AFRICAN CENTRE
FOR BIODIVERSITY

# The Africa we want?

## A neo-imperialist food regime reinforced by Agenda 2063, the UNFCCC, and the CBD

## Part 1 of 5

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AFRICAN CENTRE FOR BIODIVERSITY

The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is committed to dismantling inequalities and resisting corporate industrial expansion in Africa's food and agriculture systems.

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# Part one: European imperialism rupturing and reconfiguring agricultural production and food consumption in Africa

## Contents


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This series of short papers explore how European imperialism especially ruptured and reconfigured agricultural production and food consumption in Africa, establishing and maintaining complex and enduring structural problems that are exacerbated by neoliberal economic policies. This discussion is germane to our disquiet concerning multilateral environmental agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The Conference of the Parties (COP) 27 of the UNFCCC, which recently concluded in November 2022, has dismally failed in phasing out the production and combustion of fossil fuels and addressing the historical harms caused by way of reparations. It is uncertain how the Loss and Damage fund will operate and who will get what piece of the pie. COP 15 of the CBD, slated to take place in Montreal in December 2022, is on course to develop a new global strategic framework to stave off and manage declining biodiversity via the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

Both Conventions continue to re-embed geopolitical inequality, debt, and underdevelopment in Africa. This also relates fundamentally to the African Union's industrialisation agenda, guided by its Agenda 2063, "The Africa We Want". This series questions the motivations behind Agenda 2063 and who will benefit from the various iterations of Africa's integration into the global economy and the concomitant rampant industrialisation, in light of our converging humanitarian, ecological, and economic crises. This brings us to the all-important questions: what is the Africa we want, and what is standing in our way?

As the first in the series, this paper briefly explores **the history of agricultural extractivism** on the continent, rooted in colonialism, which has radically altered the agricultural landscape, persisting during the post-colonial era.


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# A brief history of agricultural commodification and extractivism in Africa

Before the arrival of European maritime traders in the 15th century, a variety of agricultural systems were evolving, based on local needs and trade opportunities. Africa is the driest of the world's inhabited continents, with 45% of its land mass consisting of drylands and 50% of the population living in arid, semi-arid, dry, sub-humid, and hyper-arid areas. On the savannah, where annual rainfall variability makes rainfed farming unpredictable, and where soil fertility and temperatures vary widely, farming systems are based on risk minimisation (Seavoy, 1989; Bjornlund et al, 2020). This led to small-scale farmers using poly-cultural and poly-varietal inter-cropping cultivation systems that produced more than 2000 varieties of grain, including African millets, sorghums, and fonio, to minimise losses due to rainfall variability and pests (Bjornlund et al, 2020). Tropical soils, on the other hand, require many years of fallow, which gave rise to shifting cultivation traditional agricultural practices.

These systems were initially responsive to the arrival of Europeans, such as meeting the demand for cotton, cocoa, and coffee. Yet, as political, military, and economic control of African countries became concentrated in European hands through their charter companies and colonialism, production concentrated on a few export crops demanded by European manufacturers – which exposed smallholder


producing communities to uncertainties, weakening and eventually diminishing local control over food security and eroding local industries (Frankema et al, 2018, Bjornlund et al, 2020). This essentially exported all benefits of production to European countries, with little to no investment being made to support local development and food security (Bjornlund et al, 2020).

The rapid industrialisation of Europe catalysed the race to directly colonise large areas of Africa and Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as imperial powers were determined to secure greater flows of cheap agricultural commodities and other raw materials (Bjornlund et al, 2020). With the carving up of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884, African societies and communities were fractured and separated and trade routes and functioning systems were disrupted (Curry-Machado, 2013; Davidson, 1994; Kaya, 2008). Colonialists secured control over raw materials, markets, and wealth and focused their efforts on infrastructure development to facilitate exports (See Figure 1). Coercive taxes and forced land dispossession created reserves of cheap labour to work on newly established monocrop cash crop plantations.

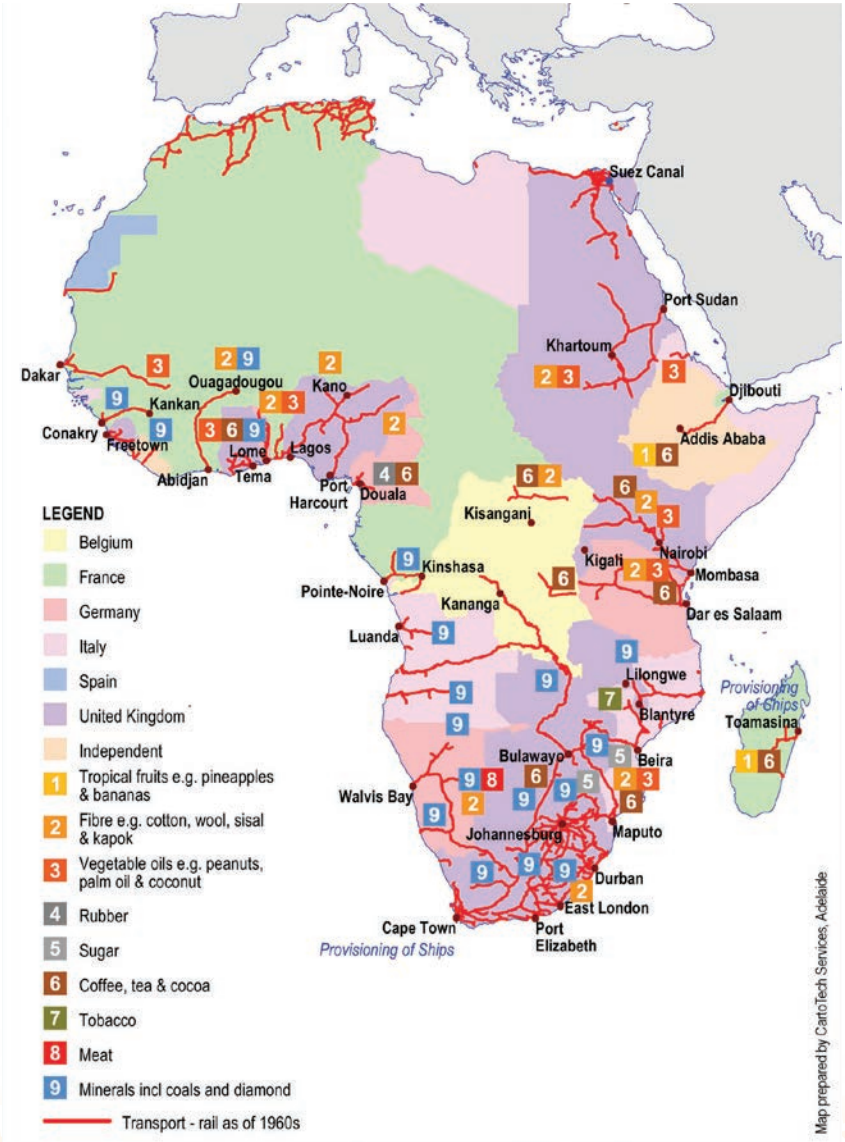


**Figure 1: Colonies, export crop production, and railroads, mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries (Bjornlund et al, 2020)**

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The colonial period consolidated agricultural production in each colony into a few export commodities. It intervened in emerging property markets and discouraged cottage industries. These processes essentially locked sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) into producing a few export commodities and prevented the diversification and development of agricultural and marketing systems focused on local development and regional markets (Bjornlund et al, 2020)

The focus on export-oriented agro-industries resulted in increased risk when droughts hit, and caused chronic shortages of local foods (Logan, 2016). There was also the direct impact of imperialism on exacerbating hunger and starvation – which is largely denied. An example was when Britain continued to export large amounts of wheat from British India amidst extensive starvation due to widespread crop failures as a result of the El Niño and La Niña Southern Oscillations, which preceding agrarian change driven by Imperialism, had caused hardship rather than catastrophe (Davis 2001). This externally dominated commodity production, in the context of an expanding world economy, has contributed to the making of the third world. It also severely exacerbated inequalities along class, race, gender, and ethnic lines and cultivated allegiance and patronage from existing or newly positioned elites.

While the timelines and motivations were different in West, East, and Southern Africa, many of the resulting impacts have been the same, with people forcibly removed from their lands and pushed into unserved African reserves, insecure land tenure, extensive land degradation, and extreme levels of social, political and economic dislocation.

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# Post-colonial era

The post-colonial food regime emerged after the Second World War and assumed a developmental economic approach. Independence did little to alter the subordinate position of the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia in the world economy. Exports continued to hinge on a small range of primary commodities; foreign corporations continued to dominate the value chains and decision-making; and, in the sphere of agriculture, agro-exports continued to be a key source of foreign exchange earnings (Weis, 2019).

In most parts of Africa, colonialism left countries with disintegrated national economies. Thus, there was a strong focus by post-colonial African governments on economic development to raise living standards and create food security, and keep promises made during the independence campaigns (Bjornlund et al, 2020). Investment in manufacturing and mechanisation of agriculture was a key strategy to achieve this. While independence began to increase general conditions – seen for example in the decline in infant and maternal mortality; diseases and malnutrition; and the increase in average lifespan, rising per capita income and gross domestic product (GDP); and agricultural production (Hobsbaum, 1996; World Bank, 2002) – this did not last long.

The newly independent states were fiscally underdeveloped. National savings and export earnings were insufficient to finance the necessary development. In the 1960s and 1970s, post-colonial governments were therefore keen to accept export credit, foreign aid, and concessional loans offered by industrialised countries and institutions (Bjornlund et al, 2020). However, most development projects were designed


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and built to support the donor countries' interest in resource extraction, while the African governments were responsible to service the debt.

Between 1966 and 1973, 15 of the 32 countries in SSA depended on a single commodity for 50% or more of their export revenues (Bjornlund et al, 2020). Then, over the past four decades or so, real prices for agricultural commodities declined by about 2% per year. Entrenched corruption and increased transaction costs, due to the quadrupling of oil prices, led to a decline in commodity prices in the 1980s, and an inability of developing countries to service their skyrocketing debts. In Africa, 80% of World Bank structural adjustment loans were subject to agriculture-related pricing or trade policy conditions (Rao & Storm, 2002), including reduction or removal of export taxes, quotas, and government controls; reduction of import tariffs and removal of import restrictions; removal of internal market regulations and private-sector restrictions; and reduction in public production and infrastructure services. Structural adjustment significantly reduced African governments' ability to invest in programmes to increase local production (Ismi, 2004).

This essentially set the scene for neo-colonial exploitation of African people and landscapes into the era of neoliberal globalisation, with agriculture firmly driving the expansion of the imperialist agenda.

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