

A Tsunami That Was Never Silent: Africa, the Food Crisis and Food Aid

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The escalation of protests over food prices in places like Haiti, Bangladesh and Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa have made news headlines around the world, and for the first time in this decade the existence of a "global food crisis" is loudly recognized. Josette Sheeran of the World Food Programme (WFP) has called the wave of food riots a "silent Tsunami" and the Economist sees the solution to the crisis in the WFP, as the first step to mend the holes in the world's safety net. In their words, "The WFP is the world's largest distributor of food aid and its most important barrier between hungry people and starvation."ⁱ

This food crisis underlines a problem that ought not to take the world by surprise. The world has been moving on a path that was bound to lead to a series of crises. Indeed, when the current crisis is surmounted, we can be sure that others of possibly more deadly variants will emerge, if we continue to pursue the current development models and in particular that of agricultural production and food consumption. Moreover, this food crisis is not an African phenomenon. For the first time in a long while hunger has been democratized, or generated, in such a manner that it is not a monopoly of the African continent. It could have been *generated* because there are analysts reading the phenomenon as outcome of commodity speculations.

The Economist proposed in its editorial (April 19-25th edition) that food aid through the World Food Programme (WFP) is the solution to the crisis. But is food aid the answer to this crisis? Do Africans need food aid from the World Food Programme and other organizations to tackle the increase in food prices?

WFP policies and the manner of food aid delivery cannot solve any of the fundamental problems that lie behind the current sharp rise in food prices. The root of the challenge is deeper than what the WFP or any other humanitarian body can solve.

We can accept the crisis being likened to a Tsunami, but to say that it was silent could be a misreading of the reality. This Tsunami was never silent. The fires that have just erupted have been smouldering over many years and only now erupted on a global scale. Africa has lived with man-made and natural *food Tsunamis* for too long a time.

The causes of this Tsunami were known and people's suffering have been visible

It is generally accepted fact that hunger is not necessarily a result of lack of food but of the lack of access to food. The same factors that make available food inaccessible to vast numbers of people can also be tracked in the matrix that affects agricultural production and delivery of products. Top on the list is the well orchestrated neoliberal policies that drive our virtually uni-polar world. These policies preach free markets while market forces are only allowed to operate selectively. Africa has experienced wholesale alteration of beneficial agricultural policies because of wrong-headed stipulations of international financial institutions such as the World Bank through its so-called structural adjustment programmes (SAP)ⁱⁱ.

The bulk of the food produced in Africa come from small family farms that are primarily cultivated for family needs. Although these can also be found in urban areas, most of them are located in rural areas. Before the economic adjustment programmes came into being, governments were concerned with programmes that assisted farmers in local food production to meet national needs. Agricultural inputs including the availability of extension officers was ensured by governments and the results were positive.

Whereas colonial governments mainly concentrated on production of cash crops, post colonial regimes continued with that but additionally provided some support to the small scale farmers. Thus large scale monoculture plantations for export continued alongside family farming. The so-called cash cropping were sources of national revenue and were pursued with great dedication while family farms kept the people fed.

Whereas some sort of balance was maintained in a way that cash cropping did not cripple local food production, this balance was disrupted by the SAPs whose main objectives appear to have been to achieve just that: destroy local production and create hunger and other situations of dependency. In other words, the SAPs were disruptive neo-colonial tools. The destruction of local food production systems by denial of farming inputs and supports as well as unfair competition with imported items gradually turned the continent into a land characterised as hungry and dependent on food aid.

Examples of how these policies have played out on African agriculture can be seen in the examples of Ghana and Cameroon. Rice imports doubled in Ghana when the nation reduced its rice tariffs from 100 to 20 percent as a result of the structural adjustment policies enforced by the World Bank. Lowering tariff protection to 25% in Cameroon saw poultry imports increase by about six-fold. Additionally, in Senegal, 70 percent of the poultry industry has been wiped out in recent years because of EU's domestic poultry policy in support of their local poultry farmers. ⁱⁱⁱ

Ghana has been affected dramatically on two fronts. Domestic rice accounted for 43 percent of the domestic market in 2000 but only managed to capture 29 percent of the domestic market in 2003. Rice imports increased from 250,000 tonnes in 1998 to 415,150 tonnes in 2003. It is also reported that 66 percent of rice producers recorded negative returns, leading to loss of employment. With regard to tomato paste, imports from the EU increased by 650 % from 3,300 tons in 1998 to 24,740 tons in 2003 with farmers losing 40 % of the share of the domestic market besides lowered local prices.

Furthermore, in Cote d'Ivoire, when poultry imports increased by 650% between 2001 and 2003, domestic production fell by 23%, prices dropped and thousands of jobs were lost. Vegetable oil imports in Mozambique had a fivefold increase between 2000 and 2004 and as a result, local production dropped from 21,000 tonnes in 1981 to 3,500 in 2002. ^{iv}

The possibility of Africa being hurt by the current food crisis is high for a number of reasons. The continent is vulnerable to climatic chaos that is engulfing the world as well as related issues of drought and desertification. Other challenges facing the continent include violent conflicts that are attributable to wars and at an insidious level to mindless natural resources

extractive activities. Both variants of violence lead to displacement of populations, reduction of manpower and disruption of agriculture as well as severe scarification of the environment. For a continent with a serious shortage of arable land these conflicts exact heavy tolls on local agriculture.

The soaring cost of food has been characterised as violence against the poor. The average African citizen is strongly impacted by the rising costs. Even in post-conflict societies where the end of war has brought peace and hope for the population, the citizens are apprehensive and anxiety is thick in the air because of the negative impacts the food crisis is having on their daily lives. The situation is best captured by Spence Page, a taxi driver in Liberia when he said, "The guns are no longer firing in Liberia, but economic hardship is killing the citizens."^v

Agrofuels and marginalised lands

Another factor that places severe stress on African economies is the rising costs of oil. The heavy burden created by the sudden price bursts has made the agrofuels appear as a viable solution to the energy situation. The allure of agrofuels led the president of Senegal to spearhead the creation of what he tellingly termed a "green" OPEC in 2006, the Pan-African Non-Petroleum Producers Association (PANPP). This body aspires to "become leaders in the field of biofuels and alternative energy strategies, following in Brazil's footsteps." In an article titled ***Africa Over the Barrel*** written by Abdoulaye Wade^{vi}, president of Senegal the point was made that although oil prices were then coming down they were still twice as much as they cost three years earlier and would yet climb higher. He should see the charts now.

The notion of a green OPEC suggests a propensity for commodity cartelization as well as a fixation on a model of civilization based on fossil fuels. In fact this PANPP initiative on agrofuels is anything but green, as it will perpetuate the dependence over oil consumption using an unsustainable mode of production that will bring no benefits to African people. The ambitious PANPP dream will worsen the food crisis and increase land conflicts.

Some other writers have seen in agrofuels a potential for Africa to make major strides. The question that needs to be answered is with regard to the direction that the major strides would be leading. "Africa's vast arable lands have the potential to rival top agricultural nations like the United States in supplying biofuels to a world seeking cleaner energy sources," says Gershwin Wanneburg in an article on the subject. The writer went on to sound a note of caution that "using land reserved for food production to supply biofuel demand could squeeze food supplies in a region vulnerable to shortages. It could also hurt poor consumers if the biofuel boom continues to push food prices higher."^{vii} The claim that Africa has so *vast* an expanse of arable land may not be exactly correct because available figures put that at 6% of the continent's land mass.^{viii} The mythical claim of a vast arable land is probably linked to the huge size of the continent which takes up 20% of the earth's land area.

The fodder for the rise of agrofuels in the continent was further provided by the FAO in its assessment^{ix} of the World food security situation in 2006 made the assertion that "The

countries facing food emergencies are mainly from the sub-Saharan African region. Therefore, urgent attention and action is required to tackle the root causes of food insecurity in those countries over the long term. Although detailed analysis is still required to confirm feasibility, the emerging opportunities for biofuel production in the region could potentially be an avenue for mitigating chronic food insecurity in Africa. Development assistance, focused on socially and ecologically sustainable biofuel production, could be warranted to meet increasing global alternative fuel demands.” We argue that this would engender food insecurity because of known reasons of land uptake, displacements, etc.

One of the arguments that make agrofuels so appealing to policy makers is that some of the crops would not be food crops and would not compete with agricultural land. One crop that is held up in this argument is the jatropha which proponents say would be grown on marginal lands and thus add value to otherwise ‘worthless’ lands. The notion of marginal land is perceived by many to be another ploy for land grabbing that would deepen the marginalisation of already marginalised peoples. The UN estimates that Africa has at least 500 million hectares of marginal, unused and underused land and that the Democratic Republic of Congo is believed to have around 150m hectares.^x But is this land really underused? Who decides what lands is marginal or unused and which are not?

In Ghana, farmers have expressed fears over a change of focus from food cropping to agrofuels production. They argue that the cultivation of energy crops such as jatropha whose oil is inedible would deprive them the use of arable land for the cultivation of food crops. They also fear that since the oil from jatropha is inedible, they will be restricted to supplying their produce only to refineries who could manipulate them by dictating the price of the produce. Some farmers have also argued that where refineries do not promptly pay for their produce, their livelihoods would be severely compromised.^{xi}

Food Aid and Control

The current food crisis in the world today must have jolted scenario planners who see Africa as a huge market for food aid business. Admittedly, food aid has its place in meeting deficits and emergencies and will continue to do so. The fact that needs to be acknowledged is that food aid is scarcely an act of charity. It has to a large extent become big business and a for profit enterprise. This came up clearly at charity dinner in the USA when Charles Worledge, who works for Sealift, a major shipper of U.S. food to the hungry, reportedly offered an insight essential to understanding the politics of food aid when he said: "I thought this was a charity...It's not. It's a business."^{xii} And Africa is a great market for this business. All players in the aid business profit. The cost of shipping food aid over huge distances could sometimes be sufficient to meet financial requirements needed to source for food regionally where deficits occur.

Food aid has played an interesting role in Africa in the past. For example, one of the worst food crises in Malawi occurred in 2002 and resulted in several hundred hunger-related deaths. This horrible famine, one of the worst in living memory was in a great part due to the decision to sell the country’s Strategic Grain Reserve thereby reducing the stock from 165,000 MT to 60,000 MT, based on the advice of the IMF.^{xiii}

The current food crisis is seen by some as an opportunity to pump GMOs into the market and environment. The idea is that when people are shocked by calamitous events, they are less able to defend themselves and are open to allowing obnoxious policies and actions. This position can be seen in the telling heading of a recent report in the New York Times, ***In Lean Times, Biotech Grains Are Less Taboo.***^{xiv} Food aid channels have been used to sneak GMOs into unsuspecting countries. For this reason, it is reasonable for us to look at food aid in the context of contaminations and as a tool for political manipulation.

The first major case of GMO contamination in food aid was found through testing by civil society groups that of StarLink maize in food aid in Ecuador in 2001. Contaminated soya was found in food aid to Colombia. Starlink is a genetically modified maize variety which was approved only for animal feed and not for human consumption. One year after the Ecuadorian scandal other contaminations were found in Nicaragua and Bolivia.^{xv} India equally denounced and rejected GMOs in food aid at about the same time.

The African situation took world stage when a food crisis affected many countries in Southern Africa, namely Angola, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland in 2002. The politics of hunger reached a high level in 2002 when Zambia rejected GMOs in food aid shipped to them. While some countries were willing to accept milled GMO food aid, Zambia rejected them both as whole grains and in milled form. Expectedly, the Zambian government was under intense pressure to accept GMO food aid. The government responded by saying that the food shortage which was mainly in the southern part of the country could be offset with tubers from the northern region. This way the food would not only be non-GMO, it would also have the added advantage of boosting national production and local incomes. Zambia eventually overcame that crisis and still has a policy of not accepting GMOs in food aid.

In 2004 the heat was turned on Angola and Sudan in very instructive ways. Both countries had special difficulties because of the conflict situations there. Yet both countries refused GMO grains except they were milled. As a part of the struggle to keep food aid free of contamination in Africa, FoE Nigeria and FoE affiliates, Earthlife in South Africa, cooperated with many African groups such as the African Center for Biosafety to stop the push by the World Food Programme and USAID to force Angola and Sudan to accept GM food aid against their will.^{xvi} The positive outcome of these struggles for dignity in food aid is that USAID and other GMO purveyors have not openly pressured sovereign nations to accept food aid in forms that they find objectionable.

The string of contamination is ongoing. In 2006, unapproved Liberty Link Rice 601 (genetically engineered by Bayer CropScience to withstand application of the herbicide glufosinate) was found in food aid sent to Sierra Leone through USAID. This contamination was uncovered through a monitoring and testing programme conducted by Friends of the Earth Africa groups.^{xvii} The contamination was also found in commercial imports in Ghana.

Another round of testing conducted in 2007 found the same kind of contaminations in commercially imported rice in Ghana and Nigeria^{xviii}.

For the strengthening of local agricultural systems

At a recent pro-GMOs workshop held in a private farm owned by a former military president of Nigeria the Minister of Science announced that the country set to introduce a roadmap for the introduction of GMOs into the country before the end of the year. In a fitting rebuttal, a national newspaper called to question the lack of participation as well as absence of a regulatory framework in the country and questioned why the minister would make such a pronouncement without an enabling environment. The paper also stated the popular rejection of those varieties of crops because of the risks and other clouds of uncertainties surrounding them. The paper warned that 'the issue of global food insecurity and spate of food riots in some countries cannot be used to stampede the nation into taking a hasty decision it might come to regret, "...before the end of the year."^{xix}

The point is that there is a risk of the biotech agencies as well as food aid donors utilizing the rising tide of food shortages as the platform for the introduction of unwholesome foods and food products into the African environment. As noted in the Nigerian situation, due to intra government incoherence, gaps may be created for unregulated entry of such crops as well as products into the country. The consequence of such an opening up of the continent will have dire consequences to local capacity to produce food that are wholesome, support local knowledge, culture and practices and livelihoods. This risk lies in the fact that GMOs erode biodiversity, place patents on seeds; require costly inputs and snuffs out the sovereign control of the people over their agriculture and foods. Besides, GMOs thrive on large-scale monoculture farming and would thus pose a serious threat on family farming on which the people depend.

The way forward towards overcoming food crises now and in the future is in promoting food sovereignty. This concept encompasses practices that promote local, diverse and generally people-controlled systems. At the end of the day, diversified small scale production holds the key to long term reduction of hunger in the world. Large scale monoculture farms are more vulnerable than small holdings as is evidenced in the drought in Australia and its ripple effects on global rice supply. Small scale farms have inbuilt resilience and can withstand shocks whereas big scale farmers depend on intensive agricultural systems, huge financial outlays, huge quantities of chemical inputs and are not ecologically compatible.

A restoration of direct interventionist policies by African governments in the provision of extension services and tools as well as market openings will greatly revive an agricultural system that has been knocked down by neoliberalism, conflicts and reinforced dependence on food aid. Where there are food shortages, such deficits should be met from locally or regionally obtained. To ensure that this is possible and in recognition of the fact that majority of African farmers live and work in the rural areas, the improvement of rural infrastructure is vital.

The current crisis was never a silent, although it may be a Tsunami. The crisis grew noisily over the years and only required seeing eyes and hearing ears. Is the world ready to see and to hear accurately today?

Notes

ⁱ The Economist. The silent tsunami. April 19th-25th.

ⁱⁱ For further details see Khor, Martin (2008). **The Impact of Trade Liberalisation on Agriculture in Developing Countries – The Experience of Ghana**, TWN:Penang

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41502>

^{iv} <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41502>

^v UN IRIN (April 2008) Liberia: Govt Links Rising Food Prices to Conflict Risk.

<http://allafrica.com/stories/200804251071.html>

^{vi} Washington Post, October 28, 2006. The article was also published in Business Day, Lagos, on November 8, 2006.

^{vii} Wanneburg Gershwin (April 2007): *Biofuels in Africa: Investment boon or food threat?*

http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news_business/&articleid=303720

^{viii} <http://www.globeafrica.com/Commons/geo.htm>

^{ix} . 2006. Assessment of the world Food security situation. Committee on World Food Security. Rome, 30 October – 4 November 2006. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/011/j8096e.pdf>

^x Dynes, Micheal (May 2008): *Growing Up*. http://www.africa-investor.com/article_mag.asp?id=2725&magazineid=23

^{xi} Private e-mail communication with Friends of the Earth Ghana 17 October 2007

^{xii} [Dugger, Celia W. \(April 2007\). U.S. rethinks foreign food aid. http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/04/22/news/food.php.](http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/04/22/news/food.php)

According to the report, **Public Law 480 and the Food for Peace program, adopted in 1954, provided a way to dispose of surplus grain, which was costly to store, and at the same time feed the world's hungry people. The law mandated that food for the program be grown domestically. Moreover the amount of food shipped falls as the costs of shipping rises.**

^{xiii} Action Aid. 2002. State of disaster: causes, Consequences and policy lessons from Malawi. <http://www.actionaid.org.uk/content/documents/malawifamine.pdf>

^{xiv} **In Lean Times, Biotech Grains Are Less Taboo.**

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/21/business/21crop.html?ex=1224388800&en=286a3c5b1e79e646&ei=5087&examp=GGBUgmcrops&WT.srch=1&WT.mc_ev=click&WT.mc_id=BI-S-E-GG-NA-CT-gm_crops

^{xv} FoEI: **Playing With Hunger,**

http://www.foei.org/en/publications/pdfs/playing_with_hunger2.pdf

^{xvi} http://www.eraction.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=23

^{xvii} http://www.eraction.org/publications/FoEAfrica_briefing01.pdf

^{xviii} <http://independentngonline.com/?c=118&a=9947>

^{xix} <http://www.independentngonline.com/edit/article01?publication=080424>