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Bill Gates and the Green Revolution do Africa

Posted by Admin on January 18, 2010 6:09 AM

Thanks to **Wendy Holm P.Ag.** for this story!

Filed Under: Food, Technology

Last October, in his first major address on the subject, Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates announced \$120 million US in grants to support nine agricultural projects in Africa and India. This latest donation brings his Foundation's support for agricultural development to \$1.4 billion. According to Gates, this is just the beginning...



Speaking in Des Moines, Iowa on the eve of World Food Day, Gates praised Nobel Prize-winning scientist Norman Borlaug, who developed a disease resistant variety of wheat that saved "hundreds of millions" of lives. Fueled by Borlaug's success and Rockefeller family money, the ensuing "Green Revolution" was, according to Gates, "one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century", that "didn't go far enough. It didn't go to Africa."

Brainchild of a trip to Mexico in the early '40's by Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Wallace (founder of Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed, also US Secretary of Agriculture and Vice President under F.D. Roosevelt), the Green Revolution was based on solving world hunger through the development of hybrid seeds for emerging markets. Mexico had asked the US for help to develop a new variety of wheat for its growing population. After that trip, Rockefeller funded it and hired Borlaug to get it done. According to Borlaug "We spent nearly 20 years breeding high-yield dwarf wheat that resisted a variety of plant pests and diseases and yielded two to three times more grain than traditional varieties."

Picking up from where Rockefeller left off, Gates is convinced that the future for agriculture — not only Africa but also the rest of the world — lies in genetically modified crops.

"We have to develop crops that can grow in a drought; that can survive in a flood; that can resist pests and disease. We need higher yields on the same land in harsher weather. And we will never get it without a continuous and urgent science-based search to increase productivity."

Endowed with \$34.6 billion, the Gates Foundation must donate at least \$1.5 billion a year to charitable projects to maintain its tax status; 2008 grant payments were almost double that and their donation budget for the health sector exceeds that of the World Health Organization.

According to the FAO, 85 percent of the world's farmers farm less than two hectares. Together with their families, they represent one-third of the world's population. Of those farmers with one or more hectares of GM crops, 90 percent are smallholders in developing countries. In Africa, 4 out of 5 farmers are smallholders, the majority women.

Gates believes that helping the world's poorest smallholder farmers grow more crops and get them to market "is the world's single most powerful lever for reducing hunger and poverty..."

The recently announced funding for Africa will support the following projects:

- funding for legumes that fix nitrogen in the soil,
- development of higher yielding varieties of sorghum and millet;
- development of new varieties of sweet potatoes that resist pests and have a higher vitamin content;
- funding to ACRA (The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, heavily supported by both the Gates and the Rockefeller foundations) to support the creation of government policies for small farmers and provide "training and resources" to African governments as they develop laws and regulations concerning the use of biotechnologies;

Impressive, yes. We are losing the fight against poverty. In 2005, 15 years of consecutive

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poverty reductions came to a sudden halt, and poverty and hunger has been on the rise ever since. Africa, home to over 200 million chronically malnourished people, desperately needs assistance.

But Gates philanthropic support to Africa is not without controversy.

For many, "Green Revolution" is synonymous with large scale mono-cropping, high levels of pesticide and chemical use, loss of biodiversity, a high degree of mechanization, the depletion of soil nutrients, water erosion, loss of domestic food supplies as land shifts to production of non-food and export crops, and alienation of peasant farmers from the land. Gates acknowledges this but says he wants to do things differently in Africa.

What Gates remains committed to is the Green Revolution's core belief that the solution to world hunger lies in genetically modified seeds. And therein lies the real controversy.

Gates and his colleagues at the Rockefeller Foundation, the World Bank, the United Nations World Food Program, the International Rice Institute argue that genetic modification of plants allows for reduced pesticide use, drought and flood tolerance, higher yields and the ability to incorporate nutrients not naturally occurring, thereby helping to boost production and alleviate hunger. Companies like Dupont/Pioneer Hi-Bred, Monsanto, Syngenta and others who produce and sell genetically modified seeds agree.

But there are many respected policy-makers and scientists who make strong arguments against the introduction of genetically modified crops to Africa. They include genetic instability and cross contamination of genetic material (development of super weeds), development of pesticide resistant bugs, reduction in bio-diversity (e.g. Bt corn pollen is toxic to Monarch Butterfly), potential human health effects (peas in Bangladesh and India), ecological hazards associated with terminator gene technology, cost to farmers to annually purchase new seeds (cannot save seeds), impediments to future trade with Europe (which bans GMO's) and ethical issues such as patenting genetic material, illegal extraction/expropriation of local genetic material and the resulting lack of fair and equitable distribution of resources.

Difficult questions. With no easy answers. Gates, through the magnitude of his targeted philanthropy, will undoubtedly change the face of African agriculture. Whether this will contribute positively to the long term sustainability of its communities remains to be seen.

Global agribusiness has used the green revolution as a trampoline to colonize the soils of Latin America. Africa is the dark continent about to light up. This time, it will begin with helping the small, local farmers. By offering to sell them magic seeds that may, in the end, wind up costing them the farm.

» AFP

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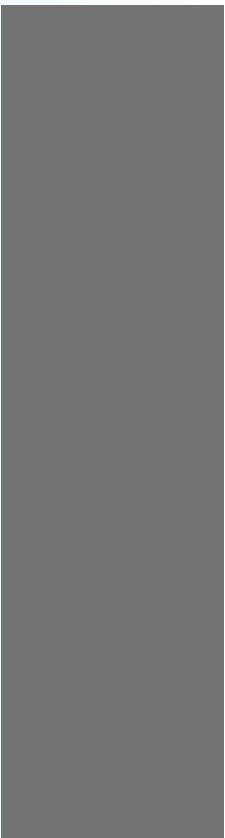
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