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## The Swynnerton Plan: Lessons from Kenya's colonial agricultural policy

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**Abstract:** This article reviews the Swynnerton Plan from 1954, which was devised by the colonial government to address the grievances of African farmers in rural areas. The main objective of the Plan was to shift the focus from large-scale European farming to profitable small-scale African agriculture. The purpose of this review was to draw lessons from the past to propose policy recommendations for a sustainable agricultural sector in Kenya. In order to gather and analyse data, this paper conducted a descriptive literature review. The findings indicate that studying the Swynnerton Plan can offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of past approaches in shaping the current and future landscape of agriculture in Kenya. The implementation of the Swynnerton Plan brought significant changes to African agriculture during colonial period. If a similar transformative policy initiative is developed and put into action, Kenya has

the potential to not only attain food self-sufficiency but also emerge as a major agricultural exporter, thereby fostering sustainable growth. This research adds to the existing literature emphasising the importance of exploring historical patterns to guide effective decision-making for the present and future. A historical viewpoint can enable policymakers in the agricultural sector to comprehend current challenges with enhanced clarity.

**Keywords** – Agricultural policy, African agriculture, Settler agriculture, Land use, Mau Mau uprising, Policy, Swynnerton Plan

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Kenya's economy has heavily relied on agriculture since gaining independence in 1963, similar to many other African countries (Agyeman-Boaten, Fumey & Norman, 2022: 11). The agricultural sector plays a crucial role in Kenya's gross domestic product, contributing more than 25% and making it the most significant sector in the economy (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 1). Additionally, over 75% of the workforce in Kenya is employed in the agricultural sector, which directly or indirectly supports more than 80% of rural households. Moreover, other sectors of the economy also depend on agricultural raw materials (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 1).

Since the colonial era, Kenya has prioritised the development of sustainable agriculture (World Bank, 2019: 4). The Ministry of Agriculture has consistently reviewed its agricultural policies to ensure food security and promote the cultivation of cash crops. One notable policy initiative was the Swynnerton Plan, which was formulated by the colonial government. The Swynnerton Plan aimed to address the persistent challenges faced by African farmers in colonial Kenya and proposed various measures to enhance agricultural production (Odhiambo, Arora, Atela, Onyango & Kyari, 2020: 5).

It was anticipated that African agriculture would thrive even more after gaining independence. However, this envisioned success of African agriculture never came to fruition (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 1). Instead, agriculture in post-independence Kenya has continued to encounter similar challenges that the Swynnerton Plan aimed to resolve. Of greater importance is the fact that most of the challenges affecting the agricultural sector in Kenya today originated during the colonial period. Consequently, despite the Kenyan government's efforts to establish effective and practical policies to boost agricultural production in the country, the agricultural sector still faces various obstacles (Odhiambo et al., 2020: 5). These challenges include limited access to modern farming techniques, a shortage of arable land, and the widespread presence of pests and diseases. These hurdles mirror the challenges experienced by African farmers in the colonial era. (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 1). If the recommendations of the Plan had been fully executed, why is the agricultural sector in the country still grappling with similar challenges that the Swynnerton Plan sought to resolve?

This paper contends that post-colonial agricultural policy reforms in Kenya have been carried out without sufficient reference to the colonial agricultural reform documents, specifically the Swynnerton Plan. The study delves into the Swynnerton Plan to assess the extent to which its recommendations were embraced and put into practice by the government of independent Kenya. It also examines the potential insights that policymakers in the agricultural sector in the country can glean from the Plan. As a result, this paper evaluates the Swynnerton Plan to offer recommendations for the creation and implementation of a sustainable agricultural policy in Kenya.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study utilised a descriptive literature review methodology to conduct research and analyse data. This approach involves systematically identifying, collecting, and evaluating written materials on a specific topic in order to identify patterns or trends. According to King and He (2006), the rigour of this method can vary, from selecting a representative sample of relevant published works to analysing them to draw logical conclusions. One advantage of this type of review is gaining insights from different perspectives (Paré, Trudel, Jaana & Kitsiou, 2015: 184). As such, the paper employed a descriptive literature review to analyse, evaluate, and synthesize all relevant studies on the Swynnerton Plan and Kenya's agricultural policy. This method was chosen to conduct a comprehensive, critical, and transparent assessment of previous research to understand the current discourse on the subject. The study identified, analysed, and examined key themes and trends, drawing conclusions from the existing literature that was reviewed and analysed.

In framing the study, the paper applied the systems model. This model as proposed by Easton (1965) views policy process as a political system reacting to the environment's demands. Easton (1965) defines a political system as a compilation of diverse yet interrelated institutions and activities. It is the amalgamation of these institutions and activities that ultimately culminate in the formulation of policy decisions. Consequently, various environments play a role in the decision-making process by means of their demands and feedback (Hanumanthappa, 2023: 14).

Demands are requests made by individuals or groups in order to meet their requirements. Support is provided when individuals or groups acknowledge decisions made by the political system in meeting these requests. Outside interests, such as pressure groups and consumer groups, provide inputs into the policy process. These inputs are then converted into policies or outputs. Feedback is used to assess the advantages and disadvantages of these policies. Errors in policies can be corrected through feedback. (Hanumanthappa, 2023: 15). From the above, systems model in policy analysis can be used in two main ways. It can be used to understand what is going on when policy is being made (systems analysis of policy). It can also be used to generate concepts and ideas when making recommendations for enactment of new policies (Hanumanthappa, 2023: 15).

The term 'policy' in this paper refers to a detailed statement that outlines future goals, objectives, and the methods to achieve them (Hanumanthappa. 2023: 15). According to this definition, policy formulation is the government's process of identifying, evaluating, and creating strategies to tackle societal challenges or problems. This process involves different steps, such as identifying issues, setting objectives, creating guidelines, deciding on actions, carrying out implementation, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes (Hanumanthappa. 2023: 15). In most cases, the process of policy creation begins with a thorough examination of the obstacles and requirements related to the issue at hand.

This examination includes evaluating the available resources, understanding the viewpoints of different stakeholders, and exploring potential solutions. The next stage in policy development entails conducting a detailed analysis of the issue and possible solutions (Hanumanthappa. 2023: 15). In essence, policy formulation, as discussed in this paper, is a complex process that involves identifying and analysing problems, considering various solutions, making decisions, implementing actions, and evaluating the results. The use of the system model helps visualise the policy process as transforming inputs into policy outputs and eventually into outcomes. Reflecting on the Swynnerton Plan is crucial as it allows for the examination of past trends in the agricultural sector to evaluate the effectiveness of subsequent agricultural policies.

### **3. COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND ITS IMPACT (1903 - 1963)**

In the first half of the 20th century, the colonial administration in Kenya established a two-tiered agricultural system consisting of European and African sectors. The primary objective of the colonial government was to encourage European settlers to engage in commercial farming in order to boost productivity and meet the effective occupation stipulations of the Berlin conference of 1884/1885. As a result, the colonial authorities provided incentives such as inexpensive land and African labour to attract European settler farmers (Oloo, 2020: 3). Significant financial resources were allocated by the government towards providing logistical and technical support to European settler farmers. However, African farmers were intentionally marginalised by the colonial government, rendering them economically subordinate and reliant on European settlers (Odhiambo et al., 2020: 5).

Due to state bias, settler farming experienced significant growth, particularly post-World War I, leading to an increase in agricultural exports in Kenya. The prosperity of settler agriculture, however, was built on the exploitation of thousands of African labourers who were forced to work for low wages on European-owned farms (Odhiambo, et al., 2020:5). African households were burdened with heavy taxes in order to generate additional funds for the development of transportation and other services for settler farmers. The colonial government further supported the settlers by establishing favourable tariffs and railway rates. Unfortunately, African farmers were restricted from growing lucrative cash crops such as coffee (Oloo, 2020: 3).

Despite the government's preference for settler agriculture, African household production increased during World War I and continued to grow in the 1920s, driven by the need to support African families. Although both European and African agriculture progressed during the 1920s, the colonial dual agricultural economy suffered due to poor crop yields resulting from extended droughts and locust invasions (Ajwang, et al., 2020:5). The situation worsened with the global Great Depression in the 1930s, leading to the collapse of the international market for agricultural raw materials. Consequently, many European farmers either scaled back their production or completely abandoned agriculture (Ajwang et al., 2020:6).

At the same time, African farmers faced significant crop failure and low prices in the domestic market, leading to a decrease in colonial state revenue. In response, the colonial government revised its agricultural policy to bolster African agricultural production (Nyanchoga & Lilechi, 2020: 18). These initiatives included incentives for Africans to

increase their production to meet the rising demand for food due to the Second World War and to prevent future food shortages caused by drought (Nyanhoga et al., 2020: 18). The government's support for African agriculture was also geared towards ensuring food security and enforcing measures for soil conservation.

The government's strict implementation of food security and soil conservation policies faced resistance from African peasant farmers, who expressed their discontent through various means, including widespread opposition to farming practices and acts of political aggression (Odhiambo et al., 2020: 5). Consequently, African leaders began to doubt the efficacy of agricultural conservation policies and urged farmers to ignore them. Additionally, they called for the elimination of existing conservation initiatives (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1946: 2). As a result of these protests, the colonial government initiated a fresh agricultural policy.

The new policy was implemented in order to motivate African households to enhance their agricultural methods with the main goal of avoiding food shortages by diversifying crops. Besides growing maize, African households were encouraged to cultivate cassava, sweet potatoes, sorghum, and beans (North Nyanza District, 1949: 2). The agricultural department also aimed to boost farm production by promoting mixed farming. Veterinary officers took on an individualistic approach to carrying out food security and soil conservation measures. This strategy was focused on introducing improved farming techniques to the African population through "progressive or better farmers" (North Nyanza District, 1949: 3).

A progressive farmer had to demonstrate to agricultural and veterinary officials that he had followed a structured crop rotation, practiced effective animal husbandry, and implemented soil conservation methods (North Nyanza District, 1949: 3). Those farmers who met these criteria were recognised with a certificate for excellence in agriculture and animal husbandry, and were classified as progressive or better farmers. Certified progressive farmers were given the opportunity to request farming equipment and supplies from the African District Councils (ADC) at discounted rates. Additionally, African farmers were permitted to sell their crops directly to the Maize and Produce Inspection Centres. Registered progressive or better farmers were also entitled to receive farm extension services and educational visits from agricultural officers, participate in educational trips to European farms, and receive a bonus of Ksh.2.10 for each maize bag produced (Kungu, Chacha & Gichobi, 2022: 37). Despite the assistance provided, African farmers continued to advocate for more support from the government. Specifically, progressive or better African farmers sought permission to cultivate high-value exportable cash crops such as arabica coffee (Kungu et al., 2022: 37).

The consistent pressure from African farmers to cultivate coffee, along with the goal of winning the support of more progressive farmers in following the colonial government's agricultural policies, had positive outcomes. In February 1949, the colonial government, under the guidance of the Director of Agriculture, "announced the permission for African farmers to grow arabica coffee in appropriate regions" (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1949: 1). As a result of this policy change, "colonial agricultural officers initiated the growing of arabica coffee in parts of Central and Nyanza Provinces in 1951" (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 2). Initially, the planting of arabica coffee was only allowed for certified progressive African farmers who owned a minimum of seven acres of suitable farmland.

The reduction of the minimum acreage for coffee growing to four acres in 1953 due to protests from Africans did not fully address the issue of land fragmentation, particularly in the central province. Consequently, more peasant farmers with small land parcels continued to protest for further reduction in the required acreage for coffee cultivation. This led to an increase in protests against colonial agricultural policies in the mid-1950s (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 2). These protests, along with the Mau Mau uprising, prompted the government to become more attentive to the agricultural needs of Africans. The Mau Mau rebellion, spearheaded by African Second World War veterans, aimed to challenge the colonial government's land and labor policies, as well as its political repression

and discrimination. The central demand of the Mau Mau movement was the restitution of “stolen” land and the establishment of self-governance. (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 3).

In 1953, African protests led to a reduction in the minimum acreage required for coffee growing to four acres, but due to land fragmentation, many farmers still did not qualify, particularly in the central province (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955:3). Despite this change, small peasant farmers with limited land continued to protest for further reductions in the required acreage for coffee cultivation. Therefore, the protests against colonial agricultural policies increased in the mid-1950s (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 4). These protests, alongside the emergence of the Mau Mau uprising, prompted the government to become more attentive to the agricultural needs of Africans (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 4).

The Mau Mau rebellion was a militant nationalist movement led by African veterans of the Second World War who fought against the colonial government's land and labour policies, as well as political repression and discrimination. The primary demand of Mau Mau was the return of “stolen” land and the establishment of self-government (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1955: 5). The African grievances against the colonial government came to a breaking point in 1952, when the demands for the return of African land and constitutional reforms took precedence over calls for independence (Kungu et al. 2022:38). Consequently, the Mau Mau revolt resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency in Kenya. The revolt pressured the colonial government to reconsider its approach to the country's political economy (Kungu et al., 2022: 38). It became evident that Kenya could not remain a white man's country and that the colony's stability relied on the establishment of a multiracial government.

In 1952, African grievances against the colonial government reached a breaking point when calls for the return of African land and constitutional reforms became more important than demands for independence (Kungu et al. 2022:38). This led to the Mau Mau revolt and the declaration of a state of emergency in Kenya. The revolt forced the colonial government to rethink its handling of the country's political economy (Kungu et al., 2022: 38). It was clear that Kenya could not continue to be dominated by white people and that the stability of the colony depended on the establishment of a multiracial government.

The social, economic, and political changes in Kenya during the 1950s forced the colonial regime to address challenges that impeded the development of African agricultural sector (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 9). As a result, the colonial government introduced new policies to increase the productivity of African agriculture (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 9). For instance, in 1954, the government introduced the Swynnerton Plan and allocated £5 million for its implementation.

#### **4. THE SWYNNERTON PLAN**

The Swynnerton Plan was named after Roger J. M Swynnerton, a senior agricultural officer in colonial Kenya who was responsible for its creation. The plan played a crucial role in shaping Kenya's modern agricultural policy framework. Out of all the post-war colonial development plans that focused on boosting production of goods and raw materials through government intervention, Plan was the most comprehensive. (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954:9). It increased the government's involvement in planning by...

- a) combining and enclosing land holdings;
- b) implementing personal land ownership systems;
- c) offering financial services and banking services; and
- d) promoting the continual cultivation of profitable crops and enhancing livestock breeding (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 9).

The Plan aimed to assist African farmers in earning income from their land by shifting from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture. The colonial administration sought to create “a stable African landowning class that could

participate in cultivating cash crops, a sector previously dominated by white farmers” (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 21). As a result, the Plan aimed to foster a new African middle class living in rural areas to prevent resistance from African peasants, such as during the Mau Mau uprising (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954:21). The colonial government hoped that this new approach to African agriculture would deter future rebellions and enhance economic and political stability in Kenya (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 21).

Moreover, the Plan aimed to promote the adoption of modern land use techniques among African farmers to enhance their productivity. Goals were set for farm incomes and efforts were made to offer assistance in all aspects of farm planning to achieve these objectives. The provision of water, financial aid, and access to markets for agricultural products were identified as key means of providing (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954:21). Despite this, the primary focus of the agricultural department remained on safeguarding soil conservation requirements and improving the productivity of existing farms in areas where land constraints limited agricultural potential (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 49).

The Plan, therefore, encouraged agricultural officers to teach Africans about innovative farming methods to enhance the production of cash crops for exports (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 49). Importantly, the Swynnerton Plan enabled progressive or better farmers to participate in cash crop cultivation, with arabica coffee being the most popular choice. Beginning in 1954, Africans were permitted to cultivate tea for the first time (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 49).

The department of agriculture not only promoted modern farming methods but also took significant steps to combat the issue of widespread land degradation in African settlements. Techniques such as building gabions, tree planting, and terracing were implemented to conserve soil. However, many African farmers were hesitant to adopt these measures due to their focus on cash crop production (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 49). African farmers failed to see the connection between soil conservation and high crop yields. The Department of Agriculture noted,

a strong desire among farmers to grow more cash crops, particularly coffee and tea. Unfortunately, this desire for crop improvement did not translate into proper land usage or soil conservation, leading to a decline in soil quality (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 50).

Consequently, until independence, African farmers were mainly concerned with growing profitable cash crops, even at the expense of their food security and soil conservation. African farmers transitioned to independence with the belief that the full implementation of the Swynnerton Plan would enable them to generate more income from their their farm holdings.

## 5. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study suggest that the Swynnerton Plan resulted in significant changes in Kenya (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954:49). These changes included alterations in the land tenure system, agricultural production and marketing, and overall management of the agricultural sector as outlined in this section as follows:

- a) The Swynnerton plan contributed to the coordination of the agricultural sector in Kenya, which had previously been segregated by race. According to the plan, both African and European settler agriculture were deemed crucial for economic development, leading the government to support and organise both sectors.
- b) Beginning in the late 1950s, land reforms in Kenya were initiated based on the proposals of the Swynnerton plan. The communal land tenure system was gradually transformed to individual ownership through activities such as adjudication, consolidation, demarcation, and registration of land holdings. The government believed that the individual land ownership system would allow African farmers to adopt modern farming techniques.

- c) Following the implementation of the Swynnerton Plan, the Department of Agriculture provided extension services to African farmers. Extension officers encouraged farmers to grow new crop varieties using fertilizers to enhance crop yields.
- d) The Swynnerton Plan enabled African farmers to access credit facilities for purchasing farm inputs by allowing them to use their land title deeds as collateral for agricultural loans.
- e) The Department of Agriculture established research stations to promote the development of modern farming techniques and crop varieties suitable for different ecological zones in Kenya. These agricultural research centers were also utilised to educate African farmers on new farming methods.
- f) The Plan resulted in the reinforcement of agricultural institutions, statutory boards, and the establishment of new ones to support African farmers in land registration, market their produce, and adopt new crops.
- g) Through the adoption of the Plan, the colonial government introduced marketing policies that allowed progressive African farmers to access both domestic and international markets for cash crops (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1954: 49).

## 6. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Since gaining independence, the primary goal of the Ministry of Agriculture in Kenya has been to enhance agricultural productivity and profitability. To achieve this, the government has focused on promoting sustainable land use and farming practices (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 18). However, despite these efforts, the agricultural sector in Kenya continues to face numerous challenges that have contributed to the impoverishment of households dependent on farming, similar to the colonial era (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 18). These challenges include;

- a) insufficient budget allocation for agricultural development;
- b) limited access to agricultural extension services;
- c) inadequate adoption of modern farming technology;
- d) high costs of farm inputs;
- e) widespread adulteration of agricultural products;
- f) lack of credit facilities for farmers;
- g) difficulties in marketing agricultural produce;
- h) crop losses before and after harvest due to lack of value addition;
- i) soil degradation from outdated agricultural methods;
- j) land fragmentation;
- k) inappropriate regulatory frameworks;
- l) high taxes on farm inputs and exports;
- m) inadequate transportation infrastructure; and
- n) absence of a cohesive land policy (Republic of Kenya, 2021: 11).

The obstacles to agricultural productivity in Kenya today mirror those that the Swynnerton Plan aimed to tackle in order to improve agricultural output. It was hoped that after gaining independence, the government would build on the success of the plan by enacting policies that would further boost agricultural productivity. However, it seems that policymakers in the agricultural sector in Kenya have overlooked the teachings of the Swynnerton Plan, leading to persistent challenges that hinder agricultural productivity for small-scale farmers in the country.

## 7. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that both the National and County governments should take inspiration from the Swynnerton Plan and create a comprehensive agricultural policy to tackle the current challenges facing the sector. The proposed policy should focus on the following areas:

- a) addressing historical land issues such as land fragmentation and degradation by implementing a new land policy that prioritises soil conservation. The process of land registration should be extended to all Kenyan citizens to help them maximise the productivity of their land holdings;
- b) supporting and incentivising small-scale farmers to engage in profitable commercial farming.
- c) empowering farmers to establish cooperatives that can provide them with improved services in production, processing, and marketing of their agricultural products;
- d) enhancing institutional frameworks to promote agriculture for both local consumption and export;
- e) enhancing regulatory frameworks, such as revising taxation policies for agricultural products to boost the competitiveness of local produce in domestic and international markets; and
- f) increasing funding for agricultural research activities.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Swynnerton Plan, considered the most comprehensive agrarian policy in colonial Kenya, brought about a significant change in the agricultural sector by putting an end to racial discrimination against African farmers. The implementation of the Plan resulted in Progressive African farmers benefiting from individual land ownership, extension services, new crop varieties, and access to credit facilities. This enabled them to enhance both subsistence and cash crop production. The lessons learned from the Plan could be valuable in informing agricultural policy development at both national and county levels of government in Kenya. Given that a large number of farmers in Kenya have small plots of land, it is suggested that the government should focus on adopting small-scale farmer-centred strategies to improve food security and promote soil conservation in the country.

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