

## Africa's Green Revolution 2.0: rejecting agribusiness, pesticides and GM greenwash

Chris Milton

28th May, 2011

**A pioneering campaign is challenging industrial agriculture in Africa, returning food sovereignty to the people and empowering women to lead a new movement that rejects the 'pesticide and loan culture' of the first Green Revolution. Chris Milton reports**

A revolutionary new initiative in African farming was launched earlier this year as part of the annual International Fair of Animal Resources (FIARA) in Dakar, Senegal. It draws together twelve rural women's networks from across the west African countries of Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Ghana into a campaign entitled 'Nous Sommes La Solution! Célébrons l'agriculture familiale' - 'We Are The Solution! A celebration of family farming.'

The campaign's aims include gathering together the best in African farming knowledge and technology, acting as a bulwark against the needless industrialisation of the continent's agriculture and facilitating the empowerment of women within rural communities.

It will run for three years during which it will focus on building capacity at grass roots level in both traditional agricultural knowledge and the ability of women to shoulder the responsibilities they've had to in recent years as effective leaders.

The need for a women-led agricultural campaign in Africa was first discussed during 2007 and plans for a west African organisation were formally laid out during a 2009 meeting of the Network of West African Peasant Producers (ROPPA).



A new movement is aiming to challenge the scourge of industrial agribusiness across Africa



### ECOLOGIST GREEN DIRECTORY

#### Safer Medicines Campaign

"Drug disasters in the past prompted new laws to protect the public but today the Government accepts this vast pharmaceutical carnage as a fact of life..."

[read more](#)



#### More articles about

food and agriculture | GM | food security | industrial farming | pesticides | fertilisers | investigations

Networks similar to ROPPA have been springing up across Africa recently, creating what Tanya Kerssen, Research Fellow at Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy and a major international supporter of We Are The Solution!, describes as 'a broad constellation of political alliances that form the growing African food sovereignty movement.'

### **New activism**

'What is astonishing,' she says 'is the great convergence of these movements that has occurred over the past few years.' We Are The Solution! is part of this convergence of small community based networks into larger campaigns, bringing a new activism to what was previously a higher level campaign.

However, despite this recent gathering of pace, the problems the movement seeks to solve date back nearly half a century. During the 1960s and 1970s the face of farming around the world was changed by a Green Revolution through which intensive farming, pesticides and fertilisers were introduced to countries in South America and Asia.

In the meantime, many African countries were encouraged to take out loans from the World Bank in order to modernise their agricultural economies and participate in the global commodity market. This modernisation saw the diversity of traditional farming methods replaced with monoculture cropping and countries' markets opened up to foreign food imports.

Danielle Nierenberg, co-director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing The Planet project, believes this approach was always going to be unsuccessful.

'World Bank projects set up people to fail by focussing on cash crops and commodities rather than traditional crops,' she says, explaining that small African farmers could never have competed on price with the heavily subsidised agro-industrial complexes elsewhere in the world.

The market liberalisation also meant traditional foods were undercut in price by cheap imports. So, when communities' crops failed to sell because they were too expensive, they were left with no food to eat and no income to buy food. International aid agencies stepped in but food sovereignty, the ability of a community to be in control of its own food and nutrition, had been lost. Rural communities became locked into a cycle of poverty compounded by climate change, unable to farm for a living and dependent on aid to survive.

### **Population growth**

However, the fact that Africa faces by far the largest population growth in the next 50 years has now led to a desire to reverse the chronic underinvestment in agriculture caused by market liberalisation. This will help to provide food security for the continent and therefore the world.

#### Related Articles

- [Why our growing taste for cheap Brazilian beef is devastating the Amazon](#)
- [Do indigenous peoples hold the key to tackling global hunger?](#)
- [What's the real environmental cost of the French baguette?](#)
- [Egypt's factory farming boom threatens stability of a hungry country](#)
- [The shocking cost of US 'mega-dairies'](#)

We Are The Solution! has the specific aim of re-establishing Africa's food sovereignty through the traditional agricultural species and techniques which have been sidelined for decades.

When it was launched in February, the campaign published a statement of intent, known as The Dakar Declaration, which outlines the initiative's aims and ambitions.

Chief among these is the rejection of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) in favour of an agroecological model of farming.

AGRA is global initiative funded by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations which has become one of the main players in this new push to develop African farmland. It takes its name from the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. However, while the original Green Revolution certainly increased production there is deep concern about whether it is the model Africa should be following.

'The Green Revolution was never meant to be a long term solution,' says Danielle Nierenberg. 'It definitely saved a lot of lives but the over use of pesticides has led to millions of deaths and the contamination of groundwater.'

Tanya Kerssen agrees: 'Farmers' organisations are very concerned about the long-term negative effects,' she says, giving ecological degradation, contamination or loss of local seeds, farmer indebtedness and the concentration of land and resources into fewer hands as examples.

### **Rejecting GM**

In addition, a new technology has since emerged which is also being championed by AGRA: genetically modified (GM) seed.

Like fertilisers in the original Green Revolution, GM seed is being hailed as a 'silver bullet' which will cure all Africa's agricultural problems. Many believe it was the over reliance on such cure-all technologies which led to the destruction of ecosystems and rural communities seen today. This is why The Dakar Declaration ends with the ringing cry 'No to GMOs, No to the patenting of life. No to agribusiness!'

However, We Are The Solution! is not a technology or investment free zone. The difference between AGRA and the agroecology The Dakar Declaration embraces is not what you use to improve farming, but how it's used.

Agroecology is a science driven blend of agronomy and ecology. Its foundation is the understanding that farmers gain specific knowledge through the generations about how to use their local ecosystems improve soil quality and combat pests.

It is this knowledge which is then used to drive technology and investment, in contrast to AGRA where the technology is used to drive farming practices.

An example Danielle Nierenberg cites is the ability of communities to store grain from one harvest as seed for the next crop. Some communities have perfectly adequate methods of seed storage, while in others they are prone to attack from mould and fungi.

One solution would be for the farmers to buy GM seed every year which had been made resistant to these mould and fungi. However, an alternative would be to invest in modern seed storage facilities within which the grain could be protected.

## **New business**

Danielle Nierenberg goes on to point out how this would have a profound impact upon local economies. 'Investing in these kinds of things brings better resilience both in agriculture and economics' she says. 'It creates new businesses, such as selling and storing seeds, and leads to a professionalisation of the agricultural community.'

Many of these arguments are highlighted in a recent report by Olivier de Schutter, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. In *Agroecology and the Right to Food* he argues that agroecology is the solution for Africa because it fulfils all three key objectives for food production:

- Meeting escalating needs: while both industrial agriculture and agroecology can be scaled up to produce more, cutting down on waste and redirecting food crops away from livestock feed and biofuels are likely to have a bigger impact;
- Increasing the benefits to smallholders first: agriculture is twice as effective at reducing poverty as any other industry, but only where local farmers are able to purchase from local suppliers;
- Preserving the ability to produce food from the same land in the future: avoiding, for example, the destruction of biodiversity, the pollution of soil and water sources, and the destabilising of markets.

The report concludes by recommending that countries should support decentralised organisations which are focussed upon the exchange of sustainable practices.

This is precisely what We Are The Solution! has been set up to do. The Dakar Declaration isn't just about protecting and enhancing the diversity of African farming practices. It also strongly emphasises the need to nurture and encourage the growing empowerment of women in rural Africa.

## **Empowering women**

Rural communities in Africa have been traditionally male dominated and women have often struggled to have their voice heard. This is now changing, sadly through the devastation AIDS has wrought and the way poverty is driving many men from their villages to seek work in the cities.

'Women are forced to take on more responsibilities,' explains Tanya Kerssen, 'While wielding little control over the land, resources and the products of their labour. So women do a lot with very little to feed their families and communities, and as such their empowerment is paramount to advancing African food sovereignty.'

Between 70 and 80 per cent of food produced in rural Africa is produced by women. We Are The Solution! seeks to bring networks of these women together, not only to share agricultural knowledge but also to share advice on gaining resources, influencing communities and becoming effective leaders.

'We Are The Solution! is a political call to action to engage in the structural transformation of local, national and global food systems,' says Tanya Kerssen. 'There is a spirit of discontent across the continent about African governments that are unaccountable to their people and beholden to foreign interests,' she continues. 'In sub Saharan Africa there have been numerous large-scale protests that threatened the political legitimacy of governments .. these rebellions were cast as "food riots," but in fact they indicate a much deeper dissatisfaction that is being expressed in various democratisation movements, of which food sovereignty is very much a part.'

So We Are The Solution! is more than a straightforward anti-agro-industrialisation campaign. It is all about Africans taking back their sovereignty as well as their food from western politicians and investors. And should it take hold, who knows how the next chapter of African history will unfold?