



Community Alliance for Global Justice

Working locally for justice in the global economy

606 Maynard Ave. S #252 Seattle, WA 98104 Ph 206.405.4600 contact_us@seattleglobaljustice.org
www.seattleglobaljustice.org

Local Alternatives to the Green Revolution in Africa Learning from Women Farmers in Kenya

By Heather Day and Travis English, Published online in Yes! Magazine, October 4, 2010

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

Local Alternatives to the Green Revolution in Africa: Learning from Women Farmers in Kenya

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.

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 Ngonyo, 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." Ngonyo, 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?



Florence, a member of the Tumaini Women's Group, proudly showing off her corn.

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 Ngonyo 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, www.seattleglobaljustice.org

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."

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 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 Nderuti, 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.

Local Alternatives to the Green Revolution in Africa: Learning from Women Farmers in Kenya

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.

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."

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
www.seattleglobaljustice.org

spending so much money," one farmer from the Lifwa Women's Group in Bikeke, Kenya wrote in a letter to Kili 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

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.



GBIACK Training Center

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."

Both groups believe that saving seed is a key part of

Local Alternatives to the Green Revolution in Africa: Learning from Women Farmers in Kenya

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.”



Tumaini widows group learning seed-saving. These women are between 70 and 102 years old, still farming, and taking care of multiple orphaned grand-children.

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 Zaiid, 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.”

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,

www.seattleglobaljustice.org

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.

Comments are welcome.
Please contact AGRA Watch to get involved in our campaign for African food sovereignty:
agrawatch@seattleglobaljustice.com
or visit:
www.seattleglobaljustice.org/agra-watch