

REPORT

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# BIG FOOD IN AFRICA

Endangering people's health



Nearly 33 million households on the African continent are involved in smallholder farming. Smallholder farmers have long supplied Africans with safe and healthy foods, making Africa's diets among the healthiest on the planet.<sup>1</sup> The situation, however, is changing. Multinational corporations are aggressively trying to take over food systems in Africa (and across the world) through the dumping of cheap, low-quality agricultural commodities – such as skimmed milk powder and broken rice – and by the promotion of highly-processed (or ultra-processed) foods that are causing the rise of diabetes and other diet-related health ailments.<sup>2</sup>

These corporations are ironically often marketing these foods as being safer than local foods – which are portrayed as being unhygienic. The reality, however, is that the industrialisation of foods in Africa increases the risks of dangerous- and sometimes deadly- food safety incidents.

In contrast, Africa's traditional agroecological farming practices and local food systems have and can continue to provide people with an abundance of healthy and nutritious foods.

### A closer look into toxic food chains

Proponents of industrial farming and production argue that this model is the 'magic bullet' that will address food insecurity and poverty on the African continent. However, industrial food production ignores health and nutrition values, including known and appreciated standards. There are many stories of expired or contaminated products on the market causing sickness. And even death.

The map below highlights some recent examples of food safety scandals across Africa, showing the dangers to people's health from industrial food production and

the displacement of local foods. These cases help reveal how industrial foods generate new risks (with GMOs for example); increase the potential for cross-border contamination, and leave consumers vulnerable to fraudulent actions that affect food safety.

In 2018, for example, a South African company – Enterprise Foods – recalled all its processed meat products from supermarket shelves after it was established that contaminated meats from their Polokwane Factory had caused what was branded as the worst outbreak of listeriosis in the world. In just one year, 218 people lost their lives and 1,065 fell ill because of the meat products. Because this recall only took place within South Africa's borders, the effects on people in other African countries where this product was shipped will never be known.

Babies have also been affected by this profit-oriented industrial food production. In 2017, France-based Lactalis recalled 12 million baby milk products after one of its plants in France was determined as being the source of a Salmonella Agona outbreak. Although authorities stepped in to suspend the export of these products, the product had unfortunately already been shipped and distributed to 30 African countries.

It is no secret that industrial food production puts profit and quantity over quality and health. But many groups are proactively working to restore food systems that are not only healthy, but that also respect the diversity, context, celebration and culture of the continent. One such group is *We are the Solution*, based in Casamance in Senegal.

1. "Dietary quality among men and women in 187 countries in 1990 and 2010: a systematic assessment," Fumiaki Imamura et al., *The Lancet*, March 2015: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(14\)70381-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(14)70381-X).

2. Andrew Jacobs and Matt Richetl, "How Big Business Got Brazil Hooked on Junk Food," *NY Times*, 16 September 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/16/health/brazil-obesity-nestle.html>

## We Are the Solution - Interview with Mariama Sonko

“Our ancestors used natural spices for stock, and with these natural spices, they were healthy and lived long lives. Why are we now using stocks that are making us ill?” Confronted by the increase of diabetes and other health problems linked to industrial soup stock cubes, Mariama and others from her community in Casamance, Senegal decided to take action. They set up *Nous Sommes la Solution*. “We saw that we needed to provide people with an alternative. For this, we believed we had to return to using our traditional spices - the ones that our ancestors used to enhance the taste. So *Nous Sommes la Solution* was created and we began to experiment,” says Mariama. They consulted nutritionists to ensure their stocks were nutritionally balanced and mixed the right spices to resemble the taste of the industrial stock they had grown accustomed to. So far, *Nous Sommes la Solution* has created two types of stock: one for shrimp recipes and another called “very good” in the local Layola language.

“Our stocks are not only improving the health of the community, but they’re also helping women have a little more income. These women are the ones taking the stock to the markets and doing the work to conserve and harvest the traditional plants that we use.” This project is also sustaining biodiversity, since one of the main ingredients comes from a local tree with several

health benefits. This tree was on the verge of extinction, but now, thanks to the stock, communities are coming together to help conserve it. This local food system is now there for the benefit of the whole population.

But however positive their contribution to the community may be, the future is uncertain for *Nous Sommes la Solution*. A series of national administrative procedures, regulations and standards adapted for agroindustry is barring their legal recognition and certification.

Other community initiatives across Africa (and the world) who are pushing back against the industrial food chain are also facing similar challenges. If states are not actively withholding support to assure the viability of these types of projects, they are throwing obstacles at them while lending a hand to agroindustrial corporations. A high price to pay, not only in terms of public health, but also for environmental protection and social welfare.

Evidence across the continent shows that the industrial food system is not concerned with the health and nutrition of people in Africa. As long as it has a market for its products and maximises profits, everything else tends to fall by the wayside. Agroecology and food sovereignty however, are centred on ensuring health and nutrition across the food production, processing and marketing network - not only for individuals, but for communities and the environment.

Mariama Sonko





# Big food in Africa Endangering people's health

Food safety scandals are plaguing Africa. From contaminated meat to GMOs and toxic milk for babies, the dangers to people's health from industrial food production are real. Here we highlight seven cases that reveal how big food corporations generate new risks, increase the potential for cross-border contamination, and leave consumers vulnerable to the fraudulent actions that affect food safety.

## 1 Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) contamination



Kenya, 2001 - 2014

Import and distribution of GMO-contaminated Aromat by Unilever Kenya from Unilever South Africa since 2001. A civil society campaign in 2014 had it pulled off the shelves.

## 2 Listeriosis – death by "polony"

South Africa, 2018

Enterprise Foods, a subsidiary of Tiger Brands, pulled its processed meat products from supermarkets after its Polokwane factories used contaminated meat that caused the worst outbreak of listeriosis in the world. The meat killed 218 people.



## 3 Banned pesticide found in Woolworths' "organic food"

South Africa, 2018

In 2018, - residues of fluopyram – a highly-persistent fungicide- were found in Woolworths' organic baby spinach imported from Europe.



## 4 Salmonella Agona in baby formula

Nigeria, 2018

Milk powder suspected of carrying Salmonella Agona from a French Lactalis plant entered Nigeria in early 2018. As in the other 29 African countries where the infected products had been distributed, the recall in Nigeria could not be properly enforced.



## 5 Bouillon cubes linked to diabetes and other ailments

Senegal, 2019

Villagers in Casamance, Senegal are boycotting Nestlé's Maggi cubes and other industrial bouillon brands claiming that these are behind a rise in Type II diabetes and other health problems in their communities.



## 6 Olam's rice not fit for consumption

Côte d'Ivoire, 2019

A boat carrying 18,000 tonnes of broken rice from Myanmar was prohibited from unloading in several African ports over concerns that the rice was unfit for consumption. Authorities in Côte d'Ivoire issued Olam a one year suspension on shipments of rice.



## 7 Expired Lato milk

Uganda, 2020

Pearl Dairy Farms Limited, a company owned by the MidCOM Group and funded by the World Bank, was denounced for selling expired Lato Milk. It is reported that the company repackaged expired milk with new expiration dates and sent it back out on the market.



**GRAIN**

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ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA



The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa brings together small-scale food producers, pastoralists, fisher folk, indigenous peoples, farmers' networks, faith groups, consumer associations, youth associations, civil societies and activists from across the continent of Africa to create a united and louder voice for food sovereignty.

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GRAIN is an international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems.

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