

Green Counter-Revolution in Africa?¹

By Jomo Kwame Sundaram²

In 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation jointly launched the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). The African Green Revolution Forum claims AGRA is the “world’s most important and impactful forum for African agriculture”.

The [initial AGRA goals](#) – to reduce food insecurity by half in at least 20 countries, to double the incomes of 20 million smallholder families by 2020, and to ensure at least 15 countries achieve and sustain a Green Revolution – have been [revised](#) to “increase the incomes and improve food security for 30 million farming households in 11 African countries by 2021”.



In [*Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers and the Battle for the Future of Food*](#), Timothy A. Wise argues that many millions of dollars spent on fertilizers and seed subsidies in Africa – and favoured by African politicians seeking rural votes – have not delivered their promised outcomes.

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Without publicly available evaluations of its effectiveness by either AGRA or donors, [Wise estimated](#) cereal output rose by only 33 per cent in the 13 AGRA countries between 2006 and 2014. As land planted with cereals has increased, actual land productivity gains were more modest.

Agrarian reform or regression

Wise shows how transnational giants gain from farm input subsidy programmes. Without the subsidies, increased output rarely generated enough additional income to justify farmer purchases and application of commercial fertilizers and other inputs.

Subsidies have induced farmers to plant AGRA promoted crops, especially maize. After structural adjustment killed research in Africa in the late 20th century, promoting maize, well researched elsewhere, was tempting, but often meant abandoning nutritious, drought-tolerant traditional crops.

But even where yields and net incomes rose, increases often diminished once soils were depleted. Julius Sigei, a newspaper agriculture editor, notes that [Kenyan farmers produce only a fifth of US maize yields on comparable land and a third of Chinese levels as soils in Kenya are too poor](#) to sustain higher yields while increased fertilizer application raises soil acidity.

Although [water was crucial for the Asian green revolution and is necessary](#) for effective fertilizer application in Africa – long subject to accelerating desertification, and increasingly to uncertain rainfall and droughts, due to global warming – AGRA efforts to improve water supplies have been modest.

Food and agriculture expert, [Materne Maetz](#) cautions, “it is risky to use fertiliser if you don’t have cash and are not sure about rain”. Hence, in the African context, he favours ‘associating’ leguminous with other crops and developing neglected, drought-resistant, traditional food crops.

Dubious gains

Probably inspired by the neoliberal mantra of ‘vampire states’ exploiting farmers, and expecting markets to work better without governments, AGRA has promoted public-private partnerships, and may even have [enabled land grabbing](#) by the private sector.

Whereas Asian governments provided a broad range of crucial infrastructure and services – such as credit and agricultural extension – with AGRA, these have been less, with transnational agribusinesses getting millions of dollars in subsidies for synthetic fertilizers and ‘miracle seeds’.

Instead, Wise found that actual productivity and income gains were mainly in countries supporting technology adoption with government-sponsored agricultural input subsidy programmes (FISPs), and not those relying on large AGRA investments alone.

Experienced Malawian agricultural analyst Mafa Chipeta observes “what little increased yield comes from subsidised inputs is often lost as predatory buyers beat down weak and balkanised farmers on produce price. Unless governments intervene to stabilise markets, the subsidy programmes will not help farmers.”

Agribusiness transnationals

In some countries, transnationals have influenced national policies and laws in their favour, e.g., by seeking to outlaw farmers exchanging and selling seeds for planting. Such seed policies leave farmers with little choice but to purchase high-cost seeds and agrochemicals every season.

Thus, agribusiness transnationals, such as Monsanto and Yara, have not only benefited from subsidies from governments, official aid and philanthropies, but also abused their monopolistic perches in developing country markets, at the expense of farmers, consumers and governments.

In this connection, Chipeta astutely observes that “subsidies seem to help more the input sellers and the produce buyers, with farmers as mere conveyors for subsidies”. For Wise, the Green Revolution has become a “high-input treadmill” on which farmers and their governments are “running without getting anywhere”.

Although the input support programme and Food Reserve Agency in Zambia took 98 per cent of the government budget for poverty reduction, according to Wise, “78 per cent of family farmers are ... in extreme poverty, living below \$1.25 a day”. Clearly, “farmers and consumers weren’t the main beneficiaries of Zambia’s ‘poverty reduction’ programmes in agriculture”.

With trade liberalization and the retreat of the state accelerated by structural adjustment, Africa was transformed from net food exporter to net food importer, becoming more food insecure. Nevertheless, African family farmers still produce four fifths of the food consumed on the continent.

Despite its much smaller population, Africa is overtaking Asia as home of the most poor people in the world. Meanwhile, AGRA’s promised African green revolution has failed, while inducing subsidy dependence, and reducing crop, food and dietary diversity, but little for agricultural climate resilience.

Food systems approach

Meanwhile, following its World Food Summits from 1996, the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has promoted a comprehensive ‘food systems’ approach.

In October 2019, the UN Secretary-General announced that it would host a Food Systems Summit in late 2021 to maximize the benefits of such an approach, embed food systems transformation initiatives around the world in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and promote growth on inclusive and sustainable pathways that address climate change.

Incredibly, the principal partner appears to be the World Economic Forum, with the UN’s Rome-based agencies serving as a pliant secretariat. Unlike FAO’s earlier summits, which had a unifying concept of food security, and built consensus among stakeholders on food systems for nutrition, the 2021 summit seems to eschew inter-governmental collaboration.

The Secretary-General’s decision to name the AGRA head as his Special Envoy for the Summit preparation process suggests an intention to make it a largely private sector-led

affair. [Civil society organizations](#) working for years on these issues are understandably [outraged](#) with its likely implications.

As the ultimate owners of the United Nations, Member States may respond to such erosion of multilateralism and its remaining institutions, through various intergovernmental channels, to ensure that the Summit involves a truly inclusive and transparent process that effectively energizes initiatives to ensure food systems drive Agenda 2030.

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- [The European Union investigates on the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#), 2016.
- [Africa: can the continent end hunger and become food self-sufficient by 2025?](#) 2016.
- [Seven principles for ending hunger sustainably](#), 2013.

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