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Another silver bullet for Africa?

Bill Gates to resurrect the Rockefeller Foundation's decaying Green Revolution

"Now it's Africa's turn. This is only the beginning of the continent's Green Revolution. The end goal is that within 20 years, farmers will double or even triple their yields and sell the surplus at market. This is a vision of a new Africa, where farmers aren't doomed to a life of hunger and poverty, where people can look toward the future with promise."

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 12 September 2006

In a fanfare of publicity, the Bill & Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundations announced on 12 September that they have teamed up in a new 'Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa'. A day later, probably in an orchestrated move, Jacques Diouf, Director General of UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), called for support for a second Green Revolution to feed the world's growing population. UN boss Kofi Annan also weighed in to support the initiative.

The core of this Gates/Rockefeller initiative is the breeding of new seeds and getting Africa's small farmers to use them. Gates will put up US\$100 million, and Rockefeller will contribute another US\$50 million plus its long experience in this field. The Gates Foundation, which had been focusing on health care since it was started, has only recently spotted agriculture as an issue to spend money on. At the press conference launching the initiative, Bill Gates stressed that this is just one of the first of many investments in the agricultural arena likely to come from his foundation, currently the world's richest charity with over \$60 billion in funds.

While the head of the Microsoft empire puts up most of the money, the real mover behind this initiative (and its primary beneficiary) is the Rockefeller Foundation. The new money provides a tremendous boost for its programme and strategy in Africa. Rockefeller was the lead agency behind the push for the Green Revolution when it started in the 1950s. Launched at the height of the cold war to counter the threat of red revolution sweeping the countryside in large parts of Asia and Latin America, the Green Revolution is often described as an agricultural development project based on the breeding of new crop varieties that respond better to fertilizer, agrochemicals and irrigation. Its

impact on farming and food production has provoked bitter controversy: its proponents claim that it has saved millions of lives by increasing agricultural productivity, while its critics point to the devastating impact it has had on small farmers and the environment. Nobody denies that it generated a massive global market for seed, pesticide and fertilizer corporations.

Talk has been going on for decades now about giving Africa its own Green Revolution. Everybody – proponents and detractors alike – agree that in Africa the first Green Revolution wasn't a great success. So how come? Why didn't the Green Revolution work in Africa? More importantly, are those pushing new agricultural technologies learning the lessons of the past?

Learning from the past?

The people at the Rockefeller Foundation, who are the real masterminds behind this “new” initiative, point to the complexity of Africa's agriculture and its lack of infrastructure to explain that the Green Revolution largely ‘bypassed’ this continent. But Green Revolution technology didn't ‘bypass’ Africa: it failed. It was unpopular and ineffective. Fertiliser use, for example, increased substantially from the 1970s onwards in sub-Saharan Africa, while per capita agricultural production fell. In Malawi, despite the widespread release of hybrid maize, the average maize yield remains roughly what it was in 1961. Yield increases were also low or stagnant across Africa in other important crops such as cassava, yams, rice, wheat, sorghum, and millet. Even the Rockefeller Foundation admits that Africa's experience raises serious questions about the Green Revolution approach: “Lingering low yields among African farmers for crops such as maize and rice, where adoption of improved varieties has been appreciable, call into question the overall value of the improved germplasm to local farmers.”

With this evidence on the table, and Rockefeller's own senior officials questioning the Green Revolution's single focus on improved seeds, one would expect the new Gates/Rockefeller initiative to take a different approach. Instead, we get more of the same. In the background document that the people at Rockefeller drew up to explain the initiative they conclude: “A main reason for the inefficiency [of Africa's agriculture] is that the crops on the great majority of small farms are not the high-yielding varieties in common use on the other continents”. They point to the need for more fertilizer use, more irrigation, better infrastructure and more trained scientists.

From this rather simplistic analysis (essentially saying that the problem is Africa, not the technology), we then get a straightforward action plan repeating Rockefeller's approaches in the past:

- Breed new crop varieties: at least 200 new varieties for Africa to be churned out in the next 5 years.
- Train African scientists to work with them, spearheading the new revolution.
- Get the new seeds to the farmers through seed companies and by providing training, capital and credit to establish a network of small agro-dealers “who can serve as conduits of seeds, fertilizers, chemicals and knowledge to smallholder farmers”.

In addition to getting new seeds to farmers, getting more chemical fertilizers to them is stressed as an important part of the new Green Revolution in Africa. Bad transportation and overpricing because of government taxes and other tariffs are identified as the main bottlenecks. So in essence, and despite some lip service to the shortcomings of earlier efforts, this initiative replicates exactly the approach of its ill-fated predecessor: the main problem is that farmers don't have access to new technology, so we are going to produce it and ensure that it gets into their hands.

The broader picture

It is incredible that this simplistic line of thinking is still being followed after so many years of Green Revolution debate. The whole question of the tremendous environmental damage caused by the Green Revolution model of agricultural development relying on the lavish use of water, fertilizer and pesticides is completely ignored and pushed aside. The soil erosion and degradation caused by the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides, and the resulting destruction of agricultural productivity in Africa are not even mentioned. Instead, the old mantra of new seeds and more fertilizer is repeated. The explosive question of genetically engineered crops is cleverly avoided in the propaganda – which doesn't mean that it's not there: both the Gates and Rockefeller foundations are amongst the most active supporters of genetic engineering in Africa.

Also totally ignored is the central role of local communities, their traditional seed systems and rich indigenous knowledge, despite increased international recognition of their crucial importance. Rather than building on these foundations and on the tremendous treasure of biological diversity that is available in the villages, Rockefeller has decided to replace it with "improved varieties".

But perhaps the starker omission is the project's failure to consider the socio-economic consequences of its techno-fix model. The thinking is: improved varieties give more production, which yields more income. But, as more than 600 NGOs put it in an open letter to the Director General of the FAO in 2004: "if we have learned anything from the failures of the Green Revolution, it is that technological 'advances' in crop genetics for seeds that respond to external inputs go hand in hand with increased socio-economic polarization, rural and urban impoverishment, and greater food insecurity. The tragedy of the Green Revolution lies precisely in its narrow technological focus that ignored the far more important social and structural underpinnings of hunger." It is indeed hard to believe that this reality has not yet sunk into the minds of US "development" planners like those at the Rockefeller Foundation.

This reality has only been growing more dramatic. Under pressure from international and bilateral trade instruments, especially under the World Trade Organization and the impending Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union, African governments are increasingly opening up their markets to let their farmers "compete" with the heavily subsidised food and other agricultural produce dumped into their economies by the US and the EU. Earlier, structural adjustment programmes imposed by the world's financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, forced African governments to dismantle public agricultural research and extension programmes and drop whatever protection and incentive mechanisms existed for their small farmers. To rub salt in the wound, the same African governments are then forced by the same agencies to devote their most fertile land to the growing of export commodities for markets in the North, thus pushing small farmers off their land and food production out of rural economies.

The bitter irony is that many of these measures that are now destroying African farming are being supported, if not instigated, by the very corporations whose charity foundations are now coming to Africa's "rescue" with technology programmes.

The seeds of privatisation

If there is anything new in the Gates/Rockefeller push for a Green Revolution in Africa, it is its reliance on the private sector as the main vehicle to deliver the goods and control the process. A substantial part of the funding is earmarked for seed companies and 'agro-dealers' to get the seeds

and the chemicals to the farmer. This approach fits very well with Rockefeller's agricultural programmes in Africa, a major element of which is the development of private seed companies. Not surprisingly, Bill Gates' vision for Africa follows the same lines. After talking about the problems of Africa, he says: "But Melinda and I also have seen reason for hope – African plant scientists developing higher-yielding crops, African entrepreneurs starting seed companies to reach small farmers, and agrodealers reaching more and more small farmers with improved farm inputs and farm management practices." The farmers are the final object to reach, not the first point from which to start.

Also new is the growing trend for corporate charities to take over the role of publicly funded development programmes. Development aid is shrinking, while private fortunes, and the need to give money away through corporate philanthropy, are blooming. This initiative is just one of the latest in a series of large private charities turning their eye – and their money – on Africa's farmers. In the same week that Gates and Rockefeller announced their initiative, the foundation headed by George Soros pledged US\$50 million for the Millennium Villages Project, oriented to help rural villages in Africa out of poverty. A few months earlier, Bill Clinton's foundation had pledged fertilizers and irrigation systems support to Rwandan farmers. Much earlier, another US ex-president, Jimmy Carter, teamed up with a Japanese tycoon to launch the "Sasakawa 2000" project to bring seeds and fertilizers to Africa. Charity foundations of companies such as Dupont, Syngenta and Monsanto have been penetrating the international agriculture research system this way for a while – and are set to do so increasingly. In the mindset of such corporate foundations, progress is guided by the vision and interests of transnational corporations, not by the collective wisdom of its rural communities.

The problem is not that the Green Revolution has "bypassed" Africa. It is that several decades of experience, lessons and new insights have bypassed the Green Revolution sponsors – now backed by corporate foundations – who insist on an outdated technology model that benefits corporations, not farmers.

Sources & further reading

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- "FAO declares war on farmers, not on hunger", Open Letter sent to Jacques Diouf, Director General of FAO, Rome, 16 June 2004, <http://www.grain.org/front/?id=24>
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