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, peasants were commonly directed regarding what to grow, and in what quantities; with the quality of their produce subject to regulations, as well as the prices they received. On the other hand, as peasants became more involved in commodity relations, the coercion to produce certain crops became increasingly economic. That is, more items of their consumption had to be purchased with cash obtained only through the production of commodities or wage labour (Bernstein, 1997).

The post-colonial government remained under imperialist domination through neo-colonialism. The neo-colonial state retained its primary role as a market for capitalist goods. It also introduced and emphasized large- and small-scale (peasant) farming for the benefit of the metropole, and the petty bourgeoisie found within the country. With some exceptions, increase in outputs came from the expansion in areas under cash crops rather than from higher yields per acre. New land came into production, and some land previously used to grow food was turned over to the production of cash crops (Ambindwile, 2021; Davidson, 1989). Because of this, local food shortages began to be felt. However, this was not the case in some areas in Tanzania, such as the Usangu Plains, where peasants cultivated maize and rice both as food and cash crops, especially before the mid-1980s. During this period, yams, cassava, sorghum and millet also supplemented the two crops to ensure food security for the peasant communities in the region.

Commercial agriculture and rural transformation processes during this period were viewed by the state and politicians as noble and beneficial processes to peasants and the nation. Under this assumption, it is argued that as farmers invest in commercial agriculture, they realise more disposable income which they can re-invest in production. As the production base of modernized agricultural production expands, incomes become incrementally larger, enabling farmers to lift themselves to a commercial level and out of poverty (Amanor, 2013). By participating in commercial agriculture, peasants would get money to pay taxes and acquire other goods and services, all of which require cash money. On the other hand, state income would increase through the sale of the raw materials (Feder, 1974). This type of thinking predominated from the mid-1980s when neo-liberal policies under the auspice of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were adopted in Tanzania.

Although there is a lot of literature on the commercialisation of agriculture and its impacts, many researchers have concentrated on seeking for systemic reasons for its failures in improving the nutritional situation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bryceson, 1989; Dewey, 1989; von Braun, 1995; Pingali & Rosengrant, 1995; Nally, 2011). Thus, these scholars' understanding of commodification of food systems and their implications on diet does not fully apply in the present context of Usangu, which does not consider food system as the whole. In other words, diet is just a petty issue as far as food security is concerned. A more appropriate examination in this context should encompass also the whole food regime for rural livelihoods in the sphere of cash economy, which is the main direction of the present study. Apart from such scholars, there are some whose works have concentrated on environmental issues, giving least consideration to peasantry food production (see, e.g., Ambindwile, 2021; 2017; 2003). It is this that necessitated this work, which explores the impact of commercialization of rice farming on peasant food security. Chuhila's (2019) paper on food shortage, which synchronically generalised it and gave the upper hand to the state, also informs this study. However, this study emphasizes more on the change of the political economic system brought by liberalization; and it privileges the peasants over the state as main actors.

Furthermore, this study is suspicious of explanations that have linked food shortage with weather. Therefore, it supports Koponen (1988) who suggests that the link between adverse weather and famines needs a review. In this regard, Koponen asserts that "... it is not necessarily true that drought can lead to chronic food shortage and famine if agricultural system and storage facilities were adequate and the social and political system was working properly" (ibid: 101). Thus, this study is informed with those studies that look on the systematic change of the political economic system as the cause of major changes, such as food system. For example, based on the scattered famines in the late pre-colonial Tanzania such as Ilogo in Gogoland (1860-1880), Sandawe (1877), Kimbuland, Iramba, Nyamweziland and Kaguruland (1880s), Koponen concludes that there is a reason to believe that the Tanzanian agricultural and social systems were becoming more vulnerable to famine towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the penetration of capital on Mainland Tanzania (ibid.). It has been argued that the famines of the 1880s to 1910s spread widely because of the penetration of capitalist relations into the hinterland (Kjekshus, 1996). The findings of this study are consistent with those of Mashindano et al. (2013) and Amanor (2013), who argue that commercialization generates growing poverty in the agricultural sector because the forms of growth are not benefitting the rural poor.

Östberg et al. (2018) and Brockington et al. (2018) provide similar accounts of changes in livelihoods in rural communities elsewhere in Tanzania. However, their works are synchronic, and therefore ahistorical: a weakness that the present study also seeks to offset by examining how commercialisation of rice farming caused food shortage in the Usangu Plains. It is important to understand changes brought by the commercialisation of farming; and why and how peasants have struggled to



### **3. An Overview of Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture in Tanzania**

Commercialization of rice farming in this study is inextricably intertwined with the advent of economic liberalization, which promoted economic reforms popularly called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), adopted in the mid-1980s in Tanzania. Therefore, the commercialization of farming was a response to those economic reforms adopted by the state and enforced on the peasants to suit the so-called agricultural modernization and development. The implementation of the reforms was structured by the World Bank, and was included in the 1985 Tanzania Agricultural Sector Report. The main provisions of the reforms (Sundaram, 2008; Ponte, 2000; Cook, 1988; Berg, 1987) included:

- (a) Priority allocation of resources and foreign exchange to the agricultural sector;
- (b) Reduction of the role of parastatals;
- (c) Raising producer prices and retail food prices;
- (d) Adjusting the exchange rate to reduce parastatals losses; and
- (e) Legalization of the private sector in agricultural input and out-marketing and transport.

These reforms were aimed at improving both economic efficiency and the allocation of scarce resources to solve the crisis, and then bring about economic development. Here, the World Bank emphasized certain programmes to assist investments in agriculture, transport, and industries as these would support smooth economic recovery. These reforms involved making profound changes to the agricultural market environment, especially the food sector. The government removed restrictions on internal marketing and the movement of food grains; private traders increased their role in the grain business; the role of the National Milling Corporation was reduced to a buyer of last resort and a manager of food security stocks; and pan-territorial pricing was abolished (URT, 1989: 16–17).

Tanzania fully liberalized the agricultural sector by 1990 when the shift from a single-tier to multi-tier agriculture was completed. Thus, by 1992, the private sector had control over almost the whole grain market (Skarstein, 2005; MAC/MDB, 1995: 21–25). Finally, a national land policy was adopted in 1995. The policy recognized the president as the custodian of all land on behalf of the citizens. It also exacerbated the commercialization of land even in the rural areas, because it stipulated that "... individuals should be allowed to obtain individual titles within an area not designed for communal uses, land conservation and other specified village or community projects" (MLH, 1995: 9, 12).

The government and the Bretton Woods institutions positively commented on the transformation of agricultural production in Tanzania. For instance, the government's review of the economy in 1986 celebrated the achievement of the agricultural reforms, declaring that "... the condition of the national economy in 1986 has changed substantially....The good rate of growth in agriculture, especially in the food sector...the implementation of the Economic Recovery Programme

(ERP) begun to yield its results” (URT, 1987: 1). The same view was replicated in the economic reviews of the years 1987, 1988 and 1989; as well as the one given by Malima in 1990 (See, URT, 1988; 1989b; 1990).<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, and its sister institution, the IMF, expressed the same view. For example, the World Bank (1992: 1) said, “... the economy is no longer in crisis.” On its part, the IMF (1995: 1) applauded: “With the support of the international community...the authorities are transforming perhaps one of the most regulated economies in Africa into one of the most liberalized. More could be done, but a lot has been achieved.”

Scholarly evaluations of economic liberalization in Tanzania suggest that the positive review on economic liberalization given by both the government and IFIs were both incorrect and misleading; and that the goal of bringing about agricultural development was not achieved. For instance, Ponte (1999) have noted that crop production during the crisis period was relatively similar to that of the adjustment period. He further noted that the government understood that the basis on which agricultural production records were created was exceptionally shaky, but still it presented shining records of the achievement of the reforms in boosting agricultural development in Tanzania (ibid.). Interestingly, this study has found that economic liberalization has increasingly commercialized the peasant agricultural sector in Tanzania and led not only to low productivity but also systemic and chronic food shortages. This study also concurs with Mittelman (2000), who argues that the higher levels of economic liberalisation, which were promoted by the SAPs, resulted in the production of poverty and marginalization caused by the substantial amount of expenditure reduction on social services and separation of economic reforms from social policy.

#### **4. Commercialization of Rice Farming and Food Shortage in the Usangu Plains**

##### ***4.1 Food Production Situation Before Commercialization***

The problem of food shortages in Tanzania has a long history. It has passed from one historical period to another. In the pre-colonial era, climatic conditions were in most cases the determining factor for a good or poor harvest, or total failure in food production. Hence, the production of food remained low throughout the period. However, it was satisfactory since peasants were producing for subsistence, and nothing was meant for exchange value (Ambindwile, 2003). During this period the inhabitants of Usangu were mostly livestock herders who exchanged their animal products with food from other areas within Usangu or neighbouring regions, such as Uwanji, Chunya and Utengule-Usongwe. Indeed, the repercussions of food shortages were minimized friendly; although surplus production for the majority of the peasants was very limited due to the low level of the development of productive forces (Mwakipesile, 1976).

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<sup>1</sup>In his speech given at the Economic Policy Workshop in Dar es Salaam, Prof. Kighoma Malima summarises the government’s stance on the outcomes of SAP/ERP thus: “The revival of agricultural production was, in large measure, the result of various policy initiatives taken under the ERP, especially, the payment of remunerative agricultural producer prices, timely distribution of fertilizers and other inputs.” (See also Tanzania Economic Trends (TET: 2(3-4): 6-12).

With colonialism, the peasants of Usangu entered a new era with their low level of productive forces. The colonial economy, the colonial state, and the penetration of capital did not improve their productive forces. Hence, peasants continued to produce small amounts of food; a part of which they had to sell at very low prices to obtain money to pay taxes or buy imported manufactured goods (Feder, 1974). While many areas in colonial Tanganyika found themselves tapped in the web of food shortages, and sometimes famines, for the longer times the Usangu Plains remained safe with abundant food (Mwakipesile, 1976; Ambindwile, 2017). Apart from depending on livestock keeping and common food crops such as maize, finger millet and millet, the indigenous Sangu developed irrigated rice farming from the late 1920s, which further supplemented their livestock economy. However, there were some localized cases of food shortages that resulted into famines in the plains, such as in 1936<sup>2</sup> and 1949.<sup>3</sup> They were both due to drought which affected the region in those years. In most cases, up to the mid-1980s, food shortage was uncommon and unfamiliar in this region. People in this area enjoyed bumper harvests of rice, which forced them to even adopt forced fallow. So, rice production came as crop production that saved the region from any kind of food shortage threats, especially from the late 1950s.

For instance, by 1959 the Usangu Plains had been producing very high yields of rice; so much so that about 2,400 tons were available for outside consumption (Tanganyika Territory, 1960: 1). Some of this rice was sold to the urban population, especially in Mbeya town. Most of this rice was produced in Mbarali, Chimala and Masasi. Moreover, between 1958 and 1960, rice did better than other common crops such as maize, eleusine and sorghum. The Mbeya District Commissioner said in 1958:

Paddy (with 1,000 tons as last year for sale) and eleusine were only really successful crops. Maize as already mentioned suffered from drought. About 1,000 tons were produced for sale a little down on last year. Sorghum suffered from head smut as well. In general weather was not good because the rains started late and ended early. This meant poor crops harvest of beans and maize without any shortage of food, however (MZA AGR. 1/10: 3)

By 1959, it was clear that rice was a favourite crop in the Usangu Plains; and that it thrived better than other crops such as maize and sorghum.

More striking were the District Commissioner's remarks in the 1960's report. He said paddy did extremely well because the harvest was above average, and far more than that of the other crops: maize (native) 1,000 tons sold at 25 cents per kilo;

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<sup>2</sup> Usangu was badly affected by both drought and rinderpest to the extent that a deadly famine occurred and there were some cases of death. In this disaster both crop production and animal husbandry were badly affected. The famine is well documented in colonial files such as TNA 77 2/29, *Agriculture-Famine and Famine Relief*; TNA 157 A 3/14, *Agriculture- Famine and Famine Relief, 1942-1953 and Tanganyika Territory, (1937), Annual Reports of the Provincial Commissioners on Native Administration for 1936* (ARPC), (Dar es Salaam: Government Printer): 62-64.

<sup>3</sup> In this year, the Usangu Plains were hard-hit with *Njala ya malale*. It was a famous famine which occurred in the 1940s in the area because of the total crop failure and which had hard-felt effects not only on the ecology and economy, but also on the lives of the Sangu people. I was told the famine claimed a good number of peoples' lives. It is literally called *Njala ya Malale* because the drought wrought insects called *malale*, which destroyed crops, especially immature crops such as maize, beans and rice by cutting down plants.

maize (estate) 100 tons sold at 25 cents per kilo; paddy 2,000 tons sold at 45 cents per kilo; and groundnuts 50 tons sold at 1 cent per kilo. Defending this as a super season, the Commissioner said that as a result of the good harvests of 1959, many people either grew less rice or did not grow it at all, as they had sufficient food which could see them through 1960 (MZA AGR., 1/10: 8). This report seemed true, as a big number of the respondents referred to the boom harvests of the 1950s and early 1960s that made them sometimes practise a forced fallow.

Apart from rice production, other traditional subsistence crops were still given weight in agricultural production, and they served a purpose in the years of drought. For example, in 1974 and the early 1980s, the plains were badly affected with persistent drought that caused crop failures, especially of rice. However, the region was minimally affected with these failures because a good number of peasants were still cultivating cassava, yams and sorghum as standby crops, which served them during the hard periods (Ambindwile, 2003; 2017).

#### ***4.2 The Food Situation after Commercialization of Rice Farming in the Plains***

Economic liberalization, particularly the liberalization of trade policy, brought about major changes that created some impetus for rapid development. The first phase of economic liberalization focused on, among other things, the elimination of the monopoly of agricultural cooperatives. Nationally, agricultural development still focused on the intensification of the production of cereal crops for food security reasons (Ponte, 2002). Responding to this call, peasants engaged in the intensification of rice production in Usangu. This was the actual time when rice production became fully commercialized.

Generally, the SAPs of the mid-1980s enhanced the process of commercializing peasant production through the removal of state control in agricultural production, and the liberalization of agricultural markets that opened new market opportunities. However, according to most of the respondents, the SAP measures of cost-sharing and removal of subsidies meant higher costs of social services (higher school fees, user fees for health facilities), and agricultural inputs. Additionally, some scholars add that the economic reforms led to more expensive lifestyles, and increased the commercialization of life in the rural areas (Ambindwile, 2021; Sokoni, 2008; Skarstein, 2005; Ponte, 1998). These changes caused peasants to pursue economic activities and farming systems that could guarantee a steadier flow of cash and returns on their investments. When asked to talk about the differences in lifestyle in their respective areas between the 1970s and 1990s, most of the respondents mentioned almost the same differences. For instance, Adam Kilasi said:

*In the 1990s, life became harder because you needed more money to satisfy the increased needs of the family... You had to pay for more needs as a result of changes in lifestyle and standards in our rural areas. For example, we needed money for paying doctors, for paying school fees, and for buying nice clothes. We also needed more money for building good houses of burnt bricks and corrugated iron sheets. On the contrary, in the 1970s we neither paid doctors nor did we pay school fees. We also built cheap, grass-thatched mud houses. In general, a little amount of cash could be*



*spent for a long time because we had very few needs. Besides, agricultural implements were cheap and were provided on soft loans* (Interview with Mzee Adam Kilasi (87 years old), Ubaruku Village, on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010).

From this quotation one can conclude that life had, by the mid-1980s, become pretty tough; and, therefore, forced peasants to look for other economic activities from which to earn a living. By and large, everything (commodities, land, services and labour) had been commoditized. To the peasants, this was the time when the market controlled everything, including their production. No money, no services; no land, no commodities, and therefore no life. In this regard, commercialised rice farming was inevitable because it was thought to be a solution to these pressing lifestyle problems brought about by economic liberalization. For instance, one woman said, “*Others had gold, others diamonds; others coffee, others tea and others cotton; but we didn’t have those things. We had white diamonds (rice), from which we earned some money*” (Interview with Joyce Mgangaluma (65 years old), Chimala village, on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2011). This explicitly implies that, in her understanding, rice was a source of money to her; just as other kinds of cash crops and precious metals were to others. Interestingly, many peasants in Usangu shared this view. Most of the interviewees suggested that rice was as marketable as diamond; and that whenever one was in need of cash, s/he could easily get it by selling some rice, just as other people easily got some money by selling other kinds of cash crops or precious metals. Thus, rice became a commercial crop.

With the political and socio-economic issues of economic liberalization, peasants were forced to increase rice production, from which they earned a living. This is evident in the expansion of farms from just 25,000ha in 1985/86 to around 45,000ha in 2000, and 63,000ha in 2016 (SMUWC, 2001; Ambindwile, 2021). These statistics clearly indicate an enormous expansion of irrigated rice production. These findings are akin to Ponte’s (2000: 330) observation that “... although economic reforms brought a livelier economic environment and greater opportunities to initiate or expand farm activities (for those with the capital to do so), they did not necessarily benefit rural dwellers.” The study interviewees said repeatedly that the economic reforms caused a very expensive lifestyle that hindered peasants to benefit from rice production. For example, Mwang’ombe, a middle-income peasant, repeatedly said that the reforms raised the cost of living.

This rise in the cost of living had an explicit negative impact on food security. A peasant was forced to sell many bags of paddy to solve even minor problems like school fees and health services, or to meet normal household needs. After selling such bags, a peasant remained with very few bags or nothing (Interview with Mzee Mwang’ombe, op. cit.). Whatever bags that remained, they were regarded as capital for the next cultivation season. The interviewee (ibid.) further said that in the 1970s and early 1980s, he used to sell 8 to 10 bags of paddy to pay the school fees of 3 students in seminary/private schools, and also buy household groceries. That was possible because of the fair price of paddy and the lifestyle of the pre-neoliberal

period. But in the 2000s, 20 bags of paddy could not pay school fees for even 2 students attending the same schools; and in the 2010s, the same 20 bags were not even enough for buying groceries for the 2 students in the same schools; also, school fees needed more than 200 bags for those two students in the same schools. All these changes were brought by neo-liberal reforms, which among other things, led to the depreciation of the Tanzanian currency (ibid.). Therefore, one can directly conclude that an increase in production did not mean an increase in economic profits or food security; instead, it was an increase in both harvests and the size of a farm. Generally, this new tendency destabilized the food security position of peasants.

As stated earlier, the agricultural policies of the post-colonial government encouraged peasants to produce more to improve their lives, and especially food security (Msambichaka et al., 1995; Stahl, 2015). Thus, peasants in the plains were made to produce rice as a cash crop by using their labour and traditional crude tools. Hence, most of their time and labour was spent on cash crop production at the expense of subsistence crops. The research findings in the plains showed that the commercialization of rice has to a greater extent facilitated the consolidation of a monocultural tendency; and the marginalization and disappearance of some traditional subsistence crops. The pattern of responses for the peasants from the 10 villages are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Types of Food Crops in Usangu: Number (No) and Percentage (%) of Peasants who Cultivated These Crops in the 10 Villages of Study**

Name of village	Paddy		Maize		Cassava		Yams		Millet/Sorghum	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Ubaruku	18	9	5	2.5	–	–	2	1	–	–
Mkombwe	18	9	5	2.5	–	–	1	0.5	–	–
Rujewa	18	9	3	1.5	–	–	2	1	–	–
Nyeregete	20	10	3	1.5	–	–	3	1.5	–	–
Chimala	17	8.5	4	2	–	–	1	0.5	–	–
Igurusi	16	8	4	2	1	0.5	1	0.5	–	–
Madibira	18	9	2	1	1	0.5	–	–	–	–
Ruiwa	17	8.5	1	0.5	1	0.5	–	–	–	–
Masasi	17	8.5	7	3.5	–	–	3	1.5	–	–
U/Usangu	16	8.0	8	4.0	–	–	3	1.5	–	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>87.5</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>	–	–

Source: Fieldwork data August – October 2020 and January 2016

As already observed, sorghum, millet, finger-millet, cassava, yams and maize were the major subsistence crops in the plains during the pre-neoliberal era. Many of these crops constituted staple foods that provided significant portions of essential calories. These foods were also important in ensuring household food security, and were equally vital at times of food scarcity (Mwakipesile, 1976). However, as time went on, peasants in Usangu neglected farming these crops. For example, one peasant openly pointed out that in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, these crops were farmed by almost all peasants as ‘standby crops’ to be used in years of bad rice harvests

(Interview with Mzee Sengele, a peasant/village elder, at Ubaruku, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2003). Almost everywhere in Usangu peasants cultivated and grew the same type(s) of crop(s), although the government often insisted on the cultivation of drought-resistant crops especially cassava, sorghum/millet, and yams. But the study revealed that rice was the preferred crop from the 1990s. Rice, though so susceptible to drought conditions, was the most popular and widely grown crop (87.5%), followed by maize (21%), cassava (8%), and yams (8%). Millet and sorghum were the most disliked and neglected ones. Indeed, no peasant was found farming them.

Therefore, the observation witnessed total neglect of these traditional crops. Peasants had totally moved to commercial rice farming. The interviewed peasants responded that rice was economically important and beneficial since it fetched much higher prices than traditional crops. One of the interviewees said:

*“For example, we in Usangu, preferred rice to maize because rice was marketable; that is, you could earn some money from it anytime. This was not the case with maize because its market was very limited and periodic. Also, rice was more valuable than maize. So, with this speedy life, you could not achieve your goals by growing maize, as its price was half or more less than that of rice. Interestingly, like maize, rice could be used as food. Furthermore, our environment was moist and had unreliable rainfall; so it was suitable for rice production, and not maize. All in all, to be sincere, we preferred rice because of its wide market and its high demand (Interview with Mzee Amrani Mbogasilongwele (89 years old), at Ubaruku village, on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013).*

Thus, rice became a commercial crop. With its marketability, it was now seen as a viable source of livelihood, and was attractive to many people who were engaging in other economic activities previously. Thus, peasants were forced into commercial rice production, from which they benefited little. At the same time, government actions, directives and campaigns being taken to revive peasant interests in the cultivation of these crops to alleviate food shortage could not be expected to alter the role of comparative price levels.

The major negative implication of the negligence of growing traditional crops in Usangu was that insufficient food was retained at harvest time for house consumption. This being the case, supplies were distributed back to the rural Usangu areas later in the crop year, or peasants were forced to purchase grain at higher prices from black markets. For example, while a kilogram of paddy was sold at TZS8 in the 1986/87 season, rice available to the peasants by the National Milling Corporation (NMC) was sold at TZS18/50 per kg during the rainy season. For instance, in the 2010/2011 agricultural season, peasants sold a bag of rice at TZS45,000 during the harvest time from May to August; and bought the same bag at TZS100,000 during the rainy season from December to April (Interview with Ally Kiponda, Rujewa, on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019). So, peasants sold cheaply, and bought the same quantity dearly. This tendency brought about problems of food security to peasants, who ultimately lamented that the NMC and traders were killing them (ibid.). This study further revealed that, during the months of December, January, February and March, most peasant households experienced serious food shortages. This has been a very common occurrence almost every year since the 1990s (ibid.).

Furthermore, there were many examples of peasants whose produce was almost all sold immediately after harvest to meet immediate commitment like medication, school fees, land rent or taxes. This left granaries empty. The practice resulted in the purchase of rice and/or maize later on at considerably higher prices, which was becoming much more frequent. For example, in the 1996/97 season a peasant sold a tin of paddy at TZS2000 in June and July, and bought the same at TZS4500 in November/December (ibid.). This was so because peasants in Usangu considered rice as a cash crop, and not a food crop. They sold all their harvest immediately after harvesting at low prices, and bought maize or rice in *vibaba* (tins) for food. At this time prices were much higher than during harvest time, hence peasants were unable to buy sufficient food for their households. Generally, the net result was that 95% of the peasants who were poor lived on the verge of food shortages and/or starvation (ibid.). The survey revealed that 61%, or 122 of the 200 peasants interviewed, were victims of such a situation.

While many scholars see cooperative societies as impediments to agricultural development, and therefore food security (Lunda & Ndulu, 1987; Eriksson, 1993), this study found that they were promoters of agricultural development in Usangu. Cooperatives were reliable markets that bought all the peasants' produce in the pre-neoliberal period. Prices given were fair, hence satisfactory for peasants' expenditures (ibid.). In this regard, peasants managed to produce enough for their own consumption, and extra to buy groceries for their households. However, trade liberalization—which intensified the commercialization of rice—was mentioned by many peasants to be one of the major reasons for food shortages in the area.

With the advent of trade liberalisation, market demand increasingly became the most important criterion for the varieties of rice grown in the plains. This is quite different to the pre-neoliberal period. For instance, in the 1970s, the Mbeya Cooperative Union (MBECU)—which was the main buyer of rice from peasants—purchased all varieties of rice regardless of their taste quality and standard. This tendency motivated peasants to grow heavier and higher-yield rice varieties that were relatively poor in taste and quality, but fit for human consumption (Ambindwile, 2003; <http://www.grain.org/publication/December992-en.cfm>). The prices for both high and poor quality rice were the same. Thus, peasants produced the heavier and higher-yield rice varieties that guaranteed higher production. However, the liberal economic reforms of SAPs brought dramatic changes on farmers' selection and preference of rice varieties. Cooperatives—like MBECU—were replaced by private traders, who were driven by consumer preferences. This led to the emergence of specific demands of varieties; and price differentiation according to a variety. Because of this change, the demand for several high yielding but poorly tasting rice varieties disappeared (ibid.). The high yielding varieties were *katrin*, *subamart*, *afa-mwanza* and *philipini* (popularly known as *mdundiko* or *kitumbo*); whereas the low yielding but quality and palatable varieties were *kilombero* and *shingo ya mwali* (from the mid-1980s to 2000s), and *saro five* and *faya dume* (from the 2000s to date).

Out of the 200 peasants interviewed between August 2002 and January 2016, 160 peasants (80%) were found planting *kilombero*, which yielded low harvests but was favoured by the market. 20 peasants (10%) who were planting half of their fields with *subarmart* and the other half with *kilombero* were mostly middle peasants. The 5% (10 peasants) planting *subarmart* only were rich farmers, who stored their produce after the harvest until December/March when rice was scarce. They thereafter sold it at very high prices to either poor peasants in Usangu, or to other outside markets, especially in Dar es Salaam. The remaining 10 peasants (5%) were found farming a mix of varieties, mostly *kilombero* and *subarmart*. The trend changed to worse in the 2010s when only two low yielding varieties of rice predominated in rice cultivation: *saro five* and *faya dume*. Although these varieties fetched relatively higher price in the market, they both produced low yields averaging between 15 and 20 bags per acre. However, even these low yields could only be realized when fertilizer was applied twice, weeding was done properly, and harvesting was timely: things that poor peasants could rarely do. In other words, the production of these varieties demanded capital investment that was hardly handy to poor peasants.

So, with this type of market demand, peasants (especially poor ones) in the area tended to produce only small amounts of rice; and they sold all or most of the harvest, and remained with nothing or only a little. This has been a very common practice in the area since the mid-1980s. It has had a direct adverse impact on food security on peasants. For example, 130 peasants out of the 200 interviewed in 2002 said to have experienced serious food shortage during the past 14 years. The same trend continues to date with most of the peasants being caught in this vicious circle of food shortage. The study tried to figure out why, in a food surplus area like the Usangu Plains, should anyone starve; and found that the major reason was due to the cultivation of only low-yield but palatable varieties of rice favoured by consumers as a response to market forces due to trade liberalization.

The commercialisation of rice farming also meant a shift from subsistence production to a reliance on food markets. For instance, it became clear from the interviews that there has been a substantial shift from consuming self-produced foodstuffs to buying food from the markets. Most respondents (95%) said that the proportion of food that their household bought from the market has increased much since 1985. Only 5% said that their household was still buying proportionally the same amount of food items from the market as earlier. Respondents were also asked to estimate the proportion of all consumed foods that were bought from the market during the 2010s. The response was that very few foodstuffs, or nearly none, were bought from the market up to around 1985; and these were purchased mainly towards the beginning of the harvest time. This is because each household produced its own food; nearly sufficient for the whole year. However, the response was that more than three-quarters of food was bought from the market from the 2010s. This tendency developed since 1985 with the advent of the commercialisation of rice farming, which led to the forsaking of subsistent farming that had positively suited their food security.

Furthermore, as another indicator for this change, respondents were asked for how many months did they consume self-produced rice. The findings showed that, on average, the households had consumed their own rice for 3 months during the agricultural year 2013; while they said that in period between the 1970s and early 1980s their food (maize and/or rice plus other cereals) were usually sufficient for the whole year, or for 11 months a year. Many respondents claimed that they very seldom bought any maize or rice during those days; and some also pointed out that maize flour or rice were hardly available in local shops then. For example, Mwasengele, reminisced that there was only one maize flour and rice vendor in the village up to the early 1980s (Interview with Mzee Mwasengele, op. cit.). Items that were commonly bought in the early 1980s included non-staples like salt, oil/fat and spices; but from the 2010s basic staples were more purchased than being produced locally (ibid.). This radical change was also acknowledged by agricultural officers and other senior officials, who had been working in the area for a longer time. Considering the fact that the availability and consumption of non-food incentives have also increased, these changes reflected a wider shift from the sphere of traditional subsistence economies, to the involvement in the capitalist system. As a peasant in Chimala talked about the 2010s situation, "... Money was now needed for everything" (Interview with Diamond Kihokule, Chimala Village, on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2016). Logically, this capitalist system negatively affected peasants' food security in the Usangu Plains.

This form of farming also led to the development of 'feudal-capitalist'<sup>4</sup> relations between poor peasants, rich farmers, and traders which negatively affected food security in the plains. Due to the lack of capital, poor peasants resorted to money borrowing from rich farmers and traders to sustain their agriculture during the farming period, which became increasingly costly. Rich peasants and traders lent money to poor peasants in return for bags of rice paid at harvest time in the next season (Interviews with Mrs Mgao; Mzee Kitaule; Mzee Msavano; and with Chief Merere.). According to the interviews, poor peasants were forced to adopt this system because they lacked production capital and money to meet their daily needs during the farming period. Thus, they were obliged to take loans in cash at the beginning of the season (mostly in December) when rice prices were high, and repaid them in equivalent amounts of rice bags or in cash at harvest time, when rice prices were commonly low. The result was a higher interest of more than one hundred per cent. Since the cost of borrowing was very high, the majority of these peasants were trapped in a vicious circle of indebtedness (Interview with Mzee Kabonga).

It should be noted that loaning was not a new practice of the late 1980s and 1990s in Usangu. It existed even in pre-colonial times, although the mode of its operation changed over the years. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, loans were not

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<sup>4</sup>This a blended socio-economic system developed in the Usangu Plains which defined the relations between poor peasants and rich farmers and/or traders. The relations here were under the loan system which involved poor peasants paying either cash or products to the money lender at harvest time. As both feudal and capitalists were, this system was also exploitative and oppressive to the poor. This is why I chose to call this kind of system as feudal-capitalist as it combines some features of feudalism and capitalism.

exploitative. Rather, they were helpful because peasants were given food loans either in tins or bags; and they were required to return the same amount at harvest time (Ambindwile, 2003: 107). This was very helpful since loans were given as a relief during periods of food shortages, or in times of problems. Indeed, these were paternalistic relations based on a social nexus. However, with the monetization of all sectors in the 1990s, the nature of these loans changed in Usangu, especially in villages where commercial rice farming was paramount. This was the period when loans were given in cash and repaid in product(s). For example, during the 1996/97 to 1998/99 period, poor peasants were given a constant amount of TZS6000 as a loan and gave the lender 1 bag of kilombero rice at harvest time. But the same bag was sold at the following prices: TZS14,000 (1996/97); TZS20,000 (1997/98); TZS26,000 (1998/99). Therefore, there were always super profits for the rich farmers and traders. Many of the poor peasants interviewed in the villages acknowledged that their families were victims of this loan system.

Furthermore, the peasants lamented that they were producing for the rich farmers and traders, rather than for themselves. One poor peasant gave a breakdown of the production costs and yields, as well as of how much was left for her after paying debts. She took a loan of TZS100,000 from a rich farmer in November 1998, and agreed to pay 16 bags at harvest time. She cultivated two (2) acres of rice. She spent TZS50,000 in production; using it in cultivation and buying other simple agricultural implements like fertilizer, hand hoes and sickles. The remaining TZS50,000 covered domestic expenditures. In June, she harvested 22 bags of *kilombero* rice. Therefore, she paid 16 bags and remained with 6 bags. She had 4 children, 2 of whom were primary school pupils who needed uniforms, pencils, exercise books and food. She also said that the remaining 6 bags could not last for even 2 months (Interview with Mrs Mgao (a peasant), at Mkombwe on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2002). This meant that out of the next 12 months, the family was able to feed itself for only 2 months, while food shortage hounded it for the remaining 10 months. Hence, this woman had to go back to the rich farmer to take another loan for farming in the next season, and for survival. This is the vicious circle of food shortages that poor peasants found themselves in, and the ensuing exploitation and consequent poverty. Given the fact that rich farmers and/or traders only accepted rice as a payment for loans, peasants had no option but to produce more and more rice every year for money lenders and not for their families which remained poor and starved. Hence, since the advent of commercial rice farming in Usangu Plains, peasants entered in this feudal-capitalist tentacle of money lending that has been pretty detrimental to their food security.

Another striking feature witnessed in this loan system was that poor peasants suffered more and found themselves into aggravated sheer poverty, i.e., poor going poorer. The reason was because some of them had crop loans payable in cash equivalent which they could not pay when the prices of rice dropped at harvest times. For example, in the 1999/00 agricultural season, poor peasants took loans of TZS7,000 in December, agreeing to pay back TZS12,000 at harvest time in June.

The price of rice in December was TZS23,000 per bag, whereas in June 2000 it was TZS11,000 per bag. Therefore, when these peasants harvested, they faced the problem that they had to sell more than one bag to pay their loan of a bag. Hence, a number of peasants were subjected to very harsh exploitation and unequal exchange that brought them into abject poverty.

Furthermore, this study witnessed a number of peasants losing their assets put up as securities for their loans. For example, in the 1997/98 season, due to the *El-nino* disaster, many peasants harvested almost no rice. As a result, the study found that more than 20 peasants in Ubaruku lost their land, bicycles, houses, or all of their properties because they put these as pawns when taking loans. This also led to the disintegration of many families in Ubaruku. The most striking example was the family of one Masanja who took a loan of TZS300,000 from Mzee Halfani; agreeing to pay back 50 bags at harvest time. He was not able to pay these bags in June. As a result, Halfani took his modern house, which was put up as a pawn in case Masanja failed to pay. I also witnessed the family of Masanja being totally disintegrated. His sons left school and became casual labourers. He, himself, moved to a remote village in Usangu, and became a traditional healer. His wife became a brewer of local alcohol, which she sold in local clubs in Ubaruku. A similar case was found to have affected five (5) more families in Ubaruku that had no husbands of the houses since these had run away fearing they could be jailed for failing to pay back similar loans (Interview with Mzee Mohamed Halfani, at Ubaruku on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2009). Of late, since the 2010s, the situation has turned even worse and many people in the plains have become landless, homeless, and poorer because of this form of loans.

Therefore, this loan system is unequal and exploitative: while it has enriched some farmers and traders into becoming conspicuously rich, with some managing to accumulate much capital that they have re-invested into other businesses such as estates, transport, hotels and construction; it has pushed the majority of the poor peasants into becoming poorer.

## **5. Conclusion**

Under economic liberalization, the Usangu Plains continued to be integrated into the capitalist economic system through rice production, which has led to a shift from subsistence farming to commercial production. Commercial rice farming, which the state also advocated as a way of improving food security and alleviating peasants' poverty has only aggravated food shortages and increased poverty. This is because, as a result of commercialisation, poor peasant household have found themselves with cash instead of self-produced food. However, the cash obtained through selling rice has not relatively been equivalent to the value of the subsistence food that would have otherwise been produced.

Still, even when the cash now earned equals to the food once produced, the following significant changes have taken place in household diets during the neo-



liberal period . Firstly, the variety of food items available in the market mostly differ from the traditional foods produced in the area. Secondly, most peasant families are unaccustomed to saving relatively large amounts of cash when incomes are received in lumpsums, like in the case of selling rice during harvest times. Thus, cash is overspent and not stored in similar manner as food was to cater for food insecurity that always increases from October to April every year. Thirdly, this commercialization, among other things, involved a bigger cultural change, which profoundly altered food habits and preferences in the region. Fourthly, and in connection to the foregoing, the commercialization process covered also other sectors than agriculture, which then led to increasing allocation of cash to necessities that earlier did not have costs or exist, such as education, transportation, housing, health services, construction, paying taxes, etc. This also involved increased consumption of 'luxuries' like electricity, better clothing, TVs, motorcycles, tobacco, alcohol, cars, and so on. So, the people in the plains found themselves immersed in new tastes and lifestyles, which often lured them into conspicuous consumption that eventually compromised their food security. As a result, food shortages have become common, and continue to be a recurring problem in Usangu. The study, therefore, refutes Eriksson's (1993) argument that, generally, the rural population has been able to feed itself, while also providing the growing urban population with food as a result of neo-liberal agricultural transformations. On the contrary it has further engraved them into acute shortages of food and sheer poverty.

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