Agribusiness, a step towards increased food dependency in Africa

The village of Yalifombo, on the banks of the Congo River in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was an essentially agricultural community. In this village it is possible to observe how the local economy, which revolved around traditional cultivation of oil palm, has collapsed from the dramatic increase in industrial plantations. Throughout the Congo Basin sub-region, whether in Mundemba (Cameroon) or Mboma (Gabon), we see agribusiness increasingly competing with local agricultural economies. The system that certain public policies promote today is destroying systems that have been beneficial to peasant communities for a long time.

African peasant farmers' organizations and NGOs continue to assert that the future of farming is not in industrial agriculture but in peasant farming, which is feeding the world and is capable of cooling the planet through agroecology and a respect for biodiversity. (1)

For example, in the report “Unlocking the Potential of Family Farms,” the National Rural Coalition (CNCR, for its French acronym) in Senegal shows that family farms—not agribusinesses—are perfectly capable of feeding the country, and indeed currently do. Family farms provide the main source of food for the Senegalese population, meeting 70% of its needs in both rural and urban areas. (2)

However, powerful pressures continue to impose the agribusiness model.

After promises made during the 2003 African Union Summit in Malabo (Equatorial Guinea)—to allocate at least 10% of their national budgets to agricultural investment by 2008—African States are still expecting financial institutions to develop agriculture that will feed their citizens.

Headed by the World Bank with its “win-win” theories, these international financial institutions are trying to redefine African agriculture based on their own programs and a strong complicity with the world of finance, its instruments and the uncertainties that these bring.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a pilot country for these policies, the first of a promised 20 Agroindustrial Parks opened in 2014. Congolese peasant farmers soon denounced this presidential initiative (3), which was an initiative of NEPAD— the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (4).

The allegations concern the lack of consultation, transparency and participation by peasant farmers' organizations. They also reveal that this program, cheered on by the World Bank, promotes agribusiness. Far from contributing to national development and poverty reduction, Agroindustrial Parks will likely cause forced displacement of communities and land-grabbing.

Thus Congolese peasants are confronting a system which, through tax relief and promotion of certain kinds of crops, is clearly designed to favor foreign investment and not themselves.

In Gabon, another playground for agribusiness, a program entitled GRAINE (5) has formed a publicprivate partnership between Singaporean group OLAM International and the Republic of Gabon in order to “develop agriculture.”

This program aims to create 30,000 jobs (through self-employment) and occupy 200,000 hectares of farmland. It has already begun to take over land from communities in Mboma in the state of Woleu. (6)

Meanwhile, the best cut of the GRAINE program goes to the US-based company Caterpillar, thanks to a 140 million-dollar contract for the acquisition of 475 bulldozers. Yet, what communities are requesting is simply to retain their lands so that they can grow the food they need.

SIAT is another company heavily involved in the agribusiness sector in Gabon, Ivory Coast and other African countries.

Dedicated to growing oil palm and rubber, among other activities, this company also uses artificial insemination techniques to increase the number of cattle in Gabon. Based in Brussels (Belgium), SIAT owns several concessions and occupies some 15,000 hectares in Gabon.

While SIAT claims to have strong social responsibility, there are doubts as to the credibility and veracity of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment carried out in 2012 in the Bitam/Minvoul region. (7)

These examples from the Congo Basin show that, although foreign investment projects in agriculture and the agribusiness model are presented as “responsible investments” creating “win-win situations,” it would be more useful for African countries to invest in small-scale farming to guarantee their food sovereignty.

Despite all the facilities granted to it, peasants continue to resist agribusiness. Investments in large-scale agribusiness must be curbed for the sake of communities and peace in the region. It is time to stop promoting policies like the G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (NASAN), the European Union's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), or the US's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which are forcing African countries to change their policies on land and seeds.

Food sovereignty goes hand in hand with people's freedom to produce based on their free and informed decisions; it is not subject to the demands of the world food and agriculture commodities market.

Agribusiness is promoting exactly the opposite: that we must produce rubber, teak, or eucalyptus monocultures.

GRAIN, https://www.grain.org/fr

(1) http://fsm2015.altermondes.org/le-monde-est-nourri-a-90-par-lagriculture-familiale/
(2) http://www.cncr.org/sites/default/files/cncr_rapport_suivi_des_efa.pdf
(3) https://www.sosfaim.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/s2-PAI-plaidoyer-AgriCongo.pdf
(4) http://www.nepad.org/
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(7) http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section3/gabon-new-study-warns-of-impacts-of-the-expansion-of-oil-palm-and-rubber-tree-plantations/