

Africa's Sovereignty Over Food

Local food and seed systems must be rebuilt for Africans, write Mariam Mayet, Stephen Greenberg and Linzi Lewis.

By Mariam Mayet, Stephen Greenberg and Linzi Lewis African Centre for Biodiversity in Johannesburg

Inter Press Service

Africa is facing dire times. Climate change is having major impacts on the region and on agriculture in particular, with smallholder farmers –many of them women – facing drought, general lack of water, shifting seasons, and floods in some areas.

Smallholder farmers are often women because in the prevailing division of labor, women are generally responsible for food acquisition and diets. Smallholder farmers are facing the loss of agricultural biodiversity, deforestation, declining soil health and fertility, land and water grabs by the powerful, loss of land access, marginalization and loss of indigenous knowledge and generalized lack of essential services and support.

At the same time, economies are weakening and remain heavily dependent on foreign aid, with extractivist interventions from outside. There is a strong authoritarian orientation in governments in the region, with secrecy and lack of transparency and accountability, weak and fragmented civil society organization and top-down development interventions.

There has been corporate capture of key state institutions, decision making processes and functions. Seed and food

systems have been appropriated for multinational corporate profit.

Unchecked Corporate Power

At present, corporate power is almost unchecked in agricultural input supply. The dominant narrative of agribusinesses being indispensable for feeding the world holds great sway on the continent, where corporations have captured policy making processes.

Although most seed on the continent is sourced from farmers' own savings, sharing and local markets, this system is not recognized in policies and laws in most countries. Instead, farmer seed practices are marginalized and generally denigrated as poor quality and backward.

The predominant thrust of agricultural and seed policy and programming on the continent is to seek to replace them. Multinational corporate interests, with support from key continental, regional and national state institutions and agencies, are driving two trends. One is large-scale commercial industrialization by a global agribusiness coalition, or through a Green Revolution smallholder strategy to integrate a layer of smallholder farmers into corporate value chains for the export of bulk commodity crops such as maize and soya.

Women play an essential role in the selection, saving, and sharing of seeds, as part of a broader network within farmer-managed seed systems, shaping the agricultural diversity that meets needs of local populations. This applies to both staple crops, as well as other food crops. In many ways, this pool of genetic resources, which women

continue to develop and maintain, is the backbone of human society.

The restrictions placed over reproductive materials, i.e. seed (including all cultivation materials), and the centralized decision-making around reproduction towards uniformity, homogeneity, ownership, creates greater inequality, amplified vulnerability and a reliance on external inputs, which places the future of food production at greater risk.

Increasing restrictions on use, lack of support for these activities and even their criminalization makes production conditions more challenging for all smallholder farmers

Restrictions on seed use, what may and may not be produced and how, translate into limits on food diversity at the household level, which is a key element of nutrition.

Since the majority of seed cultivated on the continent is saved on farms, exchanged and locally traded by farmers, this provides a solid base for alternative seed sovereignty systems to thrive outside the credit and corporate market.

For small-holder farmers in Africa, the importance of farmer seed systems as central to conserving biodiversity, ensuring nutrition diversity and supporting livelihoods has been highlighted in a huge body of work over the past 30 or 40 years.

However, these systems can benefit from external support. A key priority for smallholder farmers in Africa is resilience in the face of harsh weather events. This requires seed variety adaptation and greater agricultural diversity. Women

are the primary custodians of our seed diversity, the custodians of reproduction, of life. This highlights the struggles of farmers' rights, of reproductive rights, to self-determination, and to maintain life-supporting systems.

An ecological, food-systems-transition coalition, based on agroecology and food sovereignty, has found some traction in Africa and globally, but remains relatively weak, fragmented and under-resourced.

Farmers, with support from civil society groups, are doing important work on agroecology and sustainable agriculture, but are often unable to break out of their localized practices.

These need to urgently connect with others on the continent into a bigger and more coherent movement for change, especially radical feminist movements on the continent.

Together, we can fight back and contest the hegemony of large-scale commercial farming and corporate agri-business. We must, together, rebuild and strengthen local food and seed systems for all Africans.

The [African Centre for Biodiversity \(ACB\)](#) is a nonprofit organization based in South Africa with staff in Tanzania. It carries out research and analysis, learning and exchange, capacity and movement building, and advocacy to widen awareness, catalyze collective action and influence decision making on issues of biosafety, genetic modification (GM) and new technologies, seed laws, farmer seed systems, agricultural biodiversity, agroecology, corporate expansion in African agriculture, and food sovereignty in Africa.

The Prisoner Says ‘No’ to Big Brother

The refusal by Australia’s foreign ministry to honor the UN’s declaration that Julian Assange is the victim of “arbitrary detention” is a shameful breach of the letter and spirit of international law, says John Pilger.

By [John Pilger](#)
in Sydney, Australia



Whenever I visit Julian Assange, we meet in a room he knows too well. There is a bare table and pictures of Ecuador on the walls. There is a bookcase where the books never change. The curtains are always drawn and there is no natural light. The air is still and fetid.

This is Room 101.

Before I enter Room 101, I must surrender my passport and phone. My pockets and possessions are examined. The food I bring is inspected.

The man who guards Room 101 sits in what looks like an old-fashioned telephone box. He watches a screen, watching Julian. There are others unseen, agents of the state, watching and listening.

Cameras are everywhere in Room 101. To avoid them, Julian maneuvers us both into a corner, side by side, flat up against the wall. This is how we catch up: whispering and writing to each other on a notepad, which he shields from the cameras. Sometimes we laugh.

I have my designated time slot. When that expires, the door in Room 101 bursts open and the guard says, "Time is up!" On New Year's Eve, I was allowed an extra 30 minutes and the man in the phone box wished me a happy new year, but not Julian.

Of course, Room 101 is the room in George Orwell's prophetic novel, *1984*, where the thought police watched and tormented their prisoners, and worse, until people surrendered their humanity and principles and obeyed Big Brother Julian Assange will never obey Big Brother. His resilience and courage are astonishing, even though his physical health struggles to keep up.

Julian is a distinguished Australian, who has changed the way many people think about duplicitous governments. For this, he is a political refugee subjected to what the United Nations calls "arbitrary detention".

The UN says he has the right of free passage to freedom, but this is denied. He has the right to medical treatment without fear of arrest, but this is denied. He has the right to compensation, but this is denied.

As founder and editor of WikiLeaks, his crime has been to make sense of dark times. WikiLeaks has an impeccable record of accuracy and authenticity which no newspaper, no TV channel, no radio station, no BBC, no *New York Times*, no *Washington Post*, no *Guardian* can equal. Indeed, it shames them.

That explains why he is being punished.

For example:

Last week, the International Court of Justice ruled that the British Government had no legal powers over the Chagos Islanders, who in the 1960s and 70s, were expelled in secret from their homeland on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and sent into exile and poverty. Countless children died, many of them, from sadness. It was an epic crime few knew about.

For almost 50 years, the British have denied the islanders' the right to return to their homeland, which they had given to the Americans for a major military base.

In 2009, the British Foreign Office concocted a "marine reserve" around the Chagos archipelago.

This touching concern for the environment was exposed as a fraud when WikiLeaks published a secret cable from the British Government reassuring the Americans that "the former inhabitants would find it difficult, if not possible, to pursue their claim for resettlement on the islands if the entire Chagos Archipelago were a marine reserve."

The truth of the conspiracy clearly influenced the momentous decision of the International Court of Justice.

WikiLeaks has also revealed how the United States spies on its allies; how the CIA can watch you through your iPhone; how Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton took vast sums of money from Wall Street for secret speeches that reassured the bankers that if she was elected, she would be their friend.

In 2016, WikiLeaks revealed a direct connection between Clinton and organized jihadism in the Middle East: terrorists, in other words. One email disclosed that when

Clinton was US Secretary of State, she knew that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were funding Islamic State, yet she accepted huge donations for her foundation from both governments.

She then approved the world's biggest ever arms sale to her Saudi benefactors: arms that are currently being used against the stricken people of Yemen.

That explains why he is being punished.

WikiLeaks has also published more than 800,000 secret files from Russia, including the Kremlin, telling us more about the machinations of power in that country than the specious hysterics of the Russia-gate pantomime in Washington.

This is real journalism – journalism of a kind now considered exotic: the antithesis of Vichy journalism, which speaks for the enemy of the people and takes its sobriquet from the Vichy government that occupied France on behalf of the Nazis.

Vichy journalism is censorship by omission, such as the untold scandal of the collusion between Australian governments and the United States to deny Julian Assange his rights as an Australian citizen and to silence him.

In 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard went as far as ordering the Australian Federal Police to investigate and hopefully prosecute Assange and WikiLeaks – until she was informed by the AFP that no crime had been committed.

Last weekend, the Sydney Morning Herald published a lavish supplement promoting a celebration of “Me Too” at the Sydney Opera House on 10 March. Among the leading participants is

the recently retired Minister of Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop.

Bishop has been on show in the local media lately, lauded as a loss to politics: an "icon", someone called her, to be admired.

The elevation to celebrity feminism of one so politically primitive as Bishop tells us how much so-called identity politics have subverted an essential, objective truth: that what matters, above all, is not your gender but the class you serve.

Before she entered politics, Julie Bishop was a lawyer who served the notorious asbestos miner James Hardie which fought claims by men and their families dying horribly from asbestos.

Lawyer Peter Gordon recalls Bishop "rhetorically asking the court why workers should be entitled to jump court queues just because they were dying."

Bishop says she "acted on instructions ... professionally and ethically."

Perhaps she was merely "acting on instructions" when she flew to London and Washington last year with her ministerial chief of staff, who had indicated that the Australian Foreign Minister would raise Julian's case and hopefully begin the diplomatic process of bringing him home.

Julian's father had written a moving letter to the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, asking the government to intervene diplomatically to free his son. He told Turnbull

that he was worried Julian might not leave the embassy alive.

Julie Bishop had every opportunity in the UK and the U.S. to present a diplomatic solution that would bring Julian home. But this required the courage of one proud to represent a sovereign, independent state, not a vassal.

Instead, she made no attempt to contradict the British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, when he said outrageously that Julian "faced serious charges". What charges? There were no charges.

Australia's Foreign Minister abandoned her duty to speak up for an Australian citizen, prosecuted with nothing, charged with nothing, guilty of nothing.

Will those feminists who fawn over this false icon at the Opera House next Sunday be reminded of her role in colluding with foreign forces to punish an Australian journalist, one whose work has revealed that rapacious militarism has smashed the lives of millions of ordinary women in many countries: in Iraq alone, the US-led invasion of that country, in which Australia participated, left 700,000 widows.

So what can be done? An Australian government that was prepared to act in response to a public campaign to rescue the refugee football player, Hakeem al-Araibi, from torture and persecution in Bahrain, is capable of bringing Julian Assange home.

The refusal by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra to honor the United Nations' declaration that Julian is the

victim of “arbitrary detention” and has a fundamental right to his freedom, is a shameful breach of the letter and spirit of international law.

Why has the Australian government made no serious attempt to free Assange? Why did Julie Bishop bow to the wishes of two foreign powers? Why is this democracy traduced by its servile relationships, and integrated with lawless foreign power?

The persecution of Julian Assange is the conquest of us all: of our independence, our self respect, our intellect, our compassion, our politics, our culture.

So stop scrolling. Organize. Occupy. Insist. Persist. Make a noise. Take direct action. Be brave and stay brave. Defy the thought police.

War is not peace, freedom is not slavery, ignorance is not strength. If Julian can stand up to Big Brother , so can you: so can all of us.

John Pilger gave this speech at a rally for Julian Assange in Sydney on March 3, organized by the Socialist Equality Party. You can watch it here:

Video by Cathy Vogan

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist and filmmaker based in London. Pilger’s Web site is: www.johnpilger.com. In 2017, the British Library announced a John Pilger Archive of all his written and filmed work. The British Film Institute includes his 1979 film, “Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia,” among the 10 most important documentaries of the 20th century. Some of

his previous contributions to Consortium News can be [found here](#).

Small Farmers Vs. Big Mining in Central America

Heavy-metals pollution threatens indigenous agriculture throughout the region, reports Edgardo Ayala.

By [Edgardo Ayala](#)

in San Salvador

[Inter Press Service](#)

Like an octopus, metals mining has been spreading its tentacles throughout Central America and dealing a blow to the region's agriculture and natural ecosystems, according to affected villagers, activists and a new report on the problem.

"Where the mining company is operating was land that peasants leased to plant corn and beans, our staple crops. But since the company came in, there is no land left to farm," said Lesbia Villagrán, who lives in the municipality of San Rafael Las Flores in eastern Guatemala.

Minera San Rafael, a subsidiary of the Canadian company Tahoe Resources, set up shop in this rural municipality of just over 9,000 people in 2007, and since then local residents in different villages scattered throughout this municipality and nearby areas have been organized to bring its operations to a halt. Villagers have been fighting the El Escobal silver mine arguing that it will affect their

livelihood in agriculture, as well as local water sources and biodiversity.

“When I was little, my father leased four or six manzanas (a little more than four hectares) of land and for us it was a joy to work in the abundant harvest. But when the owners of the land sold it to the company, my father was no longer able to plant our staple crops,” added Villagrán, 28, in an interview with IPS from San Rafael.

The mine changed ownership in January, and now the company is called Minera San Rafael El Escobal, a subsidiary of Canada’s [Pan American Silver](#), which according to its website, is the world’s second-largest producer of silver. It owns and operates six mines in Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, and now Guatemala.

“The situation in agriculture is complicated by the company’s operations,” said Alex Reynoso, a coffee grower from a municipality near San Rafael.

Fears of Heavy Metal Contamination

According to Reynoso, the country’s markets do not want produce harvested near the mine because of fears that they are contaminated with heavy metals used in the extraction process.

“The country’s most important markets flat-out avoid buying our products,” he told IPS from his hometown.

IPS attempted to get comments from both Tahoe Resources and Pan American Silver with respect to the criticism by San Rafael Las Flores residents against the mine, but had received no reply by the time this article was published.

Mining operations have been suspended since July 2017 while the Guatemalan Constitutional Court studied a complaint by organizations of local Amerindian Xinca residents that they were not consulted about the project as required by law.

The Court issued a ruling upholding the suspension of mining activity in September 2018.

This case in Guatemala is an example of the tensions caused in Central America by metals mining, an activity that has been ongoing in the area, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, since the time of Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century.

Recent Expansion

In the last few decades it has expanded with the arrival of transnational mining corporations to the area.

The arrival of foreign corporations generated social conflict, as local residents in the villages and towns where the mines are active began to organize, especially in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The consortia that win the mining concessions have been grabbing up traditional farming and forest land, while monopolizing water resources that local communities, especially indigenous ones, depend on, putting their food security at risk.

A study released Feb. 11 in San Salvador, gives an account of this expansion and its impacts. Published in Spanish by the [Central American Mining Alliance](#), a conglomerate of environmental organizations in the region, its title in English is, ["Strategies for the Defense of the Environment](#)

and Human Rights in the Face of the Impacts of Mining Extractivism in Central America,"

In Honduras, up to January 2017, 172 mining concessions had been granted, covering a total area of 7,275 square kilometers, equivalent to 6.47 of the country's territory.

In Guatemala, up to the same date, 55 concessions had been granted, covering an area of 4,143 square kilometers, or 3.81 percent of the national territory.

And by May 2017 Nicaragua had granted 146 mining concessions, and is still processing 20 more applications. Altogether, including the pending applications, they cover 11,143 square kilometers, or 8.55 percent of the country.

El Salvador made international history by being the first country in the world to ban all forms of mining in March 2017. But as of 2006 there were 31 mining concessions, covering an area of 1,088 square kilometers, 5.17 percent of the national territory.

Central America is a region of great social deprivation, with a population of 48 million inhabitants and an area of 524,000 square kilometers, also made up of Belize, Costa Rica and Panama.

Vulnerable to Climate Impacts

It is also one of the regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with high annual crop losses, either due to excess water, during the rainy season, or due to droughts in the dry season.

Following the Salvadoran example, “there are cases of movements that are demanding mining-free territories” in neighboring countries, Nicaraguan researcher Angélica Alfaro, one of the chief authors of the new study, told IPS.

“But the reality is that countries like Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua have passed laws aimed directly at promoting the mining sector,” said Alfaro, who worked on the document as a consultant for the [Association for the Development of El Salvador](#).

The mining industry jeopardizes food security in Central America because it directly impacts agriculture, as it affects several watersheds, Julio González, of the Guatemalan group Madre Selva, told IPS.

For example, the Cerro Blanco mine, located in the Guatemalan municipality of Asunción Mita, bordering on western El Salvador, is part of the Ostua-Guija-Lempa basin.

The pollution generated by the mine runs into Lake Guija, in El Salvador, and from there to the Lempa River, which winds through this country, supplying water that is processed for use in irrigation and for human consumption.

“Water, apart from daily use, is vital for agriculture, and is affected by the presence of metallic minerals, like cyanide, all of which will alter food production,” said González, who participated in the presentation of the study in San Salvador.

He added that the land used by the mining industry is not the enormous extensions of land owned by large landowners, but rather the areas used for subsistence agriculture,

especially in the territories of indigenous people, historically expelled from their land and pushed into forested areas. “But that’s the agriculture that sustains food security,” he said.

The report [“Impacts of metal mining in Central America,”](#) published in 2011, warned that “access to the geographical space available to mining is twice that dedicated to the production of basic grains, that is, for every square kilometer that is planted with basic grains in Central America there are two square kilometers controlled by the mining industry.”

Edgardo Ayala covers El Salvador for the Inter-Press Agency.

JOHN PILGER: The War on Venezuela is Built on Lies

The reporter as clown – for whom the truth is too difficult to report – may be the final stage of much of mainstream journalism’s degeneration, writes John Pilger for **Consortium News**.

By [John Pilger](#)

Special to Consortium News



Travelling with Hugo Chavez, I soon understood the threat of Venezuela. At a farming co-operative in Lara state, people waited patiently and with good humor in the heat. Jugs of water and melon juice were passed around. A guitar was played; a woman, Katarina, stood and sang with a husky contralto.

“What did her words say?” I asked.

“That we are proud,” was the reply.

The applause for her merged with the arrival of Chavez. Under one arm he carried a satchel bursting with books. He wore his big red shirt and greeted people by name, stopping to listen.

What struck me was his capacity to listen.

But now he read. For almost two hours he read into the microphone from the stack of books beside him: Orwell, Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, Hemingway, Chomsky, Neruda: a page here, a line or two there. People clapped and whistled as he moved from author to author. Then farmers took the microphone and told him what they knew, and what they needed; one ancient face, carved it seemed from a nearby banyan, made a long, critical speech on the subject of irrigation; Chavez took notes.

Wine is grown here, a dark Syrah type grape. “John, John, come up here,” said El Presidente, having watched me fall asleep in the heat and the depths of *Oliver Twist*.

“He likes red wine,” Chavez told the cheering, whistling audience, and presented me with a bottle of “vino de la gente.” My few words in bad Spanish brought whistles and laughter.

Watching Chavez with the people, la gente, made sense of a man who promised, on coming to power, that his every move would be subject to the will of the people. In eight years, Chavez won eight elections and referendums: a world record. He was electorally the most popular head of state in the

Western Hemisphere, probably in the world.

Every major chavista reform was voted on, notably a new constitution of which 71 percent of the people approved each of the 396 articles that enshrined unheard of freedoms, such as Article 123, which for the first time recognized the human rights of mixed-race and black people, of whom Chavez was one.

Their First Champions

One of his tutorials on the road quoted a feminist writer: "Love and solidarity are the same." His audiences understood this well and expressed themselves with dignity, seldom with deference. Ordinary people regarded Chavez and his government as their first champions: as theirs.

This was especially true of the indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Venezuelans, who had been held in historic contempt by Chavez's immediate predecessors and by those who today live far from the barrios, in the mansions and penthouses of East Caracas, who commute to Miami where their banks are and who regard themselves as "white." They are the powerful core of what the media calls "the opposition."

When I met this class, in suburbs called Country Club, in homes appointed with low chandeliers and bad portraits, I recognized them. They could be white South Africans, the petite bourgeoisie of Constantia and Sandton, pillars of the cruelties of apartheid.

Cartoonists in the Venezuelan press, most of which are owned by an oligarchy and oppose the government, portrayed Chavez as an ape. A radio host referred to "the monkey." In the

private universities, the verbal currency of the children of the well-off is often racist abuse of those whose shacks are just visible through the pollution.

Although identity politics are all the rage in the pages of liberal newspapers in the West, race and class are two words almost never uttered in the mendacious “coverage” of Washington’s latest, most naked attempt to grab the world’s greatest source of oil and reclaim its “backyard.”

For all the chavistas’ faults – such as allowing the Venezuelan economy to become hostage to the fortunes of oil and never seriously challenging big capital and corruption – they brought social justice and pride to millions of people and they did it with unprecedented democracy.

Stellar Election Process

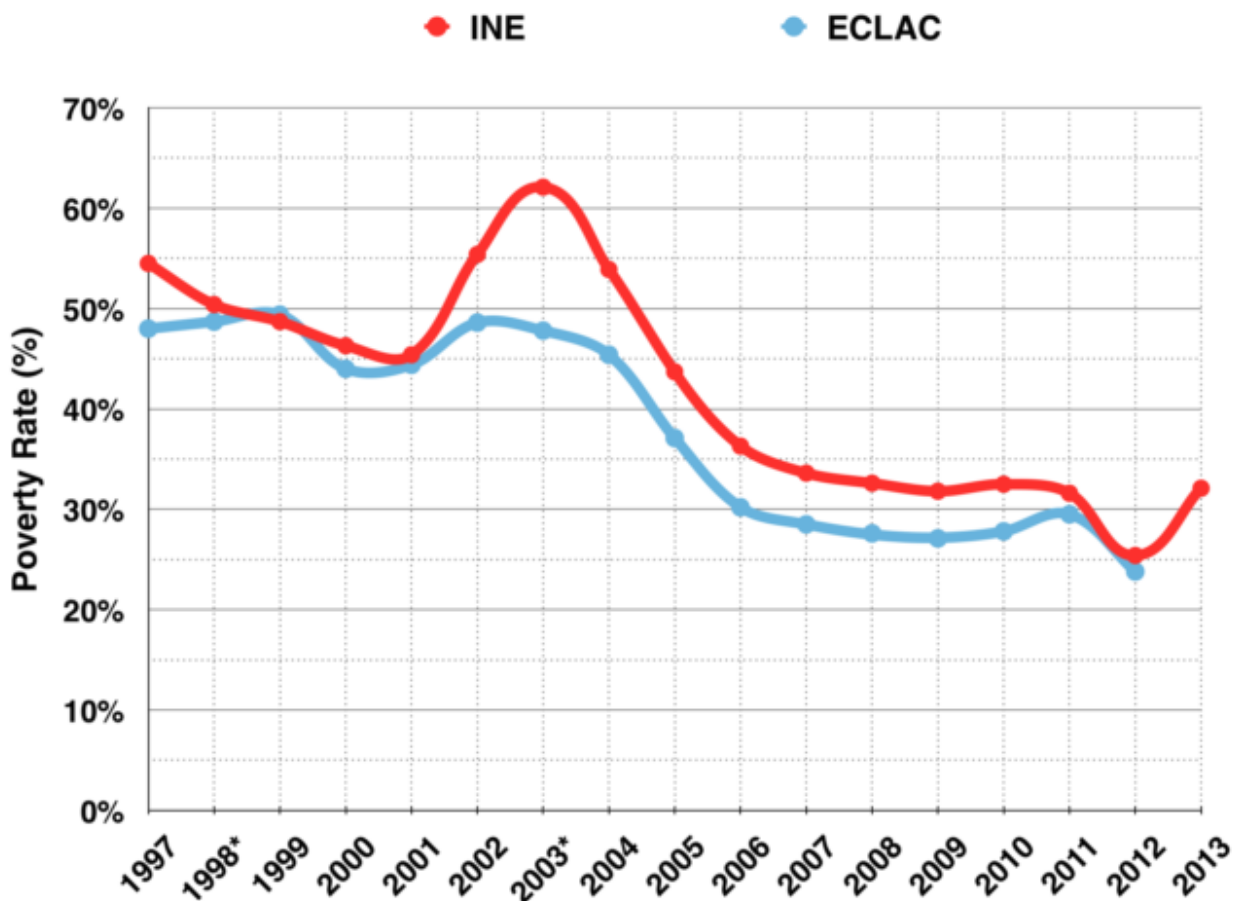
“Of the 92 elections that we’ve monitored,” said former President Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center, is a respected monitor of elections around the world, “I would say the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world.” By way of contrast, said Carter, the U.S. election system, with its emphasis on campaign money, “is one of the worst.”

In extending the franchise to a parallel people’s state of communal authority, based in the poorest barrios, Chavez described Venezuelan democracy as “our version of Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty.”

In Barrio La Linea, seated in her tiny kitchen, Beatrice Balzo told me her children were the first generation of the poor to attend a full day’s school and be given a hot meal

and to learn music, art and dance. “I have seen their confidence blossom like flowers,” she said.

In Barrio La Vega, I listened to a nurse, Mariella Machado, a black woman of 45 with a wicked laugh, address an urban land council on subjects ranging from homelessness to illegal war. That day, they were launching Mision Madres de Barrio, a program aimed at poverty among single mothers. Under the constitution, women have the right to be paid as caregivers, and can borrow from a special women’s bank. Now the poorest housewives get the equivalent of \$200 a month.



In a room lit by a single fluorescent tube, I met Ana Lucia Fernandez, aged 86, and Mavis Mendez, aged 95. A mere 33-year-old, Sonia Alvarez, had come with her two children. Once, none of them could read and write; now they were studying mathematics. For the first time in its history, Venezuela has almost 100 percent literacy.

This is the work of Mision Robinson, which was designed for adults and teenagers previously denied an education because of poverty. Mission Ribas gives everyone the opportunity of a secondary education, called a bachillerato. (The names Robinson and Ribas refer to Venezuelan independence leaders from the 19th century).

In her 95 years, Mavis Mendez had seen a parade of governments, mostly vassals of Washington, preside over the theft of billions of dollars in oil spoils, much of it flown to Miami. “We didn’t matter in a human sense,” she told me. “We lived and died without real education and running water, and food we couldn’t afford. When we fell ill, the weakest died. Now I can read and write my name and so much more; and whatever the rich and the media say, we have planted the seeds of true democracy and I have the joy of seeing it happen.”

In 2002, during a Washington-backed coup, Mavis’s sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren joined hundreds of thousands who swept down from the barrios on the hillsides and demanded the army remained loyal to Chavez.

“The people rescued me,” Chavez told me. “They did it with the media against me, preventing even the basic facts of what happened. For popular democracy in heroic action, I suggest you look no further.”

Saddam Hussein Incarnate

Since Chavez’s death in 2013, his successor Nicolás Maduro has shed his derisory label in the Western press as a “former bus driver” and become Saddam Hussein incarnate. His media abuse is ridiculous. On his watch, the slide in the

price of oil has caused hyperinflation and played havoc with prices in a society that imports almost all its food; yet, as the journalist and film-maker Pablo Navarrete reported this week, Venezuela is not the catastrophe it has been painted.

“There is food everywhere,” he wrote. “I have filmed lots of videos of food in markets [all over Caracas] ... it’s Friday night and the restaurants are full.”

In 2018, Maduro was re-elected president. A [section of the opposition](#) boycotted the election, a tactic tried against Chavez. The boycott failed: 9,389,056 people voted; 16 parties participated and six candidates stood for the presidency. Maduro won 6,248,864 votes, or 68 percent.

On election day, I spoke to one of the 150 foreign election observers. “It was entirely fair,” he said. “There was no fraud; none of the lurid media claims stood up. Zero. Amazing really.”

Like a page from [Alice’s tea party](#), the Trump administration has presented Juan Guaidó, a [pop-up creation](#) of the CIA-front National Endowment for Democracy, as the “legitimate President of Venezuela.” Unheard of by 81 percent of the Venezuelan people, according to *The Nation*, Guaidó has been elected by no one.

Maduro is “illegitimate,” says Donald Trump (who won the U.S. presidency with 3 million fewer votes than his opponent), a “dictator,” says demonstrably unhinged Vice President Mike Pence and an oil trophy-in-waiting, says “national security” adviser John Bolton (who when I interviewed him in 2003 said, “Hey, are you a communist,

maybe
even Labour?”)

As his “special envoy to Venezuela” (coup master), Trump has appointed a convicted felon, Elliot Abrams, whose intrigues in the service of Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush helped produce the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s and plunge central America into years of blood-soaked misery.

Putting Lewis Carroll aside, these “crazies” belong in newsreels from the 1930s. And yet their lies about Venezuela have been taken up with enthusiasm by those paid to keep the record straight.

On Channel 4 News, Jon Snow bellowed at the Labour MP Chris Williamson, “Look, you and Mr. Corbyn are in a very nasty corner [on Venezuela]!” When Williamson tried to explain why threatening a sovereign country was wrong, Snow cut him off. “You’ve had a good go!”

In 2006, Channel 4 News effectively accused Chavez of plotting to make nuclear weapons with Iran: a fantasy. The then Washington correspondent, Jonathan Rugman, allowed a war criminal, Donald Rumsfeld, to liken Chavez to Hitler, unchallenged.

Overwhelming Bias

Researchers at the University of the West of England studied the *BBC*’s reporting of Venezuela over a 10-year period. They looked at 304 reports and found that only three of these referred to any of the positive policies of the government. For the *BBC*, Venezuela’s democratic record, human rights legislation, food programs, healthcare initiatives and

poverty reduction did not happen. The greatest literacy program in human history did not happen, just as the millions who march in support of Maduro and in memory of Chavez, do not exist.

When asked why she filmed only an opposition march, the *BBC* reporter Orla Guerin tweeted that it was “too difficult” to be on two marches in one day.

A war has been declared on Venezuela, of which the truth is “too difficult” to report.

It is too difficult to report the collapse of oil prices since 2014 as largely the result of criminal machinations by Wall Street. It is too difficult to report the blocking of Venezuela’s access to the U.S.-dominated international financial system as sabotage. It is too difficult to report Washington’s “sanctions” against Venezuela, which have caused the loss of at least \$6 billion in Venezuela’s revenue since 2017, including \$2 billion worth of imported medicines, as illegal, or the Bank of England’s refusal to return Venezuela’s gold reserves as an act of piracy.

The former United Nations Rapporteur, Alfred de Zayas, has likened this to a “medieval siege” designed “to bring countries to their knees.” It is a criminal assault, he says. It is similar to that faced by Salvador Allende in 1970 when President Richard Nixon and his equivalent of John Bolton, Henry Kissinger, set out to “make the economy [of Chile] scream.” The long dark night of Pinochet followed.

The Guardian correspondent, Tom Phillips, has tweeted a

picture of a cap on which the words in Spanish mean in local slang: “Make Venezuela fucking cool again.” The reporter as clown may be the final stage of much of mainstream journalism’s degeneration.

Should the CIA stooge Guaidó and his white supremacists grab power, it will be the 68th overthrow of a sovereign government by the United States, most of them democracies. A fire sale of Venezuela’s utilities and mineral wealth will surely follow, along with the theft of the country’s oil, as outlined by John Bolton.

Under the last Washington-controlled government in Caracas, poverty reached historic proportions. There was no healthcare for those could not pay. There was no universal education; Mavis Mendez, and millions like her, could not read or write. How cool is that, Tom?

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist and filmmaker based in London. Pilger’s Web site is: www.johnpilger.com. In 2017, the British Library announced a John Pilger Archive of all his written and filmed work. The British Film Institute includes his 1979 film, “Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia,” among the 10 most important documentaries of the 20th century. Some of his previous contributions to Consortium News can be [found here](#).

A ‘Tick Tock’ Incident in the Land of the Piscataway

As each timeline emerged in the story, it seemed to offer a

correction to an earlier version that muddied the moral of the story in its rush to judgement, says Corinna Barnard.

By Corinna Barnard

Special to Consortium News



Consumers of news via social media knew their faces before their names. One was older, wore glasses and was chanting and striking a hand-held drum. The younger man's complexion was lighter. He wore a red MAGA, or "make America great again," cap. The younger one stared and smiled in a way that seemed, to many, arrogant and derisive.

They were both in Washington, D.C., in a stone-paved plaza where people gather for protests, or for sightseeing. What was instantly striking was the juxtaposition of their faces. They were too close to one another, in each others' way somehow.

The video clip spread far and wide, generating discordant shards of outrage, arguments over which of the men was actually intimidating or disrespecting which. A big lingering question is: Did you see the "whole" video? Did you see what really happened?

By the time the editors and reporters showed up, they worked, quite helpfully, to generate "tick-tock" timelines. By establishing the beginning of the story, there would be a middle and then an end. Only this story, like so many, resisted tidy narrative packaging.

The timelines started getting tangled with each other, catching flak from an audience that felt closer to the primary source; from people who had seen the "whole" video,

(which was over an hour long and painfully boring and repetitive in parts).

As each timeline emerged, it seemed to offer a correction to an earlier version that muddied the moral of the story in its rush to judgement (the chronic predicament of journalism overall, which is in the business of producing the first, not last, draft of history).

Here's the introduction that *BuzzFeed* offered on its chronology:

"Nick Sandmann, a junior at Kentucky's Covington Catholic High, denounced what he called 'outright lies' about his conduct toward attendees at the Indigenous Peoples March."

The Daily Caller headlined its timeline in angry bold, all-capital letters: **"YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO HOW THE MEDIA TRIED RUINING THE LIVES OF INNOCENT TEENAGERS."**

Juvenile and Terrifying

One of the most comprehensive retroactive timelines was put together by *Indian Country Today*. Its series of clips take you through a procession of taunting, heckling and baiting scenes. Scrolling through produces the sense of a nightmarish piece of Cinéma vérité.

Scenes of young men jumping up and down, chanting school fight songs in unison and egging each other on, teeter on a boundary between juvenile and terrifying, inducing something like the feeling of reading or watching "Lord of the Flies." It all took place, apparently, at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

The story began as a video clip. The first words heard, in reaction to what had happened, came from Nathan Phillips, who is widely described as an Omaha elder and Vietnam-era veteran.

“These are indigenous lands, we never had walls,” Phillips said.

There was lamentation in his tone.

A Reuters [story](#) echoed the remark in its headline: “ ‘These Are Indigenous Lands, We’re Not Supposed to Have Walls,’ Says Native Elder Nathan Phillips.”

But the article, while headlining the remark, did not seem to know what to do with it after that. The comment was treated as something that spoke for itself, with nothing further to say or ask; a conversation stopper. Aside from the headline, the story went on to report that Covington High School and the Diocese of Covington had condemned the actions of the students “towards Nathan Phillips specifically, and Native Americans in general.”

By Monday, the incident had spread across the ocean. By then Britain’s *Daily Mail* had turned it into the kind of divisive, polarizing [story](#) of sufficient standing to attract a celebrity. The headline it ran was this: “Alyssa Milano is slammed for saying MAGA hats are ‘the new white hood’ after watching viral video of Trump-supporting teenagers taunting Native American veteran.”

Inevitably, President Donald Trump began to issue [tweets](#) about the situation:

Looking like Nick Sandman & Covington Catholic students were treated unfairly

with early judgements proving out to be false – smeared by media. Not good, but making big comeback! “New footage shows that media was wrong about teen’s encounter with Native American” [@TuckerCarlson](#)

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [January 22, 2019](#)

Sandmann, the high school student, claims that, contrary to the impression created by the video clip, he was not invading Phillips’ space. He says Phillips locked eyes with him and moved in his direction, and that he merely stood his ground.

Phillips, on the other hand, [told CNN](#) that yes, he did move towards the students, intent on defusing tensions that had been building between them and an altogether different group that has been described as affiliated with the Black Hebrew Israelite movement. But then Sandmann blocked his way. “If I moved I would be in his presence, in his space,” Phillips said.

Whatever else had been going on, the issue of space and territory was always pertinent. It was visible from the start, in the awkward juxtaposition of the faces of the two men. If nothing else was clear, everyone could agree they were too close for comfort.

‘These Are Indigenous Lands’

When Phillips said “these are indigenous lands” he was not strident or militant. His tone was low keyed, as though expressing a common and obvious truth. It’s easy to understand why reporters chasing a dragon of a story, didn’t dwell on it.

But the comment is worth going back to for insight into what makes the incident incendiary.

An echo of Phillips' "indigenous land" comment can be found in an [online tool](#) that some people share with each other, as a matter of curiosity, or in some cases, by teachers, who might use it as a piece of curriculum.

Open the Native Land [link](#) in your browser and you instantly contemplate a rendering of the North American continent covered in overlapping blankets of color, each one representing a different group of traditional inhabitants. You can put in your address or zip code to see what tribe lived where your house now stands.

Search "Washington, D.C.," where the Phillips-Sandmann incident just took place and you will get a better sense of what Phillips meant when he said "this is indigenous land."

"You are in the land of the Pamunkey and Piscataway," the search engine tells you.

The message does not say "you are in the 'former' land of the Pamunkey and Piscataway." It speaks in the present tense.

Looking up your own city or town causes an eerie sense of displacement. You thought you knew where you lived. You thought your own address, at least, was a fact about which you could be confident. But someone else, you learn, considers it intrinsic to their ancestry. You suddenly sense yourself as an interloper, someone from somewhere else. An invader.

Along with the seizure of their territory, indigenous Americans cope with a dolorous loss of continuity and context, through genocides; generations of injustice. More

of this is known and discussed than years ago. But there has been no truth and reconciliation, no healing or compensation.

Centuries after Spanish and Portuguese explorers arrived in the “New World,” assured of their right to all that they could seize under the “Doctrine of Discovery,” the question of whose land this is, remains deeply unsettled.

The American novelist William Faulkner said: “The past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.” That’s particularly true, of course, when great wrongs are left unattended. They don’t tend to go away. Instead they smolder. And from time to time, they blow up out of seemingly nowhere.

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