

Food sovereignty in Africa: The people's alternative

By Mamadou Goita (07/2010)

The different explanations given for Africa's current food crisis seem to miss the real causes of the problem. Mamadou Goita does not believe that the crisis is of an economic nature. Rather, it is the endpoint of the dismantling of Africa's agricultural sector and its linking to the international market and brutal liberalism. Based on an analysis of the political choices that have contributed to the current situation, notably the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, Goita proposes solutions and decisions that need to be taken to achieve food sovereignty in Africa.

In Africa as a whole, but particularly the western and central regions, agriculture is the primary occupation for the majority of the populations. Mostly it is practised at a rural subsistence level, by families who combine their knowledge, labour, skills and resources in order to create wealth and produce surplus. Production is, first and foremost, to meet the food needs of the family. However, if there is a surplus produced, this is then used to meet other needs. This differs from private agribusiness, where members are linked through capital (monetary contributions of the sole proprietor, or the partners).

The first chapter of this essay will reflect on agriculture at a global scale, but from the perspective of a specific context. In the second chapter, we will look at the promotion and protection of indigenous produce, in order to achieve food sovereignty in Mali, West and Central Africa. The final chapter will present a framework of solutions to the problems identified.

AGRICULTURE AND ITS CHALLENGES FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Keeping in mind the description we have given above it is clear that agriculture¹ as it is practiced in most of the continent is much more than just food production and economic activity. It has multiple orientations and contributes in many different ways to society's fundamental aspirations. From the social perspective, subsistence agriculture, as practised in countries like Mali, provides employment, which in turn maintains the social fabric, if it is practised at a family scale.

Culturally, agriculture reflects our diverse tastes in food (our foods according to our tastes and our culture). It also promotes local consumption and agricultural biodiversity. This is one of the primary reasons for valorising local production. These local foods constitute a viable counterfoil to the changing urban dietary trends that are dependent on foreign foods.

At an environmental level, agriculture can contribute to maintaining soil fertility, conserving genetic resources and water quality.

At independence, most African countries strongly advocated for food self-sufficiency through the promotion of indigenous agricultural production. With the introduction of the SAPs (structural adjustment programmes) this policy was abandoned in favour of food security based on the international liberalisation of commodity markets. Under this system, the question of who produces the food becomes of secondary importance.

In Africa, liberalisation implies the political disengagement of the state and the decentralisation of agricultural services. At an economic level, it has to do with development of GMOs (genetically modified organisms), bio-piracy and the privatisation of genetic resources. Lately, we have also seen the development of biofuels. At the social level, we still see high levels of illiteracy among rural farmers, which limits their access to information.

The widespread liberalisation of trade in agricultural goods has had serious consequences for Africa: the worsening of the food situation, as well as the loss of rural jobs; the impoverishment of the peasant populations; and a subsequent spike in the rural urban exodus, which poses a serious threat to political and social stability. A large part of the African population now has limited access to food.

Under these circumstances, it is vital to deepen the analysis and understand all the factors that impact agriculture and rural development policy.

The recent high-level FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) meeting of experts in Rome, under the theme 'Ending hunger by 2050', provided yet another opportunity to demand commitment from the so-called rich nations controlling global capital and destroying African economies to 'save' the continent from starvation. As is always the case with Africa, once again the world is obsessed with addressing the consequences while blatantly ignoring the root causes of the problem.

The food crisis of 2007–08 revealed the lack of coherence between international institutions and states in managing food and agriculture problems. The media focused on two problems at the root of rising food prices.² The foremost one related to China and India and their modes of consumption. But as time rolled on, the deeper causes of the crisis became more apparent. It had to do with a boom in production of agrofuels, the insufficient stocks of cereal products in Europe and the US, and financial speculation – an artefact of the neoliberal model that has been applied to food commodities.

China and India are not responsible for the crisis. In the 2007–08 period, these two countries were net exporters of agricultural produce. Their cereal stocks rose by more than 10.9 megatons for China and 7.8 megatons for India. In contrast, the US (with a deficit in fisheries stocks) and the European Union (in cereal stocks deficit) were net importers. Statistics show that the EU and the US are responsible for 94 per cent of the drop in global cereal stocks for the period 2007–08.

The policy of promoting agrofuels in the EU and the US is a key factor in the crisis. The use of maize grew from 12 per cent of total production in 2004 to 23 per cent in 2007, with the goal being 32 per cent in 2008. This growth impacted negatively on the availability of food products, especially maize, with the amount used for ethanol production being greater than the US's exports.

The EU's decision to start a biodiesel programme also led to a rise in the price of oil crops. The decision to start producing agrofuels, especially by the EU, attracted speculators to oil crops and maize.

It is clear that the steep rise in prices of agricultural produce is mostly due to insufficient stocks in the US and the EU, the growth of agrofuel production and financial speculation of cereals and oil crops.

In addition to this, we must point to an even older problem: the role of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank in Africa. After the debt crisis of the 1980s, when the prices of raw materials collapsed, the IMF and the World Bank obliged African countries to adopt SAPs, which entailed:

A reduction of the acreage used for subsistence farming and specialisation in one or two export crops (cotton for Burkina Faso, Mali and Benin, coffee and cocoa for Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, etc).

In Mali for instance, cotton production grew from less than 200,000 tonnes to 620,000 tonnes by the end of the 1990s. This growth in production was as a result of expanding acreage and not necessary yield per acre, which remained more or less the same. The country paid a heavy price for this, with an increase in debt and reassignment of technical assistance away from agro-silvo-pastoralism. Cotton was soon the only commodity benefiting from any investment in terms of production and marketing.

The economy became more and more export-oriented, with development strategies based on access to export markets:

- A reduction on technical assistance at the level of producers
- A removal of price-stabilisation mechanisms that had helped to sustain other forms of small-scale production
- An abandonment of policies aimed at self-sufficiency in cereal production
- The brutal opening of domestic markets to external commodities to the detriment of locally produced, and in some cases, strategic commodities, etc.

All these measures, combined with the opening African markets to foreign capital, led to economies becoming extremely fragile and susceptible to the vagaries of the global markets, a big reduction in budgets for social services, a drop in subsidies for local products and the destruction of nascent local, national and sub-regional markets. It also pitted small-scale producers squarely against large multinationals...

African populations are paying the heavy price for these policies that very soon proved to be dangerous. The intransigence of the Bretton Woods institutions destroyed modes of production and, consequently, modes of consumption in African countries as well.

In a destructive process that was roundly condemned by social movements all over, the situation soon became clear for all to see: in one year, the prices of rice and wheat doubled, that of maize rose by more than a third. Cereal stocks dropped to a 25-year low. The price of a meal increased exponentially, and the threat of famine became very real.

Several demonstrations were organised in Africa to protest a situation that was clearly unjust, especially to urban populations: They needed a means of coping with skyrocketing prices of basic goods, including fuel and cereals. Similar demonstrations were planned in Europe, especially France, and these were referred to as 'marches for purchasing power'. Even though these marches were different in form, the underlying principle was the same. People wanted a more equitable distribution of national resources. They wanted to bridge the rich-poor divide. They wanted their share of that economic growth that their leaders evoked every year to justify their neoliberal economic policies. Yes, it turns out people other than Africans also want their share of this growth.

Repeated calls for action on the food crisis forced those responsible to come up with new strategies, the ended up producing more negative than positive outcomes. Some of these are:

- The lifting of tariffs on food commodities, notably rice, in most African countries, leading to a great liberalisation of markets
- A pledge of around US\$200 million in food aid to Africa by President Bush
- The signing of accords between AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution), FAO, WFP (World Food Programme) and IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development)³
- The rice initiative in Mali and other West African countries like Burkina Faso and Senegal,

with very little technical support and even less social capital in its implementation

- Irrational decisions taken in certain countries concerning agricultural policy, based on neoliberal principles, 'fast-food' policymaking became the hallmark of this 'artificial crisis'
- Demands by the WTO (World Trade Organisation) for markets to be opened up for greater trade, even if it would be at the expense of poorer countries, and more specifically, women and children
- The frenetic sale of land to foreign investors, better known as the 'land grab', etc.

The sum of these actions is a further attack on the peasant societies who have needed systemic change all along. The current view of the food and agriculture crisis is very reductionist, especially when viewed in the context of the struggles being waged by civil society and social movements:

- It reduces the scope of analysis to the rise in prices of cereal crops
- It constrains the search for solutions to the crisis, by trying to solve urban problems while neglecting those of the rural areas where the real production takes place.

This level of analysis proposed in some quarters prevents a deeper examination of the real causes of the crisis and the possibility of finding long-term solutions to the African food sovereignty question. Granted, there are problems of food sovereignty in Africa. And yes, the rise in prices of certain foods has affected Africa. But the question is how did we end up in this situation? What good decisions need to be taken to emerge from the crisis? These are the key questions that we must seek to answer.

One good result of the crisis is that it unmasked the paradox of Africa's situation. Most African countries were surplus producers of agricultural commodities prior to December 2007. In February 2008, most of these countries had declared a crisis, either due to official lies regarding food stocks, or speculation on cereal commodities. Either scenario seems plausible.

One can also point to speculation at a global level, and the weakness of the state vis-à-vis private business. Another important factor is the lack of capacity and mechanisms to collect reliable data necessary for planning. It is often the case that states themselves have not taken responsibility for certain key elements of the socio-economic development process.

Mali exemplifies the present paradox. The production of the main cereals (millet, sorghum, maize and fonio) rose every year, except for the 2004–05 harvest year, due to a pest attack. Agricultural production as a whole in all these years was at least 500,000 tonnes in excess of domestic requirements. In 2008–09, cereal production in Mali was 4 million tonnes, and peaked at 6.3 million tonnes in 2009–10, according to official figures from the Ministry of Agriculture.

While it is true that certain regions suffer chronic shortfalls, national production is enough to cater even for these areas. The problem therefore is differentiated access to food for some sections of the population, as well as weak domestic markets for local produce.

In the case of Mali, the problem was clearly not the volumes of food. There were other factors such as:

- Rising cereal prices due to speculation, coupled with low domestic purchasing power
- Changing consumption patterns, with more being spent on imported rice and wheat for bread

- Devaluation of local produce in terms of consumption, and hence less reliance on local expertise used to produce it. Consequently, this led to more reliance on international markets
- Low producer prices, which led unscrupulous traders to start stockpiling and speculating.

Increasing the value of local produce is an important mechanism for preventing such crises, as well as achieving long-term food sovereignty. This is one of the six key principles laid down by social movements who met at Selingue, Mali, on the occasion of the World Social Forum on food sovereignty, 'Nyeleni 2007'. It would be very difficult for any country to achieve food sovereignty without taking this mechanism into account.

For thousands of years, local husbandry has produced thousands of different varieties of plants and animals. All of these varieties have responded to various local requirements in terms of consumption, climates and other traditional forms of use.

In places where traditional agricultural practices still exist, such as Mali, you find dozens of varieties of cereals (millet, maize, wheat, rice, etc), pulses, fruit, as well as other plants that are a product of local innovation and participatory research.

When we talk of 'local produce', we understand 'local' to also refer to localised cultural practices, traditions and markets. Local produce is therefore linked to local development, which in turn impacts on the national. Local produce, therefore distinguishes itself from the 'transnational' – those from places 'other than here'⁴ – and that have to do with rampant liberalisation and end up on our plates through practices that destroy our rural economies.

Local produce constitutes one of the most dynamic elements of food consumption on our countries, because they have a way of responding to social evolution given that they are a distinctive part of our individual and collective identities. In Mali, one speaks of the Sarakholé and his 'bassi gnoukou na'⁵; the Malinké and his 'tigudègè na'⁶; the Tombouctouciens and his 'takoula mafé'⁷; and the Minianka and his 'Jawèrè siké'⁸, etc. These dishes are cultural markers.

In terms of crops, livestock or other harvest, our sub-region has great potential if these resources are valued and used rationally, and can be spared from food deficit and malnutrition.

Local producers face unfair competition from imports that are often cheaper than local produce as a result of open markets as prescribed by the IMF-imposed SAPs. Subsidies to farmers in the US and the EU drop prices and weaken local markets.

This unfair trade impoverishes our producers and forces local traders to play along and further weaken local markets.

The current EPA (economic partnership agreement) negotiations may deliver the final nail in the coffin in terms of whatever little hope still exists. The ACP (Asian, Caribbean and Pacific) countries have been asked to further open up their markets, knowing very well that they will not be able to export their products to northern markets because: a) they do not meet the hygiene and sanitation standards imposed there; and b) they are not state-subsidised and therefore not competitively priced.

In spite of all this, local produce is still overwhelmingly consumed in rural areas. The current food crisis has given an impetus to the consumption of local produce in urban areas. Although it has been significantly weakened, agriculture is based on well-adapted and resilient local

varieties.

There are huge risks associated with linking African agriculture to global markets dominated by subsidised produce from the US and the EU. There is also the threat of GMOs and other industrial hybrids that could wipe out tradition systems, but we can still hope.

Without a doubt, radical measures are necessary to safeguard local production and producers, who make up close to 80 per cent of the population in some countries, from utter ruin.

The valorisation of local produce is a must for the entire sub-region, whose economy relies on agriculture. This policy must involve not only production, but also the commercialisation of this produce as well as raising its nutritional profile. The demand for food in African cities presents a unique opportunity for local producers.

Certain women's organisations and NGOs have been at the forefront of promoting and transforming local produce. But they remain largely unknown because they have tended to focus on niche and elite markets, such as supermarkets, to the exclusion of the masses.

In terms of small business, we have witnessed families marketing some of the produce targeted for family consumption. This has contributed significantly to meeting the food needs of the population.

In spite of the progress that has been made by NGOs like l'Association Malienne pour la Sécurité et la Souveraineté Alimentaire (AMASSA/Afrique Verte Mali), and others, there are still problems that need to be overcome, including:

- A lack of equipment needed to transform local production. Many smaller organisations are unable to acquire, for example, solar driers, without external help. There needs to be a national strategy to deal with this.
- An inability to successfully sell produce due to competition for imported goods that are preferred because of price and availability. In addition, issues of aesthetics such as packaging make the imported goods a preference, especially for women.
- Sadly, packaging of local produce remains a challenge and has not been seen as a priority for these smaller organisations.

Packaging is an important way in which the seller communicates with the buyer. In essence, it is less about having expensive packaging and more about having that which preserves quality and hygiene standards. In local markets you often find recycled packaging – cement bags and plastic wrapping – which does not help to positively present the produce. It is not about buying expensive wrapping that will increase the price of the produce, rather it has to do with clean packaging that is adapted to the produce and is hygienic.

It is a delicate balancing act between good quality packaging (clean, sanitary and protective) and keeping the costs of production low. This will enable local producers to provide goods that are priced suitably for their markets because the consumer price is an important factor when it comes to food sovereignty.

Food safety and hygiene lie at the heart of valorising local produce. One of the arguments for shunning local produce is that it is not hygienically safe. The question then becomes: How can you safeguard your consumers while keeping prices manageable? The produce tests currently being proposed by the National Agency for Food Safety to ensure certification are a good idea.

The agency still needs to be adapted to adequately meet the needs of local food processors.

It is, however, still prohibitive to practise individualised certification of products. There is a need for a system that allows for tests based on economies of scale, that is to say, a system where producers are combined and a certification issued for a range of products. This way, the costs of certification are limited, and the consumers are reassured at the same time.

One must add that certification and the testing of foods are not an end in themselves but rather part of a larger strategy to valorise local produce and encourage consumption. It would be more sustainable to sensitise local producers to issues of quality so that these are internalised and implemented in daily practice. Self-regulation in this regard could go a long way in boosting local production and processing.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES FOR GREATER VALORISATION OF LOCAL PRODUCE?

The valorisation of local produce is inextricably linked to the broader question of food sovereignty. The solutions we propose go beyond adding value to products. We are proposing mid- to long-term solutions:

- Bolstering family farming so that it performs better and becomes more sustainable. It is important to note that in Africa, family farming feeds the continent
- Strengthening food security, with special emphasis on local produce
- Putting in place mechanisms to support African agriculture (in the form of subsidies for both production and consumption) through investments, water management and other means. It is imperative that we develop agroecological alternatives to the industrial model. African social movements must fight this form of agriculture driven by multinationals and certain rich countries. This form of agriculture is destructive and detrimental to Africa's predominant mode of production, family farming
- Better organising and managing domestic, local, sub-regional and regional markets for cereals by means of a cereals exchange that works to link producers and consumers and excludes speculation⁹
- Ensuring reasonable producer prices in order to promote investment in farming and enable producers to access basic social services
- Promoting social security for producers and availing disaster relief
- Establishing a fund for the processing and marketing of local produce
- Establishing systems for locally based participatory research and integrating this into the national knowledge repository
- Resolving land tenure and agrarian issues, taking into account the realities of each particular country. It would be important to avoid the system of individual title, which has a tendency to lead to privatisation. It is also necessary to declare a moratorium on the sale of land, which has taken on a worrying dimension in some countries.
- Re-nationalising agrofood industries that are strategic to agricultural development. Industrialisation will be a key determinant for the development of agriculture in Africa.
- Setting in place agricultural policies that are based on food sovereignty and that make all issues related to food human rights issues.

These proposals will contribute to mid- and long-term solutions to sustainable agricultural development in West and Central Africa. We must learn from the past and act fast in order to avoid the inappropriate 'fast-food policy' steps that have been taken by certain countries and their partners.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

- Mamadou Goita is the executive director of the Institute for Research and the Promotion of Alternatives in Development (IRPAD). He is also chair of the board of AMASSA (Association Malienne pour la Sécurité et la Souveraineté Alimentaire).
- This paper was presented at a colloquium organised by the Gabriel Peri Foundation and the Parti de l'indépendance et du travail-Sénégal on 18–19 May 2010.
- Translated from the French by Josh Ogada.

NOTES

[1] When we talk about agriculture, we refer to the sum total of agro-silvo-pastoral activities including plant and animal husbandry, fisheries and forestry

[2] This section is inspired by an article written by the author (Mamadou Goita) in November 2008 entitled 'The Drama of the Food Crisis'

[3] Bringing together the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Rockefeller and headed by Koffi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations

[4] 'Home-grown' at a local, regional provincial, national, sub-regional and eventually African continental level

[5] Couscous with Bamanankan vegetable sauce

[6] Bamananaka groundnut sauce

[7] Spaghetti with bolognaise

[8] Millet cakes with bean vegetables and karite butter

[9] Research conducted by Afrique Verte in three Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), which tested its relevance for the three countries. AMASSA in Mali; APROSSA in Burkina Faso and AcSSA in Niger continued this research.

Source: <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/65933>