

AFRICAN STRUGGLES AGAINST NEOLIBERAL GLOBALISATION

Introduction

This essay written at the request of Aneek's Editorial Board is intended to briefly introduce the magazine's readers to the theme of African struggles against neo-liberal globalisation. To start, it is important to note for those who are not familiar with the structure of Africa's current crisis, that the continent suffers more seriously from globalisation policies which are being pursued by the world's financial and trade institutions, than any other of the globe's continents. Whereas in some countries of Asia, for instance, the percentage of people living below the line of absolute poverty during the decade of the 1990s has decreased in relative terms – in the case of Subsaharan Africa the number of people who have to survive on less than a dollar per day has continued to increase both in absolute and in relative terms. Thus, the percentage of people living in deep poverty in African least developed countries exporting minerals in the beginning of the new millennium was as high as 80 percent, according to reports published by UNCTAD (1).

Further – whereas in South Asia and in parts of Latin America, there has been significant resistance against the pressure to dismantle the social state, in the case of Africa many states have literally collapsed under the onslaught of the policies imposed by the World Bank/IMF and the WTO. In West Africa, for instance, the dismantlement of state-owned corporations has contributed to the outbreak of civil wars, or has even been the leading cause of the state's collapse. This is true for Ivory Coast where the government was forced to break up the state corporation (the Caisse) which had previously regulated the marketing and exports of cocoa, the country's main agricultural product (2). Again, in the case of Liberia, where foreign companies for many decades have been allowed an exceptionally free access to the country's natural resources, relentless pressure by the World Bank and the IMF to implement a series of structural adjustment measures in the 1980s did not result in economic recovery, but instead, in 1989, in the eruption of a war which has completely disrupted the country's social life.

What is the most striking, however, is that the world's financial institutions have not learnt from these bitter experiences, but instead are continuing to impose neo-liberal globalisation on countries which are trying to recover from years of costly wars. Some 4 million people are reported to have lost their lives during the war which has raged in the Congo (DRC) from 1997/1998 till 2003. This war by some has been termed Africa's first world war, in view of the large number of African countries and extra-regional economic actors that got involved in this murderous conflict. Congo (DRC)'s people could recover from the shocks of war and rebuild their lives if only the massive natural resources which the country possesses were properly utilized. Yet recovery is virtually excluded for the foreseeable future, due to the prescriptions on mineral extraction pushed by World Bank and IMF. Before the start of Congo's wars - there were in fact two, the first one leading to the overthrow of the country's dictator Mobutu -, the last Mobutu government made a start with privatisation of state-owned mining enterprises. This policy has been resumed in 'post-war' years. Thus, the World Bank has forced the country's parliament to adopt a fresh 'Mining Code', which is resulting in the transfer of mines and mills for mineral processing that in the past had generated substantial state-income, to foreign-owned mining companies (3).

In spite of numerous setbacks, however, there are many signs that Africa's peoples and governments are slowly pulling themselves together, in order to oppose neo-liberal globalisation. Below, I will focus on two examples of Africa's crucial contribution to the worldwide struggle against the dictates of Northern-dominated world economic institutions and imperialist powers. First, I will focus on the role of African organisations and governments in the battle over the future of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Then, I will briefly highlight the international campaign around Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), - a name which refers to the free trade agreements presently being negotiated by the European Union with African countries and other Southern trade partners of the EU. These examples do not cover the whole range of struggles currently being waged by African peoples against neo-liberalism, nor the whole range of topics being addressed. Yet they bring out sufficiently well that Africa's role in the worldwide struggle against the neo-liberal model of economic policy-making cannot be slighted.

Africa's Contribution to the Derailment of the WTO-process

Let me start with the example of the global resistance against the WTO, the world body which strategises worldwide trade liberalisation. The start of world resistance against globalisation is generally traced to the confrontations which took place during the WTO's Ministerial held in Seattle in 1998. The direct actions staged here by a broad coalition of diverse (mainly US) organisations surely has inspired militant internationalist groups to undertake similar actions of civil disobedience in subsequent years – in Prague (Czech Republic), in Davos (Switzerland), in Genua (Italy), and more recently in GlenEagles (Scotland, UK). However, it is often overlooked that the direct actions in Seattle ran parallel to the struggle waged by Southern representatives from inside the WTO Ministerial, which struggle resulted in a walk-out by government representatives that was significant in itself. Rarely also is it mentioned that African negotiators took the lead in staging this walk-out. Africa's leading progressive trade expert Yash Tandon, for instance, insists that the role of African representatives was decisive in the break-up of Seattle's Ministerial.

Another key moment in the history of resistance against the WTO and its trade liberalisation agenda was the Ministerial held in Cancun, in Mexico, in September of 2003. As is generally recognized, the key topic around which the situation got polarized in Cancun was the dispute over the subsidies of hundreds of billions of dollars which the US and Western European countries each year provide to their well-do-to farmers, - subsidies which enable Northern powers to export their own agricultural commodities to the world market below production price. As is well known too, Southern countries formed several key coalitions in the months leading up to Cancun, - coalitions such as the Group of 22 and the Group of 90 which acted as powerful counter forces to Northern powers and made it impossible for the North to divide the South. People who watched the Cancun events on television may have marked how activists of peasant and farmers organisations took the lead in street protests, as they did in December last during the Ministerial held in Hongkong. The dramatic interventions of Korean farmers, in the form of a self-immolation in Cancun, and in the form of civil disobedience in Hongkong, are naturally remembered as key moment in the history of internationalism.

Yet African peasant organisations and African governments too have been in the forefront of the struggles against trade liberalisation, in particular during the Ministerial held

in Cancun. They in fact, and quite literally, took the lead here, for on the very first day of the Conference in Cancun African diplomats put the issue of cotton subsidies on the agenda of the meeting, and insisted this be settled first. And with due reason: since the mid-1990, the US has succeeded in enormously enlarging its share in the world's trade in cotton, and such by providing an indefensible amount of subsidies to their cotton farmers. These farmers number merely 25 thousand, yet yearly receive about 4 Billion Dollars from the US government in production subsidies! The effects for millions of West African small peasants who too are dependent on the exports of cotton, and whose production costs in view of very differential labour costs are far lower than those of their American counterparts, are that their subsistence is undermined. Hence, West African peasant unions united under the banner of a coalition called Roppa, and West African governments, had all reasons to be outraged by Northern cotton-policies. In Cancun they launched the Conference's first open battle, demanding that US cotton subsidies which are the most disruptive to world cotton trade be scrapped.

Thus, although observers of the WTO-process and even proponents of the WTO's derailment often overlook or ignore the crucial contribution of African peasant organisations and governments to the battles staged from Seattle onwards, - this contribution has been real. It should be valued specially in view of the extremely weak position which the African continent occupies in the world economic system. Some calculations have been made by academicians regarding the amount of capital which the continent over two decades has lost in consequence of trade liberalisation alone. The figure is stated to be 272 Billion dollars for the Subsaharan region (4) – money lost in particular as a result of the tearing down of tariff walls, as 'advised' by the triple alliance of WTO, World Bank and IMF. The experiences of the Ministerials in Seattle and Cancun attest to the fact that there is increasing awareness at Africa's societal and state-levels of the fact that externally imposed trade liberalisation in combination with continuation of Northern agricultural subsidies, have a disastrous impact for Subsaharan countries. These countries are specially vulnerable since they remain very dependent on the exports of one or a few primary commodities.

Economic Partnership Agreements: New Frontline of Africa's Struggle for Economic Survival

Further, the examples of Seattle and Cancun do not stand alone. Thanks to the results reaped there, a new frontline of struggle has been opened in Africa's battle against neo-liberal globalisation, in the form of an international campaign against the so called Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). This new campaign was launched from Africa and Europe simultaneously, in 2004. EPAs, as stated, are agreements which the European Union intends to sign with groups of Southern countries, foremost African ones. With this aim in mind, a framework treaty was drafted and signed between the EU and 77 so called ACP (African/Caraibbean/Pacific) countries in Cotonou, Benin, in 2000. The contents of this treaty already bring out clearly which direction the EU wants to move. Whereas the ACP countries in the past have benefited from non-reciprocal trade relations, meaning that the European Union facilitated their access to the European market without demanding from them that they offer equal access for European commodities to their own markets in return, - the trade relations envisaged for the future are unmitigated free trade relations. In fact, the Cotonou treaty insists on compliance, by all ACP-trade-'partners', with the regulations instituted by all three world institutions of neo-liberal globalisation, including besides the WTO's the regulations of WB and IMF (5).

In advocating Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) as a 'development' endeavour (sic!) to the European public, spokesperson of the European Commission insist that it wishes to advance the process of regional integration in African and other ACP-regions. African trade specialists instead argue that the EU, by forming regional bodies with which to negotiate future free trade agreements, is disrupting processes of economic integration which are still fragile, but have been initiated by African countries themselves. The agenda to prepare for EPAs, in fact, is very one-sided. Whereas ACP-countries in the past have enjoyed privileged access for their primary products to the European market, - liberalisation as proposed under the Cotonou treaty implies that reductions of import tariffs be enacted by African and other ACP countries. Such reductions can have very dramatic effects for African states. Since European imports often constitute a key portion of total imports, and since import taxes generally are key to governmental income, - reductions on import tariffs inevitably will have a major impact on the income position of African governments - and hence on their capacity to cater to their populations' needs (6). Moreover, experience with partial trade liberalisation in the past has also brought out that this leads to flooding African markets with cheap European products, and that it tends to complicate regional economic integration. In one pointed case, i.e. that of the imports of European tomato concentrates, -tariff reductions agreed on by Senegal and other West African states resulted in a steep fall in Senegal's tomato production to a third of its former level, and to the disruption of Senegal's exports of tomato concentrates to its West African trade partners.

In 2004, campaigning against EPAs took off through a Conference held in the European Parliament in Brussels. Here, Leftist African trade experts argued with force that the EU's plans if executed would constitute a new threat for the continent – a threat coming on top of various threats the continent already faces due to neo-liberal globalisation. Hence, in the Declaration drafted by African experts attending the Conference (7), all participants agreed that campaigning around Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) is a key internationalist obligation to be undertaken jointly by activists in ACP-regions and in Europe. The EPAs-campaign has since been taken forward by a whole range of civil society organisations, - including African peasant organisations, trade unions and church groups, as well as by so called non-government organisations. Launching events were staged in parallel at the African Social Forum and at the European Social Forum held in 2004, and activists in both continents are engaged in lobbying their own governments, so as to force the European Commission ultimately to change gear. Given the enormously large interests at stake – EU imperialism is competing madly with US imperialism, and increasingly also with China, so as to preserve strategic trade positions in the African continent –; given the fact also that the EU's agenda is intricately linked with Northern choices in favour of the neo-liberal model, - campaigners are up against many odds.

Nevertheless, it is striking that the battle against EPAs in no time did gather momentum after the Conference held in the European Parliament. This was, for instance, quite visible at a trade meeting held under the umbrella of the so called Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA), a body linking ACP-parliamentarians and European parliamentarians, in the beginning of 2005. African politicians attending the event, for the first time challenged the Commission unanimously. Again, at meetings held by Africa's Trade Ministers, in the middle of 2005 and in mid-2006, declarations have been adopted expressing Africa's view that trade reciprocity constitutes no option and would be extremely detrimental to the interests of Africa. Thus, while the negotiating process towards regional EPAs is heading for a general review – the review is scheduled for the end of this year –, the governments of African countries and of other ACP-regions are gradually becoming more assertive. Here again - as is

the case for cotton – it is obvious that any victory over the European Union (which includes Africa's historical colonizers) can only be obtained if strong coalitions operate at several distinct levels: * at the level of people's movements, representing peasants and workers' interests, and * at the level of ACP-states, equally victimized by the neo-liberal impositions of Northern imperialist states.

Conclusions

Ever since international agendas have been drafted in opposition against neo-liberal globalisation, - it has primarily been the Latin American continent where people's struggles against this destructive economic model have gained most momentum. Compared to Latin America, where people's movements are everywhere inspired and being jolted by the successes scored in Hugo Chavez' Venezuela, and to an extent in Evo Morales' Bolivia, - the state-of-affairs in Africa is clearly less rosy. In some cases, such as in the case of Chad, governments under the impact of domestic social conflict are pushed to be more assertive. Whereas originally, under the contract signed with a consortium of foreign oil companies, royalties in connection with oil extraction to be paid to the state of Chad were fixed at a meagre 12 percent, the government now reportedly has decided this should be raised to 60 percent (8). On the whole, however, the exploitation of Africa's rich natural resources by multinational companies in the era of globalisation has become far more rapacious than it used to be in the period following the decolonisation of the continent. If African peoples are to start benefiting from the continent's enormous natural wealth, - a principled and common opposition against the neo-liberal policies of the World Bank and the IMF urgently needs being charted.

Africa is far from having reached that point. Nevertheless, numerous and varied struggles are daily taking place against neo-liberal globalisation at different places in the forgotten continent. Nigeria, for instance, has experienced a general strike organized by a broad coalition of workers' trade unions, and South Africa has seen several struggles at community level against unjust price policies around water and electricity supplies. At a broader level, there is growing awareness that the mountainous debt which burdens the continent like a dead weight, is a consequence of illegitimate policies pursued by external creditors, including the world's financial institutions. Some activists have started whispering into governmental ears the idea that only collective repudiation of all of Africa's debt, including all multilateral and private credit agency debt, will do. If a combined picture were to be drawn of all the costs which Africa needs to bear in consequence of neo-liberal globalisation – the costs of debt repayment, the costs of trade liberalisation, the losses suffered in consequence of the robbing of the continent's natural resources, etc. – it would immediately be evident that the only way out is expulsion of the international financial institutions from the continent, along with stringent measures against transnational companies.

In this article, I have focused on two examples of common struggles against neo-liberal globalisation which have been waged from Africa so far, namely: the struggles against Northern subsidies for Northern agricultural production waged under the WTO; and the campaigning against trade liberalisation, pushed by the European Union via negotiations towards Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). The first struggle targets the global trade regime instituted by collective imperialism, whereas the second one targets the regional trade regime designed by Africa's principal Northern trade partner, the EU. Even without having led to a major breakthrough in international policymaking, these two struggles have already

borne fruit in a concrete sense. For whereas in the past the consequences for Africa of policies implemented by WTO, WB and IMF received little attention at international forums where neo-liberalism was being debated, - thanks to the increasing assertiveness of African social organisations and governments, there is a growing awareness that Africa of all continents is the principal victim of neo-liberal policies, and that internationalist solidarity towards African people's struggles should be stepped up.

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