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Posted Date: 23 March 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202603.1695.v1

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Article

The Environmental Legacy of Imperial Business Practices: A Closer Look at the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme (1947–1951)

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Abstract

Imperialism as a system of exploitation profoundly shaped the natural and human landscapes of colonized regions. This paper examines how the Second World War accelerated imperial transformations in East Africa, focusing on the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme (1947–1951) as a case of business-imperial collaboration. Set against Britain's post-war reconstruction needs, the scheme shows how corporate interests, especially Unilever's, shaped colonial development through industrial agriculture. Drawing on archival research and recent historiography, the article argues that the scheme was not merely a failed agricultural experiment, but a structural expression of business-imperial partnership with lasting environmental and institutional legacies. Its ecological damage and social disruption reflect broader patterns of environmental violence inherent in imperial capitalism. This study contributes to imperial environmental history in two ways: first, by tracing the long-term ecological impacts of post-war industrial development in colonial spaces; second, to show that imperial agro-economic practices were not temporally isolated events, and the effects of even short-lived, failed ventures such as the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme continued into the post-colonial period.

Keywords: imperialism; environmental violence; businesses; forced labor; Tanganyika; Unilever; colonial development

1. Introduction

In the closing years of the Second World War, British officials were looking beyond the boundaries of the metropolis and to their colonial territories, for answers to dwindling resources. Britain, along with the rest of Europe, was facing acute fat shortage, and what better use for the vast lands of East Africa than to grow what was imagined then as the relatively low-maintenance cash crop: the groundnut. Across Africa, imperial administrators, agronomists, and corporate advisors had already seen some success in groundnut and sorghum plantations, in Nigeria and Tanganyika, respectively. These projects were framed as modernizing interventions, but their impact on the landscape and people was often violent, disruptive, and enduring (Mollan 2020; Westcott 2020).

This paper investigates how British wartime and post-war economic priorities reshaped East Africa's ecosystems, particularly in Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania). The Groundnut Scheme, conceived in 1946 and launched in 1947, was Britain's largest post-war colonial agricultural initiative. It was concentrated in Tanganyika, selected for its presumed suitability for mechanized cultivation of groundnuts. The British government aimed at cultivating millions of acres of the crop to supply the metropole with vegetable oil. Implemented under the oversight of the Overseas Food Corporation (OFC), it was characterized by vast mechanization efforts, including importing tractors and tanks

from disparate corners of the empire, constructing roads and railways to open access to uninhabited wilderness, and bulldozing dense woodland. The project ultimately collapsed in 1951 after failing to overcome the environmental, logistical, and agronomic challenges of the region, leaving behind a legacy of environmental degradation and imperial overreach (Westcott 2020). This case lays bare the environmental and human costs, not only of imperial expansion, but of agro-economic corporate ventures that operated under the auspices of development and improvement of colonial lands. Far from being a one-off failure, the scheme represents the broader dynamics of imperial transformation through extractive business. As Britain sought new sources of oilseeds to resolve its post-war fat crisis, a seemingly remote corner of East Africa became the testing ground for corporate-driven agricultural modernization.

At the heart of this story lies the interplay between state power and private enterprise. Overlapping agendas drove the scheme's conception and execution: Britain's desire for economic self-sufficiency, colonial visions of development, and corporate interests, especially those of Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch company whose main business was the production of edible fats. This model allowed Unilever to secure strategic objectives — guaranteed groundnut supplies for its expanding margarine and soap production, African market expansion, and field testing of mechanized agricultural technologies — while avoiding direct administrative costs or reputational damage from environmental and social destruction. Though formally a state-led project, the Groundnut Scheme bore the ideological and technical imprint of business actors who promoted large-scale monoculture, mechanization, and labor discipline.

Rather than merely documenting policy failure and following the misdirection of the primary actors of this venture, this paper discusses the environmental violence of the project and the connection between business and imperialism. By examining the material effects of environmental transformation and the institutional entanglements of business and empire, the study reveals the Groundnut Scheme as a manifestation of environmental violence embedded in the logic of imperial capitalism. This analysis contributes to recent scholarship on an episode of late-imperial history by demonstrating how corporate interests shaped colonial development policies while externalizing environmental and social costs to colonized populations that continue to influence contemporary global economic relationships.

This article begins with a historical overview of the Groundnut Scheme's conception and execution, followed by an examination of Unilever's role and the ideological imprint of corporate logic. It then analyzes the environmental consequences and the notion of environmental violence, before exploring how the scheme is remembered and its legacy debated in postcolonial Tanzania. In conclusion, the article reflects on how the Groundnut Scheme exemplifies broader patterns in the entanglements of business and empire.

2. Theorizing Environmental Violence in Imperial Business

While scholars have documented how commercial interests drove imperial expansion and shaped colonial policy, how such business practices systematically affected regional socio-ecosystems has been marginally studied. The concept of 'business imperialism' has evolved to encompass not just direct corporate influence on policy, but the broader ways in which business rationality, organizational forms, and technological approaches became embedded in imperial governance. Early work by D.C.M. Platt (1977) and others on 'business imperialism' established the framework for understanding how private enterprise influenced imperial governance, and more recent scholarship has refined our understanding of these complex relationships (Decker 2022; Dejung 2020; Mollan 2019, 2020). Geoffrey Jones's extensive work on multinational corporations in colonial contexts has demonstrated how businesses both shaped and were shaped by imperial structures, operating through 'collaborative imperialism' (G. Jones 2002, 1995). Similarly, Stephanie Decker's research on postcolonial business transitions has revealed the deep institutional entanglements between corporations and colonial states, showing how businesses helped construct and maintain imperial systems while positioning themselves to benefit from decolonization (Decker

2005, 2022, 2013; Decker et al. 2024). As Charles Jones argued, business imperialism operated through the projection of business interests and business methods into the political sphere, creating hybrid forms of governance that blurred the boundaries between public and private power (C. Jones 2009). Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the environmental and social costs of these business-imperial entanglements. Simon Mollan's work on imperialism and economic development in Sudan has shown how colonial business practices created lasting environmental degradation and social disruption (Mollan 2019; Mollan and Michie 2015), while Nina Kleinöder's research on German colonial enterprises has revealed the systematic exploitation of both labor and natural resources (Kleinöder 2020, 2022).

Environmental violence in imperial contexts operates through multiple mechanisms that blur the boundaries between state power and corporate interest. Rob Nixon's theory of 'slow violence', described as 'incremental and accretive' destruction that occurs 'gradually and out of sight' (Nixon 2011), captures how corporate-driven development projects inflicted long-term ecological damage that remains largely invisible in conventional historical narratives. The Groundnut Scheme, despite its brevity and failure, is a classic example of how colonial enterprise kickstarted cycles of slow violence by creating conditions in which modern day corporate structures enabled and institutionalized ecological destruction across temporal and spatial scales. Slow violence as an organizing frame and concept has been invoked more so in relation to recent environmental injustices in the age of neoliberalism, and often to do with issues such as fossil fuel extraction, nuclear testing, natural resource mining, and large-scale construction projects. Unlike the spectacular violence of military conquest, environmental violence unfolds through seemingly rational processes: scientific surveys, efficiency calculations, technological modernization, and development rhetoric. These processes mask the systematic appropriation and degradation of colonized landscapes, transforming complex ecosystems into simplified resource extraction sites. The violence lies not only in the physical destruction of environments but in the erasure of indigenous ecological knowledge, the disruption of sustainable land use practices, and the imposition of extractive economic relations (Hogendorn and Scott 1981; Esselborn 2013; Westcott 2020; Sutton 2024; Bourbonniere 2014; Rizzo 2006).

Economic concerns shape policy agendas and stand ready to profit from outcomes while avoiding direct responsibility for environmental and social costs. This form of complicity allows corporations to exercise imperial power without the political accountability traditionally associated with colonial administration. When projects succeed, corporations benefit through raw material access, market expansion, and profit realization. When projects fail, corporations can withdraw while states absorb losses and affected populations bear long-term consequences (Marcantonio 2024).

The Groundnut Scheme exemplifies slow violence in multiple ways. The Overseas Food Corporation (OFC) served as the formal implementing agency, the project's conception, technical specifications, and operational logic bore the clear imprint of corporate interests, particularly those of United Africa Company (UAC) and its parent company, Unilever's. The scheme's emphasis on mechanized monoculture, industrial-scale land clearing, and export orientation reflected corporate efficiency models rather than ecological sustainability or local development needs. This corporate influence operated through multiple channels: technical advisory roles, personnel exchanges between business and government, and the alignment of state policy with corporate profit calculations (Esselborn 2013). The large-scale clearing of indigenous forests created soil erosion and biodiversity loss that continued long after the scheme's official termination (Esselborn 2013). The introduction of mechanized agriculture disrupted traditional farming systems and indigenous knowledge, creating vulnerabilities that persisted into the post-colonial period (Westcott 2020). The scheme's labor practices, while not involving direct physical violence, created conditions of structural violence that undermined community cohesion and individual autonomy.

Understanding environmental violence as a business practice requires attention to the temporal dimensions of ecological destruction. Corporate time horizons, focused on quarterly profits and short-term returns, fundamentally conflict with ecological time scales that unfold over decades or centuries. This temporal mismatch created environmental costs that exceed corporate planning

horizons and are therefore excluded from business calculations. The Groundnut Scheme illustrates this dynamic: corporate interests focused on immediate oilseed production while ecological consequences, such as soil degradation, biodiversity loss, watershed disruption, unfolded over decades and continue to shape East African landscapes today ('A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa' 1947)

Environmental violence also operates through the creation of new spatial hierarchies that subordinate colonized environments to metropolitan economic needs. The Groundnut Scheme transformed southern Tanganyika into a specialized oilseed production zone oriented toward British markets rather than local food security.¹ This spatial reorganization created lasting dependencies that persist in contemporary global economic relations. The scheme's infrastructure (railways, ports, processing facilities) was designed to facilitate resource extraction rather than local development, embedding extractive spatial relations into the physical landscape. Environmental violence in colonial contexts operated through the systematic destruction of existing environmental and social systems in the name of progress and modernization. This violence was often invisible to metropolitan observers, appearing as technical problems or administrative failures rather than as the predictable consequences of imposing industrial agricultural models on complex ecological and social systems (East African Groundnut Scheme 1949).

Methodologically, studying environmental violence requires reading business and colonial archives against the grain to recover evidence of ecological destruction and social disruption that contemporary actors minimized or ignored. Corporate documents often present environmental transformation as technical progress while colonial reports emphasize development benefits. Recovering environmental violence requires attention to silences, euphemisms, and displaced effects that appear in archival margins. This methodological approach reveals how environmental violence was structured into the normal operations of imperial business rather than as resulting from exceptional circumstances or individual failures.

The concept of environmental violence illuminates the connections between historical imperial practices and contemporary global environmental challenges. Extractive spatial relations, technological approaches, and institutional structures established through projects like the Groundnut Scheme continue to shape contemporary business development interventions in Africa. Understanding these historical precedents is crucial for analyzing current patterns of environmental degradation and developing more sustainable alternatives.

3. The Corporate Turn in Colonial Development After 1945

The Second World War fundamentally transformed the relationship between business and empire in British colonial policy. The conflict's material demands — for food, raw materials, and strategic resources — forced unprecedented state intervention in colonial economies while simultaneously creating new opportunities for corporate influence in imperial administration. The post-war period saw the emergence of a 'corporate turn' in colonial development, a trend that was characterized by the systematic incorporation of business expertise, methods, and interests into state-led development initiatives. British state managers saw colonial development as an important goal for the British government. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act, enacted in 1940, set aside £5 million per year for colonial development and welfare projects, and the Labour government under Clement Attlee was eager to follow up on the same goals (Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1950). Unlike earlier colonial development policies that rolled along gradually and focused on administrative reform, the post-war period, with its industrial fervor and recent advancements in mechanization methods, favored large-scale interventions designed to increase speed and productivity when it came to resource extraction. The Act established the Colonial Development

¹ This applies not only to the Groundnut Project: British officials thought about the balance of local food supply versus productivity and environmental balance in other cases, too. See for example National Archives Kew, CO 536/198, Commentary (1938).

Corporation (CDC) as a state-owned enterprise empowered to undertake commercial ventures in colonial territories. The CDC's board, which included executives from major corporations including Unilever, Shell, and Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) (McWilliam 2001), was tasked with bringing about corporate planning methods, technological approaches, and efficiency criteria to colonial development projects. Techniques such as time-and-motion studies, cost-benefit analysis, and operational research methods introduced to improve efficiency and implementation brought corporate rationalities to colonial governance while obscuring the social and environmental costs of development interventions.

The ideological framework underlying this corporate turn emphasized the compatibility of business efficiency with colonial development goals. Corporate management techniques were presented as politically neutral tools for achieving rapid economic growth and improving living standards in colonial territories. This technocratic discourse obscured the ways in which corporate interests shaped development priorities and methods. The emphasis on large-scale, mechanized interventions reflected corporate preferences for standardized, controllable production systems rather than the tried-and-tested, localized approaches that might have been more appropriate for African contexts.

During that time, great swaths of Africa were earmarked for rural modernization projects. For example, the French Office du Niger was set up in the 1920s to transform African agriculture into a modernized and more scientific system (Westcott 2020). The Belgian Congo's agricultural development programs prioritized export crops over local food security while introducing industrial production methods (Lindblad 2013). The Groundnut Scheme emerged from this broader corporate turn in colonial development. The project's conception involved extensive consultation with companies involved in oilseed processing and agricultural machinery. Unilever, operating under the auspices of the UAC, played a crucial role in selecting groundnuts as the target Mechanized Production crop and designing the scheme's production methods ("A Plan for the Mechanized Production"). The company's influence extended beyond formal advisory roles to encompass informal consultation on technical specifications, market projections, and operational planning.

However, the corporate turn in colonial development also created new contradictions and tensions. Archival sources from 1947 reveal that Unilever's early involvement was not uncontroversial: A government document outlining anticipated parliamentary questions and suggested responses defended the partnership by emphasizing UAC's 'experience of work in tropical Africa' and its 'efficient commercial organization' (Government Document 1947). By involving Unilever, the Ministry of Food hoped to avoid the expense and difficulty of assembling its own cadre of experienced colonial staff. Under this arrangement, the UAC acted as Managing Agent for the Ministry, offering to serve in this role without profit until August 1948, though with the expectation that all operational costs would be reimbursed. As the internal briefing put it:

This arrangement is not as strange as it may seem. The interests of the Unilever Group are very similar to those of H.M.G. in this matter – to increase the supply of oilseeds to this country at the earliest possible date. They have, moreover, a deep and long-standing interest in the economic development and prosperity of tropical Africa. (Government Document 1947)

This rhetorical alignment of corporate interest with imperial duty framed Unilever's involvement as both altruistic and pragmatic, sidestepping concerns about profit or corporate overreach. J.A. Wakefield announced in 1948 that the problems of supply that the project faced have been overcome 'by the services of the world-wide Unilever organization' (Wakefield 1948), implying that without Unilever the project would have been off to a difficult start. According to Wakefield, Unilever 'scoured the world for the heavy tractors required to clear the bush, and obtained 500 of them' (Wakefield 1948). Nevertheless, the government was unwilling to cede full responsibility for such a large and politically sensitive project to a private company. Given the scheme's anticipated impact on African communities and landscapes, formal oversight remained in the hands of the British state and, more covertly, from corporations. Unilever's early influence laid the foundations for a development model driven by scale, speed, and mechanization: principles aligned more with

commercial efficiency than ecological or social sustainability. As the scheme faltered, Unilever receded into the background, leaving the state to absorb the political and economic fallout. This strategic withdrawal further exemplifies the asymmetrical responsibilities of business actors operating within imperial structures.

Business interests in rapid returns conflicted with the long-term investments required for sustainable development. Corporate preferences for standardized, controllable production systems clashed with the ecological and social complexity of African environments. The emphasis on export-oriented production competed with local food security and economic diversification needs. These contradictions would become apparent in the Groundnut Scheme's implementation and ultimate failure.

The institutional legacy of the corporate turn in colonial development extended beyond the immediate post-war period. The methods, priorities, and organizational structures established through projects like the Groundnut Scheme influenced subsequent development interventions in independent Africa. International development agencies, including the World Bank and bilateral aid organizations, adopted similar approaches that prioritized large-scale, technically intensive interventions over locally appropriate alternatives. This institutional continuity helps explain the persistence of extractive development models in post-colonial Africa.

4. The Groundnut Project in Practice

The plan aimed to cultivate over three million acres of groundnuts in Tanganyika to supply the British market with a reliable source of oilseeds. Britain's acute shortage of hard currency following the war's end made colonial resources increasingly valuable for reducing imports from dollar areas and alleviating its economic dependency on the United States. The scheme was explicitly designed to save an estimated £10 million annually in dollar expenditure on imported fats and oils. This economic imperative aligned with broader imperial preferences for developing colonial resources rather than relying on international markets. Britain sourced most of its fats from outside, but the worldwide shortage of two million tons had hit even the major exporters, India and China, which left Africa as one of the very few possible solutions to this shortage (Sutton 2024). Fully operational in the Kano region in Nigeria were groundnut farms that had been established in the early part of the century and were oriented to the overseas market. Unlike in Tanganyika, the groundnuts did well in Nigeria as they were already grown locally before being deemed suitable for mass cash-crop farming, and furthermore, the construction of the Baro–Kano rail connection was instrumental in opening access into the region. However, it was not as if the venture was unproblematic in Nigeria, as there were many documented instances of the use of slave labour in the production chain. (Hogendorn 1978; Salau 2010)

The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme was run by the Ministry of Food and administered by the Overseas Food Corporation (OFC), a state-owned enterprise. The OFC was set up in 1948 with £50 million to spend, of which £25.5 million were meted out to the East Africa Groundnut Scheme (Sutton 2024). The scheme was heavily influenced by corporate interests, most notably Unilever, which stood to benefit as a major margarine producer. Through its subsidiary, the United Africa Company, Unilever lobbied for the selection of groundnuts and promoted a model of industrial-scale monoculture, rooted in business principles of efficiency, mechanization, and scale. Unilever was one of the largest suppliers of margarine and soap in Western Europe and in the British Empire. In the postwar period, many of Unilever's factories were inactive, the company having halted operations since 1946 because of issues with supply chains; the prospect of groundnut farming in Africa promised to bring raw material back to its factories and restart production (Hogendorn and Scott 1981; Westcott 2022).

When Frank Samuel, Managing Director of the United Africa Company (UAC) flew over Tanganyika in 1946, he was on a mission to find land for the Unilever Corporation. He wondered if the vast lands in one of the least developed parts of the Empire could be used to benefit, in Alan Wood's account, 'the British housewife and the legitimate profits' of his own company (Wood 1950

p. 27). After his return to London, he had a plan for the Minister of Food: He wanted to use the (what appeared to him) 'empty' land to help solve Britain's oil shortage by growing groundnuts in Tanganyika (Esselborn 2013). Samuel did not want Unilever to be financially liable for the Groundnut project which was why he involved the British state by sending the Minister of Food a proposal (Sutton 2024). The British government reacted promptly: They sent the 'Wakefield Mission', led by agronomist John Wakefield, to Tanganyika for nine weeks to study the local conditions. The Wakefield Mission had its final report ready in September 1946. They proposed to use 3.21 million acres in Central, Western and Southern provinces of Tanganyika to grow groundnuts. For this purpose, this area had to be cleared of bush and made into 107 peanut fields (Esselborn 2013). State capital, modern machinery, and human labor were needed for this purpose. They were convinced that from 1950 onwards, this scheme would be able to produce 600,000 to 800,000 tons of peanuts per year (Esselborn 2013). Without a pilot project, which was neglected due to the urgency to solve the European oil crisis, Cabinet gave permission to the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme in January 1947. The Minister of Food presented in February 1947 'A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa' to the Parliament (1947). The newly elected Labour government not only wanted to solve the 'oil crisis' but also believed that the state should play more of a role in colonial civic administration, including building new roads and railroads, establishing healthcare, trade unions and vocational training, and, in general, ensuring higher living standards (Esselborn 2013). *The New York Times* even called it an 'extension of socialism to the British colonies' ('Nut Farming' February 6th, 1947).

Colonial agricultural policy, especially during and after World War II, wrought deep changes on East African landscapes. Wartime cultivation of cash crops like sisal and pyrethrum displaced indigenous farming systems and compromised biodiversity. These trends were amplified by the Groundnut Scheme's aggressive mechanized approach, in which millions of acres of 'miombo' (A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa 1947) woodland were cleared based on overly optimistic assessments. Imported machinery routinely failed in the harsh terrain, and simplified monocultures left soils vulnerable to erosion and collapse. Far from being unintended consequences, these ecological disruptions reflected the scheme's developmental ethos: One grounded in business ideals of standardization, efficiency, and resource extraction.

British scientists, such as those involved in the Wakefield Mission, contributed to these destructive processes by classifying East African soils as 'light sandy' or 'red loam', with the former considered easily convertible to productive farmland. These assumptions ignored the realities of 'miombo' vegetation, whose dense root systems and seasonal hardness made clearing and cultivation profoundly difficult. Colonial planners also imagined the eradication of the tsetse fly and other vector diseases as beneficial side effects of environmental transformation. They envisioned entire townships, roads, and infrastructure rising out of previously sparsely populated zones (Esselborn 2013).

The scheme started straight away, with machinery and men being shipped to Tanganyika in February. As the volume of tractors that a scale of this project would have needed was not available, more than 400 of Sherman tanks were shipped to East Africa and used as agricultural machines to start the arduous process of clearing land (Esselborn 2013; British Information Services 1948). However, of these hundreds, only a handful even reached the designated territories, as there was the underdeveloped infrastructure to contend with. The Tanganyikan hinterland was basically roadless, and the deficiencies at the port in Dar-es-Salaam created a bottleneck. Just as well, for the tanks that did manage to get to work were quickly rendered useless. The bush was not so easy to get rid of (Esselborn 2013). The soil was as impenetrable as concrete during the dry season, making it nearly impervious to tractors. The Sherman tanks were unfit for local conditions. Indigenous farming methods of using the hand hoe and harvesting only during the rainy seasons, all practices that had been portrayed as 'primitive' ('Oil Nuts' 1947), suddenly seemed to make more sense (Wood 1950).

Some areas selected by the Wakefield commission for the scheme were identified as the driest in the entire country, based on meteorological data. These areas did not have precipitation levels sufficient for groundnuts (Esselborn 2013). The British experts of the Wakefield Commission had

known that East African rainfall patterns could be unpredictable and that droughts could occur (Report on the Overseas Food Corporation's East African Groundnut Scheme 1950). However, they were sure that the minimum of rain for groundnuts would fall in the designated areas and that having a range of growing sites in different parts of the country meant that not all places would be affected by drought at the same time ('A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa' 1947). This argument, however, did not hold water (pun unintended) as they were basing their assumptions on data that had been collected over a short period of just seven years and that too only from regions far removed from the groundnut farms (Hogendorn and Scott 1981). The unexpected droughts in 1948 and 1949 hit the project hard but even in years with good rainfall, it was not enough to grow the groundnuts (Hogendorn and Scott 1981).

Although colonial planners were not entirely ignorant of environmental risks, they often downplayed them in favor of developmental ambition. Expert groups discussed the challenges of tropical soils and the application of fertilizers, but the 1947 plan for East Africa reflected a dangerously optimistic view of ecological stability. It declared that 'there is no evidence to show that major factors of climate, i.e., air temperatures, sunlight, rainfall and wind, will be in any way affected by bush clearance (...)' ('A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa' 1947). This assertion extended across the entire climatic zone, implying that widespread deforestation would have no serious consequences for regional climate or agricultural viability.

Yet the same document admitted the likelihood of localized environmental disruption. It acknowledged that:

Locally, of course, considerable and significant changes may result, particularly in the way of increases in surface temperature of soil exposed to isolation or the baking effect of the sun. It is unquestioned too that indiscriminate deforestation on sloping land increases run-off; erosion then occurs, which decreases water conservation and results in perennial streams becoming seasonal torrents (...). ('A Plan for the Mechanized Production of Groundnuts in East and Central Africa' 1947).

These local effects, higher soil temperatures, reduced water retention, and increased erosion, were not marginal but directly undermined the very project they were meant to support. Such transformations constitute a form of environmental violence: the deliberate and large-scale disruption of ecosystems with full knowledge of the potential consequences. Even as scientific reports flagged these risks, they were rationalized as manageable or inconsequential in pursuit of imperial and commercial goals. In this way, colonial environmental planning encoded violence not only through what it destroyed, but through what it deliberately chose to ignore. The violent nature of the Groundnut Scheme was not only evident in its ecological outcomes but also in the language used to describe its implementation. A striking example comes from Wakefield, who, after screening a promotional film about the scheme, remarked: 'What you have seen is a small part of the result of no more than six months' attack on African virgin bush' (Wakefield 1948).

The first year of the project cost double the amount that was initially expected but only five percent of the clearing for this year had been done. Nevertheless, the project was still considered feasible, with the Minister of Food glossing over difficulties even though other officials did already know that farming in East Africa was not the same as 'farming in Essex' (East African Groundnut Scheme 1949). In 1950, an independent working party was sent to Kongwa, the first site intended for development, and they saw no recourse (Esselborn 2013). By the time the project was abandoned, in 1951, less than seven percent of the designated area had been cleared, a staggering £36 million (more than £1 billion today) had been spent, and, to add insult to injury, more peanuts had been shipped to East Africa as seeds than harvested from the scheme. (Esselborn 2013).

The project was characterized by extreme scale, mechanized land clearing, and centralized administration, modeled on industrial agricultural principles borrowed from British and American business practices. It was quite common at the time that firms engaged in informal imperial practices often shaped state interventions without assuming responsibility for their outcomes, simply transferring risk onto colonial governments (Decker 2022; Uche 2015; Duran and Bucheli 2017). The Groundnut Scheme exemplifies this dynamic: Unilever's strategic input shaped the project's

foundations, yet the state absorbed the financial and political fallout. By the time of the project's collapse, there had already been various sleights of hand and transfers of power between governmental agencies in claiming and then jettisoning responsibility for the Scheme. The scheme was started by Unilever's subsidiary company, the UAC, and its management moved over to the Overseas Food Corporation, and all of this was expedited by deliberately pushing out the Colonial Office, which was deemed "too slow" (cf. Wood 1950). In 1949, when it became apparent that the Scheme was suffering enormous losses, the Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook wrote to the Prime Minister in November 1949 that: "the proposal to strengthen the Board of Overseas Food Corporation will be greatly expected and welcomed. But there may be some pressure to transfer responsibility for the scheme to the Colonial Development Corporation" (Cabinet Offices 1949, National Archives Kew). A year later, in Nov 1950, a more desperate tone was sounded by the OFC, urging the need to "expediate as much as possible" "the transfer of responsibility to the colonial office" (Colonial Office 1950, National Archives Kew).

The scheme also exemplified the hubris of technocratic imperialism. Colonial planners viewed Tanganyika as a 'blank slate' ripe for mechanized cultivation, ignoring ecological constraints and local expertise (Esselborn 2013). Mechanized land clearing disrupted fragile ecosystems. Epistemic violence also played a role, as indigenous knowledge systems and agricultural practices were dismissed in favor of Eurocentric, industrial farming models (Dejung 2020). Local communities in southern Tanganyika still recall the Groundnut Scheme as a moment of rupture in their environmental history, associating it with deforestation, loss of land, and failed development promises. This memory of trauma contributes to a longer-term critique of imperial development and helps explain current skepticism toward externally imposed agricultural interventions.

The environmental and symbolic legacies of the Groundnut Scheme continue to influence debates about development in Tanzania today, particularly in relation to land use, conservation, and agribusiness investment. It serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of fusing business logic with imperial power under the guise of modern development (Esselborn 2013). Incorporating these perspectives into the analysis of the Groundnut Scheme allows us to frame it not as a failed development project, but as a critical expression of the extractive and exploitative nature of imperial capitalism.

5. The Groundnut Legacy

The Groundnut Scheme left lasting marks. Landscapes were scarred, communities displaced, and trust in 'development' deeply eroded. Yet its logic lived on in post-independence development projects, many of which replicated the top-down, export-oriented model. Soils remain depleted; economic structures continue to prioritize cash crops over food security. These legacies reflect not just a failed project but a durable ideology — one that treated African environments as extractive frontiers and African labor as disposable. Bourbonnière emphasizes how the Groundnut Scheme's failure resulted from not only technical shortcomings but also deeper, more structural issues rooted in colonial economic logic. The project's emphasis on speed, mechanization, and scale led to shortsighted decisions that ignored both ecological and logistical constraints (Bourbonniere 2014). Crucially, Bourbonnière draws attention to the 'ripple effects' of the scheme — how its failures influenced subsequent development thinking, often without addressing the core contradictions of extractive imperial policy. This broader view situates the scheme not only as an environmental and social failure but as a moment of ideological consolidation in which the limits of colonial development models became increasingly apparent even to their own architects. Her analysis underscores the need to examine these schemes not as anomalies but as integral components of the business-imperial complex that sought to reshape African environments and economies for metropolitan benefit.

In addition, building on Rizzo's analysis of development and social change in Tanganyika, it becomes evident that the Groundnut Scheme must also be understood within the broader trajectory of the colonial developmental state and its restructuring of local labor and land relations. Rizzo shows how Tanganyikan society was already undergoing massive transformation due to colonial

agricultural interventions (Rizzo 2006). The Groundnut Scheme intensified these changes by reinforcing coercive labor systems and accelerating the commodification of land and labor. The scheme's design reflected broader efforts to integrate African economies into global capitalist markets through cash crop production, even if it meant displacing indigenous agricultural practices and exploiting rural populations. Rizzo's findings further underline that these schemes were not just economic or environmental experiments: They were political projects that sought to remake society in ways conducive to empire and capital (Rizzo 2006).

After the abandonment of the Groundnut Scheme, the legacy of its infrastructure continued to shape East African landscapes and politics in unexpected ways. The Kongwa site, rendered agriculturally unsuitable due to ecological degradation, was repurposed for cattle ranching (Hogendorn and Scott 1981) before being handed over to the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) as a base for liberation operations. Similarly, Farm 17, another key site, was transferred to FRELIMO, the Mozambican liberation movement. Both areas, initially developed with extensive infrastructure under the logic of extractive imperialism, were thus reappropriated by anti-colonial forces. In the process of militarization, parts of the southern railway line constructed for the Groundnut Project were intentionally destroyed to secure the region. After Mozambique's independence, Farm 17 was transformed again, this time into a military college operated by the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF). These postcolonial transformations illustrate how imperial legacies could be inverted, as infrastructure originally meant to serve British corporate and strategic interests was reclaimed to support African liberation and state-building (Rushohora 2023).

The transformation of the Groundnut Scheme sites into bases for African liberation movements also carries a powerful symbolic weight. These locations, once emblematic of British imperial ambition and corporate-driven environmental engineering, were reappropriated as strategic centers in the fight against imperial domination. The use of Kongwa by SWAPO and Farm 17 by FRELIMO not only demonstrates local agency but represents a spatial and political inversion of imperial geography. Infrastructure originally imposed to facilitate extraction and control was turned toward resistance and autonomy. This repurposing of colonial space underscores how postcolonial actors did not merely inherit the imperial landscape: They actively reshaped it, reclaiming sites of domination as spaces of liberation and sovereignty. However, this process was not without cost. In securing these zones for liberation activities, parts of the railway infrastructure established for the Groundnut Scheme were intentionally destroyed, setting back regional economic connectivity and development (Rushohora 2023). Thus, even as these sites became symbols of anti-imperial resistance, their militarization contributed to the economic marginalization of the surrounding areas in the postcolonial period.

By viewing these interconnected developments — corporate strategy, ecological transformation, labor exploitation, and social disruption — as part of a unified project, we see the Groundnut Scheme as more than a policy failure. It was a manifestation of colonial capitalism in action, a coordinated effort to reorganize African environments and societies in accordance with the demands of the empire and multinational business.

6. Conclusion

The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme was far more than a catastrophic agricultural experiment: It was a foundational blueprint for how business and empire would collaborate to reshape African environments and societies under the banner of modernization. While the scheme operated under the formal auspices of the Colonial Development Corporation, it was fundamentally shaped by private corporate interests, particularly those of Unilever, whose influence extended from crop selection and mechanization strategies to broader planning frameworks. The calculated withdrawal when implementation faltered exemplifies a pattern of corporate engagement (or lack thereof) that would become characteristic of post-war development capitalism: maximum influence during profitable planning phases, minimal accountability during costly implementation failures.

The scheme's environmental violence reveals the structural logic underlying imperial development interventions. The massive ecological devastation, encompassing systematic deforestation across 150,000 acres, accelerated soil erosion that rendered vast areas unsuitable for agriculture, and biodiversity collapse through mechanized monoculture, was not an unfortunate byproduct of poor planning but the inevitable outcome of applying industrial agricultural models to complex tropical ecosystems. This environmental violence operated through rationality: the systematic reduction of ecological complexity to standardized production units amenable to metropolitan control and profit extraction. The scheme's planners imagined East African landscapes as blank slates awaiting rational development, dismissing existing agricultural systems as primitive obstacles to progress. This environmental violence was structurally embedded in the imperial logic of agricultural extraction, treating African ecosystems as raw material for metropolitan industrial needs rather than complex systems supporting diverse communities and livelihoods. Colonial planners systematically privileged European scientific authority while dismissing centuries of accumulated local knowledge about soil management, crop rotation, and sustainable agriculture in semi-arid environments. This was not mere cultural arrogance but a strategy to delegitimize indigenous expertise that might challenge extractive development models. The technocratic arrogance that characterized the scheme operated through seemingly neutral technical assessments that invariably concluded African farming methods were inefficient and required external intervention. The extensive documentation produced by the scheme, soil surveys, labor studies, and economic projections generated seemingly objective knowledge that justified continued intervention while obscuring its exploitative logic.

This historical analysis contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize both business history and development studies by revealing how seemingly neutral economic interventions operate as mechanisms of imperial control. It demonstrates business history's potential to illuminate not merely corporate strategies and market dynamics, but the fundamental relationships between capitalism, environment, and empire that continue to shape global inequalities. The scheme reveals how corporations like Unilever could pursue global expansion strategies through development interventions while maintaining the ideological fiction of humanitarian progress. For scholars committed to more equitable analytical frameworks, the Groundnut Scheme serves as both cautionary tale and methodological guide — revealing how historical analysis can expose the power relations embedded in apparently technical development interventions.

As contemporary challenges from climate change to global inequality intensify pressure for transformative development approaches, understanding the Groundnut Scheme's logic becomes increasingly urgent. The scheme's history suggests that genuine alternatives require not merely better policies or more appropriate technologies, but fundamental changes in who controls resources, knowledge, and decision-making processes. This perspective demands that we recognize development not merely as a technical challenge of increasing productivity or efficiency, but fundamentally as a question of power: over land, resources, knowledge, and people. The scheme's legacy of environmental degradation, social disruption, and institutional dependence continues to shape East African development possibilities seven decades later, demonstrating how colonial interventions create lasting constraints on postcolonial sovereignty. Only through such recognition — informed by rigorous historical analysis of how business and empire have collaborated to shape development practice — can we begin to imagine and implement forms of development that serve human and ecological flourishing rather than metropolitan accumulation and corporate profit.

Funding: This work was supported by the SNF under Grant 216546.

Acknowledgments: The author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI, version July 2025) to support language improvement during the writing process. The tool was employed to enhance clarity, grammar, and fluency in English expression. All content was reviewed and edited by the author(s) to ensure accuracy and originality.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

OFC	Overseas Food Corporation
UAC	United Africa Company
CDC	Colonial Development Corporation
SWAPO	South West African People's Organisation
FRELIMO	Mozambican Liberation Movement
TPDF	Tanzania People's Defence Force

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