CASH CROPS VERSUS FOOD CROPS IN AFRICA : *
A Conflict between Dependency and Autonomy

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Introduction

The conflict between the need to grow cash crops for export and the need to grow food crops for self-reliance has deeply marked colonial as well as post-colonial agricultural patterns and policies in Africa. With the African economic crisis, especially the increasing food dependency and the decline of agricultural production per capita, this conflict became sharp and took the form of a debate in the developmental literature of Africa. Now this debate has a great influence upon planners and policy-makers who became more aware of and more concerned with African agricultural problems than they used to be.

In fact, emphasis was on industrialization during the 1960s; but with the drought of the early 1970s in the Sahel region the African governments suddenly realized both the precariousness of the agricultural sector and its vitality for political stability and economic development. The same concern with agriculture was shared by agribusiness transnationals, international agencies and donor governments which do all have, in some cases, as much interest in African agriculture as the African governments themselves. This growing importance of agriculture in African politics reflects a new phase in a long conflict over agricultural policies in Africa and a serious controversy over the export-led growth model of development.

The purpose of this paper is to explore this conflict between food crops and cash crops. First, we examine what is at stake in this conflict, i.e., how important is agriculture in African economies and societies. This is measured by the percentage of population depending on agriculture and the contribution of agriculture to foreign exchange earnings. It is measured also by matching the trends of agricultural development with those of the economic growth in general.

Second, we look at how the conflict has developed over time. Prior to the colonial era food production was the raison d'être of agricultural activities. Colonialism imposed the cultivation of crops for export. The post-colonial governments inherited foreign-oriented economic structures and continued to manage them. In this process, land and labor were gradually withdrawn from the subsistence economy to the cash crop economy. The transfer took place thanks to systematic policies which favored the cash crop economy over the food crop economy in terms of allocation of resources such as credit, infrastructure, marketing boards and research.

Third, an analysis of the complex social and political forces underlying this conflict throws light on other aspects of the antagonism which shaped the agricultural patterns. The transfer of land and labor from the subsistence sector to the export sector was accompanied by a growing differentiation in terms of the distribution of power and wealth. This process of accumulation led to the enrichment of a minority and the empoverishment and marginalization of the majority of the population.

Finality, we examine the conflict as one between two approaches to development, i.e., between dependency and autonomy, between the diffusionist approach to development and the autocentric one. Overall, it is a conflict over resources allocation. We conclude that only a rejection of the capitalist model of resources allocation (and therefore the export-led growth model) will restore Africa's independence which is a sine qua none condition to any socio-economic development.

Importance of Agriculture to African Economies and Societies

Although Africa does not have an ideal agricultural environment, agriculture is the backbone of African economies and societies. The majority of the population depends on agriculture for a living. Output and export are still largely agricultural in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 1986 : 18). Much of the foreign exchange in tropical Africa is earned by the sale of agricultural products abroad (Barker, 1984 : 14). Stagnation, decline and sporadic growth of African economies have been closely tied to those of agriculture (Bates, 1983 : 1). Africa's major problems such as famine and desertification are agricultural problems in their essence, and most solutions to these problems, projects and plans of development have, in a way or another, special focus on agriculture.

In fact, despite a decade of attempts to industrialization and a massive rural-urban exodus, and despite the decline of agricultural output per capita and the growing dependency on imports, 60 percent of the African population sill depend for their livelihood on agriculture an 62.9 percent of the economically active population are still in agriculture in 1984 (FAO, 1985 : 63). This is a high proportion compared to the world average where only 43.7 percent of the population depend for their livelihood on agriculture, and 43 percent are economically active population in agriculture. In Africa south of the Sahara the proportion is even higher where 67.5 percent of the population depend on agriculture; and in 20 countries the proportion is 80 percent or above (Dinham, 1984 : 12). This is an indicator of poor industrialization, but it is also an indicator of the importance of the agricultural sector in the economy as a whole.

Compared to other economic sectors, agriculture contributes largely to GDP where in 1977 it contributed between 30 and 65 percent in most sub-Saharan countries (Dinahm, 1984 : 12). This is a particularly high contribution compared, for instance, to the manufacturing sector which contributed only 8 percent to GNP in 1983 while agriculture contributed 29 percent (World Bank, 1986 : 69). It is significant if one takes into consideration the continuing rapid growth of the urban population at the expense of agricultural rural areas.

But even the urban population itself depends on agriculture for most of its foreign exchange earnings. The hard currency--used to import industrial machinery, technicians, petroleum products as well as luxury goods and food--is earned by the sale of agricultural products abroad. More than half of sub-Saharan African countries earn over 50 percent of their foreign exchange from agricultural exports and 15 countries earn 80 percent or more (Dinham, 1984 : 12).

Another way to measure the importance of agriculture is to match its performance with that of economic development as a whole. According to the World Bank (1981 : 45) "agriculture is the heart of African economies". Therefore, its performance affects directly the rest of the economy. The widely quoted "economic growth of the 1960s" was accompanied by an expansion of agricultural production and export. In the same way the African economic decline or stagnation of the 1970s is accompanied by a decline in the growth rate of agricultural production and particularly a stagnation of the agricultural export. This is why Africa's problems and their advocated solutions are largely agricultural.

Famine and desertification constitute now a serious threat to people and environment in many parts of Africa, especially in the Sahel region including the Sudan and Ethiopia. These problems are agricultural problems in their essence. Famine kills or displaces farmers, and desertification makes land merely impossible to cultivate, and in both cases agricultural production is affected. Because of this, most advocated solutions to African problems focus on agriculture. The Organization of African Unity's Lagos Plan of Action (1980) proposes (as remedy to African economic problems), building a self-reliant local and regional economy, especially as far as agriculture is concerned. The World Bank in its famous 1981 report (accelerated development in sub-Saharan Africa : an agenda for action) advocates more integration of Africa into the world market by encouraging more cash crops export. The Bank disagrees with OAU on both the causes and the cures of the African economic crisis.

In its interpretation of the causes of the crisis, the OAU's report emphasizes factors such as historical legacies, deterioration of the terms of trade and Africa's dependence on foreign markets (Paul, 1984 : 1). The report does not blame the African governments. The Bank, on the contrary blames the African governments and their interference with "free market laws". The Bank urges for more "pure" capitalism by advocating the liberalization of the internal as well as external market and the reduction of the state to "a policeman" in this context.

This difference of view between the Bank and the OAU is a part of the conflict over agricultural policies in Africa. A conflict between the constant need for African peasants to grow food for their own subsistence and the no less urgent need for African governments and agribusiness transnationals to grow cash crops for exports. Thus, at stake is African agriculture, i.e., land and labor. It is important to notice that even though the "food self-sufficiency model" is increasingly powerful in its argumentation, nevertheless the export-led growth model is still powerful in the real world. The cash crops are still leading African agriculture in terms of land and priorities of development. Cash crops in Africa constitute an important proportion of the world production. In 1979 Africa produced 23 percent of the world's production of coffee, 29 percent of oil (palm), 43% of kernels, 61% of cocoa and 29% of groundnuts (Dinham, 1984: 188, 190, 131). To understand this puzzeling situation (especially when we consider shortages of food supply it is necessary to examine when, why and, how these developments took place. As Lappe (1977 : 182) put it "there is nothing natural about Africa's concentration on a few, largley non-nutritious crops. There is no advantage either".

Africa becomes a Cash Crops Plantation

Most of present-day agricultural patterns in Africa have their origins in the colonial era. These patterns (especially cash crops plantations) were established to meet the needs of Europe. The post-colonial governments of the 1960s inherited those agricultural patterns and structures and continued their management. During the 1970s and 1980s the inadequacies of those patterns began to be revealed in the light of successive droughts and famines. Now the "food sel-sufficiency model" is widely accepted, but in practice it did not yet find a concrete materialization (in Africa) as a model to be followed. In other words, the model needs not only theoretical acceptance (il gained already) but also a political will and force to implement it. The African agricultural crisis nowadays is the product of a long process of conflict and competition over Africa's land and labor.

From the outset we should point out that premercantilist Africa was self-sufficient in food production and was neither inferior nor weaker than the rest of the Ancient World (Amin, 1973 : 33). Food production was the primary goal of agriculture. Food security was ensured by putting up to three harvests in reserve. Even Mali (now on the brink of famine) was once known as the breadbasket of Africa (Lappe, 1977 : 100). And as near as World War II, the Sudan (now hit by famine) used to supply Middle Eastern countries with food (Manci, 1978 : 53).

In fact, it is from the 16th century onwards that the internal stability, self-reliance and the standing of the Continent in the world were increasingly undermined by the activities of the European slave trade. Officially, this trade lasted 300 years of chronic civil wars which reached and devastated almost all corners of the continent, and in which Africa lost between 30 and 100 million of its youngest and strongest men and women (Dinham, 1984 : 18). Under anarchy and wars many communities of people abandoned relatively advanced agricultural methods and became food gatherers in inhospitable regions. These developments led to a considerable reduction of the population and a serious regression of productive forces (Amin, 1973 : 279).

With colonialism the Europeans changed their African strategy especially after the loss of many colonies in the Americas from late 18th to early 19th century. Instead of bringing Africans to work on plantations in the New World it became more profitable to "bring" plantations to Africans in Africa. Thus, from the 19th century onwards the Europeans wanted African labor in Africa not in America. This is the essence of the abolition of the slavery trade. Henceforth the cash crops plantations era began. A typical plantations project was the French attempt to establish plantations of cotton, sugar cane and tobacco in the Waalo region of Senegal in 1819. On the coast of Benin the slaves - who continued to be captured but can no longer be exported - were put at work for the export of oil palm needed by Europeans. In North, East and Southern Africa, European settlers themselves engaged in cash crops, production and export (Amin, 1973 : 285, 287).But these projects were undermined in the beginning by the resistance of African peasants who did not give up their land and did not want or need to work on European plantations. In this context, colonialism came to use force in order to extort land and then force Africans to work on it in order to produce crops needed in Europe.

The role of the colonial state was to use extra-economic measures (direct coercion) to organize society and production according to the European interests. The major role was to ensure that the European settlers and companies obtain labor, land, and favorable pricing policies (Barker, 1984 : 43). This contributed to a massive extraction of African wealth. For example, peanuts bought by the marketing boards from peasants in West Africa in the 1930s were sold in Britain more than seven times what the peasants received (Lappe, 1977 : 79). On the one hand, the colonial state undertook the construction of the necessary economic infrastructure which served the cash crops economy. For instance, the railway between Senegal and Mali goes through groundnuts fields in order to ease their transport to the coast. On the other hand, the state organized the flows of migrations of labor according to the cash crops needs. At first, force was widely used but later the increasing dependence of labor on cash crops, taxation and even temptation sufficed (Wallerstein in Gutkind, 1976 : 47).

This violent process of expropriation reinforced steadily the cash crop economy at the expense of the subsistence economy. Peasants were forced to replace food crops with cash crops. The companies and the settlers took over the best agricultural lands for export crops plantations and then forced the most able-bodied workers to leave the village fields to work as slaves or for very low wages on plantations. They encouraged a dependence on imported food and blocked native peasants' cash crops from competing with cash crops produced by settlers or foreign firms (Lappe, 1977 : 84), in many cases, such as that of coffee in Kenya, Africans were simply forbidden to grow cash crops (Dinham, 1984 : 19). In this process it is not surprising that many Africans lost the ability to feed themselves long time before independence.

Although African peoples made great sacrifices to get their independence, we should not exagerate the significance of change in many African states from 1955 to 1965. In many cases, the indigenous civil servants of the colonial administration took the offices of their former masters. But even if some kind of political change has occurred, the economic structures remained almost untouched, especially the structures of cash crops economy with cocoa and oil palms plantations in the forest zone, cotton and groundnuts in the Savana, and coffee and tea in East Africa. For example, Senegal continued to export groundnuts which occupied 55 percent of its arable land in 1976 and provided 50 percent of its foreign exchange in 1977 (Dinham, 1984 : 187). In 1977, half of Ghana's arable land was planted with cocoa trees (Lappe, 1977 : 185). The concentration on a limited number of crops is a characteristic of African agriculture. In 1984, nine countries were dependent on just one crop for over 70 percent of their income (Timberlake, 1985 : 70).

In fact, in many cases the African governments have outdone the colonial administrations in forcing export crops production. In Mali in 1929 the French levied a tax that required each adult over fifteen to grow between five and ten kilos of cotton to pay it. By 1970, during the drought, the Malian government forced each adult peasant to grow at least forty-eight kilos of cotton just to pay taxes (Lappe, 1977 : 100). These policies lead African peasants to bring more marginal land under cultivation, thus contributing to soil degradation and therefore desertification. But if cash crops get governments' attention they rarely get good prices on the international market.

Despite the priorities the governments give to cash crops, their prices continued to fall over time in comparison to the prices of manufactured goods. In 1960, three tons of bananas could buy a tractor. In 1970, that same tractor costs the equivalent of eleven tons of bananas; and in 1971-72 bananas accounted for 31 percent of total export earning of Somalia (Lappe, 1977 : 182 - 183). For 25 tons of exported rubber an African country could import six tractors in 1960. In 1975 it could import only 2 tractors (de Souza, 1979 : 533). This deterioration of the terms of trade may well continue. In fact, since many African countries produce the same commodities and since the tendency is to increase productivity, the simultaneous increase of production in these countries will increase the offer without necessarily increasing the demand and therefore will lead to a decline in prices. Decline in foreign exchange earnings may lead the country to try to produce more crops using ecologically damaging methods. These countries have failed so far to constitute any efficient cartel. Indeed they can not succeed in making a cartel because of the competitive nature of their products. According to Lappe (1977 : 182) "the total loss of foreign exchange earning to Africa due to falling prices, particularly in agricultural products in the two decades following World War II exceeded all foreign funds invested, loaned or granted to Africa during the same period". To this we can also add the negative effects of the fluctuations of agricultural prices from year to year which can lure economic planning.

During the 1970s and 1980s, drought hit hard many parts of Africa, causing a great damage to agriculture and livestock. Rural-urban exodus accelerated, affecting food production in rural areas; towns and cities got crowded and food imports increased with an estimated one in four Africans, on average, being fed by imports in 1984 (Timberlake, 1985 : 71). Imports need hard currency which can be earned mainly by exporting cash crops. The other way to get foreign exchange is to contract debts. In 1984 the external debt of Africa (except South Africa and Morocco) reached $130.65 billion (New York Times, May 29, 1986). This economic crisis and vicious circle gave resurgence to the idea of "food self-sufficiency" as the only viable solution to solve Africa's food problems. But so far, cash crops continued to get better land, more skilled labor, more help, advice, credit, etc., than food crops (Timberlake, 1985 : 74). Perhaps more amazing is that cash crops prosper amidst drought and famine. During the drought of the 1970s, from early December until May a DC-10 takes off from Senegal loaded with green beans, melons, tomatoes, eggplant, strawberries, and paprika; destination Amsterdam, Paris or Stockholm (Lappe, 1977 : 259). Even during the most recent drought which began in 1983, five Sahlelian countries--Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Chad--harvested a record 154 million tons of cotton fibre which represented an incredible increase of production from 22.7 million tons in 1961-62 (Timberlake, 1985 : 19). This demonstrates that there is a real potential to grow food crops in the Sahel region.

This simple example shows that food problems in Africa has more to do with policies than anything else. The long emphasis on cash crops has failed to solve the problem of food, indeed it has contributed to its aggravation. Why then do the African gorvernments continue to give them priorities? Why the Lagos plan of Action did not see the light especially when there was a quasi-unanimity on food self-sufficiency as a solution. Isn't it ironical enough that the World Bank continues to urge and press African governments for more priorities for cash crops? After all, aren't the Bank's policies and advice over two decades the ones which led to the present-day agricultural crisis in Africa? These questions are not answerable to Africa's natural endowment or climate conditions, they are answerable to those who make policy in Africa.

Social and Political Forces Underlying the Conflict

The nowadays social structures in Africa were shaped through the long and painful process of incorporation of the Continent into the world capitalist system. At each phase of this incorporation, the social contradictions sort out an African elite serving as an intermediate between the Africans and the Europeans. These elites provided slaves during the mercantilist era, were Europeans' right hand during the colonial period and inherited the post-colonial states.

As we have seen the colonial state was an agent of the market. Whenever the "laws of market" would not promote the commercialization of agriculture, the state uses its coercive machine to extort land and then force Africans to work on it. Over time, these political and economic means made much of the rural population landless or pushed them onto marginal lands. Thus, it is the colonial state intervention which created the internal market of each African country and linked it to the "mother" European country. The play of free exchange was often affected by the interference of the state; in fact, colonialism coincided with the monopolistic phase of the capitalist system. This importance of the state in economic activities was reinforced by the quasi-absence (at least until after indepencence) of national bourgeoisies in most African countries. Indeed, the exploitation of Africa was so brutal (forced labor) and so direct (settlers) that the African elites were subservient and dependent on foreign possessing and ruling strata.

After the independence, the rapid urbanization was not accompanied by industrialization, and the emerging bourgeoisie was of the compradore type, i.e., financial and commercial groups whose fortune comes from the big import-export business, from the exploitation of the countryside (usury, etc.), real estate speculation, etc. (Amin, 1964 : 38). In the same way urbanization did not engender a true proletariat, but a semi-proletariat. These social structures are distorted compared to those of Europe, nevertheless social differentiation and antagonism are obvious. The juxtaposition of symptuous villas and slums in most of the great urban centres testifies to that (Amin; 1964 : 38). In most coastal African countries the privileged social strata constitute 7 percent of the population and receive 45 percent of national income (Amin, 1973 : 308). This growing social differentiation inside African societies is part of the growing differentiation between nations. The per capita income gap between the richest and the poorest countries widened from 2 : 1 at the beginning of the 19th century to 80-100 : 1 in the 1980s (Kim, 1984 : 191). It is the transfer of wealth through unequal exchange which led to this situation.

But despite the growing national and international socio-economic differentiation, most African governements continue to give priority to cash crops over food crops. Two socio-economic groups have interest in perpetuating this strategy of development. On the one hand, the comprador bourgeoirisies are dependent on world market by the very nature of their import-export business. They collaborate closely with agribusiness transnationals by selling to them agricultural products and buying from them tractors, fertilizers, etc. On the other hand, there is the state bureaucracy which plays a similar role when the state owns plantations. These bureaucracies work closely with the international lending agencies for the formulation of development plans. The World Bank instructions and advice as well as the

IMF conditionality shape most economic policies in Africa. At this level, the conflict between cash crops and foods crops turns into a controversy over which model of development the African governments ought to follow, a conflict between an export-led growth approach to development and an autocentric, autonomous one.

Dependency Versus Autonomy

The introduction of cash crops in Africa was the beginning of a historical process which undermined economic self-sufficiency and opened the door to economic dependency. Externally, the cash crop economy performed the function of driving belt between African economies and those of developed capitalist countries, a process which led to massive extraction of African wealth through the mechanisms of unequal exchange. Internally, it constituted a pivot around which the local market turns. Later it became a model of development to be followed by planners and policy-makers.

The cash crop sector created and perpetuated a dependent economy serving foreign interests. Africans engaged in large-scale production of crops which they don't consume and don't have any control over their prices. They were competing with each other to produce the same crop, and, if production increases simultaneously in all countries, prices fall. According to de Souza (1979 : 534) there is even a "built-in structural disequilibrium" which will result in worsening terms of trade for countries which export largely agricultural produce. Also, most of these crops are non-nutritious and their demand is elastic especially with the development of synthetics. Thus, Africa became more and more dependent on crops wich are less and less demanded. But instead of shifting to the production of food crops, most African governments reply by producing more cash crops to compensate the loss. This bias in prioriities and investment towards export crops is illustrated by Tanzania (a long-time-self-reliant-oriented country) which allowed tobacco to replace gradually maize during the drought of 1973/4 (Dinham, 1984 : 125).

Not only did the cash crop sector channel Africa's economic relations with the rest of the world, it also played a determining role in the creation and shaping of the internal market. Since colonial time cash crop sector has been eroding the subsistence economy by draining off labor, by taking out substantial profits by means of usury and trading networks, and by introducing manufactured imported goods and therefore introducing new methods of consumption. In this process, monetization of all corners of Africa was achieved and peasants lost their autonomy and independence since they have to produce for the market not for their own consumption. Peasants caught into this trap found themselves, finally, producing only to pay back loans they have acquired in order to obtain hybrid seeds, fertilizers, tractors and sometimes transportation (Barker, 1986 : 58) ; in almost the same way, African governments found themselves contracting debts just to pay previous ones. Thus, Africa lost its autonomy and self-sufficiency and became too dependent at all levels.

This strong dependency of Africa on capitalist market puts agribusiness transnationals, donor governments and international agencies in a position to deal directly with the African peasant (the small producer) without middleman (the state). This is the strategy advocated in World Bank's report on Africa. According to the Bank African governments are the source of the economic crisis because they interfere with the mechanisms of the market. The state should only provide security for business and should never own, run or even supervise any economic activity. In fact, agribusiness feel that African governments constitute a real and a potential rival since they take over important part of the agricultural surplus in Africa. They are correct in this feeling. However, without state intervention there is little chance for any genuine economic development not only in Africa but in all Third World countries. The "state" that the World Bank wants to reduce to mere "policeman" is the only instrument able to conceive, plan and implement a genuine policy of development. There are many examples and experiences which support this argument.

First, in Britain (where the whole "story" of capitalism started) during the mercantilist period, state intervention and regulations (especially in foreign trade) protected the nascent British industries which were facing strong competition from India. This policy (with others) integrated and consolidated the British market, thus paving the road to the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the 18th century. The liberalization of foreign trade advocated later by Adam Smith and David Ricardo was accepted only because Britain no longer faced any competition (indeed the rest of the world began to face British competition). Second, the colonial state in Africa (as we have seen) created and shaped (through intervention and regulations) the market of all African countries according to European interests. It is quite possible (now) that African governments can intervene to create and shape markets according to African interests. Third, today all socialist countries around the world have broken the vicious circle of underdevelopment and built a fairly self-sufficient economy through state intervention in economic activities. The developed capitalist countries oppose state intervention because the level of productivity in their economies is high enough not to fear any competition; and in any case what is good for developed capitalist countries is not necessary the best for the Third World.

Conclusion

We have examined the important role of agriculture in Africa and how European colonialism imposed cash crops at the expense of food crops. This created dependent economic structures based on social and regional inequalities and led to savage exploitation of African resources. Most post-colonial governments inherited these economic structures but few have attempted to change them. These dependent economies perpetuate themselves thanks to political forces led by state bureaucracies and dependent bourgeoisies and supported by abribusiness transnationals. These forces continue to impose the export-led growth model of development on Africa through the recommendations of the World Bank, the conditions of the International Monetary Fund, the aid (including military) of the donors, and the complicity of most African governments.

On the light of the growing deterioration of food production and environment degradation, in Africa, surely something has to be done, but first some facts (in my view) have to be acknowledged:

1) the export-led gowth model of development has failed since it led to growing social and regional inequalities, famine, desertification, and indebtness. Any genuine rejection of this model will lead necessarily to the rejection of the capitalist model of resources allocation and its driving force (profit) in favor of a socialist model based on needs not market returns.

2) African agriculture remains the impotant and strategic economic sector in Africa. Without a "take-off" in agriculture it's difficult to imagine any food self-sufficiency and any healthy industrialization. Any reform in this direction should begin with the empowerment of the peasants.
3) A mutual assistance between African states in trade is necessary in order to increase exchange between them even through barter agreements.
4) At this stage of development in Africa, the state is still an indispensable instrument of development if used appropriately. No national or regional market can be created and prompted without state intervention and protection. The state here will be necessaily devoid of its bureaucratic and reactionary content. It will be run by a revolutionary movement willing and able to carry out revolutionary change. Policies and recommendations (like those of the OAU's Lagos Plan of Action 1980) without political will and force to implement them are exactly like agricultural land which will feed no one at all unless it is cultivated.

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