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Seed is Power: Reclaiming African Seed Sovereignty

AFRICANS SPEAK OUT AGAINST CORPORATE HEGEMONY OVER SEED AND FOOD SYSTEMS

This is the written transcript of a presentation by African Centre of Biodiversity (ACB) research and advocacy officer, Sabrina Masinjila, which featured in the online event:

SEED IS POWER: RECLAIMING AFRICAN SEED SOVEREIGNTY

This was one of 15 online sessions that formed part of a global counter-mobilisation spanning four days, in rejection of the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). The presentation is based on the work of the ACB, in collaboration and partnership with many social movements on the continent, and work with social movements in various international fora over the years. You can watch the presentation [here](#).

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting ACB to be part of this panel, to be among friends as we continue in solidarity to push back against the current corporate hegemony of our food and seed systems, particularly under the UNFSS. Before I begin, I would like to express solidarity with the people of South Africa and the crises that engulfed the country in the last weeks, but also to the rest of the continent where structural challenges related to authoritarianism, inequality, ecological crisis and the constant looting of our governments continue to impact our African people. Our heart goes out to you as we continue with the struggles for emancipation for our continent.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

I would like to start my talk by situating it in the current state of play on the African continent, which involves Africa's experience of the intersecting ecological, economic, social and democratic crises.

Much of the African region is hardest hit by the impacts of the climate crises and is bound to experience this crisis in the coming future. In addition, the continent is also facing a multitude of intersecting shocks such as: droughts and flooding in southern Africa, as we have seen in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi, which were ravaged by Cyclone Idai; the spread of the fall armyworm and the locust infestations in East and the Horn of Africa; the outbreak of Ebola in West and Central Africa – a strong marker of the impacts of the intersection of economic subordination and biodiversity and ecological destruction linked to extractivism and its impacts on populations – and the current global pandemic, COVID-19.

However, the impacts that these shocks actually have on African smallholder and rural populations is shaped also by economics. In particular, African problems in our key sectors, such as agriculture among others, are deeply rooted in its subordination in the world economy and neo-colonialism – a large part of which is austerity measures imposed by the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), in favour of capital, thus deepening indebtedness and contributing to crumbling states.

At the same time, the state is often complicit in taking loans from the IMF and WB, and from a new range of actors that, through corruption, often become sources of accumulation of wealth for elites.

Among the deep political problems in Africa is the state failure to support the flourishing of agriculture and smallholders in the context of neo-colonialism, which has led to weak and depleted agricultural sectors, in which a majority of women smallholder farmers nonetheless do the labour that continues to feed Africa.

This state of weakened agriculture, and often poor democratic relationships between state and citizenry, provides one of the openings for corporations to advance their agendas of increasing their market power and control, with very little push back from affected populations, as a result of democratic deficits. The advance of corporate agriculture is, as we see with the UNFSS, posed as genuine solutions to the problems of African agriculture, yet the average smallholder farmer has had little input in defining their content.

This is an important context against which to understand the advance of corporate seed laws on the continent.

AGRICULTURAL LEGISLATION – SEED LAWS AND POLICIES

The capitalist capture of agriculture has led governments to put in place systems such as policies and laws, with limited or lack of public consultation, failing to include affected interest groups in decision making, and in particular small scale and community food producers in both urban and rural areas and other people who are

involved in food systems. There is also non-compliance with international human rights declarations – such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and agreements such as the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). As a result, it is difficult for communities to engage with decision makers, and further these groups are utterly marginalised politically, economically and socially, despite administrative justice enshrined in most of African governments national constitutions.

In the end the constitutions are just paper tigers.

Seed policies and laws exist within a dualistic seed system where on one hand we have a tiny but highly formalised commercial seed system and on the other a significant, diverse farmer-managed seed system, which is largely unsupported despite it producing most of the seed and food that we consume on the continent.

The current seed and intellectual protection laws are thus instruments that support and continue to entrench industrial agriculture and the reinforcement of indebtedness, inequality, social exclusion and ecological crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and degradation, pest infestations, and deforestation, among others. As a result, in the case of an emerging political or ecological crisis, the most vulnerable, poor and marginalised are hugely impacted – socially and economically – due to the push and adoption of false corporate solutions and the lack of real solutions rooted in local structures and grassroot communities.

In light of the failures of corporate seed laws, to work in the interests of the majority of African smallholders, we need to not only protect but to actively advance farmers' rights and farmer managed seed systems. This poses questions of how we do this in the current context.

We must be very clear that:

- Seed laws do not contain measures to safeguard the diversity on-farm and the continued maintenance of heterogeneous seed in farmer managed seed systems, which is vital to ensure food sovereignty and resilient food systems.
- Autonomy over seed is a prerequisite and core component of the exercise of rights by family and community farmers and peasants – complete autonomy. Protections are needed against patents, plant variety protection laws, digital sequence information and the like. These are calculated to erode the exercise of farmers' rights.
- PVP laws are commercial laws-they do not and should not surpass farmers rights which are human rights including the right to food and

nutrition and are linked to a bundle of other rights recognised by several UN Declarations and especially UNDRIP and UNDROP.

We must assert the primacy of farmers' rights as a human right. In its own right.

We must insist that:

- African governments must expressly recognise farmers' seed and farmers' rights to seed and seed practices as necessary building blocks for our struggles for transformation towards seed and food sovereignty. We must work towards protecting and expanding territorial markets, towards ensuring local and community markets for farmer seed, crops and produce, including also *inter alia*, public procurement programmes built around diverse crops for food and nutrition security programmes.

Most importantly, *we must recognise that farmers' rights is not just about the protection of genetic diversity and household food security. We need to advance a conception of farmers' rights grounded in a wider vision of food sovereignty, that is linked to a whole view of the food system, that encompasses those living in cities and towns who have rights to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and which sees seed as both a part of and a potential enabler of deepened social relationships that form the basis for working together to build better societies grounded in ecological and social justice.*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like thank all the social movements, academics, NGOs, and others who have worked so hard to put this counter summit together. It has brought together all of us who care about valuing ourselves as human beings, through learning to value others and learning to value and care for the environment in which we develop ourselves.

We all are committed to a world where the individual's wellbeing can only be achieved through harmonious relationships with the wider community – including people, the environment, other living beings, ancestors and the cosmos.

We embrace food sovereignty, land rights, environmental justice, economic solidarity and the protection of local biodiversity.

We are vehemently opposed to capitalist consumerism and aspire for global democratic societies, where happiness and leading a meaningful life is not bound by material accumulation. Rather, we embrace harmony between human beings and also between human beings and nature, as we are nothing without each other, or without the natural world.