

A Green Revolution for Africa: disaster in the making

Ignorance is the night of the mind, but a night without moon or star. -Confucius

Introduction

A recent World Bank report caused ripples around the world because it blamed agrofuel production in the United States and Europe, speculative trading and food export bans as the main reasons for the steep rise in global food prices. The report concluded that these factors pushed up prices by a staggering 70-75%.(1). However, the World Bank report has only scratched the surface of what really lies at the heart of the current food crisis. A much more brutally frank appraisal is called for to dismantle the 'structural meltdown' brought about by policies such as the Green Revolution, which transformed food that is sacred, into a global commodity for speculation and bargaining. (2) Indeed, the widespread food riots have been precipitated by a growing dissatisfaction and frustration by many of the world's poor to the 'collateral' damage incurred by the globalising forces of capital. These very same forces are being galvanized to accelerate agricultural development in Asia and Latin America, and to resuscitate the agrarian sector in Africa. In other words the driving forces behind the 'new' green revolution in Africa.

When world leaders hastily gathered at the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) High Level Conference to respond to the global food crisis, they spewed out a dismal declaration (3) that continued to prescribe the customary promotion of technical and economic solutions such as the advancement of the 'new' green revolution in Africa. In the midst of the Conference, the three Rome based United Nation's institutions, namely, the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Food Programme (WFP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations' Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), to aggressively advance the Green Revolution push in Africa.

A distinctive underpinning of the propagation of the Green Revolution is the inherent tendency to view food shortages as a shortcoming of food supply rather than as a more complex phenomenon requiring a far more holistic and wide ranging understanding of why people go hungry.

The AGRA-led Green revolution is a threat to the richness of African traditional agriculture. It stands in sharp contrast to the many successful African alternatives in organic agriculture, sustainable agriculture, agro-forestry, pastoralism, integrated pest management, farmer-led plant breeding, sustainable watershed management and many other agroecological approaches.

At its core, the Green Revolution undermines Africa's food systems and food sovereignty: people's right to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

The Green Revolution

The Green Revolution refers to the development of high yielding varieties (HYVs) bred for a strong yield response to inorganic fertilizers and other chemical inputs. These HYVs are part of a technological package, consisting of inorganic fertilizers, pesticides and other chemical inputs. They are acclaimed as having greatly improved global agricultural production, thereby contributing to sustained food surpluses and eliminating the threat of hunger. (4)

The development of sterile hybrid seeds to replace naturally self-producing seed was one of the key steps in the process of capitalist accumulation in the agricultural sector. As long as seeds reproduced themselves it would be extremely difficult for capitalism to control the core component of the agricultural sector. Once the development of seeds had been removed from the farmer and seeds were no longer self-producing, the course of capitalist control of the agrarian sector was complete and seeds became a crucial component of the accumulation process. This element of control has been further accentuated through the production of Genetically Modified Organisms and the establishment of a more rigorous patenting and intellectual property rights regime.

The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s therefore facilitated the integration of a world agrarian system under the 'guise of addressing the question of national food security'. (5)

The problems associated with conventional and industrial agriculture, as epitomized by the Green Revolution entail the following: (6)

Agriculture has come to draw the inputs which it uses from more distant sources, both spatially and sectorally, to derive an increasing proportion of its energy supplies from non-renewable sources, to depend upon a more narrow genetic base and to have an increasing impact on the environment. This is particularly reflected in its heavy reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, its dependence upon subsidies and price support and its external costs such as threats to other species, environmental pollution, habitat destruction and risks to human health and welfare.

Indeed, the Green Revolution package is highly energy dependent, directly in the form of fuel for transport and machinery, and indirectly in the production of fertilisers and other inputs. Continuous and increasing utilisation of an energy intensive agricultural paradigm will not only drive up the cost of food production but will also contribute further to climate change.

The Green Revolution in Africa

The 'new' Green Revolution for Africa is a 'science based revolution' aimed at transforming 'backward' and 'inefficient' agriculture into a new vision of modernity. On 12 September 2006, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (7) ('Gates Foundation') launched their Green Revolution partnership titled

the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, AGRA is designed to help millions of small-scale farmers lift themselves out of poverty and hunger by significantly boosting farm productivity with Green Revolution type technologies. (8) To this end, the Gates Foundation has committed \$100 million and the Rockefeller Foundation, \$50 million for the next five years. (9)

The main focus of AGRA is on crop breeding in respect of which an ambitious 5-year target has been set to develop 100 new varieties from core crops such as maize, cassava, sorghum and millet. AGRA has been registered as a charitable organization in the US and serves as the pivotal administrative body, providing policy advocacy support and resource mobilization expertise, especially regarding the disbursements of the initial commitment of \$150 million.

In June 2007, former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan was appointed as the chairperson of AGRA. It is anticipated that one of Annan's primary roles will be to draw on his considerable political connections, extensive network and general clout to strongly advocate for global, regional and national policies to support AGRA and its programs. Already he has been able to solicit the direct support from the three Rome based UN agencies, the FOA, IFAD and the WFP. In terms of the MOU referred to above, specific agricultural intensification zones in selected African countries will be identified in order to accelerate food production.

Kofi Annan's AGRA is nothing but a philanthropic flagship of a large network of chemical-seed, fertilizer companies and Green Revolution institutions seeking to industrialize African agriculture. AGRA's high-profile campaign for a new Green Revolution is designed to attract private investment, enrol African governments, and convince African farmers to buy new seeds and fertilizers. AGRA is preparing researchers, institutions, and African farmers for the introduction of GMO crops, not only for rice, wheat and maize, but also for cassava, plantain and other African food crops. The ideology thus underpinning the entire AGRA as a package is to pave the way for the industrialization of African food crops, opening the door to large agribusiness to enter African agricultural systems and dominate.

Food Sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty was developed by La Via Campesina, a global peasant movement, and introduced into the public debate during the World Food Summit, held in Rome, Italy during 1996, as an alternative framework for food and agriculture. According to Via Campesina, the world is facing a historic clash between two models of economic, social and cultural development for the rural world: an agribusiness model of agricultural development within which the Green Revolution is located, and an alternative paradigm called food sovereignty which starts with the concept of economic and social human rights, which include the right to food. (10) Food sovereignty is concerned with political and economic rights for farmers as precondition for the attainment of food security.

The concept is increasingly gaining more support as the alternative political model for food, agriculture, fisheries and pastoralism. During February 2007, more than 500 representatives from more than 80 countries from organizations of peasants/family farmers, artisanal fisher folk, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest communities, women, youth, consumers and environmental and urban movements gathered together in the village of Nyéléni in Sélingué, Mali to strengthen a global movement for food sovereignty. Towards the end of 2007, another meeting of representing farmers', pastoralists, environmental, women, youth and development organizations from more than 150 participants from 25 African countries and 10 countries from other continents gathered at the Nyéléni center and pledged to seek African alternatives to AGRA's campaign for a new Green Revolution; alternatives that are locally rooted in local agroecosystems and struggles for food sovereignty. (11)

Much work is to be done at the national level to advance a campaign for African alternatives to AGRA's campaign and those of its consorts, for a new Green Revolution. These alternatives must be rooted in local agroecosystems and struggles for food sovereignty. Farmer to farmer learning and research, grassroots information campaigns, and policies that support agro-biodiversity and the rights of pastoralists, women farmers, and all small farmers are important pillars of such a campaign.

By Mariam Mayet, African Centre for Biosafety

[1] Biofuels major driver of food price rise-World Bank 28 July 2008. Reuters. <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N286150`6.htm>. Biofuels are prime cause of food crisis, says leaked report Aditya Chakroborty, July 3 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/jul/03/biofuels.renewableenergy>.

[2] GRAIN. Making a killing from the food crisis. April 2008. <http://www.grain.org/ing/?id=39>

[3] High Level Conference on World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy, in Rome 3-5 June 2008. Declaration of the high-level Conference on World Food Security: The challenges of climate change and society. (www.fao.org/foodclimate/hlc-home/en). See also, Neth Dano, Food Security Declaration weak on substance www.twinside.org.sg, www.biosafety-info.net

[4] International Food Policy Institute (IFPRI) (2002). Sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty: Green Revolution Cure of Blessing www.ifpri.org

[5] McMichael, P. (2004) 'Global Development and the Corporate Food Regime'. Symposium on New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development. XI World Congress of Rural Sociology. Trondheim.

[6] Rigby, D and Brown, S. (2007) 'Whatever Happened to Organic? Food, Nature and the Market for "Sustainable" Food'. Capitalism Nature Socialism. Vol. 18, No. 3.

[7] Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) is a Seattle based company founded in 2000, through the merger between the Gates Learning Foundation and the William H. Gates Foundation. The BMGF is the biggest charity foundation in the world. Foundation Factsheet <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/MediaCentre/FactSheet/default.htm>

[8] Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. <http://www.agra-alliance.org>

[9] OECD. Africa Partnership Forum www.oecd.org/dataoecd/37/1/39024069.pdf

[10] Via Campesina. (2002). Food Sovereignty. Flyer distributed at the World Food Summit + 5, Rome Italy.

[11] Outcome of conference at Nyeleni Centre in Selingue, Mali November 26-December 2, 2007.