J. of Modern African Studies, 40, 2 (2002), pp. 313–320. © 2002 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Printed in the United Kingdom

Reply to van Donge

Stefano Ponte*

Van Donge's comment on my reassessment of agrarian change on the Uluguru Mountains, Tanzania, raises a number of issues that go beyond the specificities of the location under scrutiny. Before dealing with these, however, let me restate my argument, which van Donge has reconstructed only selectively. In my article (Ponte 2001a), I argued that rural households are not 'trapped in decline' on the Uluguru Mountains, as depicted in previous literature. Although agriculture is not going through an easy transition in the area, and some options are becoming more limited, others are being more skilfully utilised. On the Uluguru Mountains, land scarcity is the main feature of agriculture; deforestation and soil erosion are major problems; and inputs have become increasingly expensive. Under these circumstances, the main ways households can improve their quality of life – short of leaving the area altogether, and in addition to relying on remittances from outside – are to expand land cultivated in other locations, to experiment with alternative farming systems, and to increase non-farm incomes. I observed that Uluguru households were doing all of these in the mid-1990s, and that their income levels and housing characteristics had improved. This was intriguing and challenging to me, since farmers' adaptations to changing markets had not led to higher incomes in other areas that I had researched in Tanzania. Finally, I suggested that economic diversification can play an important role in improving rural livelihoods, but that this process is more likely to take place in locations with well-established economic ties and relatively good access to major markets.

Van Donge has a variety of problems with my argument. These can be grouped around three main themes: (1) issues of methodology; (2) a perceived misunderstanding of his argument; and (3) the impact of liberalisation. Due to space limitations, in my reply to van Donge I deal with these larger themes. A more detailed response covering specific evidence and technicalities is available from this author and has been sent to van Donge.

METHODOLOGY

In his comment, van Donge argues that 'getting to know the poor and understand their social practices … requires more intensive and long-term research – than RRA and surveys' (van Donge 2002: 309). I could not agree more with van Donge on this point, and I am befuddled by the fact that he seems to represent my work as 'short-term', placing

* Centre for Development Research, Gammel Kongevej 5, 1610 Copenhagen V, Denmark.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it in the same category of large-scale surveys and Participatory Poverty Assessments that have been carried out by the World Bank in the last decade. As I explain in a brief methodological appendix at the end of my article (Ponte 2001a: 96), I carried out eighteen months of fieldwork for the research project under which the Uluguru Mountains material was collected. Of course, having studied six villages in two rural districts, this meant that I did not spend the whole time on the Uluguru Mountains, but then what does 'long-term study' mean for van Donge?

Furthermore, van Donge seems to conceive of only one concept of 'survey'. From the point of view of needing 'intensive contact with the people studied' (van Donge 2002: 304), does it make a difference whether a survey covers thousands of households and is carried out in the format of a questionnaire by 'enumerators', or whether a small number of households are interviewed by the author using a widely understood language in the area (Swahili), through repeated visits and by talking to various members of each household? Does a closed-answer questionnaire format yield the same insights as a partly open-ended and flexible 'interview guide' such as the one I used? My experience in carrying out my 'survey' in the six villages was that most of the interview time was spent on discussing issues that were not pre-formatted in the guide, or that were not even in it at all. Therefore, the survey was instrumental in generating not only some quantitative material but also a wealth of qualitative material, including oral statements on the history of agrarian change in the area. Because interviews were conducted primarily in people's homes, I was also able to assess directly some of the simplest indicators of wealth, such as the type of roofing, or the material used for the walls of the house. A visit to the homestead was often coupled with a visit to the fields, which ended up as an informal conversation over agro-ecological conditions and changes in farming systems. Interestingly, van Donge's material on agricultural decline on the Uluguru Mountains was also partially based on a household survey (van Donge 1992a, 1993).

On the issue of using RRAs, is it the 'rapid' part in its label that transforms a research project into a 'short-term' one? Are RRAs not suitable to inform the researcher on how to select the issues that are at the heart of the people in a specific location, allowing a fine-tuning of the interview guide used for a survey, helping to learn more about local history, agricultural practices, and perceived problems with markets and prices? On their own, RRAs certainly cannot provide material for the precise formulation of the history of a community, which was in any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

case outside the scope of my article. However, they do provide valuable insights on changing economic and social relations, especially if triangulated with information available from previous literature (of which there is plenty on the Uluguru Mountains), in-depth interviews carried out for the survey, interviews with other informants (shopkeepers, extension officers, local administrators), and informal conversations.

This eclectic methodological approach allowed me to collect different types of evidence that not only supported each other but also interrogated each other. I carried out ethnographic research in the sense that I spent considerable time in the locality, did the research myself, and spoke fluent Swahili. My primarily inductive research design meant that I did not go to the field limiting myself to the parameters of a pre-designed survey or to narrowly defined hypotheses.

Within the strict limitations of space imposed in this journal, it is obvious that details on methodology sometimes have to be spared, and perhaps the one page I did include in my article did not do justice to the complexities of fieldwork. However, if interested, one could have checked the facts in other publications (for example, in Ponte 1998), or where I had more space to explain my methodology in detail (Ponte 1999b). The 'precise quantitative insights' that van Donge talks about in my work (van Donge 2002: 303) have been triangulated with other sources (including RRAs) and are seldom left to speak for themselves. If one reads my article from which van Donge drew the title of his response (see Ponte 1999a), it becomes clear that questioning the validity of statistical sources, especially large-scale surveys and data collected by governments through routine administrative procedures, is part of my work. Therefore, questioning my approach on methodological grounds is counterproductive for van Donge, as we share more ground than he portrays in his comment.

IN DECLINE OR NOT?

The second ground on which van Donge (2002: 303) challenges my portrayal of the Uluguru Mountains under market reforms is by arguing that I did not understand that he was explaining 'how economic decline can be caused by internal dynamics in African societies'. He argues that he found 'three distinct patterns of social practices sustained by cultural beliefs that kept people in decline' on the Uluguru Mountains (ibid.: 306): (1) growing maize and the ideal of food self-sufficiency; (2) distrust and individualism in trading,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which blocked effective capital accumulation; and (3) land conflicts. Interestingly, I did not challenge these points in my article. First, I also found that households kept cultivating maize for food security reasons (Ponte 2001a: 89). In the face of increasing fertiliser prices, fertiliser use on maize in Langali declined less than in other areas of Tanzania where maize is cultivated also for commercial purposes.[1] This makes no sense if one follows the 'economic models' of behaviour that van Donge thinks I am attached to, and indeed it is an indicator that the ideal of food self-sufficiency is still important for the Waluguru. The continuing importance of food security, however, does not preclude farmers from using other channels to raise the cash they need. Secondly, I never said that Uluguru traders were a monolithic group, but just that – through their contacts and travels – they may have facilitated an early diversification in off-farm activities after liberalisation back in the home area. Third, I never argued that there were fewer land disputes in the area, but only that commercial land transactions seemed to have become more common in the 1990s than they were in the 1980s.[2]

What I did challenge was whether rural livelihoods were in 'decline' on the Uluguru Mountains or not – independently from the continuation of maize cultivation, individualism and land conflicts. In his work, van Donge found many 'poverty traps'. I found increasing incomes, assets and better housing characteristics. However, I also pointed out that poorer farmers, especially those relying exclusively on agriculture for their livelihoods, were more likely to have become marginalised. He found no clear processes of accumulation in the 1980s. I found increasing economic differentiation in the 1990s. He portrayed a picture of involution on the Uluguru Mountains on the basis of the fact that 'the mainstay of agricultural enterprises remains maize cultivation' (van Donge 1992a: 90) and that even though yields are declining, 'people refuse to contemplate switching to other crops other than maize and using the cash earned from such crops to buy more food' (ibid.). I found a set of new or rediscovered combinations in Uluguru farming systems, which often included commercial activities. Therefore, my evidence pointed to an interpretation of livelihoods that were not in 'decline'. If they were not in 'decline', then they could not have been 'trapped' either.

I found several 'areas of resourcefulness' that Uluguru households tapped into, including diversification into off-farm activities, cultivation of lands in the surrounding plains on a seasonal basis,[3] the increased cultivation of fruit trees, the adoption of potato cultivation and pig rearing *on a commercial basis*, and the renting of vegetable plots.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The fact that some innovations were first taken into the area from outside (or by outsiders) does not delegitimise the characterisation that their adoption (or re-adoption) is a sign of resourcefulness. There are certainly plenty of examples of development interventions that have failed because of lack of uptake. No matter where an innovation comes from, resourceful people make the most of it.

What I did not do, and here van Donge has a point, was investigate changes in socio-cultural factors behind these changes, which was not part of my research objectives. This, however, does not mean that I did not understand his argument, just that the evidence I collected in the 1990s did not indicate the same process of decline as he had portrayed when talking about the situation in the area in the 1980s. Social practices sustained by cultural beliefs can indeed mediate livelihood opportunities, but they are not fixed in time. In some historical periods, they take a long time to form or disappear; in other periods, change takes place more quickly. If internal forces are the main cause of economic decline, as van Donge argues, then something could have changed in social and cultural practices on the Uluguru Mountains. In addition to potential changes within the socio-cultural fabric of Uluguru society, outside forces may have played a more important role than van Donge believes. The dynamics of change in any African society can rarely be attributed exclusively to internal or external forces.

LIBERALISATION

Van Donge counters my argument that liberalisation seems to have led to higher incomes, especially through the rise of off-farm incomes. Again, he infers that my approach provides only limited insight because it is fundamentally the same as that carried out by the World Bank through its poverty surveys. He argues that the results of these surveys are not reliable because they are designed and 'used to bolster arguments for further liberalisation' (van Donge 2002: 308). Therefore, he implies that I fall into the same trap, and that I subscribe to World Bank-inspired economic models and assumptions on behaviour. Finally, van Donge argues that I assume an immediate and effective response to liberalisation (van Donge 2002: 309, fn 1).

This is a gross misinterpretation of my article and of my work on liberalisation in general. If anything, I have been critical of structural adjustment and of the evidence used by International Financial Institutions to justify further reforms in African countries (see Ponte 1995, 2000b, 2001b), and in Tanzania specifically (see Ponte 1998,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1999a, 2000a, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, I agree with van Donge that the realities of agrarian change and rural livelihoods under economic reform are complex, and that there is no single economic model that can explain this complexity. I also recognise that the link between liberalisation and the response to it is not even, either in time or geographically.

As for the specific Uluguru case, my survey evidence shows that not only incomes, but also other indicators of well being (such as the proportion of houses with tin roofs, plastered walls and cement floors; see Ponte 2001a: 91), were generally higher in Langali than in the other locations where I conducted research, and that they were increasing over time. The main thrust of my argument was that these incomes increased through off-farm rather than farm income, and that in focusing too much on agriculture, we miss an important aspect of rural livelihoods. This does not mean that all households that diversified were successful, or that they fell into a particular 'behavioural model'. Indeed, I pointed out that some households did not diversify in order to maximise profit or diversify risk, but rather in order 'to keep the money circulating' (see also Ponte 2000a).

My point was that in *this particular location* the effects of liberalisation could be reasonably interpreted as positive; therefore, I attempted to identify the factors behind this trajectory. Only by reflecting on 'successes' (where there are any), can we understand the dynamics of the (many) failures of market reforms in Africa. I was very careful to point out that these results did not represent realities of liberalisation in other areas in Tanzania or elsewhere (Ponte 2001a: 92–5). I find van Donge's remarks particularly surprising in light of his own recently co-authored article on adjustment in Uganda (Dijkstra & van Donge 2001). In this article, *on the exclusive basis of official statistics*, he finds positive and important supply responses in Ugandan agriculture, and argues that these 'responses can be clearly related to liberalisation' (ibid.: 852).

❀ ❀ ❀

In his comment, van Donge argues that 'ultimately, this debate is not about methods, but about images that are laid over Africa' (van Donge 2002: 309). Indeed, he is reminding us of the epistemological 'truth' that all researchers, regardless of their methodology, lay their own image over Africa. Unfortunately, he has picked the wrong person to accuse of 'merely making an ideological point rather than debating issues in an informed manner' (ibid.: 2). I have no 'ideological' interest in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

showing that liberalisation 'works' and that households are successful in their quest for prosperity under free markets. If anything, other work of mine has shown the contrary. Curiously, both van Donge and I share a healthy criticism of secondary sources, but use them when they are reasonably reliable. We both carry out 'long-term' fieldwork, when possible, and acknowledge the complexity of reactions to policy change. What divides us, in the case of the Uluguru Mountains, is that van Donge has looked at the area 'from within' during the 1980s, and I concentrated on external influences on the local rural economy during the first half of the 1990s. If van Donge or I or anyone else did follow-up research on the Uluguru Mountains, we would probably observe internal dynamics and external influences confirming many of the tendencies earlier documented, but also more recent trends indicative of the current circumstances. African rural areas, such as the Uluguru Mountains, do not stand still once the researcher departs from them.

NOTES

1. Van Donge accuses me of overlooking poverty when I suggest that fertiliser use is spreading and that I do not provide a proper indication of this trend (van Donge 2001: 3). I welcome the possibility to add more evidence. I have already shown that the proportion of households using some fertiliser increased (Ponte 2001a: 87). My survey also indicates an increase of fertiliser use on maize per household in Langali village from the mid-1980s to 1990/91, when prices were highly subsidised. The survey results also indicate a decline of 9 per cent between 1990/91 and 1994/95. Between these two seasons, the average price of fertiliser had increased by over 200 per cent. However, if we calculated use of fertilised per acre of maize, there was hardly any change between 1990/91 and 1994/95. If we compare these data with the situation in other Tanzanian locations, it becomes even clearer that farmers on the Uluguru Mountains are sticking to fertiliser use for maize more than in other areas. The aggregate result for the six villages I covered (three in Songea Rural District and three in Morogoro Rural Districts) shows, between 1990/91 and 1994/95, a decline of 27 per cent in fertiliser use on maize per household, and a decline of 26 per cent in fertiliser use per acre.

2. Obtaining information on commercial land transactions is tricky in some locations in Tanzania. In the six villages I researched, land markets are developing across the board. Purchasing and hiring of land are seemingly on the increase. However, in some locations no one would openly acknowledge that commercial land transactions are taking place because villagers still officially proclaim that 'the land is property of the government'. This is fairly common, for example, in Songea Rural District. On the other hand, in some Morogoro villages even elders acknowledge that land sales and rents are normal happenings, and information on prices and modalities of land transactions is widespread. In Langali, I found that people were talking openly about commercial land transactions during focus groups, but not during the interviews I carried out for the survey. They mentioned it mostly at the end of the interview – when I had finished writing on my interview guide – or in other informal conversations. They almost always referred to land transactions in terms of 'people do this all the time', but never in relation to their own practices. Therefore, I decided not to use my survey data on this aspect in my article, but to rely instead on qualitative statements. I did not imply, however, that increased commercial transactions led to fewer land disputes.

3. One of the villages covered in my research was Mlali, which is at the foot of the Uluguru Mountains, and where many Waluguru come to cultivate maize on a seasonal basis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press

REFERENCES

Dijkstra, G. & J. K. van Donge. 2001. 'What does the "show case" show? Evidence and lessons from adjustment in Uganda', *World Development* 29, 5: 841–63.

Ponte, S. 1995. 'The World Bank and "Adjustment in Africa"', *Review of African Political Economy* 66: 539–58.

Ponte, S. 1998. 'Fast crops, fast cash: market liberalization and rural livelihoods in Songea and Morogoro Rural Districts, Tanzania', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33, 2: 316–48.

Ponte, S. 1999a. 'Trading images: discourse and statistical evidence on agricultural adjustment in Tanzania (1986–1995)', in P. Forster & S. Maghimbi, eds., *Agrarian Economy, State and Society in Contemporary Tanzania*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 3–25.

Ponte, S. 1999b. 'Farmers and Markets: policy reform, agrarian change and rural livelihoods in Tanzania (1986–1996)', Ph.D. thesis. Norwich: University of East Anglia.

Ponte, S. 2000a. 'From social negotiation to contract: shifting strategies of farm labor recruitment in Tanzania under market liberalization', *World Development* 28, 6: 1017–30.

Ponte, S. 2000b. 'Changes in output markets and processing', in E. Friis-Hansen, ed. *Agricultural Policy in Africa after Adjustment*, CDR Policy Study Series. Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research.

Ponte, S. 2001a. 'Trapped in decline? Reassessing agrarian change and economic diversification on the Uluguru Mountains, Tanzania', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39, 1: 81–100.

Ponte, S. 2001b. 'Policy reforms, market failures and input use in African smallholder agriculture', *European Journal of Development Research* 13, 1: 1–29.

Ponte, S. 2002a. *Farmers and Markets in Tanzania: how market reforms affect rural livelihoods*. Oxford: James Currey, and Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ponte, S. 2002b. 'Brewing a bitter cup? Deregulation, quality and the re-organization of coffee marketing in East Africa', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 2, 2: 248–72.

van Donge, J. K. 1992. 'Agricultural decline in Tanzania: the case of the Uluguru Mountains', *African Affairs* 91, 362: 73–94.

van Donge, J. K. 1993. 'Trapped in Decline: a sociological analysis of economic life in Mgeta, Uluguru Mountains, Tanzania', Ph.D. thesis. Wageningen: Wageningen Agricultural University.

van Donge, J. K. 2002. 'Trading images? A comment on Ponte's reassessment of agrarian change in the Uluguru Mountains', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40, 2: 303–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X02003932 Published online by Cambridge University Press