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The New Wild West

Commercial Colonization of Africa

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Dancing to the tune of their corporate benefactors, governments of the ruling G8 countries are enacting complex agriculture agreements delivering large tracts of prime cut African soil into the portfolios of their multinational bedmates.

Desperate for foreign investment, countries throughout Africa are at the mercy of their new colonial masters – national and international agrochemical corporations, fighting for land, water and control of the world’s food supplies. Driven overwhelmingly by self-interest and profit, the current crop of ‘investors’ differ little from their colonial ancestors. The means may have changed, but the aim – to rape and pillage, no matter the sincere sounding rhetoric – remains more or less the same.

Regarded by her northern guides as agriculturally underperforming, Sub-Saharan Africa is seen, The African Centre for Bio-diversity (ACB) relate, as a “new frontier”, a place to “make profits, with an eye on land, food and biofuels in particular”. Africa, then, is the new Wild West; smallholder farmers and indigenous people are the natives Indians, the multi nationals and their democratically elected representatives – or salesmen – the settlers.

Various initiatives offering what is, indisputably much needed ‘support and investment’ are flowing north to south. Key amongst these is The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa (NAFSNA), designed by the governments of the eight richest economies, for some of the poorest countries in the world. The New Alliance was born out of the G8 summit in May 2012 at Camp David and, according to, WoW, “has been modelled on the ‘new vision’ of private investment in agriculture developed by management consultants McKinsey in conjunction with the ABCD group of leading grain traders (ADM, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus) and other multinational agribusiness companies.”(Ibid) It has been written in honourable terms to sit comfortably within the Africa Union’s Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), bestowing an aura of international credibility.

The New Alliance... In Land and Seed Appropriation

At first glance, The New Alliance, with its altruistically-gilded aims, appears to be a worthy development. Who amongst us could argue with the intention, as reported by the United Nations (UN), to “achieve sustained and inclusive agricultural growth and raise 50 million people out of poverty over the next 10 years”. The means to achieving this noble quest however, are skewed, ignoring the rights and needs of small-holder farmers and the wishes of local people – who are not consulted during the heady negotiations with government officials local and national, and the multi zillion \$ corporations who are swarming to buy their ancestral land. Alliance contracts and deals-done favour wealthy investors, revealing the underlying, unjust G8 initiatives objective, to “open up African agriculture to multinational agribusiness companies by means of national ‘cooperation frameworks’ between African governments, donors and private sector investors”, WoW report.

Poverty reduction (the principle stated aim of the Alliance), will be achieved we are told, not by rational methods of sharing and re-distribution, but USAID 18/05/2012 reveal, by “aligning the commitments of Africa’s leadership to drive effective country plans and policies for food security”. ‘Plans and policies’, drafted no doubt in the hallowed meeting rooms of those driving the ‘New Alliance’: the G8 governments and their cohorts including The World Bank and, pulling the policy strings, the agriculture companies sitting behind them, nestling alongside the pharmaceutical giants and the arms industry magnates. With African governments anxious to eat at the head table, or at least be invited into the cocktail chamber they have little choice but to sign up to such unbalanced ‘plans and policies’.

To date, nine African countries (from a continent of 54 nation states), have committed to The New Alliance. First to sign up were, Tanzania, Ghana and the West’s favoured ally in the region Ethiopia – where wide ranging human rights violations, including forced displacement and rapes have reportedly accompanied land sales, and where over 250,000 people in Gambella have been forced into the Orwellian sounding ‘Villagization Programmes’. Then came Burkina Faso, Mozambique and Cote d’Ivoire, followed by Benin, Malawi, and Nigeria. It is an agreement dripping with strings that promise to entangle the innocent and uninformed. After “wide-ranging consultations on land and farming”, with officials from potential partner countries, the results of which were “ignored in the agreements with the G8”, deals “between African governments and private companies were facilitated by the World Economic Forum”, behind, The Guardian report, firmly closed doors.

Conditional to investment promised by The New Alliance, African leaders, USAID tell us are ‘committed’ – forced may be a better word – “to refine [government] policies in order to improve investment opportunities”. In plain English, African countries are required to, change their trade and agriculture laws to include ending the free distribution of seeds, relax the tax system and national export controls and open the doors wide for profit repatriation (allowing the money as well as the crops to be exported). In Mozambique, as elsewhere across the continent, local farmers have been evicted from their land under land sales agreements, and The Guardian 10/06/2013 report, “is now obliged to write new laws promoting what its agreement calls “partnerships” of this kind”. A polluted term, disguising the real relationship between African governments and the multi-national ‘investors’, which is closer to master and maid than equal collaborators.

The Alliance offers a combination of public and private money to African countries willing to take the G8 plunge into international political-economic duplicity, with, ACB relate “the large multinational seed, fertiliser and agrochemical companies setting the agenda ... and philanthropic institutions (like AGRA and others) establishing the institutional and infrastructural mechanisms to realise this agenda”. Britain has pledged £395 million of foreign aid whilst, according to the UN “over 45 local and multinational companies have expressed their intent to invest over \$3 billion across the agricultural value chain in Grow Africa countries [a Programme of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) established by the African Union in 2003.]”

In order to get their hands on some of the corporations billions however, African nations are required to “change their seed laws, trade laws and land ownership in order to prioritise corporate profits over local food needs”, Mozambique e.g. is contracted, The Guardian tell us to “systematically cease distribution of free and unimproved seeds”, and is drawing up new laws granting intellectual property rights (IPR) of seeds, that will “promote private sector investment”. In other words, laws are being written that allow foreign companies – ‘investors’ (a word used to mislead and bestow legitimacy) – to grab the land of their African ‘partners’, patent their seeds and monopolise their food markets. In Ghana, Tanzania and Ivory Coast, similar regulations sit on the table waiting to be rubber-stamped.

The re-writing of seed laws, along with the fact that these unbalanced deals allow “big multinational seed, fertiliser and agrochemical companies such as Yara, Monsanto, Syngenta and Cargill to set the agenda”, is a major concern expressed by environmental NGO’s and campaigners, Reuters 20/06/2013 report. These are concerns that the initiating G8 governments, were they at all troubled by the impact of their meddling, should share.

The wide ownership, by a small number of huge agro-chemical companies of the rights to seeds and fertilisers, is creating, the UN in their report on the Right to Food, state: “monopoly privileges to plant breeders and patent-holders through the tools of intellectual property”. This growing trend, facilitated through the support of the G8 governments is placing more and more control of the worldwide food supply in their hands, and is causing, “the poorest farmers [to] become increasingly dependent on expensive inputs, creating the risk of indebtedness in the face of unstable incomes.” India is a case in question where farmers strangled by debt are committing suicide at a rate of two per hour.

Share the Land, Seeds and Water

African farmers, and civil society along with 25 British campaign groups including War on Want, Friends of the Earth, The Gaia Foundation and the World Development Movement, have declared their objections to the New Alliance and asked that the government withhold the £395 million so generously pledged by Prime Minister Cameron. The African civil society see clearly that “opening markets and creating space for multinationals to secure profits lie at the heart of the G8 intervention”, they “recognise the New Alliance is a poisoned chalice, and they are right to reject it”, asserts Kirtana Chandrasekaran of Friends of the Earth (FoE).

Having made a continental mess of their own countries’ economies, not to mention the environmental mayhem caused by their policies, It is with unabashed colonial arrogance that the G8 governments deem to tell African countries what to do with their land and how best to do it. Not only do they have no genuine interest in Africa, save what can be gained from it, but they have “no legitimacy to intervene in matters of food, hunger and land tenure in Africa or any other part of the world”, WoW make clear. The New Alliance, according to David Cameron, is “a great combination of promoting good governance and helping Africa to feed its people”. He and the rest of the G8 sitting comfortably club, are, FoE state, “pretending to be tackling hunger and land grabbing in Africa while backing a scheme that will ruin the lives of hundreds of thousands of small farmers”, the New Alliance is “a pro-corporate assault on African nations”.

The ‘investment and support’ opportunities are laid at the door of investors, to further expand their corporate assets and with the support of participating governments, obliged to provide a selection box of state incentives.

The ending of hunger in sub-Saharan Africa, India and elsewhere, will not be brought about by allowing large tracts of land to be bought up by corporations whose only interest is in maximizing return on investment and, as ACB report these governments believe. The Alliance, far from providing investment and support for the people of Africa, is a mask for exploitation and profiteering: True investment built on relationships, is investment in the people of Africa; the smallholder farmers, the women and children, the communities across the continent. It involves working collectively, consulting, encouraging participation, cooperating instead of competing, and crucially sharing. Sharing of knowledge, experience and technology, sharing the natural resources – the land, food and water, the minerals and other resources equitably amongst the people of Africa and the wider world. Such radical, commonsense ideas would go a long way to creating not only food security but harmony, trust and social justice which just might bring about peace – the ultimate security.