

“Green Revolution (Africa) Beta” programme out now (trial version only)*

Microsoft’s Gates throws \$100 million at a “new” Green Revolution for Africa

In a fanfare of publicity, the Bill & Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundations announced on 12 September their new joint “Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa”.

The core of this 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 the first of many investments in the agricultural arena likely to come from his foundation, currently the world’s richest charity, with over US\$60 billion in funds.

While the head of the Microsoft computer software empire puts up most of the money, the Rockefeller Foundation is the real mover behind this initiative. The new money provides a tremendous boost for its programme and strategy in Africa. Rockefeller was the leading agency behind the original Green Revolution, launched at the height of the cold war in the 1950s to counter the threat of red revolution in large parts of Asia and Latin America. The Green Revolution was based on breeding new crop varieties that respond better to fertiliser, 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 fertiliser corporations.

Another point that everybody agrees on – proponents and detractors alike – is that the Green Revolution didn’t work in Africa. Do those promoting new agricultural technologies know why it didn’t?

Learning from the past?

The Rockefeller Foundation explains that the Green Revolution largely bypassed Africa, pointing to the complexity of the continent’s agriculture and its lack of infrastructure. 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. Yield remained stagnant or increased only marginally across Africa in important crops such as maize, cassava, yams, rice, wheat, sorghum, and millet.

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 initiative to take a different approach. Instead, we get more of the same. A background document that the people at Rockefeller drew up to explain the initiative concludes: “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”.

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 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”.

Bad transportation and overpricing because of government taxes and other tariffs are identified as the main bottlenecks in getting new seeds and more chemical fertilisers to farmers. In essence, despite some lip service to the shortcomings of earlier efforts, this initiative replicates exactly the approach of its ill-fated predecessor: 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 tremendous environmental damage caused by the Green Revolution model of agricultural development, relying on the lavish use of water, fertiliser and pesticides, is ignored. The soil erosion and degradation caused by the use of chemical fertiliser and pesticides, and the resulting

(*) This programme is a trial version only and may expire suddenly and without warning in a few years time. Hotfixes for this trial version Beta programme may or may not be available for implementation. Parts of this programme will almost certainly be protected by various international and national intellectual property laws.



destruction of agricultural productivity, are not mentioned. Instead, the mantra of new seeds and more fertiliser is repeated. The explosive question of genetically engineered crops is studiously avoided in the propaganda – but both the Gates and Rockefeller foundations are among the most active supporters of genetic engineering in Africa.

Also ignored, despite increased international recognition of its crucial importance, is the central role played by local communities, their traditional seed systems and rich indigenous knowledge. Rather than building on these foundations and utilising the treasure of biological diversity available in the villages, Rockefeller has decided to rely on “improved varieties”.

Perhaps the starkest omission is the project’s failure to consider the socio-economic consequences of its model. 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 polarisation, 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.”

This reality has grown steadily more dramatic. Structural adjustment measures imposed in the past by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund forced African governments to dismantle public agricultural programmes and drop protection mechanisms for their small farmers. The same agencies forced those governments to devote their most fertile land to growing export commodities for the North, thus pushing small farmers off their land and food production out of rural economies. Now, under pressure from the World Trade Organisation and the impending Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union, African governments are increasingly opening up their markets, forcing farmers to “compete” with the heavily subsidised food and produce dumped into their economies by the US and the EU.

The bitter irony is that many of the measures now destroying African farming are being supported, if not instigated, by the very corporations whose charity foundations are 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. A substantial part of the funding is earmarked for seed companies and ‘agro-dealers’ to get the seeds and chemicals to the farmer. The farmer is the final object to reach, rather than point from which to start. In the mindset of such corporate foundations, progress is guided by the vision and interests of transnational corporations, not by the collective wisdom of 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 sponsors of the Green Revolution – now backed by corporate foundations – who insist on an outdated technology model that benefits corporations, not farmers.



This “Sprouting up” is a shortened version of a longer report by GRAIN, Another silver bullet for Africa? Bill Gates to resurrect the Rockefeller Foundation’s decaying Green Revolution, “Against the grain”, September 2006, <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=19>