



Sections

- ▶ Agricultural biodiversity themes
- ▶ Biodiversity Rights Legislation
- ▶ Growing Diversity

Quarterly magazines

- ▶ Seedling
- ▶ Biodiversidad

Home | Seedling | April 2003 | Who is getting fed?

Who is getting fed?

Matt Mellen

In the last year, the UN's World Food Programme has twice launched what it has described as the "largest humanitarian operation in history" – first in Southern Africa, and in recent weeks in Iraq. But how helpful have these interventions been and are they really reaching the people who need them? More than ever, the food aid agenda is being driven by the interests of donors rather than recipients. The issue of genetically modified food aid is now also being used by the US, the world's largest food aid donor, to manipulate the agenda.

These days, famine is not generally caused by shortfalls in food. The real reasons are historical and political, and explain why many farmers in the South lack the capacity to withstand bad harvests. The inequality that exists between North and South – the legacy of colonial intrusion – has led to a spiralling decline for agriculture in the South, and the subsequent ineffectiveness of conventional aid and its ability to prevent future famines. By focusing on alleviating the symptoms of famine, without paying due attention to the causes, the dominant food aid strategies are perpetuating a system of dependence and agricultural subservience that reinforces the inequalities of the world.

The dominance of the Western countries over the majority of the world's population is greater now than ever before. But today's brand of colonialism differs in some ways from the historical model. Social control is not always executed through direct state oppression and violence, but increasingly by management and economic measures. Had Africa continued on its developmental trajectory without the influence of the Europeans, it might well not face the hunger crisis it does today. Western Europe established a relationship which ensured the transfer of wealth from Africa to Europe, which has endured ever since. Trade tariffs

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and agricultural subsidies are modern manifestations of the inequalities that started with colonialism. This outflow from the South to the North was \$619.2 billion in 1992. [1] In terms of agriculture, “colonialism destroyed the cultural patterns of production by which traditional societies previously met the needs of the people”. [2]

European colonisers viewed local people, culture and agriculture as backward. Using an ideology of superiority and subordination, they replaced complex, sustainable agricultural systems with monocultures of cash crops. The introduction of the plantation signalled the divorce of agriculture from food production and the erosion of local cultural knowledge of biodiversity essential for effective husbandry. “The plantation colonies became regular factories, whose only purpose was the production of sugar, coffee, and other high-priced merchandise”. [3] This commodification of agriculture introduced by the colonising forces has seriously compromised subsistence agriculture and forces African farmers to sell their produce and buy food instead. As markets are increasingly globalised these farmers cannot compete with the massively subsidised farms in the North. Having being forced to substitute their food production systems for capital generating systems, they are now caught without either food or cash. Because of these changes, famines today are primarily caused by lack of access to food caused by food insecurity and poverty.

A new start or a bad re-run?

A new organisation, the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), is being set up in Nairobi, Kenya, to “to remove many of the barriers that have prevented smallholder farmers in Africa from gaining access to existing agricultural technologies that could help relieve food insecurity”. The AATF is the brainchild of the US’ Rockefeller Foundation that was behind the so-called ‘Green Revolution’, which focused on industrialising farming, particularly in Asia, in the 1970s. Rockefeller and USAID are funding the start-up costs. Pre-empting criticism that the Green Revolution was bad for the environment and for small farmers, Rockefeller president Gordon Conway talks of a “doubly green revolution” in Africa that will be more sensitive to environmental concerns. Four of the world’s largest seed/agrochemical companies are also tied into the venture. Their motivation is said to be philanthropic, but they do

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acknowledge that they hope to open new markets in the long run. They have said they will donate patent rights, seed varieties, laboratory know-how and other aid. The foundation's aims are to identify crop problems in Africa that might be amenable to technological solutions. It then plans to negotiate with the corporations involved for assistance and patent licenses and seek support from African governments to help put new resources – mainly new seeds – into the hands of small subsistence farmers across the continent. The initiative is being hailed as “the most comprehensive attempt yet to bring the expertise of the major Western companies to bear on the problems [African farmers face]”. The foundation will be run by Eugene Terry, a plant pathologist from Sierra Leone known for his work with cassava, a tropical plant whose starchy roots are used to make bread and tapioca.

Getting involved with AATF “has been fantastic for us,” said Gerard Barry, director of research in a Monsanto unit that spearheads technology-sharing projects. DuPont's William Niebur declared, “We have a real opportunity to bring not only our technology but our experience and commitment to world agriculture.” The new foundation will focus on staple crops important to Africans, including cowpea, chickpea, cassava, sweet potatoes, banana and maize. Of these crops, only maize currently represents a meaningful market in Africa for agrochemical companies.

Tewolde Egziabher, head of Ethiopia's environmental protection authority, warns that if the foundation comes to be seen as just a vehicle for pushing genetic engineering in Africa, it will fail. He expressed particular concern that the project would create seed varieties that entirely supplant traditional ones. Eventually, he said, the companies will want to be paid for their seed, instead of giving the technology away, and if old varieties are lost, African farmers may have nothing to fall back on.

Sources: Justin Gillis “To Feed Hungry Africans, Firms Plant Seeds of Science”, Washington Post, Tuesday, 11 March 2003, AATF website: www.aftechfound.org

That said, natural disasters and climatic fluctuations still impact food security. Food shortages as a result of natural processes cannot be avoided in certain parts of the world. The consequences of such shortages can be minimised through improved

infrastructure and good food storage capacity. Sound government and regional economy is also required to enable food purchases and imports, should these be required. Tewolde Egziabher of Ethiopia's Environmental Protection Agency says that the most effective form of help for Ethiopia is "ensuring that the food produced goes for food security by investing in infrastructural development and in the diversification of the rural economy". [4] The UN Environment Program and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have warned that it is quite possible Africa's droughts are now being exacerbated or triggered by global warming and that Africa suffers disproportionately from global warming. [5] This is a cruel twist of fate considering that Africa is the least to blame of all the continents for global warming. With 14% of the world's population, it is responsible for only 3% of global CO2 emissions.

Ethiopia is one country that seems to be feeling these effects acutely at the moment. Varying rain patterns as a result of the consequences of el niño and la niña years mean either the north or the south of the country will struggle to produce enough food to feed the local population. These cyclical patterns were typically separated by five or six years, but recently the droughts have become more frequent, most probably as a result of climate destabilisation caused by global warming. In 2002 these weather occurrences were back to back. This freak situation will lead to crop shortfalls that could lead to as many as 20 million people being without adequate food supplies over the next year. [6] The peak time of need will be just before harvest during the months of August to October 2003. [7]

Food aid as a tool of colonialism

These days, the world has considerable capacity to respond to large-scale famines and avert widespread starvation. But the machinery that provides food for the hungry is not as effective as it should be because it is not always driven by the needs of the hungry, but by motives that tie in with the history of colonialism. The World Food Programme (WFP) is the biggest cog in the world's food aid machinery. The US is by far the biggest single donor to the WFP, providing more than 60% of aid. But it insists on either donating foodstuffs or tying cash contributions to the purchase of US produce. This policy is part of a deliberate strategy to subsidise US agriculture and undermine its agricultural competitors. [8], [9] Giving aid in kind alleviates the symptoms of famine but perpetuates

the causes.

It is in the interests of the US economy and agricultural sector to develop the South only so much that it opens new markets and can purchase off the US. As Lawrence Goodwin of The Africa Faith and Justice Network has observed, "The US wants to see its corporations control life's most basic resources, including seeds, food crops and water. Unfortunately for Southern Africa, the drought plays right into this unprincipled strategy". [10] Until recently, the US agrochemical industry focused little attention on Africa in its worldwide promotion of chemical farming. But it seems to be recognising the lost opportunities and is making greater efforts in the region, particularly in relation to GM crops (see box on p 16). David King, the UK's chief scientific advisor has echoed the thoughts of many in denouncing the US attempts to force GM technology into Africa via food aid as a "massive human experiment" [11] (see box on p 17). There are even indications that the world's rejection of GM crops is an important factor driving US aid practice at present. With the current global upwelling of resistance to GM crops, much of the maize that the US is currently offering as aid to Africa could not be sold anyway. As the London Independent points out, "Aid is the last unregulated export market open to US farmers as worried European and Asian consumers shun GM grain and introduce strict import and labelling rules". [12]

Why GM crops are particularly dangerous for Africa

In addition to the general risks that GM crops carry (contamination of local varieties, lost markets for higher-value GM-free crops, high investment risk, unknown effects on ecosystems, etc), the African context presents some unique challenges. When Bt maize passed through the regulatory channels for approval in the US and Europe in the early 1990s, it was understood that 98% of it would be used as animal feed. The situation in Africa is completely different. As Charles Benbrook points out, "If [US] regulatory authorities had felt that a sizable portion of the populations of people consuming this corn would eat it directly (largely unprocessed) and that moreover, the corn might make up as much as half or two-thirds of daily caloric intake, they would NEVER have approved it based on the human safety data presented at the time". Also, it is known that Bt corn may have adverse impacts on the stomach lining and that some potential food

safety/allergenicity impacts are a function of gut bacteria and the overall health status of the gastrointestinal tract. No one has thought to consider how people suffering acute or chronic malnutrition may react to the consumption of Bt corn, especially when minimally cooked and processed, and present as a major share of their diet.

There are also big implications for the environment and the future food supply for African farmers. There is now no doubt that GM maize being imported into Africa will contaminate local varieties of maize in the same way that local maize varieties have been contaminated in Mexico (see p 20). Since African farmers rely on many locally developed varieties, this could have serious consequences for maize farmers throughout the continent. David Quist, the scientist responsible for discovering the contamination of local varieties of maize in Mexico, says that the best management strategy in this instance would be to encourage local seed swapping as an attempt to dilute out the transgenic plants.

Sources: Charles Benbrook (2002), "Comments to the Zambian delegation", September 13, 2002, www.biotech-info.net; See "Better Dead than GM Fed", Seedling, October 2002, p15

If we look at what is going on in Africa and the Middle East at the moment, it certainly seems that something other than human need is driving the aid machinery. We are told by the WFP that the Iraq operation "may become the largest single humanitarian operation in history – a massive intervention totalling \$1.3 billion over six months". It is planning to provide food aid for the entire population of 27 million people. [13] Last year, we were told by the WFP that Southern Africa was facing its worst famine in a decade and that 20 million may starve. This scenario led to massive aid mobilisation from the world community, and the US in particular, but the crisis has not played out (see below). [14] At the same time, we hear from other sources that the situation in Ethiopia has been drastically underplayed and under-reacted to, with potentially catastrophic results for 20 million people in one country alone.

These imbalances support the idea that countries receive aid not according to their need but according to the benefits that will be reaped by the donor. The benefits include opening new markets, undermining agricultural competitors and unloading surpluses. Perhaps the Southern African nations pose a greater

threat as agricultural competitors, especially given their export connections with Europe and the GM-free status of their crops? Perhaps Ethiopia is less of a priority because its cultural preference for wheat deems it unacceptable for the offloading of unsellable GM maize? In the case of Iraq, it is clear that one of the outcomes of the recent invasion will be the opening of Iraqi markets preferentially to US corporations. Iraqi agriculture has declined badly in the last decade because of sanctions and the loss of US markets for export. [15] Like the other sectors of the Iraqi economy, there is a great opportunity for the US to rebuild Iraq's agriculture according to the blueprints of the corporate giants. The man who has been put in charge of the agricultural reconstruction programme is Dan Amstutz, a former senior executive of Cargill, the biggest grain exporter in the world (see p 31), who also served in the Reagan administration as a trade negotiator in the Uruguay round of world trade talks. [16]

Southern Africa – the crisis that wasn't?

Southern Africa is in the midst of what official aid organisations have been describing as the most serious food security crisis since the severe drought of 1992. [17] The number of people judged to be in need of food aid was estimated to be more than 15 million in late 2002, and by the end of December, 270,000 tons of food aid had been distributed to the region. [18] The WFP estimated that 1.2 million tons of food would be needed to feed everyone. [19] The six hardest-hit countries were predicted to be Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. But it seems that the scale of the famine has been seriously exaggerated. The WFP says that famine was averted because it did its job well, intervening before the crisis mushroomed. Others argue that the problem was never as big as the WFP and other agencies warned (see box, p18).

Yes – people are hungry, but they always are in the region. In Zambia and Malawi at least, this year was not any worse or any better than the average year. The UN has coined a new term for the kind of hunger Southern Africa faces – “new variant famine”. [20] This is famine set off by the traditional causes of bad weather or political instability, but exacerbated and made more complex by AIDS. The ongoing food crisis is also partly caused by an overdependence on maize. Maize was introduced in colonial times and replaced more diverse and drought-resistant production systems that utilised the qualities of cassava,

sorghum and millets. A diversity of crops provided a diversity of benefits. These included improved micro-nutrient uptake and therefore nutritional health, greater ecosystem services (such as soil formation and water retention), better resistance to pests and diseases, and less impact should an epidemic wipe out one crop. Traditional production systems increased livelihood options.

Zambia's rejection of GM food aid stimulated much debate internationally and domestically about the nature and impact of food aid. In Zambia, one outcome of this has been a call to re-establish traditional cropping systems. Chief Sinazongwe (one of the traditional leaders in Southern Province) has called for intensified reintroduction of cassava, sorghum and bulrush millet in the valley. Dr Drinah of the Program Against Malnutrition noted that: "Recently, the Government has realised the importance of crop diversification, the appropriate use of indigenous foods, and the importance of integrated systems that include livestock for income and draft power. This year the government has put a lot of money in programmes such as the fertiliser and seed support programme for small-scale farmers (\$30 million) and the Food Security Pack for vulnerable but viable farmers (\$6 million). The programmes promote traditional crops and diversity, with emphasis on cassava as a reserve, and food security crop, preservation and storage. In general the agricultural policy is being changed to promote growth and sustainability". [21] This is a significant development of policy and illustrates how certain African governments are starting to recognise the threat that industrialisation and genetic engineering pose to African agriculture.

Responding to the crisis

Politics apart, there is no doubt that there remain a great number of hungry people in Africa. In a recent statement in New York, WFP head James Morris urged the Security Council not to forget the 40 million Africans in danger of starvation as heads turn towards the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. But, he argues, many African families would "find it an immeasurable blessing" to be in the shoes of most Iraqis when it comes to the amount of food available to them. Morris' statement does not make for easy reading as he catalogues the problems that African countries face. [22] The scale of the problem – in Southern Africa, Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Sahel – is mind-boggling and underlines just how ineffective current

food aid strategies are. Morris lists a number of steps that need to be taken to address the situation, some of which do emphasise the importance of long-term thinking to stimulate agriculture in the region and curtail global trade policies that suffocate local production. Clearly conventional aid must be forthcoming to prevent a monumental tragedy but the emphasis must shift to poverty prevention not just alleviation.

Morris makes light of the issue of GM food aid, which he claims “has faded and is no longer delaying and disrupting deliveries. Five of the six countries needing aid in Southern Africa are accepting processed and milled GM foods”. Given the enormous pressure that weighed in on the government of Zambia for standing its ground in rejecting GM food aid, it is perhaps not surprising that the others did not follow suit. But to claim that the GM food aid issue has faded is somewhat laughable, given the slanging match that continues to rage between the US and the EU on the matter. [23] Despite the US’ persistent insistence that there weren’t enough non-GM food reserves to make providing non-GM food aid viable, the US did follow in the footsteps of the EU and several other donor countries and ended up giving a 30,000 tonne GM-free maize donation to Zambia, which suggests that international pressure may be having some effect. But at the same time, it seems that the US is using food aid as a way to deliberately contaminate seed and grain sources all over the world as part of its strategy to make segregation of GM and non-GM crops impossible. Other African and Middle Eastern countries are now facing the same dilemma as Zambia: accepting GM foodstuffs from the US or rejecting them and hoping the international community will rally round and provide cash instead. There is a great deal of anger about having to make such a lousy choice. As an editorial in the Gambia’s Independent says, “The continent of famine and drought is living up to her nickname as the world’s dumping ground”. [24]

But aside from the GM debate, Zambia is experiencing other problems related to food aid. Farmers bringing in the winter maize harvest are having trouble selling it because the market is flooded with imported maize. In March, former president of the Zambia National Farmers Union (ZNFU) Ajay Vashee told Reuters that Zambia expected to harvest about one million tonnes of maize for the 2002/03 season, a harvest he said would exceed domestic needs by about 100,000 tonnes. “The food crisis is over”, says ZNFU executive

director Songowayo Zyambo. “The situation on the ground is that there is enough maize, both imported and local maize. The unfortunate development is that early (winter) maize farmers have found themselves with no good market because millers are claiming to have enough stocks”. [25] The same situation is presenting itself in South Africa, which is having trouble finding markets for this year’s above average maize harvest, owing to the large-scale imports of imported maize. [26]

Zambia’s famine

In Zambia early last year, the government began encouraging imports to plug a 630,000-tonne maize deficit, which prompted the WFP to declare that a quarter of the population was in need of food aid. Guy Scott, a former minister of agriculture in Zambia and now an agricultural consultant, says that the WFP exaggerated the number of people in need in Zambia by a factor of at least two. He doesn’t claim that the exaggeration was intentional, but says the WFP’s assessment of the situation was based on flawed data and influenced by the government which had a political interest in seeing as much free food distributed as possible.

When the Zambian government banned GM imports from the US in June, the WFP made no move to bring in alternative food supplies and remove the GM food aid that had already been delivered. There was even a surplus of 300,000 tons of cassava nationally, which could have been bought to benefit Zambia’s agronomy and economy. The UN confirmed there was enough non-GM food in Southern Africa and on world markets to deal with the famine, but the US was recalcitrant. The reason for delaying the procurement of GM-free food aid was simply to put the Zambian government under pressure to accept GM food aid. It seems that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was manipulating the WFP not just to subsidise its farmers and shifting unsellable surpluses, but also as a way of “integrating GM crops into local food systems”. This is one of the goals USAID broadcasts on its website.

According to Scott, for three months after the government’s GM food aid ban, the WFP distributed less than one-third of the food they said was needed. For the two months after that, it was less than half. If things were so bad, he argues, there should have been some visible negative effects from these five months. Not only is there no evidence of increased deaths, he says, but there is also little

evidence that malnutrition reached a crisis level among children, who usually suffer the quickest in times of food crises. Bernadette Lubozhya of Zambia's Agricultural Training Centre and the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection confirms that no one in Zambia has died of hunger this year. She adds that the Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) in its January report found that malnutrition levels are still the same as at their August 2002 reports, and in some cases the levels had actually improved.

Sources: Nicole Itano, "The famine that wasn't", The Christian Science Monitor, 9 April 2003, www.csmonitor.com/2003/0409/p07s02-woaf.html; "Continued pressure against Zambia on GM food", Afrol News, 30 October 2002; www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2002/fs020612.html; Personal communication with Bernadette Lubozhya, 2 May, 2003.

The aims of development and international aid programmes must be to increase local peoples' control of their own livelihoods. This cannot be achieved whilst people regularly suffer from a lack of food. The key to maintaining food levels is through local food security. The International Fund for Agricultural Development says that securing local food security requires putting in place (a) measures to enhance and stabilise household access to, and availability of, food across seasons and shortages; (b) activities to sustain food supply in the long term; and (c) constant attention to the adequacy of food while complying with nutrient and safety requirements and cultural preferences.

The adoption of industrial agriculture in the south will do nothing to put these pieces in place. GM technology will lead to a loss of diversity in third world agriculture and a loss of control and food sovereignty. The current food crisis in Africa is not an inescapable reality of life on Earth but a continuation of a trajectory of exploitation that began in the late 15th century when Africa and Europe were drawn into common relations. By restructuring the global economy and applying appropriate technologies logically to our problems we can build equitable, sustainable societies in which hunger is experienced by all, but only as a prelude to eating.

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