



# Cutting the Hand That Feeds: The Plight of Smallholder Farmers in Kenya

By Claire Nasike



In the pre-colonial days of the early 1900s, [Africans predominantly farmed](#) finger millet, sorghum, pearl millet, amaranth, jute mallow, spider plant, and lablab, among other indigenous crops. The farms were so rich in biodiversity that food production thrived. This subsistence nature of farming saw crops being transferred from farm to plate.

In the western Nyanza belt, for instance, ugali was brown (a mixture of sorghum and millet) and often accompanied by [indigenous vegetables](#), such as elisaka (spider flower), omurere (jute), and chimboka (amaranth). During bountiful days, farmers thronged the local food markets to sell off their surplus produce. Food was diverse, high in nutrients, locally grown, and locally available.

In contrast, most farms in Africa today have morphed into monoculture (cultivation of one type of crop) farms. In Kenya, maize is the most dominant food crop on most farms. Cash crops, such as tea, cotton, and coffee introduced by the [colonial enterprise, still dominate](#) most farms, and food markets mostly sell kales (sukuma wiki), spinach, maize, and cabbage. Consequently, meals in most households have shifted to either white processed ugali and sukuma wiki or beef and chapati or rice. Food is now processed, low in nutrients and [14% of it is imported](#).

The diversity present in farmers' fields has continually declined and the threats to diversity are on

the rise. Of the [more than 6,000 plant species](#) cultivated for food, fewer than 200 make substantial contributions to global food output, with only 9 accounting for 66 per cent of total crop production in 2014.

Such has been the evolution of food systems that farmers intuitively gravitate towards producing what has a ready market as opposed to what is nutritious and indigenous. Cash crops have replaced heritage foods that fed people for generations sprawling back to the dawn of human life.

### **Cash cropping: A profit-driven paradigm**

Mass cash cropping (popularised by industrial agriculture) has done more harm than good to smallholder farmers. Fertile lands in the Kenyan highlands are occupied by multinational tea corporations, such as James Finlays and Unilever Tea. These corporations pocket high profits at the expense of Kenyan smallholder tea farmers, who constantly grapple with low prices for this produce and remain mired in poverty. Meanwhile, [tea pickers work and live under destitute conditions and some suffer from sexual harassment](#).

Whereas the proponents of cash crop farming might argue that this type of farming has placed farmers on the global market (thereby increasing their chances of earning an income, which could, in turn, address food insecurity) health, economic and social concerns have assumed a secondary place to profits.

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The development history of cash crops in Africa over the last few decades, however, shows that [cash crops have produced minimal cash](#). In the previous three decades, real income from cash crops has declined. African shares in world markets of most commodities have worsened, and most African countries have been sinking deeper and deeper into debt.

The cash crop monopoly has led to the inhumane exploitation of smallholder farmers. This system has consistently oppressed farmers economically and socially through land grabbing, repressive seed laws, and dependency on multinational corporations for farm inputs. Farmers can no longer save and share seeds from the current harvest to plant the next season, as these seeds are patented by multinational seed corporations and protected by intellectual property laws. In [Tanzania, farmers risk a prison sentence of at least 12 years or a fine of over €205,300](#), or both, if they sell and share seeds, including their own farmer-bred seeds, that are not certified. Smallholder farmers now have to buy the seeds, chemical pesticides, and fertilisers each planting season. They have increasingly found themselves at the short end of the stick in this profit-driven paradigm.

This dependency has tied farmers to crippling debt that has sunk the farmers deeper into cyclic poverty. In India, many farmers have committed suicide on account of spiralling debt. In Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, [60,000 farmers](#) committed suicide in 2007 because of debt, repeated crop failures, and the inability to meet the rising cost of cultivation.

Growing cash crops for export has taken more productive land from local food production. Resources that would otherwise have utility in local food production have been channelled into producing agricultural export crops. Consequently, smallholder farmers have converted marginal land with little agricultural productivity for local consumption.

Cultivating cash crops on lands traditionally meant for food crops has a significant impact on the food security of a community or nation. Conversion from subsistence farming to market-oriented agriculture, and shifting from the cultivation of traditional food crops to cash crops through the commercialisation of agriculture have led to an increase in malnutrition and food insecurity in most African countries. In Kenya, for instance, in 2008, an [estimated 1.3 million people](#) in rural areas and between 3.5 million and 4 million in urban areas were food insecure. This is despite Kenya exporting more than 3 billion dollars in food crops in 2010.

Cultivation of cash crops has also led to the excessive use of fertilizers and agrochemicals, which have harmed our bees and soil and aquatic organisms, and left our water bodies choking with pollution. The need for more land for cash crop cultivation has led to massive deforestation, which has further degraded soils and increased water scarcity. According to the [Ndung'u land report](#), from 1963 to 2003, 11,000 acres of forested land in Kenya was excised off to create the Nyayo Tea zones. In 1988, Transmara Forest Reserve lost 937.7 hectares to Kiptagich Tea Estates.

### **Monocropping issues**

Agricultural commercialisation has led to monocropping. This introduction of new and similar crops into farmers' fields has drastically altered the diversity of local varieties previously cultivated by farmers. Farm agricultural diversity has been killed under the false assumption that local varieties have low productivity. Ownership of diverse indigenous seed varieties has shifted from smallholder farmers to multinational corporations. The farmer no longer controls and owns the seeds he grows. New patented varieties, often marketed as high yielding varieties, require smallholder farmers to purchase the seeds from one supplier, in this case, the multinational corporations.

Growing monocultures on farms only advances the global agenda of globalisation, which is often controlled by global corporations. Monocultures have been proven to displace the biodiversity on farms. The [UN International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources in Leipzig Germany, 1996](#), noted that industrial monocultures in agriculture had replaced 75 per cent of all agrobiodiversity.

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In addition, Western agricultural corporations and governments are now pushing African countries to industrialise their agriculture. Consequently, food crops, such as rice, wheat, and maize, are currently grown as cash crops. These crops currently account for more than 50 per cent of the world's calorie intake. An indication of the loss of agricultural diversity is the fact that today we have more [Kenyans consuming imported maize, wheat, and rice](#) as opposed to millet and sorghum so much so that the former have become the staple foods.

It is this reliance on food and agricultural imports that has seen most Kenyans go to bed on an empty stomach. What's worse, in the wake of COVID-19, farmers are losing their produce due to lack of markets or are sell it at throwaway prices.

President Uhuru Kenyatta, in his March address, encouraged traders and farmers to continue with their agricultural activities so that Kenyans can have access to farm produce at all times - a clear indication that smallholder farmers produce the food consumed in the country.

## Who feeds Kenya?

A [World Bank Report](#) shows that Kenyan agriculture covers small-, medium-, and large-scale farming. Small-scale production represents roughly 75 per cent of the total agricultural output. The report further states that small-scale production further accounts for 70 per cent of the marketed agrarian produce, as opposed to large-scale farming, which accounts for 30 per cent of traded agrarian food and mainly involves growing commercial crops, such as tea, coffee, maize, sugarcane, and wheat.

Hans Binswanger-Mkhize, in his book, [Agricultural Land Redistribution: Toward Greater Consensus](#), makes a similar assessment. He notes that with just 37 per cent of the land, small-scale farms in Kenya produced 73 per cent of agricultural output in 2004.

It is therefore quite evident that small-scale farmers feed Kenyans as they focus on producing food for local and national markets and their own families. In contrast, large-scale farms specialising in cash crops tend to produce commodities and concentrate on export crops, many of which people can't eat. They also focus mainly on return on investment.

Despite this realisation, there is little evidence of action taken to ensure that these small-scale farmers produce more during this COVID-19 pandemic. To cushion Kenyans against hunger, the Ministry of Agriculture has sought to import 4 million bags of maize to curb the shortage in the country instead of supporting the smallholder farmers who produce 70 per cent of the maize consumed in the country to produce more. This dependence on the international market for food security that prioritises the industrial agriculture paradigm (the frontier of the cash crop monopoly) is the very foundation of the food crisis we are facing today.

This lack of support has led to the reduction in the number of smallholder farmers. Dr. Vandana Shiva, in her book, [Who Really Feeds the World](#), notes that since the introduction of policies of globalisation of agriculture in 1991, farmers have sunk in numbers, from 110 million to 95.8 million - a loss of nearly 15 million farmers, or 2,000 farmers per day.

This reduction in the number of smallholder farmers is a direct result of the loss of their agricultural land. A large number of farming families have less than two hectares to feed themselves and humankind. The acreage available for cultivation is shrinking due to a number of factors, including population pressure, lack of access to land, and rules of corporate globalisation designed to make profits at the expense of smallholder farmers.

A World Bank report shows that between [2008 and 2010, at least 60 million hectares](#) of productive farmland was leased out or sold to foreign investors for large-scale agricultural projects, with more than half of these in Africa. [farmlandgrab.org](#) noted that these massive new agribusiness projects were throwing a limitless number of small farmers off their territories.

As though the shrinking land size is not enough of a hurdle, farmers are even locked into debt as multinational corporations sell them costly inputs in the form of patented seeds, fertilizers, and agrochemicals while buying their produce cheaply. Multinational corporations such as Bayer, Dupont, Syngenta, Land O'Lakes, BASF, Yara, PepsiCO, Unilever, and Carrefour are ripping everything off farmers. Consequently, farming has become unviable, and most farmers are leaving their farms for meagre jobs in the urban areas.

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The future of food security and food safety lies in promoting and safeguarding small-scale farmers. It is time to make farming feasible for the smallholder farmer, given that high input, resource-intensive farming systems have failed to achieve sustainable food and agricultural production.

Contradictory to this, is the decision by the government not to buy maize for its Strategic Food Reserve from local farmers but instead pave way for private sector warehousing. This will lead to no stabilisation of food supply levels and prices within the country during prolonged droughts. This move is likely to exacerbate the levels of food insecurity within the country by increasing the prices of food thus reducing its availability to majority of Kenyans. This is per the [Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy 2019 -2020](#), which purports to boost food security in the country.

### **What needs to happen**

Small-scale farms have already proven that they can produce more diverse foods for households and the market. The Ministry of Agriculture needs to prioritise domestic food production over international exports and increase investment in smallholder farmer-based food production.

The UN Environment Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the UN special rapporteur on the right to food estimate that [small farmers produce up to 80 per cent of the food in non-industrialised countries](#). We need to stop the allocation of land to agribusiness-led ventures and make land accessible to smallholder farmers through appropriate land reforms. Land from the cash crop plantations needs to be handed over to smallholder farmers. Women farmers who produce most of our food have no access to land. We need systems that make it legal for women to own and cultivate land.

We need policies that enable farmers to grow locally, export real surpluses, and import what is not available locally. Policy interventions include stabilising market prices and regulating import controls through taxes to avoid dumping, which threatens local agricultural production.

We need to innovative and create eco-friendly farming systems, such as ecological farming that protects and enhances the natural resource base while raising agricultural productivity. Farming systems should encourage diversity to cope with climatic shocks.

We need farming systems that protect farmers and consumers against the increasing monopoly power of vast, multinational, agro-industrial corporations. We require systems that encourage consumers to purchase food directly from farmers, systems that allow farmers to breed their seeds, save and exchange these seeds amongst each other, systems that will not make smallholder farmers dependent on the excessive use of agrochemicals and fertilisers.

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These systems promote self-reliance and self-sufficiency, which are key to a future free of hunger, oppression, and starvation.

In the words of Thomas Sankara, “He who feeds you, controls you.” Because food is fundamental for the development of society, and serves the purpose of nourishment alongside enlivening our culture, its producers must be protected and supported.

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