

Building Food Sovereignty through Ecofeminism in Kenya

From Export to Local Agricultural Value Chains

LEIGH BROWNHILL, WAHU M. KAARA AND TERISA E. TURNER

Les auteures ont revisité le district de Maragua au Kenya et ont analysé les protestations des fermières face à l'exploitation du café en 1990. En 2016 elles ont noté une transition très claire vers une agroécologie biologique caractérisée par des alliances générées et générationnelles démarrées il y a plusieurs années par les femmes qui protestaient. Depuis elles ont imaginé le partage des sols, elles ont préservé une variété de semences qu'elles ont semées et ont ajouté certaines connaissances écologiques et des préférences culinaires locales.

Reprising Kenyan Women's Struggle Against the Coffee Economy, 1986-1997

In 1997, in the pages of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, we co-authored an analysis of a women-initiated movement of Kenyan farmers to break free from long-standing coffee commodity value chains in which they had been entangled for a century. The article described how coffee was first grown in the temperate Central Kenyan highlands on white settler plantations in the early part of the twentieth century. By 1940, coffee was one of the most lucrative commodity markets in the world. After protest against discriminatory coffee licensing practices, large

land-holding African farmers were allowed to grow coffee. Smallholders were later provisionally given license to grow coffee, but restrictions still barred the majority, whose under-four acre farms were deemed in policy as uneconomical for coffee production.

By the 1980s, the World Bank was actively advocating for farmers to grow more coffee, and for governments of peasant nations to adopt policies that would facilitate increase of export production, in part as a means for those governments to repay international loans. Corporate coffee value chains came to benefit auctioneers and middle men, as well as foreign bankers, far more than the average farm husband, whose name was on the land title, the production contract, and the bank account (Brownhill, Kaara and Turner 43). That piece described the gendered class dynamics within which peasant women in coffee growing districts like Maragua in Central Kenya uprooted coffee trees, and in tandem planted food crops on their small farms.

Our 1997 analysis emphasized the ways that women collectively asserted their usufruct rights to grow food on their own family land. In asserting this claim, women broke the “male deals”¹ that had bound husbands (and wives) into unfair

production and trade relationships with men of the state and of international capital, relationships which were becoming harmful to the environment through chemical application, and to producers' health and well-being through exposure to chemicals but also significantly to loss of food gardens when the coffee economy expanded.

The article also examined the “ethnicized gendered class alliance” that emerged to support women's return to cultivation that prioritized local food value chains, starting with feeding farm families and supplying basic nutritious foods, like organic bananas, to urban markets. Women farmers found allies among young men who worked in transport and trade, and who built links between rural farmers and urban eaters. We held up the case as an example of the contemporary state of global struggle that saw the enclosures of neo-liberal corporate rule being resisted by peasant women, whose efforts in alliance with young, dispossessed men were aimed at enabling the re-emergence of subsistence-oriented agriculture and local trade. Twenty years later, how far have women and men in places like Maragua succeeded in re-establishing what we can call in contemporary parlance, local food sovereignty?

The Coffee Economy Transformed: Maragua in 2016

In March 2016, I, Leigh Brownhill, returned to Kenya to visit my co-author, sister, and friend, Wahu Kaara. During that stay, we made a daytrip to the collective farm of a youth group in Maragua to learn about the progress of the agricultural transformation there, in the heart of a region that spurned coffee some thirty years ago. What had happened to the farm women's efforts to transition to the cultivation of food crops? What follows is our collective reflection on this question, with attention to the gender dynamics and ecological outcomes in the Maragua case.

It is one thing to uproot coffee trees and plant bananas and vegetables to supply household subsistence, as women in Maragua and surrounding areas did beginning in the mid-1980s. But it is quite another thing to continue to maintain a food-first focus year after year in a market and policy context that is hostile to subsistence agricultural production and trade.

Farmers who have abandoned a cash crop, for reasons varying from world market forces to plant disease and cost burdens, need not only to grow their own food, but also to find alternative sources of income to cover purchases of goods they cannot produce, and for their other cash needs. To produce surpluses of vegetables for sale takes time, not only to convert the farm, but also to find the customers and build the market links. Hence in rural areas of Kenya today, there are large surpluses of fruits and vegetables that never reach markets or paying customers, due to lack of affordable transport.

The Maragua ex-coffee farmers were not given much chance, or any official support, to re-establish local agricultural skills, indigenous seed stocks, and local produce markets. The dominant view guiding policy and development planning in Kenya remains entrenched in a neo-classical economic paradigm whose proponents assert that subsistence means poverty, and global markets mean

development (Seavoy 252). International advisors have designed and imported development interventions that sought (and continue to seek) to fully commercialize Kenyan farming (as elsewhere in the world) by linking smallholder farmers into global value chains.

In this neo-liberal policy milieu, instead of supporting the coffee farmers' initiatives with research, extension,

It is one thing to uproot coffee trees and plant bananas and vegetables to supply household subsistence. But it is quite another to continue to maintain a food-first focus in a market and policy context that is hostile to subsistence agricultural production and trade.

and education focused on the crops that farmers do prefer, agricultural scientists and international advisors simply sought to recapture the coffee labour force and channel it into alternative export crop production. Canadian and U.S. development agencies, for example, in alliance with biotech and big agribusiness firms, promoted ex-coffee farmers' adoption of other mass-market-oriented crops, especially perishable horticultural products, such as strawberries, macadamia nuts, and French beans (Komu).

Maragua, as it happens, was the site of one such project to promote tissue culture bananas (Karembu 2). "Tissue culture" is a method of propagation of plant material, done in laboratories in a specially formulated

nutrient medium, using the tissue of disease-free plants. Tissue culture bananas produce uniform, disease-free plants and fruits, but require more labour, more inputs, and more expenditures, as planting material must be purchased each season rather than propagated on-farm from suckers from mature banana plants (Indimuli 7). Many of these crops were touted as "women friendly" and marketed to appeal to female-headed households (Kabunga et al 22). Now the old coffee "male deal" was being repackaged as a new kind of deal for both women and men to independently contract their labour for supply to global horticulture value chains.

About six years ago (2010), when the Shiriki youth group began a collective organic farm in Maragua, they were confronted with the reality of a local political economy still heavily slanted towards highly chemicalized commercial production. Tissue culture bananas were only one of the new cash crops that farmers had adopted to replace coffee. Some neighbours grow cucumbers for urban wholesalers. Some have tried French beans, destined for export. But in Maragua, even for those who adopted the production of these alternative cash crops, many have found similar problems, including high costs, variable incomes, unequal burden of labour in the household, and negative ecological implications. Farmers' low adoption and discontinuance of those crops has become a problem for the bio-tech firms operating in Maragua (Indimuli 5; Kabunga et al 2). The alternative cash crops have turned into false solutions to critical problems of rural hunger and youth unemployment.

The Shiriki group is comprised of young Rastafari, most of whom were originally living in urban slums. Rastafari in East Africa is rooted in the region's nineteenth-century Nyabingi militant matriarchy and the global Rastafari movement (Turner 9). "Shiriki" means "participation" in Kiswahili, and signified the youths' commitment to self-sufficiency and self-determination. The group



organized for the purpose of raising money from craft manufacture and fundraising cultural events to enable them to move to the rural area, find land to farm, and build houses, storage sheds, and a communal hall. They did so after forging an agreement with a widow who could not farm the land due to her employment in a distant urban centre. Now a core and fluctuating group of some five to fifteen youth live in Maragua and operate a two-acre collective farm, with the long-term aim of establishing a rural cultural education and media centre.

The group's goals include food self-sufficiency through organic ecological farming, and establishment of rural food processing, crafts, and trade. Members also seek to build a larger community of "fossil fuel-free" farmers (Shiva), and so educate and disseminate information in the weekly village market, where they sell surpluses of their local organic foods and handmade arts and crafts. They do outreach among neighbours, school children, visitors, and international volunteers, along with demonstrations of the use of their powerful solar cooker. The land is richly endowed with spring water and a high water table, allowing for readily available ditch irrigation. They have a local as well as a continental view of their initiative for "cultural independence" (Shiriki website).

The Shiriki group has gained ground since 2010 in becoming largely food self-sufficient. The initiative has grown as group members have integrated with the community. The seed varieties they have planted have come from local women farmers, especially elder women seed savers, who encourage the Shiriki youth's effort to revitalize local farming with Indigenous agricultural knowledge and seeds. The biggest challenge they reported was that while most of their neighbours want to "go organic" and to focus on local food crops, the markets for these crops are not developed, and the need for increased labour (e.g., for weeding and pest control) acts as a barrier, due to the migration of youth away from rural

areas and farming professions. To counter these challenges, the Shiriki youth have worked diligently to build marketing links, both in local village markets and central urban areas. They have even managed to represent their group at an international trade fair in Tanzania (Shiriki).

Rural-urban migration is a highly gendered phenomenon. Shiriki's group members, the majority of whom are young men, have developed a position on the gender dynamics of contemporary agricultural communities, where both women and men are prone to leave for the town or urban areas. They ask,

...where are the young men and women of this community? And the answer is quite apparent for the young men are [taking work in the] unintelligently designed industry of motorcycle transport [taxis]. And if the men are not in the farm, who shall attract the young women to till the land? So the sisters have found themselves in this exodus to the urban [areas] where they offer themselves for pure exploitation. (Shiriki)

Their analysis relies on an understanding of land relations in the country where women rarely get independent access to land. Without up-turning the whole colonial and cultural history of bias against women's land access, the only viable option for most young women is to seek employment in towns or cities to meet their subsistence needs. This gendered dynamic is firmly at the root of the emptying out of rural areas and the filling up of urban slums—the cumulative socio-cultural, economic, and geographic impacts of waves of colonial and post-colonial imperial enclosures. Ecological degradation and deep social injustice in both rural and urban areas have also been the persistent, disastrous results of these ongoing enclosures.

The Shiriki youth do not *advocate* women's access to land only through relationships with men. They rather *acknowledge* that the huge project

of establishing food sovereignty and transforming the capitalist food system must be started—is *being started*—even before all of the perfect conditions are present in the society. The construction of a food sovereign future requires concrete work now. And the Shiriki youth have shown themselves prepared to work within, against, and around the existing policy and market barriers, and discrimina-

One of the biggest challenges is the need to transform the policy context into one that supports local trade of local goods. Public budget support and international development funding could go a long way towards advancing the transformation of rural economies globally from food insecure to food sovereign.

tory social norms around land access, in order to get a footing from which to replace the old hierarchical and exclusionary order with an inclusive, gendered, and generational alliance for food sovereignty.

As much as farming is a seasonal and cyclical activity, it is also a generational matter. So the willingness and ability of the Shiriki youth to ground themselves on land can only go so far, and for so long, if there are no young women around. Both in the day-to-day and seasonal cultivation of the farm, and as importantly in the founding of successor generations, women's presence and labour can be a deciding factor in the success of the organic transition in the long-term, at Shiriki farm and more widely.

Given the double impact of a history of women's exclusion from land ownership and decades of youth outmigration from the countryside, young women's return to rural areas in large part depends on the availability of land. Access to that land may come both through marriage (which then requires securing of potential spouses' land rights) and through independent means (owning, leasing, or borrowing). Very few women, particularly young women residing in urban slums, can ever afford to buy or lease land and make an income to cover all the associated costs of farming. And most do not have any direct relative from whom to borrow even a small plot. So how will the landless, men or women, be able to return to farming in Kenya, and elsewhere for that matter?

Barring massive state-sponsored land re-distribution, which is unlikely, the transformation of the rural economy from its present doldrums and decline to the emergence of vibrant, youthful, agroecological communities may well depend upon a re-invigoration of the customary practices of overlapping entitlements. In particular, the critical return of young women to rural areas calls for the re-institution and re-invention of some long-lost Indigenous forms of land tenure that applied specifically to women (e.g., variations on old Kikuyu customs of some daughters' and widows' rights to occupy land singly). Farmers who cannot utilize all of their land or who need extra help on their farms can find their own ways of following the example of land-sharing at Shiriki, to bring young women and young men back to the land, perhaps as farm apprentices in exchange for periods of usufruct rights. Whatever path the Maragua farmers choose, their decisions will shape the future of farming on their own land and within the wider community, including within the urban diaspora, for generations to come.

The transformation of the food system in Kenya remains in progress in 2016. This progress is accompanied by diverse efforts to retain and

rebuild Indigenous knowledge, seed systems and soil fertility, not only at Shiriki's farm, but in hundreds of farmer groups mobilizing for food sovereignty across Kenya. One of the biggest challenges to the food sovereignty movement is the need to transform the policy context into one that supports local trade of local goods, and spurs youth self-employment and urban-rural migration. In tandem with farmers' own efforts and initiatives towards the building of movements and communities of organic farmers, public budget support and international development funding could go a long way towards advancing the transformation of rural economies globally from food insecure to food sovereign.

When going into organic farming for local markets, while farmers' incomes may begin small, they come with other unpriced values (health, biomass, soil fertility, social capital) which can be re-invested in the farm to enable the small income to grow. The main lesson gleaned from the visit to Shiriki was that an ecologically-conscious new generation of Kenyan farmers has emerged with the energy, skills, willingness, and orientation to realize an agricultural transformation that has eluded previous generations. The younger generations' potential stems in part from their cosmopolitan urban experiences and from their exclusion from their elders' lifelong entanglement with export crop production regimes, commercialization policies, and agro-chemical applications.

Because youth have for decades been taught to "rise above" mere farming, and so have fled rural areas for elusive urban educational and job opportunities, most youth have also never been enmeshed in corporate agricultural value chains. There is great willingness among Kenyan farmers and capacity among the youth, in Shiriki and in other food sovereignty initiatives, to switch from corporate control over oil-dependent, global agricultural value chains to commoners' value chains that enable organic and Indigenous methods,

seeds and culinary preferences, and are characterized in particular by farmers' sovereign decision-making over land, seed, knowledge, and on-farm energy sources.

But besides a willingness to learn and capacity to work hard, the wider transformation of the farming system towards agroecology requires people who can change the social relations of rural areas from hierarchical and

Market-driven agricultural development has meant that public resources (whether Kenyan scientific organizations or publicly funded international development and research funding) are failing to realize or to mobilize the knowledge and power of local agricultural systems.

extractive towards horizontal and harmonious. We have characterized these relations as "male deals" and "ethnicized gendered class alliances" (Turner and Brownhill 1046). The most important change characterizing the Shiriki farming initiative was the establishment and elaboration of ethnicized, gendered class alliances, first between the young men who wanted to return to farming, and the elder women who had the advantage of land, and Indigenous knowledge and wisdom to share. The extension of this alliance to wider constituencies depends on the increased involvement of young women who share an interest in returning to the land. Such alliances, rooted in making access to land more equitable, remain key to the

transformational power of ecofeminist food sovereignty initiatives.

Eric Holt-Gimenez, the Executive Director of Food First and the Institute for Food and Development Policy in Oakland, California, recently blogged that researchers need to go beyond studies of and strategies for "scaling-up" agroecology and "changing the food system," to inquire more deeply into "how agroecology [can] help us transform capitalism itself" (Holt-Gimenez). In reviewing what is needed to make agroecology "the norm rather than the alternative," Holt-Gimenez also partially answered his own question, when he noted that, "agroecology requires extensive human labor coupled with place-specific knowledges—both of which are incompatible with the current system's need for vast, cheap inputs" (ibid).

Extensive human labour and place-specific knowledge? It sounds like the emerging youth agricultural initiatives, urban-rural migration and Indigenous knowledge systems that the Shiriki youth and the wider food sovereignty movement are championing. It is precisely in the process of new generations actually reversing the erosion of farming as a livelihood, and learning and sharing Indigenous knowledge and seed systems, that agroecology transforms the capitalist system (Giacomini). Agroecology provides grounds for the more widespread replacement of capitalism by offering the opportunity for household and community food self-sufficiency and "cultural independence" outside of corporate value chains.

Conclusion

The decades-long commercialization drive of international development through trade and aid has failed to overcome the chronic humanitarian disaster of hunger and malnutrition, especially in East Africa (Brownhill 2009(a), 225). Neo-liberal policies have only served to scuttle, divide, and weaken the alternative answers to the hunger question, including

local food self-sufficiency initiatives, crop biodiversity, and Indigenous knowledge. Market-driven agricultural development has meant that public resources (whether Kenyan scientific organizations or publicly funded international development and research funding) are failing to realize or to mobilize the knowledge and power of local agricultural systems. They only deem it worthy to do so if there is something that can be patented and commercialized, whether by a local or foreign firm that will privatize the knowledge and exclusively reap the profits.

Instead, through direct household food self-sufficiency and the re-institution of local marketing of local goods, the Shiriki farmers and others linked (often through mobile technology) into wider Kenyan, East African, and global food sovereignty networks, are tackling hunger and malnutrition by refusing to participate in the corporate market, and by implication, by strengthening Indigenous agricultural technologies and practices and recreating peoples' markets. They do so by changing with whom they do business (urban and rural commoners rather than local or foreign capital) and under what terms they carry out their farming initiatives (cooperative, organic and life-centred rather than competitive, chemical-intensive and profit-driven).

In an age of extreme extractivism, post-peak oil, climate chaos and political and economic uncertainty, the Shiriki case highlights the critical relation of youth to the coming transition to post-capitalist (and therefore more labour-intensive) organic food systems, globally. It also suggests that the reversal of rural-urban migration requires, to start, a wider recognition of the many kinds of opportunities that could entice jobless youth into self-employment in services and trades supporting farmers' food sovereignty initiatives. Everywhere in the world are urban dwellers, especially youth, who are returning (or wishing to return) to rural livelihoods, learning to farm without expensive and damaging chemical inputs, and

grappling with the imbalance between the labour required and the labour available. Youth unemployment and farmers' on-farm labour shortages could both be addressed through further urban-to-rural migration, and this likely requires support through the establishment of new types or re-constitution of old customs of land-sharing, such as that reached by Shiriki youth and the widow on whose land they farm.

Youth are a powerful catalyst for rural transformation, insofar as they can inject energetic labour, skills, and creativity into labour-intensive agriculture-related fields, and whose self-employment in rural areas could facilitate farmers' existing efforts. Supportive industries range from supply of local construction materials and carpentry services (e.g., for irrigation, fences, granaries, coops and barns), to ox-ploughing, composting and post-harvest value-addition in crop processing, packaging, branding, and distribution.

This kind of transformation of the farming system is not the effort of one season; but the slow, steady work of rebuilding self-sufficient, subsistence-oriented rural political economies. In Maragua, that work is well advanced. Elaborating on the transformation begun by a women's coffee protest in Maragua twenty years ago, the enthusiastic initiative of young Rastafari women and men in Shiriki sets a stellar example of the vast untapped potential for a generational succession from extractive corporate agri-business to a new era of climate-adapted, youth-mobilized agroecology.

Leigh Brownhill teaches Sociology and Communication Studies at Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, with a focus on environment, social movements, food sovereignty and eco-feminism. Wahu M. Kaara is a global social justice activist from Kenya. Terisa E. Turner is an independent scholar working mainly on petroleum issues.

¹Male deals are cross-class and cross-ethnic collaborations between

capitalists and colonized or working class men, for the purpose of channeling the land, labour, fertility and other resources of women, poor men and whole communities into the commodified, cash economy and global markets (see Brownhill 2009(b): 24).

References

- Brownhill, Leigh. "A Climate for Change: Humanitarian Disaster and the Movement for the Commons in Kenya." *Women, Gender and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives*. Eds. Enarson E. and P. G. Dhar Chakrabarti. Delhi: Sage International, 2009(a). 224-232. Print.
- Brownhill, Leigh. *Land, Food, Freedom: Struggles for the Gendered Commons in Kenya, 1870-2010*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009(b). Print.
- Brownhill, Leigh, Wahu M. Kaara and Terisa E. Turner. "Gender Relations and Sustainable Agriculture: Rural Women's Resistance to Structural Adjustment in Kenya." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 17.2 (Spring 1997): 40-44. Print.
- Giacomini, Terran. "System Change Grounded in Food Sovereignty at the 2015 Climate Talks in Paris." *La Via Campesina, International Peasant's Movement*, 27 January 2016. Web. Accessed 21 July 2016.
- Holt-Gimenez, Eric. "If Agroecology Is So Great, Why Aren't All Farmers Doing It?" *Huffington Post Blog*, 8 July 2016, Web. 10 July 2016.
- Indimuli, Raphael. "Factors Influencing the Discontinuance in Adoption of Tissue Culture Banana Technology: A Study of Smallholder Farmers in Maragwa District." Master of Arts, Development Studies, University of Nairobi, October 2013. Print.
- Kabunga, Nassul S., Thomas Dubois and Matin Qaim. "Information Asymmetries and Technology Adoption: The Case of Tissue Culture Bananas in Kenya." Courant Research Centre Discussion Paper 74, Georg-August-Universität