

In Kenya, Farmers Grow Their Own Way

Thousands of grassroots, African-led efforts are building locally rooted alternatives to the chemical agriculture promoted by the Gates Foundation and Monsanto.

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Saving seeds gives the women's group local control of their food supply.

Photo by Heather Day

We had just been visiting farmers cultivating land in the lush, steep hills north of the town of Thika in central Kenya. Samuel Nderitu, our guide and host, had one more project he wanted us to see: the Tumaini Women's Group. They were meeting to found their community's first seed bank.

We were now in an area that has suffered from six years of drought and has a high concentration of people living with HIV/AIDS, both compounding the area's struggles with hunger.

Samuel left the highway and drove down a flat, dusty road. In the distance we could see a cluster of trees. As we got closer we could hear music, and then more than twenty elderly, colorfully dressed women emerged from the shade, singing and dancing to a song they had composed just for our visit. They led us to a tree where they asked us to sit while they told us their story.

Like most of the farmers in this area, the Tumaini women explained, they had followed the advice of outsiders (mostly large-scale foreign NGOs) who told them that yields would increase if they purchased special seeds rather than saving their own and applied chemicals to their crops. But the women soon learned the long-term consequences of these methods. When the rains

stopped, crops didn't produce well and debts mounted. Stripped from years of chemical use, the soil couldn't [retain what little moisture was left](#), nor was there enough water to dissolve the chemicals. Yields declined and farmers could no longer afford the inputs—chemical fertilizers, genetically engineered seeds, pesticides—that they believed were necessary to cultivate their land. Farmers became poorer and hungrier.

Now, with the help of Samuel and his wife, Peris, the women of the Tumaini group are rejecting the methods they had been taught and learning both new and traditional ways of farming—replacing methods that depend on chemicals or expensive seeds with practices rooted in ecological management and local knowledge. In doing so, they are also rejecting the latest scheme by the Global North to cure Africa of hunger and poverty, the so-called “New Green Revolution in Africa.”

The New Green Revolution: Too Much Like the Old One

In 2006 the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations launched the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which is based in Nairobi, Kenya. Their aim is to alleviate poverty and hunger in Africa by increasing food production. Much like [the original green revolution](#), which still plagues farmers throughout India and Latin America, their mission is to increase production by increasing the amount of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and chemical dependent high-yield seed varieties farmers use. They are also aggressively pushing genetically modified seeds and the involvement of agribusiness giants such as [Monsanto](#)—currently being investigated by the Department of Justice for monopolistic practices in the United States seed market.

"The biotech seeds are patented. You cannot replant. You cannot harvest and store them before replanting. You're totally dependent on Monsanto."

-Josphat Ngunyo

Many civil society groups in Kenya are outraged by AGRA's plans and wonder why they have not been involved in deciding what is best for Africans. Josphat Ngunyo, director of the Africa Network for Animal Welfare and member of the Kenya Biodiversity Coalition, states, “AGRA didn't involve the people in Africa. This was an idea pushed onto Africa that does not work. If Africans aren't included, it's clearly not about us.” Ngunyo, along with many other organizers and farmers, often asks a basic question that the foundation has yet to answer: Why do you want to spread the very same farming methods that have made our farmers poor and hungry?

Many farmers' biggest worry, however, is losing control of their seeds. AGRA's grantees are teaming up with Monsanto and other seed companies to distribute free, patented seeds to farmers and discourage farmers from saving seed. As Ngunyo explains, “Now we're having seeds from Monsanto, the [biotech seeds that are patented](#). You cannot replant. You cannot harvest and store them before replanting. You're totally dependent on Monsanto.”

Another Way: Food Security through Food Sovereignty

But the new green revolution ignores groups like the Tumaini Women's Group: the thousands of

grassroots, African-led efforts that, like AGRA's programs, are designed to boost production and generate income, but which—unlike AGRA—use methods that nourish the soil, cool the planet, build community, and empower farmers. As members of the Seattle-based campaign [AGRA Watch](#), we came to Kenya to see some of this work firsthand.

Again and again, the farmers we met discussed the importance of controlling their own food sources—what the international peasant movement [La Via Campesina](#) calls “food sovereignty.”

Thousands of grassroots, African-led efforts are also designed to boost production and generate income, but—unlike AGRA—use methods that nourish the soil, cool the planet, build community, and empower farmers.

Food sovereignty, as defined in the "Declaration of Nyéléni," a document produced by a gathering of farmers in Mali in 2007, is the “right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Food sovereignty requires the [democratization of our food system](#), with people, not corporations, in control.



Florence, 72, shows off her maize crop.

Photo by Heather Day

Florence is the leader of the Tumaini Women’s Group and the hostess of the seed-saving workshop we had come to witness. At 72 years of age, she has transitioned away from chemical farming and transformed her land into a demonstration farm where others come to learn. She took us on a tour and proudly showed off her robust maize crop, one of over 30 crops she was growing.

Florence explained that the Tumaini women’s group consists of 23 widows, ranging from 72 to 102 years old, who collectively care for 73 orphans. The women lost their husbands and many of their children to the AIDS epidemic and are now responsible for the younger generation of grandchildren. She explained the importance of teaching the children how to grow their own food using sustainable, locally controlled methods: “We are getting old, and as the orphans grow up, we want them to sustain themselves, so we are teaching them how they can be self-sustaining through agriculture and other business.”

It was Florence who asked Samuel Nderitu, our guide, to teach her and the other members of the

Tumaini group about another approach to agriculture. Samuel and his wife, Peris, are the directors and founders of Grow BioIntensive Agricultural Centre of Kenya, or [GBIACK](#). Both are graduates of the [Manor House Agricultural Centre](#) in Kitale, Kenya, which, unlike many agricultural schools, teaches students ecological farming methods and gives them tools to organize whole communities to become self-sufficient and food secure. A key component of this approach is its emphasis on self-reliance: Farmers are taught how to grow sufficient food for themselves and their families using locally available, affordable resources, while also generating income to send their children to school and pay for other necessities.



Photo by Heather Day

Refugees from Kenya's recent political violence, Peris and Samuel chose to relocate to Thika, where they felt their work could have the most impact in addressing the area's difficult living conditions. GBIACK focuses on working with the most vulnerable populations: widows, orphans, and those who are poor, HIV positive, or living with AIDS. Their beautiful training center includes a demonstration farm, community library, seed bank, and classroom. In addition to training farmers in agroecological farming methods, they teach animal husbandry, beekeeping, and water conservation. They also started a program for girls to learn tailoring, allowing them to earn the income necessary to attend school. All of this is on a shoestring budget.

During the height of the drought, the GBIACK farm was one of very few in the area still able to produce food, proof to many that their methods are more resilient than those that rely on chemicals and “improved” seeds. Samuel explains, “To assist my poor brothers and sisters who are languishing in poverty due to lack of knowledge, I teach them how to fish, so that they may continue fishing the rest of their lives. I believe that [if I share the knowledge that I have](#), many people will be able to feed themselves using the biointensive techniques.”

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GBIACK’s primary aim is to provide training in the communities surrounding Thika. Most often, farmers reach out to them after seeing the results of their trainings in neighbors’ fields. To broaden the impact of trainings, Peris and Samuel choose to work with farmers—like Florence—

who take leadership within their communities and teach others how to farm without chemicals. In this way, they have been able to train thousands of farmers in just a couple of years of operation.

"We didn't know that farming can be done without spending so much money," one farmer from the Lifwa Women's Group in Bikeke, Kenya wrote in a letter to [Kilili Self-Help](#), a U.S. group that helps raise funds for GBIACK. "We have always thought that without money we cannot do farming. We have found out that we can make our own fertilizers and also grow our own seeds."

Self-reliance Starts With Seeds



[Photo Essay: Seed Savers Exchange](#)

The largest non-governmental seed bank in the U.S. collects and stores thousands of heirloom seeds for the benefit of future generations.

Both groups believe that saving seed is a key part of self-sufficiency. "[Community seed banks](#) are important as a source of healthy and vigorous seed to replace degenerated or lost seed, to serve as a collection point of different types of seeds from the community and beyond, and to supply farmers with quality seed of new varieties," Peris told us.

In contrast, Samuel laments, "The technologies that are promoted by the Gates Foundation in Africa are not farmer-friendly or environmentally friendly. Some of them have not been tested fully to determine their effects on the environment and consumers. More research is required before they are released to the farmers or for commercial production."

Farmers [all over the world](#), the majority of whom are women, are insisting on their right to food sovereignty, and placing seed at the center of that fight. As Do'a Zaied, Palestinian agronomist and food sovereignty activist affiliated with La Via Campesina, stated, "To have your independent voice and your independent thinking, you have to have food sovereignty, and that starts with control over your own seeds."



Photo by Heather Day

Florence also emphasized the importance of diversifying, growing a variety of crops appropriate to the region and their culture. “Because of foreign crops that have come, farmers have neglected the indigenous crops. GBIACK has taught us [the importance of the indigenous crops](#)—millet, cassava, and sorghum—which is good food and it helps to maintain food security,” she said. GBIACK also helps farmers living with HIV/AIDS learn to grow crops that boost their immune systems, such as amaranth.

The day we sat under the trees with the Tumaini women, many of their seeds had just finished drying, and they were testing the viability of each saved crop. The women placed samples of each of their seeds onto a damp paper towel inside a petri dish. The following week they would return to see what percentage of each seed variety germinated, which would tell them whether they could use that seed for planting. Each woman in the group had saved seed from a different crop, supplying the seed bank with a wide variety. Their collective effort resulted in a diverse, resilient collection of seeds, to which each woman had free access, taking them one step closer to food sovereignty.



Heather Day and Travis English wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Heather is co-founder and director of [Community Alliance for Global Justice](#). Travis English is a student in the Masters of Urban Planning program at the University of Washington and is co-chair of AGRA Watch.

Want to learn more? Visit [Kilili Self Help](#) to learn more about training programs, biointensive farming methods, or make a donation (specify that your donation is for GBIACK).

Interested?

- [Food Rebellions: 7 Steps to Solving the Food Crisis](#): Resistance to the trade and “aid” policies that displace farmers and increase hunger.
- [Video: Alternatives to Monsanto in India](#): Vandana Shiva explains the effect of GMOs on Indian agriculture—and how to promote home-grown alternatives.
- [Food in Dry Times](#): Growing food in a future of droughts, floods, and storms? The answer lies in the dirt.
- [A Month Without Monsanto](#): April Dávila wondered what it would take to cut the GMO giant out of her family’s life. She found that it was far more entrenched than she’d ever realized.

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Reader Comments

Watch "A Thousand Suns" about AGRA in Ethiopia

Posted by Alan Zulch at Oct 06, 2010 10:29 PM

Greetings,

It is wonderful to read this expose and to see the Kilili Self-Help Project being featured.

I'd like to invite interested readers to watch 'A Thousand Suns', a 30 minute documentary on AGRA and evangelical missionaries combined detrimental impacts on the indigenous self-sustaining culture of the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia.

This film was shown on PBS in April and is available online. It is also available on DVD for free to anyone willing to host a screening.

Here is the link: <http://www.globalonenessproject.org/videos/athousandsuns>

Thank you again for a great article!

Reply

Kenyan Farmers

Posted by abacktorootsAmerican at Oct 08, 2010 10:18 PM

Well done, Kenyans! Great article.

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