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'Coercion or resilience? Expanding African commodity exports during the Great Depression'

Background. The Great Depression adversely affected livelihoods across the globe and induced widespread government responses. Between 1929 and 1934, commodity (minerals and agricultural) prices declined faster than prices of manufactured goods, worsening the terms of trade of commodity-specialized economies in Asia, Latin America and Africa. How did colonized producers and colonial states respond to such a shock? We investigate the impact of the Depression on export production, colonial coercion and social distress in eight British African colonies.[\[1\]](#)

Question. African commodity exports continued to expand during the 1930s, despite falling prices and deteriorating terms of trade. We explore two possible explanations for this “price-volume paradox”: 1) the *resilience hypothesis*: African producers voluntarily expanded their production for global markets to compensate for falling prices, at low opportunity cost. This hypothesis is consistent with the view that African producers operated below their production possibilities frontier and had large amounts of underutilized land and labour remained at their disposal. 2) the *coercion hypothesis*: African producers were pushed by colonial governments to expand production of export commodities to sustain colonial government finances and the flow of raw materials which underpinned the African colonial project.

Empirical strategy. We conduct a panel analysis of c. 250 districts from 1920 to 1939. We use colonial maps and trade statistics to reconstruct annual district-level commodity production volumes and values. We exploit spatial variation in annual district-level imprisonment rates to identify whether expanding commodity exports were driven by resilience or coercion. Imprisonment was an outcome of colonial coercive effort on the one hand, and social unrest and distress on the other. Fluctuations of imprisonment signifies intensified coercion, heightened distress, or both. This allows us to formulate and test the following predictions:

- If commodity production expansion was voluntary (the resilience hypothesis), we should not expect it to be associated with more coercion and/or distress, and thus imprisonment. Only in cases where Africans were unable to expand production (e.g. when resources were already fully committed or suitable ecology and infrastructure lacking), should we expect heightened distress. Therefore, *if production expansion was voluntary, we should expect imprisonment to spike more in areas with little or no expansion of export production.*
- If export production expansion was involuntary and enforced by colonial authorities (the coercion hypothesis), it should be associated with both increased colonial punitive effort and increased social distress (as producers were not free to allocate their resources in ways preferred and may see their welfare reduced). Therefore, *if production expansion was coerced, we should expect imprisonment to spike more in areas with considerable expansion of export production.*

Preliminary conclusions. Our first results suggests that districts with fast commodity expansion during the Depression also saw the most pronounced imprisonment spikes. This supports the coercion hypothesis. We still have substantial work to do in terms of disaggregating the commodity data, consider a range of control variables and exploit the qualitative historical record to refine our analysis.

[\[1\]](#) From east to west: Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Tanzania (Tanganyika and Zanzibar) and Kenya.