Yara, Greenwashing and Peasant Resistance in Sub Saharian Africa

By Mana, from Free the Soil – KlimaKollectivet, involved with solidarity work, peasant organisations (many of them connected to La Via Campesina) in Global South: Colombia, Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction/background on Yara in the Global South and Sub-Saharan Africa

The article 'The Exxons of Agriculture', by GRAIN, focuses on the fertiliser industry and points at Yara as one of the main actors in this sector. Yara also strongly lobbies for a 'Green Revolution' in Africa, and is one of the major stakeholders behind the 'Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture' (GASCA).

'The political economy of Africa's burgeoning chemical fertiliser rush', from the African Center for Biosafety contains more information on Yara, with an entire chapter dedicated to the company. It's also mentioned everywhere else in the report.

I met a group of women from Malawi who told me about the 'Farmer Input Subsidie Program' (FISP) aka Fertiliser Subsidie Program. Input means hybrid seeds, fertilisers, pesticides… For the context, Malawi knew a hunger crisis at the start of the 2000s and at this time, hunger aid was often directed to food subsidies. The FISP was implemented in the mid 2000, and fertilisers were distributed at a local level; the poorest 50% of the population had access to the program, everywhere in the country. Few years later, Malawi came out of the crisis. This was seen as a success story, since people were able to feed themselves. This case was widely communicated and created a boom in FISP in many countries on the African continent.

However, the Women's Rural Assembly were very critical.

- They saw that they were being forced into dependency on transnational corporations. They could not grow food with their own means any longer and were pushed into a spiral of getting and using input. As long as people belonged to the 50%, they could keep the subsidies. But then, they had to buy inputs themselves.
- Moreover, these inputs from big companies such as Monsanto and Yara weren't produced in Malawi, but was imported from far away.
- Therefore, state subsidies and development aid from foreign countries went to these companies.
- Finally, once farmers start using inputs, more is required to keep the same yields. In tropical areas, the soil is used to the jungle ecosystem, which provides a lot of organic material (leaves). After deforestation, very little humus and fertile soil are left. The soil layer there is thinner than on farming land in the Global North, and more fertiliser is required.

Since the African Center for Biosafety wrote the report mentioned above, FISP are booming all over the place. Another big issue is the development of 'Agricultural Growth Corridors'. Africa is now framed as the food basket of the world (= for export) and many public – private partnerships are created to start the corridors. This means identifying a stripe fertile land, often along a river, pushing the local peasantry away and creating large-scale agricultural production for export. Yara is one of the biggest lobbyists in public – private partnerships to create Growth Corridors.

The Nacala corridor, in the centre of Mozambique, is a public-private partnership between Brazilian, Japanese, and Mozambican governments and companies. Just as Japan helped Brazil with starting to grow soy on deforested land, they now want to repeat the same model there, in the Pro Savana project. 4 millions of peasants live there; many organised themselves to resist this project. Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa are likely to create partnerships with foreign government or aid funds, but it never serves local people's interests.

I met a partner organisation in a development project I was working in: this organisation was part of the resistance against Pro Savana, but it got funding from WWF, which was greenwashing and supporting Pro Savana. To keep the funding, it had to drop the resistance!

This spring, I went to the Northern province in Mozambique, close to Tanzania where a huge offshore fossil gas reserve (and maybe oil) was discovered. Since 2017, there is lots of violence in the region, but no one has claimed responsibility. The situation is extremely confusing: the US military, present in the area, says it's Islamic terrorism but why would terrorists kill poor Muslim farmers? The entire province is militarised, with a focus on protecting gas infrastructure.

Anadarco, a US oil company recently bought by Occidental, Shell and Exxon are already operating there. What's the link with Yara? As we know, nitrogen fertiliser requires huge amounts of fossil gas, both as an ingredient as a source of energy for the fabrication process. Yara declared it wanted to build a production plant there.

I also met people affected by the gas industry, mostly fishers and farmers living on the coast. Some were already resettled. I met a fisherman who used to have 62 hectares of land. He is now resettled 12 km from the sea, has no more place to moor, and only got 1.5 ha of land (it is the same for everyone). Farmers were invited for training on agricultural inputs, in order … to yield more crops from less land; peasants are turned into customers for the new fertiliser business… The National Peasants' Union (UNAC) don't want to use inputs: poor farmers want to stay independent from corporations.

Gangs are massacring people, the military is scaring people to go off their land and there is a hunger crisis. It's a well-known story being repeated: big natural resources are discovered and people around suffer from violence and hunger.

People there need help, this story must be shared. I hope we can bring this message and their voices to our action.

Discussion and summaries of texts read in small groups

1. Yara, the Company – booklet from ASEED made for Free the Soil

Yara belongs to many lobby groups and organisations, and the company is active in many fields. Since 2010, it spent more than €11M on lobbying in Europe. They try to go to new countries, such as India, and present themselves to governments as those who have solutions to climate change and food production issues. Unlike in other sectors in agriculture, the fertiliser industry as a whole is not very concentrated, though the nitrogen fertiliser sector is. Yara strongly lobbying for gas extraction.

2. 1st chapter from the report 'The political economy of Africa's burgeoning chemical fertiliser rush', by the African Center for Biosafety African Center for Biosafety.

We should take numbers with caution: these texts date from a couple of years ago. Markets are very dynamic and it's incredibly hard to obtain shares and precise numbers.

At the Abuja Fertiliser Summit in 2006, in South Africa, government representatives met with the fertiliser industry and development actors.

- The main initiative was to raise fertiliser use from 8 kg per ha by then to 50 kg per ha by 2015.
- The G7 initiative (said to be politically dead now), was a public private partnership where Yara played a big role.
- The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, founded by the Gates and Rockfeller foundations followed these steps. Based on hybrid seeds, making farmers dependent on companies.

3. 2nd part from the report 'The political economy of Africa's burgeoning chemical fertiliser rush', by the African Center for Biosafety African Center for Biosafety.

Exposing the cooperation between government and aid organisations to push fertilisers. Grow Africa is an alliance of big corporations, including Yara, and African governments to define legal frameworks on seed regulation and fertiliser distribution. The companies are involved in writing rules around their business. They write 'letters of intent', stating how much they want to sell to countries, which in return may make laws saying that farmers can only buy from them.

Inputs are transport-intensive. Doubling the amount of fertiliser used means doubling the number of trucks to transport them. Governments use a lot of money for these subsidy programs and private public partnerships, which means less money is spent on other research and practises. There is no exit strategy for such subsidy programs, what happens afterwards? In addition, subsidies reproduce inequalities already present: more male-headed households get subsidies than female-headed households.

4. The Exxons of Agriculture – GRAIN 2015

Energy companies producing gas and oil are well-known and visible. But companies that use them to produce fertilisers or pesticides, and lobby for extraction, like Yara remain invisible. Numbers are difficult to obtain. They are responsible for 1 to 2% of the global energy consumption and GHG emissions (conservative estimation). Extraction, production of fertilisers and their application all generate emissions. Big lobby organisations say this is needed to feed the world. If we stop using fertilisers, we could reduce GHG emission by 10% or more.

In the GACSA, 60% of private sector organisations are fertiliser companies of fertiliser lobbies. World Food Prize winner Hans Herren: 'They have the money and the lobby groups. Those of us defending agroecology, local food systems and small-scale farming as the holistic and truly climate-friendly solution were simply pushed out of the process.' There is no quotas to make farmers or civil society more represented in policy making. Lobbying remains completely unregulated.

The main message that fertilisers make higher yields possible is now challenged by new research, showing that agroecological methods can reach the same yields.

5. African Agricultural Growth Corridors and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. Whe benefits, who loses? Econexus - 2012

The idea of Growth Corridors was first presented by Yara to the UN (2008) and the World Economic Forum. Growth corridor projects are led by private companies such as Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Monsanto, Rabobank in partnership with governments.

Official and unofficial aims are to produce food for export and to create complete supply systems, with all the infrastructure needed for transport.

Examples of corridors:

- Nacala in Mozambique (resistance from locals)
- Beira in Mozambique (sugarcane for ethanol, mining with Rio Tinto)
- SAGCOT in Tanzania (there for the first time, private actors included in agricultural policy)

Impacts of Growth Corridors

- Major reordering of water and land.
- Land rights and titles are not respected.
- Discrimination of women, the majority of small-scale peasants
- Local people suffer from these projects.

6. Climate Smart revolution … or a new era of Greenwashing? CIDSE Briefing 2015.

'CSA' was started by corporations and governments with the goal of spreading industrial agriculture, mainly in Africa.This label is used for greenwashing: no rules, no clear definition of climate smart, voluntary reporting. The text describes tricks that can be used by companies to decrease the emissions declared. GASCA does not small farmers at all.

- Frustrating use of CSA acronym, which usually refers to Community Supported Agriculture.
- No tillage method (conservation agriculture), no ploughing, labelled as 'CSA' because the soil sequestrates carbon, but intense use of herbicide such as Round Up, usually with GMO seeds. This also ignores the emissions from the fertiliser industry, and social consequences of such model of agriculture. Herbicide tolerant crops (aka GMOs) are also considered climate-friendly by the GASCA.