

# **The Past of Present Livelihoods**

Historical perspectives on modernisation, rural policy regimes  
and smallholder poverty – a case from Eastern Zambia

by

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## ABSTRACT

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This study is an enquiry into the processes shaping rural livelihoods in peripheral areas. The study is situated in the field of livelihood research and departs in the persistent crisis within African smallholder agriculture and in rural policy debates during the post-independence era. The research takes a critical stance to the way that people-centred and actor-oriented approaches have dominated livelihood research, thereby over-shadowing structural and macro-oriented features.

The aim of this study is to, through a historical perspective on rural livelihoods and policy regimes, uncover the political and economic processes, with their discursive foundations, that shape contemporary rural livelihoods in peripheral areas. The analytical framework emphasises four key factors: ideas of development and modernity; the terms of incorporation into the global economy; rural policy regimes; smallholders' ways of making a living. Inspiration is gained from critical political geography, world-systems analysis and different perspectives on rural livelihoods and development.

The empirical study is based on fieldwork in Chipata District in Eastern Zambia, investigations at the National Archives of Zambia, the British National Archives and library research. The findings are presented in three parts. The first part looks into contemporary policies and the situation among smallholders in Chipata District. The second part examines the history of the area up to independence in 1964. The third part examines the post-independence period which links colonial experience to the contemporary situation.

The findings suggest that smallholders' livelihoods are shaped by long-term political-economic-discursive processes, rooted in the terms of the study area's integration into the world-economy in the colonial period. Colonial policies peripheralised the area through tax, labour, and market policies and the creation of native reserves, all of which have led to contemporary problems of food insecurity, soil depletion and a marginal role in agricultural markets. Since the inception of colonial rule, semi-proletarianisation has been a dominant process in the area. Current diversified livelihoods are more a contemporary expression of this semi-proletarianisation than a consequence of post-colonial policies. The households in the study area show preference for a farming way of life. However, the development goal of modernity has since long led to an 'othering' of smallholders, labelling them backwards and resistant to change. In the early twenty-first century this 'othering' has been played out through a development programme aimed at changing attitudes and mindsets among the farmers in line with individualistic and entrepreneurial behaviour. The 'othering' discourses of contemporary and colonial policymakers display striking similarities in this case.

**Keywords:** Rural livelihoods; Smallholders; rural policy regime; development; modernisation; Zambia

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