



How Bill Gates & the *Agribusiness Alliance for a Green Revolution* Failed Africa

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Tim Wise in Introduction: One of the things that we're really pleased about, about the book, is the title "Eating Tomorrow" and the double meaning captures the real essence of what I was trying to communicate, which is that humanity does indeed face a continuing challenge to ensure that everyone can eat today. And climate change makes that challenge all the more daunting, about making sure everyone can eat tomorrow. But the way we're producing our food is, on chemical intensive industrial scale farms, is quite literally devouring the natural resources, the seeds, the land, the soil, the climate, the water, on which future food production depends. By continuing and now even expanding such unsustainable production methods, we are eating our collective tomorrows. And the powers that be far from shifting away from that kind of a damaging farming model are instead promoting ever more industrial scale agriculture. I wrote this book because with 30 years in this field, I wanted to understand why policymakers were ignoring all the low cost solutions all around them offered by their own small scale farmers. And instead they're pushing expensive policies that not only fail to help the hungry eat today, they are undermining the capacity of all of us to eat tomorrow.

Lynn Fries: Hello and welcome. I'm Lynn Fries, producer of Global Political Economy or GPEnewsdocs. Today's guest is Tim Wise. In that opening clip, Tim was speaking at the 2019 launch of his book "Eating Tomorrow", a book about agribusiness, family farmers and the battle for the future of food. Today, we'll be looking into the battle for the future of food in Africa. We'll do this through the lens of two very different alliances, one the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and the other the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. Their respective acronyms being AFSA and AGRA. Tim Wise is senior research fellow at Tufts University's Global Development And Environment Institute and senior adviser on the Future of Food from the US to India and Mexico to Mozambique at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. Welcome, Tim.

TW: Thanks so much, Lynn.

LF: In early September, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa released an open letter stating the Green Revolution had failed Africa. And in the statement, AFSA demanded that donors of the alliance with the Green Revolution in Africa stop funding the AGRA initiative. There was a press briefing held at the time. So Tim, start by giving us some background on all that and who the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa represent and something about the discovery process of your own research findings on the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa.

TW: When I was researching my book, a lot of the work I did was in southern Africa, and I heard a lot about the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and its program to promote the use of chemical fertilizers and commercial seeds to replace farm seeds and practices that farmers typically use in those regions. And, but you never came across the actual organization, AGRA. What you saw was lots of promotional activity and direct subsidies for African governments to sell those inputs. And you heard a lot about how it wasn't working. After I'd heard about that, really, for the three, four years, I was doing the research for the book, I finally got the occasion to do a deeper study on whether the Alliance for a Green Revolution Africa was having the kind of impact that it claimed it was going to have, really promising a productivity revolution for Africa's small scale farmers. They promised in their original goals to double productivity and yields and incomes for 30 million small scale farmers. That's a lot of farmers while cutting food insecurity in half. And so I just looked at the 13 countries that I grew focuses on, or have focused on for most of its 15 year history, and looked at whether there was any sign of a productivity revolution, income improvements or food security improving. And there really isn't. So it's striking that what I had observed more anecdotally out in the field doing my research for the book was so dramatically confirmed in this research on well where's the Green Revolution. And the farmers I talked to in southern Africa weren't wrong when they said it's not working, it's not working. So the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa is the largest civil society organization in Africa. Those farmers I was talking to in southern Africa are members of organizations, peasant unions, networks that are often members of the alliance. They claim among their members and affiliate over 200 million members across the continent in 50 countries. So this is a large, powerful grassroots organization representing food producers largely, not just farmers, but fisherfolk, pastoralists and others. And so when they take a stand and say, directly challenge the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and donors, to stop funding it, it's a big deal. And it really deserves attention because it's a bold step for an organization to come out there publicly and say to aid organizations, "hey, your aid is not what we want or need. We want something else". And the something else they want is support for agroecology and other low input, smallholder friendly, climate resilient programs that actually support smallholders doing what they do but doing it better.

LF: In the words of AFSA, at that press briefing, they said after nearly 15 years spending more than \$1 billion to promote the use of commercial seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides in 13 African countries and an additional \$1 billion per year of African government subsidies for seeds and fertilizers, AGRA has failed to provide evidence that yields incomes or food security increased significantly and sustainably for smallholder households across its target countries. So the message from AFSA to AGRA's donors is stop funding the Green Revolution technology and shift your support to agroecology, an approach that Africa's smallholder food producers say works and they want. So, in short, what's meant by agroecology?

TW: Agroecology is defined in many different ways, but I think the simplest way to understand it is as an approach to growing food that tries to work in harmony with natural systems rather than trying to overcome them by using, say, pesticides to control pests, fertilizer to create soil fertility for the crops, etc.. But it's also a social movement at this point, and I think a lot of people, like those that are at the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, really connected to food sovereignty in the sense that it's really about empowering local food producers to take the lead in and determining how agriculture and food moves forward.

LF: The general coordinator of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa put it this way, he wrote, “we welcome investment in agriculture in our continent, but we seek it in a form that's democratic and responsive to the people at the heart of agriculture, not as a top-down force that ends up concentrating power and profit into the hands of a small number of multinational corporations”. The AFSA press briefing at the time of the open letter made it clear that well before releasing that open letter in September, AFSA has sent letters to major agro-donors asking them to provide some evidence that the AGRA initiative was living up to its promises, in other words, meeting its goals. But AFSA reported they received few and no credible responses, despite the fact that the AFSA network represents more than, as you say, 200 million food producers across Africa.

TW: These leaders are deeply insulted, and they should be. I mean, it's not just the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, one of its member organizations, the Southern Africa Faith Communities Environment Institute, an organization started by faith leaders in southern Africa who wrote an open letter to the Gates Foundation, Gates Foundation is far and away the largest donor to AGRA. I mean, really, it is the Gates Foundation organization. They've contributed two thirds of a billion dollars over 15 years of AGRA's billion dollar budget so far. So it's really their organization, and they never even responded to this letter sent by faith communities, a letter signed by 500 faith leaders across the region. I mean, I don't know, the lack of accountability is really astonishing from these organizations. AFSA, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa wrote its letter in June, sent it to all of the major donors to AGRA and got very few replies, absolutely no evidence and no response at all from the Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, from USAID, a major sponsor, UK aid. They got very little and nothing in terms of evidence. It's a little bit surprising to me that having

published my research now more than a year ago, that none of the donors and AGRA itself have come up with anything credible that refutes or challenges our findings that it's not working. I mean, we found such failure. We found that yields have barely, have increased hardly faster than they had before AGRA and the Green Revolution push came along at very low rates. We found that poverty was still endemic, particularly in rural areas, and that the most remarkable and to me, surprising finding, honestly, was that the number of undernourished people, the UN's measure of severe hunger, had gone up 30 percent. Rather than being cut in half in AGRAs 13 countries.

LF: So the published research that you cited is the 2020 Tufts University paper titled Failing Africa's Farmers: An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. And for this impact assessment, we should note you used national level data to assess progress and productivity, poverty reduction and food security in AGRAs 13 target countries. Because despite spending billions, there was little publicly available data documenting the impact the AGRA initiative was having, either from AGRA, the Gates Foundation or donor governments. And AGRA itself declined to provide data from its own internal monitoring and evaluation. However, in 2020, as AGRA reached its own self-imposed deadline and meeting its own stated goals, your study revealed that AGRA had failed on its own terms, and you've confirmed those findings and subsequent updates. So fast forward to October 2021, you find it surprising that AGRA and AGRA donors have failed to provide credible evidence to refute the findings of your research publications and the related report False Promises. So as an alarming example of all this, you were saying that far from meeting its own goal to cut hunger in half by 2020, undernourished people in Africa, which is the UN measure of extreme hunger, has gone up in AGRAs 13 countries.

TW: In the most recent UN report it is even more alarming about this being just the wrong, the wrong path for Africa to follow, because it showed that the number of undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole since 2006, when AGRA was founded, has increased by 50 percent, not decreased by 50 percent. So taking Africa in the absolute wrong direction and no answer providing any evidence that anything they're doing is really working. And then, like you said, no accountability, no interest in engaging and responding to these major community organizations and networks in Africa. The stakeholders that matter, if you're talking about increasing smallholder productivity and incomes and food security, no response to them.

LF: Among other things, the report, a sting in the AGRA tail, makes the connection between Africans being taken in the wrong direction and AGRAs influence on laws in favor of agribusiness in Africa. And that report details how AGRA promotes and creates through financial and other contributions and institutional framework in many of its focused countries, that makes its own Green Revolution approach binding through laws and framework conditions. In other words, AGRAs role in the corporate capture of governance of food and agriculture in Africa. The upshot being the exclusion of voices of, as you say, the

real stakeholders at the heart of agriculture in Africa, which is what AFSA obviously argues. And what the UN Food Systems Summit has shed light on is AGRAs influence and as it's put in the title of a report on this topic, Cementing Corporate Capture of Food Governance, through decision making in the world, international public institutions and the corporate capture of the UN Food Systems Summit being a case in point. And a recent report titled Exposing Corporate Capture of the UN Food Systems Summit through multi-stakeholderism, gets into details. And among other things, the report shows how AGRA fits into the interconnections between multi-stakeholder institutions and corporate actors and corporate influence in the leadership of the UN Food Systems Summit. So given all that comment more broadly on the battle for the future of food in Africa and specifically, give us more context on the statement by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa that they, quote, wanted to state clearly and categorically that the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa does not speak for Africans.

TW: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa is based in Nairobi. Every year they hold an annual Green Revolution Forum, it's called. It's really a place where agribusiness and governments and foundations come together and kind of rally the troops and make deals for investment and the rest. This year, they were, I thought, pretty brazen and insensitive in announcing that their Green Revolution forum would offer a what they called a singular, African coordinated African voice going into the Food System Summit, as if they spoke for Africa and African food producers. And that just incensed the leaders of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty and Africans was like you do not speak for Africans, we speak for Africa's food-producers and you won't even answer our letters. The battle for the future of food is exactly a battle between, I call it agribusiness and family farmers, but it's much broader than that, right? It's the battle between those who are advocating an equitable just and climate resilient and sustainable food system that produces healthy food and those who are advocating really business as usual in spite of their claims that business as usual is no longer an option. That's exactly what they're offering at this UN Food Systems Summit. For example, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, has participated in that process with a very critical eye and came out with a report as the UN Special Rapporteur saying this, the problem with the way this has been conducted and the way it's being carried out, and with the conclusions that it's coming to, with these, a bunch of so-called game changing solutions to our food system problems is that corporate interests have dominated the agenda. It marginalized the actual food producers from those discussions. And the outcome is more strategies that are threatening to have us eating our collective tomorrows by undermining the resource base. We need to grow food in the future, not just in Africa, in the US, not just in the US, in India. And the Food Systems Summit was convened on the premise and the recognition that we were not on track to meet the goal by 2030 of eliminating extreme hunger. We absolutely are not. In fact, we're moving in the opposite direction. And unfortunately, the Food Systems Summit has jettisoned all of the most promising approaches that could actually end business as usual and give us food systems that begin to restore the Earth, provide healthy and nutritious food to everyone on the planet, and

to achieve the promise of the right to food that is enshrined and endorsed by so many countries around the world.

LF: Let's talk now about another common denominator in what's happening with food systems, with whether how the AGRA initiative is taking Africa in the wrong direction or the UN Food Systems Summit is taking the world in the opposite direction of what you say could actually begin to restore the Earth and provide healthy and nutritious food for everyone on the planet. I'm thinking here about disinformation campaigns that demonize approaches like those jettisoned from the UN Food Systems Summit that you're talking about. For instance, an op-ed by renowned economist Jomo K.S. titled "Beware UN Food Systems Summit Trojan Horse", draws attention to what he calls deliberate deceptions to undermine support for agroecology. And the Gates funded Cornell Alliance for Science, for instance, has been widely criticized for disseminating this kind of disinformation. In a Scientific American op-ed titled "Bill Gates Should Stop Telling Africans What Kind of Agriculture Africans Need", AFSA gives details how this applies to Africa, where support for the agroecology paradigm they support is being undermined among Africa's scientists and political leaders by this kind of disinformation campaign. So comment on the demonization of agroecology.

TW: It's a concerted campaign and in part that's the result of the movement for agroecology gaining traction in international institutions like the UN's Agriculture Organization, they adopted a scaling up agroecology program to support governments that want to expand ecological agriculture. The UN's high level panel of experts, it's called, on Food Systems, is a very well respected group that does these in-depth studies. They just recently did one that resulted in a resolution by the Committee on World Food Security to promote agroecology as one of the important solutions to the climate crisis and to hunger. So it's gaining traction and the powers that be are alarmed, and they've fought back with just crazy disinformation campaigns demonizing and portraying African farmers as backward for saving their seeds and being wedded to these, I mean, what they call traditional technologies. What most offended me as a researcher who has worked with a lot of different organizations that promote agroecology is that they are wildly innovative. I mean, the idea that this is somehow backward is just, it's just ludicrous. I mean, they're basically taking scientists out into the field and saying how, talking to farmers and saying, what do you need? How can you improve your soil fertility so you get higher yields? And how can we help you? The innovations are not minor in that process, and in fact, farmers themselves are some of the most innovative because they're the ones on much of the frontlines of climate change. They see what seeds perform well under drought conditions. They see how growing a multiplicity of crops in the same fields improves soil fertility and reduces their climate risk. Because if a drought comes through and wipes out the corn crop, they have other crops that they can rely on for food. And that's where the Green Revolution model is so limited. But to have these proponents of what I argue is actually really old technology seeds and fertilizers, that strategy comes from the Green Revolution of the 60s and 70s, in the middle of the last century. We are 50 years on from that and they're still selling the same old technologies. How can you demonize people

who are truly innovating with ecological agriculture with this old technology claiming that it's an innovation that is somehow fresh, new and going to solve today's problems? It just, it's just not.

LF: So then the way you see it is that these disinformation campaigns partly reflect agribusiness alarm at a situation where governments, instead of depending on corporate solutions to combat hunger and climate change, are increasingly seeking solutions and other approaches. And in the case of scaling up agroecology, doing so with the support of programs that the world's public institutions of food governance, in this case, the UN Rome based agency, The Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO. So it's not so hard to understand how an agenda and narrative coming out of the UN that agroecology is a “win win win” for people, planet and livelihoods, would alarm agribusiness and its allied interests, and how, as you say, corporate interests are fighting back. This then serves to protect markets for corporate innovation from old technology like the Green Revolution technology we've been talking about in the context of Africa to new technology like the kind championed is techno fixes at the UN Food System Summit. Talk more about Africa as a market for corporate innovation. Most of us think of Green Revolution technology as genetically modified crops. So tell us more about the kind of Green Revolution technology that's being advocated by AGRA in Africa.

TW: AGRA itself is very careful not to publicly state that it is advocating for genetically modified crops because they are just so widely rejected on the continent of Africa. What it's doing though, and what the Gates Foundation is doing and others, USAID, are advocating for changes in seed laws and intellectual property laws that would open the door for genetically modified crops to start to be used in Africa. They've made some incursions in that regard in Nigeria and Ghana. Overwhelmingly, the countries do not allow genetically modified crops, particularly food crops, to be grown. Cotton is often an exception to that because it's not directly consumed. But it's important to recognize that the road to genetically modified crops has a number of steps along the way. First, what you do if you're trying to open that door is you get farmers to stop using the seeds that they save year to year and you don't need GMOs to do that. What the Green Revolution sells is what are called hybrid seeds, seeds that have been bred, and they're bred in such a way that they supposedly will give you high yields, usually only if you have all of these inputs that mostly farmers can't afford, irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides and the like. Hybrid seeds can't be saved from year to year because they don't hold their, what it's called, vigor their productivity. It will degenerate if they're saved from year to year. So the first step you do and I saw this in Malawi is you try and get farmers to give up their local seeds. You tell them they're unproductive. Some of them are not very productive, that they've been overused, that they're tired, as people would say. And you should start using our commercial seeds. And once you're using them, you can't save them. And so you need to buy them every year and you've opened up a market for seed suppliers. Monsanto and now Bayer in Malawi sells 50 percent of the hybrid maize seeds in that market. And so those are big markets for these seed companies. They don't need to be selling

GMOs to make money. And that path of getting farmers dependent on commercial seeds, that are these hybrids you can't save year to year, so they have to buy them every year and the fertilizers to make them grow creates a dependency that very much serves the interests of these agribusiness corporations.

LF: So the experience we've seen in the Green Revolution from the 60s and 70s over the decades in other parts of the world is that as farmers get put on the path of dependency on these corporate inputs, they can run into serious debt problems. Comment on that risk.

TW: Sure, that's a huge risk. It's probably the headline risk that people have heard about from India because of the high levels of farmer suicides. Farmers suicides because crops fail and farmers have gone into debt to buy the seeds and fertilizers and rather either out of the humiliation of being in debt or the desire to free their families from the debt that the farmer himself has incurred they take their own lives. We're not at that level in Africa. I mean, the levels of dependency are not as high on these inputs. Like I said, this has been, this is a relatively early stage in the attempt to bring African agriculture under agribusinesses control. The vast majority of African food is still produced by Africans using seeds they saved from year to year from their crops. So that's the market that the Bayer, Monsanto, and others want to get.

LF: In wrapping up, talk now about agroecology as the kind of approach members of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa want agri-donors to switch funding to. There's plenty of compelling and inspiring stories in support of that on AFSA's website, which has a whole section of agroecology case studies. So your work takes you all over the world, but staying with today's focus on Africa, tell us something about what you are seeing there.

TW: Oh, sure, I mean, it's very inspiring stuff. That's what keeps me in this work. Is getting to be, I mean, it's been, it's been awful and under COVID not to really be able to travel and do that kind of international research and reporting that I was able to for the book. And in my career generally, to be out in the field and see what's going on. I mean, it really is a growing movement. You have literally millions of acres in West Africa in a program of restoration of degraded drylands through the regeneration of tree farming. Very simple, but labor intensive process of getting trees that have been cut down to grow again. They provide shade, they literally change the climate in that region and allow food to once again be grown on those lands. Wildly successful and literally on millions of acres of land. You have others where again, I think it's millions of acres, farmers doing what's called either intercropping or cover cropping. It's basically farmers who've grown dependent on monocultures of maize, of corn, which is what's generally promoted, being coached into choosing good, good leguminous crops, like beans, to intercrop in the rows of corn. Very much taking from what we know in the United States as the old three sisters model of the ancient Maya, right? You grow beans, squash and corn in the same fields, and you're both producing a nutritious diet in combination and a way to sustain the soil in combination. That's all been destroyed by industrial

agriculture that's being broken apart. Each crop on its own field and mining the nutrients from the soil and in their own ways. In Africa, there are huge projects to get farmers growing these leguminous crops with their maize crops and they've found these guys have more than doubled yields for maize and other fruit crops in the process without resorting to dependence on chemical inputs. It's really not hard to find success stories out there, but if you have your blinders on, like the Gates Foundation does and others and you are wedded to the dogmatic notion that the only way you can get progress and solve problems is with technologies, then you're going to miss, you're missing that train.

LF: Tim Wise, thank you.

TW: Thank you so much, Lynn.

LF: And from Geneva, Switzerland, thank you for joining us for this segment of GPEnewsdocs. For Related Stories I'll put links in the transcript to conversations with Guest Harris Gleckman, Nick Buxton and Pat Mooney, respectively. The conversation with global governance expert Harris Gleckman unpacks the multi-stakeholder model championed by multi-stakeholder institutions like the World Economic Forum as the mechanism and pathway for the corporate takeover of global governance. A process that's being normalized at the United Nations under a strategic partnership agreement signed by the UN secretary general with the World Economic Forum. The conversation with Transnational Institute's Nick Buxton was on how people's movements all over the world are mapping the corporate takeover of global governance in sector after sector from agriculture to technology. What Buxton calls a silent global coup d'etat. The conversation with ETSI Group and IPS Foods Pat Mooney goes into the corporate takeover of global governance of food and agriculture and reaches into the corporate capture of the UN Food Systems Summit that was part of today's conversation with Tim Wise.

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