

ACB Reaction to the Regional Dialogue on African Food Systems, which took place at the Seventh Session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, 4 March 2021

On 4 March 2021 a Regional Dialogue was held on African Food Systems, which took place as part of the programme of the Seventh Session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in Brazzaville. From perusing the background document that was issued to frame the dialogue and topics and participants indicated in the programme:

The African Centre for Biodiversity's (ACB) initial reaction to the dialogue is that it seems to represent another legitimating space for elite-consensus building, which will then be presented at the UN Food Systems Summit as the 'voice of Africa'. This voice is to please and impress the 'global community' of how Africans are aspiring to be more integrated into markets and global relations crafted through neoliberal globalisation as the singular solution to all our food systems' problems.

However, such a voice will be far from that of the ordinary African working person. Instead, it reflects the priorities of development experts aligned to the modernist, technology-driven visions of change and transformation, biotechnology companies, agribusiness, and the neoliberal, global development agenda. A number of problems are pointed out (hunger and malnutrition, women's rights, the marginalised and poorest, investment in smallholder farming and food sectors, ensuring public health outcomes linked to more diverse and nutritious diets through, for example, subsidies for healthy and sustainable foods, taxing of unhealthy foods, and public procurement problems) and so forth. However, these are simply channelled into a predictable recycling of the same solutions that have for many years now been proffered through the elite development machinery centred on the Green Revolution model: a technology driven approach centred on the dominating role of the private sector, biotechnology and digitalisation through big data, and climate smart agriculture as these are seen as productivity enhancing. The image is therefore reproduced of low input use by African smallholders being the main problem; rather than the need for people-centred economic and ecological opportunities to build a different vision of agricultural and food systems' transformation and wellbeing.

The same false solutions are thus being recycled, with the same narrow benefits accruing to a limited number of actors. The aims are not about transforming global relations with the well being of Africans and our ecological systems at the centre, but rather to entrench Africa firmly into global relations and developmental norms defined through colonialism and neoliberal globalisation. There are political, social and historical issues, grounded in smallholders' subordinate relationships to markets of the colonial and post-colonial states that are totally overlooked. These include the position of Africa in the global order (in relation to neo-colonial relations around extractivism, trade, debt and wholesale ecological degradation) and how these hugely undermines the livelihood prospects of especially African rural dwellers. Africa must question the meanings of productivity, and the social relations in which smallholder farmers could genuinely achieve greater productivity in relation to economic

wellbeing and social and ecological justice. However, what we are witnessing here, is an ahistorical and technicist framing, where technology and productivity are posed as both the problems and the solutions! In this way, these dialogues are deaf and blind to the converging systemic crises we face today, and the drastic urgent re-think it demands.