

Refereed article

Commercialization versus De-intensification? Markets, Livelihoods, and Agricultural Change in Northern Pakistan

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Summary

Based on a case study in northern Pakistan, this paper investigates the complex processes of change that have reshaped local farming systems there in recent decades. In Pakistan, agricultural policies emphasize intensification and productivity growth as overarching, nationwide goals. In an empirical investigation of changing farming practices in the mountain district of Nagar, guided by an assemblage-theory perspective on agricultural change, the paper questions this lopsided view. The case study reveals a significant shift from subsistence- to market-oriented crop production in recent decades, but also an emerging tendency among farmers to invest less time and effort in sophisticated and productivity-enhancing practices — in other words, a certain de-intensification of the latter. These processes may seem contradictory, but make sense for local households who adapt their farming strategies to a changing social, political, and economic context. Following political reforms and major road improvements, new livelihood opportunities, lifestyles, and ideals have emerged in the community and contributed to a significant shift away from farming aspirations, despite a general process of agricultural commercialization. The paper concludes that processes of agricultural development cannot be adequately addressed by the narrowly defined productivity goals of related policies in Pakistan, as for smallholder farmers the maximization of production is not necessarily a priority. Instead, more holistic approaches are needed that focus on safeguarding the agricultural resource base while also supporting the aspiration of local farming households to diversify their livelihoods.

Keywords: agrarian change, intensification, commercial crop production, Gilgit-Baltistan, Karakoram, assemblage theory

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