



The current economic boom in many sub-Saharan countries is accompanied by an unprecedented increase in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) due to industrial pollution, including pesticides. While local and international mobilizations call for more stringent pesticide control measures, African governments often refrain from adopting and enforcing strict regulations – considered as potential obstacles to “development”. Yet, pesticide-related health risks are exacerbated in Africa by the inadequacy of regulatory frameworks and the weakness, or inexistence, of surveillance and control systems. As a result, the import, production and use of pesticides take place without the legal safeguards and institutional counterweights ensuring that public health concerns receive adequate attention in a political context where “development”, narrowly defined as economic growth, and “food security”, with a single dominant focus on increased agricultural production, are the overriding priorities. Facing strong activism denouncing the adverse effects of industrial agriculture and corporate influence over pesticide-related public policy making, some European governments start to backpedal at home – at least in their declarations of political intent. African governments and Western development agencies are less challenged, however, when – backed by private foundations and transnational corporations – they are calling for an “African Green Revolution”, still essentially based on the much-contested model of chemical-intensive agriculture, with pesticides as the cornerstone. In parallel, foreign agro-companies and governments are making large-scale land acquisitions in a new “scramble for Africa”, transforming the continent into the new frontier of global agro-industrial expansion.

This interdisciplinary conference aims at laying the foundations for a long-term scientific cooperation on the management of pesticide-related occupational and environmental health hazards in Africa. It aims at exploring the trade-offs between production and prevention that underlie the expansion of chemical-intensive agriculture on the continent, to understand the relations between technique, knowledge and power that condition the inclusion of African populations in the globalized economy, and to grasp the resulting health inequalities. It develops upon the observation that the chemical-based intensification of agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa bears new occupational and environmental health hazards, which are exacerbated by the use of highly toxic pesticides, by informal trade, by dysfunctional control systems, by lack of access to risk information, by the inexistence of protective gear appropriate for tropical climates, and by the diversity of exposed populations. As rapid population growth and trade liberalization boost domestic and international demands, these hazards confront African governments with technically and politically intricate regulatory and public policy choices. While international donors, industry players and environmentalist groups try to influence pesticide legislation and its implementation, the underlying trade-offs between productive and preventive considerations become a major political stake, and the way these trade-offs are formulated becomes an important field of scientific enquiry.

We aim at bringing together researchers from various backgrounds in social sciences and public health, as well as members of administrations and NGOs involved in pesticide regulation who are eager to reflect on what may be done to better assess and manage pesticide-related detrimental health effects.