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## Empire and Colonialism: Rich Men in London Still Deciding Africa's Future

By Colin Todhunter

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*Some £600 million in UK aid money courtesy of the taxpayer is helping big business increase its profits in Africa via the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. In return for receiving aid money and corporate investment, African countries have to change their laws, making it easier for corporations to acquire farmland, control seed supplies and export produce.*

Last year, Director of the Global Justice Now Nick Dearden said:

“It’s scandalous that UK aid money is being used to carve up Africa in the interests of big business. This is the exact opposite of what is needed, which is support to small-scale farmers and fairer distribution of land and resources to give African countries more control over their food systems. Africa can produce enough food to feed its people. The problem is that our food system is geared to the luxury tastes of the richest, not the needs of ordinary people. Here the British government is using aid money to make the problem even worse.”

Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Mozambique, Nigeria, Benin, Malawi and Senegal are all involved in the New Alliance.

In a January 2015 piece in The Guardian, Dearden continued by saying that development was once regarded as a process of breaking with colonial exploitation and transferring power over resources from the ‘first’ to the ‘third world’, involving a revolutionary struggle over the world’s resources. However, the current paradigm is based on the assumption that developing countries need to adopt neo-liberal policies and that public money in the guise of aid should facilitate this. The notion of ‘development’ has become hijacked by rich corporations and the concept of poverty depoliticised and separated from structurally embedded power relations.

To see this in action, we need look no further to a conference held on Monday 23 March in London, organised by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This secretive, invitation-only meeting with aid donors and big seed companies discussed a strategy to make it easier for these companies to sell patented seeds in Africa and thus increase corporate control of seeds.

Farmers have for generations been saving and exchanging seeds among themselves. This has allowed them a certain degree of independence and has enabled them to innovate, maintain biodiversity, adapt seeds to climatic conditions and fend off plant disease. Big seed companies with help from the Gates Foundation, the US government and other aid donors are now discussing ways to increase their market penetration of commercial seeds by displacing farmers own seed systems.

Corporate sold hybrid seeds often produce higher yields when first planted, but the second generation seeds produce low yields and unpredictable crop traits, making them unsuitable for saving and storing. As Heidi Chow from Global Justice Now rightly says, instead of saving seeds from their own crops, farmers who use hybrid seeds become completely dependent on the seed, fertiliser and pesticide companies, which can (and has) in turn result in an agrarian crisis centred on debt, environmental damage and health problems.

The London conference aimed to share findings of a report by Monitor Deloitte on developing the commercial seed sector in sub-Saharan Africa. The report recommends that in countries where farmers are using their own seed saving networks NGOs and aid donors should encourage governments to introduce intellectual property rights for seed breeders and help to persuade farmers to buy commercial, patented seeds rather than relying on their own traditional

varieties. The report also suggests that governments should remove regulations so that the seed sector is opened up to the global market.

The guest list comprised corporations, development agencies and aid donors, including Syngenta, the World Bank and the Gates Foundation. It speaks volumes that not one farmer organisation was invited. Farmers have been imbued with the spirit of entrepreneurship for thousands of years. They have been “scientists, innovators, natural resource stewards, seed savers and hybridisation experts” who have increasingly been reduced to becoming recipients of technical fixes and consumers of poisonous products of a growing agricultural inputs industry. So who better than to discuss issues concerning agriculture?

But the whole point of such a conference is that the West regards African agriculture as a ‘business opportunity’, albeit wrapped up in warm-sounding notions of ‘feeding Africa’ or ‘lifting millions out of poverty’. The West’s legacy in Africa (and elsewhere) has been to plunge millions into poverty. Enforcing structural reforms to benefit big agribusiness and its unsustainable toxic GMO/petrochemical inputs represents a continuation of the neo-colonialist plundering of Africa. The US has for many decades been using agriculture as a key part of foreign policy to secure global hegemony.

Phil Bereano, food sovereignty campaigner with AGRA Watch and an Emeritus Professor at the University of Washington says:

“This is an extension of what the Gates Foundation has been doing for several years – working with the US government and agribusiness giants like Monsanto to corporatize Africa’s genetic riches for the benefit of outsiders. Don’t Bill and Melinda realize that such colonialism is no longer in fashion? It’s time to support African farmers’ self-determination.”

Bereano also shows how Western corporations only intend to cherry-pick the most profitable aspects of the food production chain, while leaving the public sector in Africa to pick up the tab for the non-profitable aspects that allow profitability further along the chain.

Giant agritech corporations with their patented seeds and associated chemical inputs are ensuring a shift away from diversified agriculture that guarantees balanced local food production, the protection of people’s livelihoods and agricultural sustainability. African agriculture is being placed in the hands of big agritech for private profit under the pretext of helping the poor. The Gates Foundation has substantial shares in Monsanto. With Monsanto’s active backing from the US State Department and the Gates Foundation’s links with USAID, African farmers face a formidable force.

Report after report suggests that support for conventional agriculture, agroecology and local economies is required, especially in the Global South. Instead, Western governments are supporting powerful corporations with taxpayers money whose thrust via the WTO, World Bank and IMF has been to encourage strings-attached loans, monocrop cultivation for export using corporate seeds, the restructuring of economies, the opening of economies to the vagaries of land and commodity speculation and a system of globalised trade rigged in favour of the West.

In this vision for Africa, those farmers who are regarded as having any role to play in all of this are viewed only as passive consumers of corporate seeds and agendas. The future of Africa is once again being decided by rich men in London.