

Democracy, Earth Rights and Ecotaxation:

Report from Dakar, Senegal

by Alanna Hartzok

This March, the Congress of the Federation of African Green Parties was held in Dakar, Senegal. Before this important event, there was a pre-conference seminar titled "Democracy, Earth Rights and Ecotaxation" — a watershed event that effectively inaugurated the Geonomic movement in Africa.

The invitation to conduct the seminar came from African Green Party leaders Adamou Garba, Secretary General of the Federation of African Green Parties, and Dr. Papa Meissa Dieng, an environmental law professor and Green Party leader from Senegal. Garba and Dieng met with Alanna Hartzok, NGO Representative for the International Union for Land Value Taxation, and Anne Goeke, a US and global Green Party leader, in Pennsylvania last December to plan the event. The Earth Rights Seminar speakers included Hartzok and Goeke, Papa Meissa Dieng, and HGI alumni and associates Sunny Akuopha (Mali) and Gordon Abiama (Nigeria). Green



Gordon Abiama, Alanna Hartzok and Sunny Akuopha on the beach in Dakar

Party representatives from eighteen African countries participated, along with Green Party leaders from Europe and Mexico.

Both Alanna Hartzok and Anne Goeke showed how, in Hartzok's words, "many goals of the Green Party can be strongly met within the framework of sustainable development by getting a handle on how we finance governance.... The emerging Green Tax movement provides guidelines for financing development based on the threefold bottom line: (1) social and economic justice (2) environmental protection and restoration and (3) strong and sustainable economy." She asserted that these goals, which are often seen as contradictory, are in fact perfectly compatible under a proper rent-as-revenue and ecotaxation model of public finance. She gave a brief explanation of Georgist economic analysis, and discussed how the economic ideology of neoliberalism has been employed to obfuscate basic economic truths and preserve an exploitative, unsustainable economic order. She distributed a paper showing the estimation that worldwide, 93% of taxes fall on labor while only 3% of taxes are on environmental damage and only 4% are for land and resource rent. "We

want to reverse this," she said, "So that people can keep the full capacity of what they work for, take taxes off of labor and shift the tax base onto land and resource use to prevent land speculation, land monopoly and land profiteering and to inhibit environmental damage."

Anne de la Bouillerie Goeke, the well-known US and international Green Party leader and co-author of the book *Fire Up Your Brilliance*, affirmed the vital importance of earth rights and green taxation policy. She said that the processes of economic globalization are worsening and accelerating many of the problems of developing economies — possibly leading us toward either environmental catastrophe, or world war — or both. Goeke stressed the need for an alternative model for development that would establish "a hopeful foundation for Africa to be a full participant in the 21st century."

Now is the time for us to become experts to promote an alternative economic system which supports our green initiatives, policies and agendas. The time has come for us to create a partnership with organizations that have been focused on how we can shift the economy towards supporting an ecologically based society. Let us as Greens develop our own skills and widen our knowledge so that we are prepared to bring about a culture of peace, to make our communities healthy and to ensure that each person on this planet is given a fair share, a decent life with shelter, food and work.

Sunny Akuopha titled his talk "Towards a New Political, Social and Economic Structure for Africa". Akuopha, a journalist and development aid coordinator in Bamako, Mali, is working to bring a French-language Geogist education program to West Africa. He began with a sweeping and poetic overview of African history. In ancient times, "the people lived on the land and gave back happily a portion of their produce from land to all those that led them in conviviality." But in colonial times, "rhythms we could not dance to were played for our people." The post-colonial independence fathers "ushered in rhythms that were all a cacophony, leaving no ideological order that could sustain a political, social and economic development, they took over the villas of the colonial masters and operated constitutions that were doctored by the departing colonial masters." Next came "the khaki boys who just wasted every aspect of our public life, using the arms bought by the people's money to maraud this same people and held public conscience hostage for over two decades."

The current era is struggling to define democracy, said Akuopha. But how can it accomplish that task, he asked, unless it can first determine "how to govern the usage of this land for the benefit of all"? How can Africans justify paying taxes, when authorities are not bound "to do anything corresponding to the value they have taken"? He then explained how a Land Government can bring genuine democracy to (*continued on page 29*)

Democracy, Earth Rights and Ecotaxation...

(continued from page 6)

Africa, with decentralization and participatory governance with transparency in public revenue collection which will "reduce corruption to zero."

To illustrate how such a Land Government could work, he compared Alodia, an imaginary nation used as a teaching construct by the Henry George Institute, to the current situation in Mali. In Alodia, land value taxation has given access to land resources so free trade can benefit the many rather than the few. Foreign debts have been unilaterally canceled, taxes on workers abolished, and public revenue is collected at the local level with a portion passed up to state and national levels. The real-life

country of Mali, in contrast, suffers from high import duties, onerous regulations on investment and production, unfair labor taxes, corrupt officials and heavy foreign debt repayments.

Instead of the "endless vain struggles for national unity that is eternally elusive", Sunny Akuopha envisions that

the people would opt for "new nations according to their ethnic, religious or regional affinity" with the possibility of the emergence of confederations of states "according to the solemn will of the people.... This new dispensation shall end recurrent ethnic crisis, civil wars and stagnating national plans that cannot be fully executed for want of national unity."

Akuopha appealed to the assembled Green Party leaders to become thoroughly versed in the principles set forth in the writings of Henry George and to encourage these principles to be taught to school children and to workers. Armed with this understanding, "their quest for public office should not be for power, but for the assurance of public trust, therefore African ecologists and others elsewhere must work ceaselessly in gaining public trust and confidence so that their election to public office should be a sign of this trust and confidence."

The next speaker, Gordon Abiama, is a widely-published Nigerian journalist currently working as the Information Officer for Bayelsa State, in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region, which has witnessed much bloodshed over royalties from oil extraction.

Abiama's presentation explored the wealth distribution problem in Africa, reasons for the gross resource mismanagement by African leaders and



impediments against enthroning equity in democratic mandates. He put forth possible strategies to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor with a particular focus on the Alaska Permanent Fund as a model of oil and mineral resource royalty distribution that could be replicated in Africa.

We live in an age when the accumulation of wealth is greatest, and by a few people while the majority of the world's population is mired in abject poverty. In the course of the struggle to earn a living, the worst cynical form of hard-heartedness — "every man for himself" — has become the watchword, thus throwing to the winds the age-long African tradition of being "your brother's keeper."

Neoliberal economists, said Abiama, simply do not sufficiently understand the roots of the problem; therefore, current mainstream development methods and strategies have not achieved sustainable development, but rather have exacerbated the maldistribution of wealth. This poverty of analysis has led many to attribute the problems of struggling poor nations to overpopulation. But, he asserted, Henry George's refutation of the Malthusian theory is as true today as it was a century ago. He quoted George's *Progress and Poverty*:

Instead of menacing any vested right or antagonizing any powerful interest, [the theory of overpopulation] is eminently soothing and reassuring to the classes who, wielding the power of wealth, largely dominate thought... it came to the rescue of the special privileges by which a few monopolize so much of the good things of this world, proclaiming a natural cause for the want and misery which, if attributed to political institutions, must condemn every government under which they exist.

In Abiama's homeland of Nigeria, the Land Use Act authorizes the public collection of land rent, and exempts the improvements on the land from taxation. In practice, however, the revenues end up lining the pockets of corrupt officials and finding their way into foreign banks. Residents of the oil bearing states of the Niger Delta region rightly feel cheated of the resources around them and are now agitating for full control. Expressing its displeasure over such agitation, the Federal Government recently set up a 24-man Security Committee on Oil Producing Areas (with logistics provided by the United States government) to ensure the oil keeps flowing. The committee is made up of the armed forces.

Youths in the Niger Delta region, in their bid to enforce the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) signed between the oil companies and their local communities, have been mowed down by bullets from security agents manning the oil installations. The destruction of Odi in Bayelsa State has come to represent a symbol of the oppressed people of the Niger Delta region.

I recall a few years ago in Jesse Town, in Nigeria's Delta State, over 4000 perished in an inferno while scooping up fuel from burst pipes to sell for a living. They were quite oblivious of the explosive danger that surrounded them in their

desperation to make a living. The reaction of the military rulers was most infuriating. Instead of rushing relief materials to aid the victims, the head of state publicly called them thieves and declared that no compensation would be paid to their families as a result. Many died later for lack of medical attention — staying away from hospitals for fear that government authorities would get them arrested and jailed for “stealing fuel”.

“Nigeria is currently engulfed in political violence,” said Abiama. “So democracy in this context has become a game of personal interests.” However, a potential solution can be found by establishing resource royalty funds similar to the Alaska Permanent Fund, which is a “case study in a new concept of the role of government — that of agent to equitably distribute resource rents to the people, thereby securing democratic common heritage rights to land and natural resources.” Such a program could be adopted in Nigeria at the Federal or the State level. In addition to a direct “citizens’ dividend” (In the year 2000, each citizen of Alaska received a dividend check for nearly \$2000) the funds could be used to provide low-interest loan funds for sustainable development.

Apparently concerned about incessant conflicts in several nations, the United Nations recently expressed its desire to expand its “Peace-keeping missions” in a bid to resolve such conflicts. Abiama ended his speech with a suggestion (taken from HGI teacher Heather Remoff), that the United Nations develop “Resource-keeping missions (which) would guarantee that the natural resource royalties that accrue to oil, clean water, pure air, land, virgin timber, minerals, the airways, and all other common heritage resources belong by right to the public, not the private sector.... Resource-keeping missions could defuse ethnic conflict before it reaches the point of combustion. The Alaska Permanent Fund may be a good model for such a mission.”

Concluding the Democracy, Earth Rights and Ecotaxation Seminar was Dr. Papa Meissa Dieng, Professor of Environmental Law at the University Gaston Berger, Saint-Louis, Senegal. He said that the ideas presented by the seminar speakers were very important for the ecological movements in the Third World. He said that geoclassical economic policy would give Green Parties and green organizations a clear alternative to neoliberal economics.

In Africa, tax policies in our countries are inherited from the colonial powers. This would be a peaceful revolution but a radical revolution that all Green Parties could join. Actually to change the way the environment is being taxed so far is a real revolutionary policy that I and my colleagues from other countries here can see.... It would be an opportunity to make a land government. A land government allows you to fight against corruption. We think that here we have an opportunity to implement what we call environmental justice.

Dr. Dieng concluded that implementing the Georgist remedy would

amount to a revolutionary denial of the neoliberal paradigm.

And it is actually the neoliberal system that we are fighting. Liberty in the philosophy of Henry George means justice and justice is the natural law, a natural right. Environmental justice is a questioning of the current order that favors the few. We think that the ideology of political ecology is... a revolution based on intelligence, where we have the mind that is taking the place of arms. I think that our friends have brought us the tools to come to this environmental justice revolution. This would be an opportunity for us to stop squabbling and to get together and unite because we have on the continent problems that we need to solve. If we do not do what we have to do then we give the opportunity for those who are leading us to keep on exploiting the poor.

The Seminar continued into the evening with further comments and discussion by conference participants and questions and answers to the speakers. The following day Hartzok gave a summary of the seminar and Abiama described plans for a conference in Nigeria in February, 2003, which will focus on the proposal for a Niger Delta Fund for the distribution of oil royalties and a sustainable development plan for the region. Akuopha will be launching a Henry George Center in Mali. Afterward, several university students reported their intentions to form a study group and establish a geoclassical economics training center in Senegal. G

Development: Why the Formality? *(continued from page 7)*

population in each nation, but they wield influence in bureaucracies, write fancy reports detailing structural adjustment plans, and manage to achieve a tolerable degree of “modernization” in their personal lifestyles. The only problem is that they are so very few. The rest of the people are, alas, left pretty much to fend for themselves.

Under “structural reforms”, the informal economy — the peasants, peddlers, unregistered craftspeople and service-providers, the masses of people scraping together a living however they can — was supposed to have been subsumed into the overall national economy, in a Western-type model. There was no way this could ever have happened, however, because of the demand for debt service, and the consequent pathological over-emphasis of export industries. National production in any realistic sense was simply not a priority for the people making economic decisions — and in fact, their policies created dis-incentives to produce goods for domestic consumption.

Meanwhile: there are no jobs, but many people who need to make a living. There are lots of underutilized natural resources, but the regulatory environment is lax, erratic, corrupt, overextended, nonexistent, etc. People need to eat; they need to live somewhere. They will either produce these things for themselves, or die — and overall populations have been increasing, so nothing else but the informal economy could have delivered