

Philanthrocapitalism: The Gates Foundation's African Programs are not Charity

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From 2009 to 2011, Bill Gates' foundation spent \$478,302,627 to influence African agricultural development. Adding in the value of grants since then, the Foundation's outlay to influence African agriculture so far has probably been around \$2 billion. Of course, Gates is not an African, not a scholar of Africa, not a farmer, and not a development expert. But he is a very rich man, and he knows how he wants to remake the world.

Gates' support for ag development strategies favors industrial, high-tech, capitalist market approaches. In particular, his support for genetically engineered crops as a solution for world hunger is of concern to those of us - in Africa and the U.S. - involved in promoting sustainable, equitable agricultural policies.

Philanthrocapitalism

"Tech's elite, lauded for their originality, are influencing media, politics and society at large with a kind of venture philanthropy, much as their industrial predecessors did more than 100 years ago." [Susan Cagle, NY Times,, May 29, 2016]

The activities of the Gates Foundation are a major example of what has come to be called "philanthrocapitalism". Philanthrocapitalism is an attempt to use market processes to do good, and therefore problematic as markets are ill-suited to produce socially constructive ends. Its advocates often expect financial returns or secondary benefits, over the long term, from their investments in social programs. Philanthropy becomes another part of the engine of profit and corporate control. Gates promotes neoliberal economic policies and corporate globalization.

Bill Gates, who has regular access to world leaders and is in effect personally bankrolling hundreds of universities, international organisations, NGOs and media outlets, has become the single most influential voice in international development. Closer examination of the BMGF is critical given that its influence is vast, indeed greater than most donor governments. The BMGF provides more aid to global health than any country donor and is the fifth largest donor to agriculture in developing countries. In 2013, only 11 countries spent more on aid than the BMGF, making it the world's 12th largest donor. The Gates Foundation has become a bigger donor than countries such as Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ireland and Italy.

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“the trend to involve business in addressing poverty and inequality is central to the priorities and funding of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We argue that this is far from a neutral charitable strategy but instead an ideological commitment to promote neoliberal economic policies and corporate globalisation. Big business is directly benefitting, in particular in the fields of agriculture and health, as a result of the foundation’s activities, despite evidence to show that business solutions are not the most effective.” [Global Justice Now (UK): “Gated Development Is the Gates Foundation always a force for good?” Janaury 2016]

High Tech vs Agroeciology

Bill Gates has a worldview colored by his own personal experiences—that high tech provides the preferred, if not only, solutions to social problems—not just about genetic engineering but for a wholly industrialized ag system. However, his technocratic ideology runs counter to the best informed science. The World Bank and the UN funded 400 scientists, over three years, to compile the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). Its conclusions in 2009 were diametrically opposed, at both philosophical and practical levels, to those espoused by Gates. It recommended research that "would focus on local priorities identified through participatory and transparent processes, and favor multifunctional solutions to local problems," and it concluded that biotechnology alone will not solve the food needs of Africa.

The IAASTD suggests that rather than pursuing industrial farming models, "agro-ecological" methods provide the most viable, proven, and reliable means to enhance global food security, especially in light of climate change. These include implementing practical scientific research based on traditional ecological approaches, so farmers avoid disrupting the natural carbon, nitrogen and water cycles, as conventional agriculture has done.

Olivier De Schutter, formerly the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, reinforced the IAASTD research. He too concluded that agro-ecological farming has far greater potential for fighting hunger, particularly during economic and climatically uncertain times.

However,

“In February 2012, the Gates Foundation announced it was giving \$200 million to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), one of the three Rome-based agricultural organizations of the UN. On the day of the announcement, Bill Gates had also been invited to speak at IFAD’s Governing Council. In his speech, Gates implored countries to bring ‘agricultural science and technology to poor farmers’, for which ‘the real expertise lies with private sector companies’. This was a reference to GM and biotechnology, . . . “ [Global Justice Now, *ibid*]

Agroecological practices have consistently proven capable of sustainably increasing productivity. Conversely, the present GM crops, based on industrial agriculture, generally have not increased yields over the long run, despite their increased input costs and dependence. The Union of Concerned Scientists details GM crops' underperformance in their 2009 report, "Failure to Yield."

[http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/our-failing-food-system/genetic-engineering/failure-to-yeild.html] This was re-affirmed in a story in the NY Times this autumn. ["Doubts about the promised bounty of genetically modified crops," Danny Hakim, New York Times, October 29, 2016

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/business/gmo-promise-falls-short.html?_r=0]

Using the guidelines that Miguel Altieri has laid down, agroecology consists of "broad performance criteria which includes properties of ecological sustainability, food security, economic viability, resource conservation and social equity, as well as increased production. . . . To attain this understanding agriculture must be conceived of as an ecological system as well as a human dominated socio-economic system."

[http://nature.berkeley.edu/~miguel-alt/what_is_agroecology.html] This goes far beyond the definition used, for example, by the OECD as "the study of the relation of agricultural crops and environment." In other words, in addition to embodying the idea of sustainability, agroecology includes principles of democracy.

The Gates Foundation claims to support agroecology, but when we analyzed the first five grants they promoted this way we found that none of them met any of the criteria.

For example, the Gates Foundation touted a \$10 million grant to Conservation International in 2012 as "agroecological." However, this grant is merely a program of monitoring what is happening on the ground in African agriculture. The Foundation's press release describes it as:

(Providing) tools to ensure that agricultural development does not degrade natural systems and the services they provide, especially for smallholder farmers. It will also fill a critical unmet need for integrating measurements of agriculture, ecosystem services and human well-being by pooling near real-time and multi-scale data into an open-access online dashboard that policy makers will be able to freely use and customize to inform smart decision making. The raw data will be fully accessible and synthesized into six simple holistic indicators that communicate diagnostic information about complex agro-ecosystems, such as: availability of clean water, the resilience of crop production to climate variability or the resilience of ecosystem services and livelihoods to changes in the agricultural system

[http://www.conservation.org/newsroom/pressreleases/Pages/Global_Tool_to_Gauge_Earths_and_Humanitys_Vital_Signs_Launches_in_Africa.aspx]

This is really a top-down technocratic program, hardly qualifying as agroecological. In fact, while it might be a beneficial activity, it could be used as a perfect illustration of trying to use an appealing label to whitewash its opposite. A Gates official claims that it

will be "for decision-makers," but these users appear to be hierarchical elites, not smallholders-who are unlikely to have "an open-access online dashboard" in their fields.

Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biosafety said of the Gates Foundation grant, "(Genetically modified) nitrogen-fixing crops are not the answer to improving the fertility of Africa's soils. African farmers are the last people to be asked about such projects. This often results in the wrong technologies being developed, which many farmers simply cannot afford."

She said farmers need ways to build up resilient soils that are both fertile and adaptable to extreme weather. "We also want our knowledge and skills to be respected and not to have inappropriate solutions imposed on us by distant institutions, charitable bodies or governments," Mayet said.

Genetic contamination is also a strategy of the promoters of GE. In 2002, Emmy Simmons, then-assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, stated that "in four years, enough (genetically engineered) crops will have been planted in South Africa that the pollen will have contaminated the entire continent." Biotechnology cannot coexist with agro-ecological techniques and traditional knowledge.

In addition, the foundation has become the world's leading funder of research into the genetic modification (GM) of crops and is funding organizations to push GM crops across Africa and to change national legislation on this issue; however, there is considerable opposition because GM threatens conventional and organic production as well as the autonomy of African producers and nations. Thus, Gates is also leading the push for massive increases in the use of chemicals by African farmers. In addition, the Foundation is promoting the privatization of seed production to benefit mainly US and European agribusiness by pressuring African nations to pass laws and join the UPOV system which will criminalize ancient practices of seed saving and sharing, turning seeds wholly into commodities to be bought and sold.. These Foundation priorities are a direct challenge to the increasingly popular movements in support of food sovereignty and agroecological farming in Africa.

How This Works Out

Second, Gates funds A Green Revolution for Africa (popularly known AGRA) and African front groups whose work with Monsanto and other multinational agricultural corporations directly undermines existing grassroots efforts at improving African agricultural production. Gates has become a stalking horse for corporate proponents promoting industrial agricultural paradigms, which view African hunger simply as a business opportunity. His foundation has referred to the world's poor as presenting "a fast growing consumer market." Referring to the world's poor as "BOP" (the bottom of the pyramid), he insists they must be subsumed into a global capitalist system, one which has done so well to enrich him. His philanthropy is really "philanthrocapitalism."

The Foundation has referred to the displacement of smallholder farmers as “urban mobility.”

By and large, Gates' grants do not support locally defined priorities, they do not fit within the holistic approach urged by many development experts, and they do not investigate the long-term effectiveness and risks of genetic modification. The choice of a high-risk, high-tech project over more modest but effective agricultural techniques is problematic, offering no practical solutions for the present and near-future concerns of the people who run small farms.

A rich Bill Gates spending money on the poor in a high-profile, technology-fixated way reinforces the notion that development is about charity and ‘delivering solutions’ to the poor. Charity can certainly help promote development, but when this approach becomes the development model, as it will tend to when ‘donors’ have so much influence over policies, the ‘poor’ become dependent on the ‘rich’, and the latter are seen as saviours while the poor are simply recipients of favours. In this sense, philanthropy is the enemy of justice.

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*Despite the impression that Bill Gates is ‘giving away’ his fortune to charity, his estimated net worth is constantly increasing. According to Forbes, Gates’ personal wealth has risen from \$56 billion in 2011 to \$78.9 billion in 2015 – an increase of \$23 billion in four years, roughly the same amount of money that the BMGF has disbursed since its inception.¹³ In January 2014, the Guardian reported that a 40 per cent increase in Microsoft shares boosted Bill Gates’ fortune by \$15.8 billion in 2013.¹⁴ That same year, the BMGF gave out grants worth \$3.6 billion. . . . much of the money the BMGF has to spend derives from investments in some of the world’s biggest and most controversial companies; thus the BMGF’s ongoing work significantly depends on the ongoing profitability of corporate America. [Global Justice Now, *ibid*]*

Conclusion

While successful in his chosen field, Gates has no expertise in the farm field. This is not to say that he and his fellow philanthropists cannot contribute - they certainly can. However, some circumspection and humility would go a long way to heal the rifts they have opened. African farmers never asked to be beaten with the big stick of high-input proprietary technology; doing so continues neo-imperialism and the perpetuation of foreign-imposed African "failure." Africans urge Bill Gates to engage with them in a more broadly consultative, agroecological approach. The Gates Foundation is certainly a powerful force, but so is the people when united for justice, democracy. And food sovereignty.