



Strengthening Africa in World Trade

Q&A with Dr. Million Belay, General Coordinator, Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa.

Dr. Million Belay is the General Coordinator of Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and a member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems and researches the transformation of food systems in Africa.

Q How do you envision the future of Africa's food systems?

AIn general, what we all want is sustainable and healthy diet. The question is, what is sustainable and healthy diet? To begin with, everybody has to have food because it's a right of every citizen and individual to have food and not simply food but the food should be nutritious capable of nourishing people's mental health. So many communities want culturally appropriate food. We also want this food to be produced without impacting the environment. The environment should be healthy because when the environment is healthy, people are healthy. Governments should understand that they have the obligation and the duty to ensure that people eat food and that they produce food in a sustainable way. Thus, governments should not impose on them agrochemicals. Governments should not make people produce for the market alone. That's the kind of food system I envision and it is what we are struggling to achieve.

Q In the face of the increasing corporate capture of the seed sector, how can we decolonize Africa's food systems?

AMultinational Corporations (MNCs) increasingly are controlling seeds distribution system, agro-ecological inputs, technologies and data now. Currently, the five rich companies are companies that operate on data and data is very much important. They come to Africa promising to offer us so many things. There is a rush to digitize Africa but one of the reasons is to mine data because data is power and data is money. MNCs come to Africa and advise governments to transform food systems but what kind of transformation are they talking about? Transformation to what? MNCs want to drive us into a path where if they do not supply agricultural inputs, we will not be able to produce.

If farmers re-orient their agriculture to the market then they should forget everything else that they produce and only produce for the market. With this, farmers will be restricted to fewer crops.

The colonizers of our food systems perceive it that we have to commercialize in order to grow. It does not mean that indigenous farmers should not use what modern science has to offer but indigenous knowledge has to be respected. Decolonizing yourself means, standing where you are but like Ghandi said;

Opening your door, your window and allowing the fresh air to come in but never allowing yourself to be taken by whirl wind. That's the true meaning of decolonizing oneself. Decolonizing starts from understanding and having the right alternative which for Africa is agroecology.

Q Please share your views on the industrial agriculture model and the growing narrative and attribution of COVID 19 to this model.

A In most cases in rural communities there is a farm and animals as part of the farm. Animals may include chicken, goat, and sheep among others. Industrialization has separated them and you will only find a farm, monoculture, use of big machines. In most cases, thousands of animals are kept together and they are not moving around. In the natural environment, they have their own viruses and most of the time, and these viruses do not mix. Sometimes because of the confinement, a virus can find its way from one animal to another. When they cross from one another to another, what happens is the genetic makeup of these two organisms mix and a virus which wasn't previously harmful to human beings will become harmful now and spreading in so many ways. This is what is creating the SARS and COVID 19 is one of the SARS. Industrial agriculture's incursion into natural habitats is also one of the causes for spread of pandemics. We can talk about Ebola, HIV AIDS, SARS and Lime disease in these category. Agroecology is the way.

Q Is the Green Revolution the solution to transforming Africa's Agriculture?

A The Green Revolution is definitely transforming Africa's agriculture to a dead end. It is transforming agriculture but in the negative way. If we are talking about a positive kind of transformation, Green Revolution would not do that. The Green Revolution has destroyed people's lives in India, eroded the culture of the people, eroded seed bases of local communities, made farmers sick, indebted and so many killing themselves. Basically Green Revolution is a bad agenda for Africa and it does not work.

Q What do you think is the role of trade in promoting sustainable food systems in Africa?

I am not an expert on trade but I recognize that trade is a very important element. In terms of trade, there is an increasing focus on territorial markets. Territorial markets are close to the people, embedded in the landscape of culture and environment. They are diverse with a wide variety of agricultural and local products to the market place. They are holistic as they perform multiple social, economic, ecological and cultural functions. They are also most profitable to small scale farmers. When countries trade, it is very important that they can be trading in healthy food. If possible, it would be good to penalize those that trade in unhealthy food and put in place laws that control food that is being traded to protect people's health. I prefer trade between African countries than trading with Europe. We should all interrogate trade and find out what we are trading in and under what influence. Trade can be a good force but it can also be destructive.

Interview by Herbert Kafeero, Communications Coordinator, SEATINI Uganda

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