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MOHAMED LAMINE GAKOU

# The Crisis in African Agriculture

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STUDIES IN AFRICAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

General Editor: Samir Amin

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Mohamed Lamine Gakou



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## STUDIES IN AFRICAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

General Editor: Samir Amin

The United Nations University's Project on Transnationalization or Nation-Building in Africa (1982-1986) was undertaken by a network of African scholars under the co-ordination of Samir Amin. The purpose of the Project was to study the possibilities of and constraints on national autocentric development of African countries in the context of the world-system into which they have been integrated. Since the 1970s the world-system has been in a crisis of a severity and complexity unprecedented since the end of the Second World War; the Project examines the impact of this contemporary crisis on the political, economic and cultural situation of Africa today. Focusing on the complex relationship between transnationalization (namely, the dynamics of the world-system) and nation-building, which is seen as a precondition for national development, the Project explores a wide range of problems besetting Africa today and outlines possible alternatives to the prevailing development models which have proved to be inadequate.

### TITLES IN THIS SERIES

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**The Crisis in African Agriculture**

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1987

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**The World Steel Industry: Dynamics of Decline**

1987

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# Foreword

In this book, we have endeavoured to demonstrate that the crisis in African agriculture affects virtually the whole continent, even if it is true that some countries are managing better than others. In the attempt to understand the causes of this crisis which is affecting not only agriculture but the whole society and economy, we have felt it necessary to go back to precolonial societies to see if their forms of organization and level of development could prevent the victory of the aggression mounted by the capitalist mode of production.

Capitalism having succeeded in ensuring its domination, we have attempted to grasp the forms of exploitation which developed during that era, and their consequences for the subject peoples. Facts and observation show clearly that there is no possibility of survival in the framework of the present world system. Is the alternative, which can materialize only in the form of a delinking from the system, possible today and on what conditions?

These are the issues we raised, without being sure of providing definitive conclusions. Societies need to be reorganized on the basis of transformations of class relations. Such a prospect is not foreseeable in the immediate future but it is the condition for the alternatives that can liberate the African peoples, make them masters of their fate and liberate their creative initiative.

**M. L. Gakou**

# Preface

Mohamed Lamine Gakou here gives an overview of the 'agricultural question' in contemporary Africa. This is a difficult task if the writer wishes both to respect the variety of situations on this vast continent and avoid the detailed juxtaposition of case studies, both to spare the reader the jargon of specialists and remain brief without lapsing into superficiality. But it is a task in which the author has succeeded.

Africa's agricultural failure—this continent is the only one in which per capita agricultural production is falling—is certainly widely recognized, but the explanations for it remain generally partial and contradictory. Does the distant past (precolonial Africa (Chapter 2)) bear some share of responsibility? If there is a 'specificity'—over and beyond their great variety—in the modes of organization of the rural areas of most of Africa, it is probably that the still virtually untouched communal or tribute-paying forms involved an extensive occupation of the land. This made possible a much higher level of food self-sufficiency than is often supposed thanks to a relatively high labour productivity (which went hand in hand with very low yields per hectare). A higher per capita production demands the shift to intensive modes calling for a considerably higher overall quantity of annual labour. This increase in per capita production is thus accompanied by a lower productivity of labour (of physical production per 'day' of labour) but also by a higher yield per hectare. The shift to intensive agriculture, the *sine qua non* of any development worthy of the name, constitutes the challenge that the African peoples will pick up.

But the challenge has not yet been picked up. Colonization not only failed to pick it up; it never set out to do so. It was easier for it, as Gakou shows (Chapter 3), to secure an immediate super-profit at no cost (involving no investment) by forcing the peasants of Africa to perform unpaid—or very poorly paid—surplus labour through forms of indirect control (Chapter 6). A slightly higher per capita production at the price of rather more work, without machines, or modern inputs (but destroying the soil of Africa), combined with a deterioration in the conditions of peasant life were enough to elicit a considerable profit for the capital dominating the global system. Colonization thus continued the old tradition of the slave trade; exploitation by pillage that guaranteed neither the long-term reproduction of the labour force, nor the reproduction of the natural conditions of production.



Independence did not alter this mode of integration into the world capitalist system. As Gakou shows (Chapter 4), independence came in response to the demands of the new stage of the globalization of capital (the rebuilding of Europe and the hegemony of the United States) and not in response to the African peasant problem. Moreover, the prosperity of the 1960s in the West led in Africa to a new euphoria for the 'extraverted system'—that system oriented to export markets. And while, courageously and clear-sightedly, René Dumont, ever sensitive to the peasant question, denounced the 'false start in Africa', the World Bank, which today weeps crocodile tears over the fate of the peasants (while its counterpart the International Monetary Fund makes the poorest foot the bill for the bankruptcy) sustained with overwhelming enthusiasm the policies that ten years later were to lead to catastrophe.

The crisis of the 1970s and 1980s results from the combined effects of the over-exploitation of the land and of men and women, raised to a level that can be raised no more, and the crisis engulfing the capitalist system as a whole. Faced with this the proposals that rain down on Africa at an ever-increasing rate are scarcely anything more than the expression of the 'quest for palliatives', as Gakou shows (Chapter 5).

If it is only a matter of palliatives, it is because the 'pro-agriculture' talk nurtured by the media in the West is contrasted with an alleged 'preference for industrialization' which is said to be the source of the bankruptcy. For the reason for seeking greater output per farmer is precisely in order to make possible a higher degree of urbanization. But urbanization without industrialization cannot but be parasitical and disastrous. Conversely, industry (but not just any industry) is necessary to make greater agricultural output possible: it has to supply it with machinery and offer it a growing market in return. That is what the option for an autocentred national and popular strategy means. If this option is rejected in favour of a systematic preference for integration into globalization (i.e., the world capitalist economy), talk of giving priority to agriculture becomes hollow and at worst demagogic. The World Bank Berg Report<sup>1</sup> has these characteristics, refraining as it does from making a self-criticism of the Bank which supported the policies that led to the present bankruptcy, refraining from making a critique of import-substitution industrialization (which finds its preferred market in the expansion of demand from the middle classes at the expense of the rural and urban popular classes) which it advocated, and refraining from analysing the implications of its proposal for export-oriented industry. But this derives its 'comparative advantage' from its low wages, which it thus contributes to reproducing. The contradictions of these 'proposals' are moreover obvious: export-oriented industry presupposes low wages and consequently, low food prices, at the very time that the raising of these latter to inspire the peasants to produce more is being recommended.

The populist dress that MacNamara, when he was President of the World Bank, gave these proposals does not alter their implications. The themes of 'basic needs' and the strategy of 'family smallholdings' analysed by Gakou scarcely conceal the worst choice scenario which unfortunately some confused

sections of the Western left have confused with the popular interest. In any case, these oratorical flourishes have never prevented Western 'aid' agencies from giving *de facto* preference to support for agri-business and the kulaks—in the name of efficiency. The fact that these policies continue to be advocated in the West testifies basically to the lack of seriousness with which Africa is treated. In fact, Africa, in the imperialist vision of the world, is above all for the West a source of mineral resources. Neither its industrialization nor its agricultural development are thus really taken seriously.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing in nature ordains that African agriculture should be impoverished. Doubtless the under-population of tropical Africa (compared with the dense population of tropical Asia) constitutes an obstacle to intensification which calls for major internal population movements. And whatever has been said, the Sahel itself is not 'poor'. Here there is water (a series of rivers whose flow is equal to that of the Nile, exceptional underground water layers, according to studies that have been kept secret<sup>3</sup>), sources of energy (is not uranium one of these sources? And the sun? And oil less than a thousand metres down?), land suitable for cultivation, and people. A social system that proves itself incapable of co-ordinating these 'factors' in a satisfactory plan able to feed the people involved does not deserve to be described as rational. Let us recognize then that the capitalist system is not rational since it does not necessarily guarantee the reproduction of the labour force in each of its segments. Here, in the Sahel, for capitalism such as it is, it is the existence of the Sahelian peoples that is 'irrational'. For this capitalism, things would be more profitable if there was only uranium in the Sahel and no useless Sahelians. Such is the logic of the world system for which Africa is still exclusively a source of raw materials. From their endless stress on emergency 'relief' distributions, Western and European institutions have created the impression that the Sahel was irrevocably condemned. Thus we see a certain progressive institution accept as self-evident, in a study of 'energy prospects' for the region, that since uranium is not intended for the 'natives', the Sahelians must be taught better ways of gathering brushwood in the desert and how not to waste it in Malagasy stoves! So let Africa adapt itself to the wastefulness of the West. Is there a better expression of the fate as mineral supplier to which imperialism consigns the continent and of the subordination of all so-called development programmes to this essential logic than this naive acceptance of the 'imperatives' of exporting the energy resources of the region? But why not the opposite; why should not Africa recover control and use of its resources, and Europe adjust itself to that?

The capacity of capitalism in the abstract to 'solve the problem of African development' could be discussed *ad infinitum*. Concrete capitalism, such as it actually exists, that is, globalized, not only has not 'solved' this problem (it even created it) over the last 150 years (or even over the last 400 years since the slave trade), but envisages nothing for the next 50 years. The challenge will therefore only be taken up by the African peoples,

the day that the necessary popular alliances enable them to delink their development from the demands of transnationalization.

**Samir Amin**

## **Notes**

1. For a critique of this World Bank report, see Samir Amin, 'Une stratégie de développement autocentrée est-elle possible pour l'Afrique?'; Kwame Amoa, 'Some problems of autocentered development in Africa'.

2. Fayçal Yachir, *The Struggle over Africa's Minerals: What is at stake?*, forthcoming in this series.

3. Explanatory notes and planning maps for the exploitation of the underground waters in the Sahel, Bureau de recherche géologique et minimânt, 1975.

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# Introduction

Our aim in undertaking this work is to demonstrate, or provide further confirmation that the crisis affecting Africa particularly — even though it is more widespread — has its profound roots in the integration of African economies into the world capitalist system. The agricultural sectors and the rural areas are most often the ones most affected because of this integration. The case of agriculture, which, in most countries, is in crisis because it is essentially oriented towards the world market and not towards the feeding of the local people, shows that it is idle for the underdeveloped countries, and particularly for Africa, to seek solutions to their problems in the framework of a system whose *modus operandi* and rules of the game operate in such a way that it is always the poorest and economically weakest that suffer the most serious consequences of the crisis. If the developed capitalist countries can make the underdeveloped countries bear at least a part of the burden of their own crisis, in these countries and in Africa in particular, the so-called 'non-modern', 'traditional' sectors, agriculture above all, bear more of the burden. Other explanations can be found for the crisis, but we feel that these explanations can be no more than secondary, the fundamental cause being the integration of Africa into a system over which it has absolutely no control.

Even in the Sahelian region there are reports of granaries of cereals always full during the precolonial period despite the low level of development of productive forces. But was it not this low level of development of productive forces that ultimately made Africa the victim of the capitalist mode of production? A brief look at the work of distinguished researchers who have studied precolonial African societies suggests that these societies were not adequately prepared to defeat the aggressions of capitalism despite great capacities for resistance often linked to very advanced levels of political and social organization. The long era of domination that followed saw Africa drained of its human and material substance which was sucked out by the invaders.

We have not sought in this study to present a specialist piece of work, but to say things simply and to recall truths which may appear obvious but which are increasingly glossed over and rejected because of their very simplicity. Yet these truths still remain highly relevant and fundamental.

Despite the still appreciable potential of African agriculture, hunger,

## *Introduction*

malnutrition and poverty have got worse over the years, reaching the point of explosion in the 1970s. Absurd policies, breath-taking in their lack of imagination, continue to be implemented almost everywhere in Africa under the control of the system and its agencies (World Bank, IMF) by leaders who clearly stand to gain by them, but who crush the peoples. What alternative can one think of in the face of this ever-worsening situation? In our opinion, the solution can first of all only be political. All African and extra-African energies must endeavour to make the African peoples the true masters of their destiny through reorganizations of society that will ensure them all their rights and guarantee them all their freedoms. These are the prerequisites, and success requires constant and militant struggles.

# 1: The Performance of African Agriculture, 1950–1980

## Basic data and broad trends

### Agricultural production and food supplies

Overall, during the three decades from 1950, total agricultural production as well as total food production rose substantially in all regions of the world, both developed and underdeveloped. According to OECD statistics, total food production in the developed market economies rose by 115% between 1950 and 1975, while the developing market economies achieved a better performance with an increase of 130% over the same period.

These remarkable increases did not, however, have the same effects on per capita food supplies in the developed regions and in the underdeveloped ones. Whereas in the former, per capita food supplies were satisfactory given low population growth rates, in the latter, population increases were quite often close to production increases making rates of growth of per capita food production virtually insignificant.

Table 1, which shows growth rates for the various regions, brings the trends out. The pattern has varied from region to region and decade to decade.

Thus, during the first decade, 1952–62, except for Africa which only achieved a growth rate of 2.2%, all the other regions of the underdeveloped world achieved growth rates in total food production of above 3%, rates higher than those of the developed market economies which averaged 2.5%. But rapid population growth in the underdeveloped countries reduced per capita food production to levels below those of the developed countries. During that decade in the developed countries as a whole, the Eastern countries recorded the highest rates, both for total production and for per capita production. North America had the lowest rates. In the developing countries as a whole, the planned economies of Asia recorded the highest growth rates while Africa recorded the lowest, far lower than those of other underdeveloped regions.

The second decade, 1962–72, was, in general, marked by a slowing down of the growth of production in both the developed and the underdeveloped world. For total food production, except for North America which recorded a striking recovery, all the other developed regions recorded decreases, sometimes quite significant ones. Nevertheless, their per capita food production



remained distinctly positive. Despite significant declines compared to the previous period, the Eastern countries again recorded the highest growth rates in the group of developed countries. During this decade, the underdeveloped market economy countries still recorded total production growth rates higher than those of the developed market economy countries. But their per capita production was insignificant not only compared to those of the developed countries, but also compared to their own previous performances because of general declines in total production (except for that of Africa, which recorded a significant recovery), and because of the increase in population growth rates compared to the previous period.

Table 1  
Annual Growth Rate of Food Production, Total and Per Inhabitant

	1952-62		1961-70		1970-78	
	Total	Per inhab.	Total	Per inhab.	Total	Per inhab.
World	3.1	1.1	2.9	0.9	2.5	0.8
<i>Developed market economies</i>	2.5	1.3	2.6	1.5	2.2	1.3
Western Europe	2.9	2.1	2.4	1.5	1.6	1.2
North America	1.9	0.1	2.3	1.1	2.9	2.0
Eastern Europe + USSR	4.5	3.0	3.8	2.7	2.6	1.8
<i>Developing market economies</i>	3.1	0.7	2.8	0.2	2.7	0.4
Africa	2.2	0.0	2.9	0.4	1.4	-1.3
Latin America	3.2	0.4	3.1	0.2	3.0	0.2
Asia	3.1	0.8	2.6	0.1	2.7	0.1
<i>Asian centrally planned economies</i>	3.2	1.4	2.9	1.0	2.8	1.1

Sources: 1952-62, UN; 1961-70 and 1970-78, UNCTAD.

With regard to Africa, which had experienced a recovery in production whereas other regions had suffered declines, the trend averaged around a very low annual growth rate in per capita food production of 0.2% over the period. The planned economy countries of Asia experienced higher rates of 0.7% because their population growth rates remained distinctly lower than those of other underdeveloped regions.

For the third decade, it can be observed that the trends initiated during the second decade were accentuated. For the developed countries, whereas in North America the annual growth rate in total food production rose, in Western Europe and the Eastern countries rates continued to decline.