

MESSENERS OF GATES' AGENDA: HOW THE CORNELL ALLIANCE SPREADS DISINFORMATION AND DISCREDITS AGROECOLOGY ¹

Community Alliance for Global Justice / AGRA Watch

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has emerged over the past decade as an extremely influential actor in an ever-intensifying battle over the future of food and agriculture, pumping major funding into industrial agriculture while participating in powerful alliances seeking to reshape the trajectory of global governance of the food system. While some of these activities are drawing increasing scrutiny and analysis, this study examines a lesser-known aspect of BMGF's strategy: framing the debates and shaping how issues are communicated, as well as fostering a new generation of leadership to carry forward its mission. Funded by BMGF, the Cornell Alliance for Science (CAS) uses its affiliation with the only ivy league institution that is a land-grant college to claim scientific neutrality while assiduously promoting communications aligned with agribusiness in its use of fellows, especially those from Africa.



"Entrance to Bill & Melinda Gates Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY", by Kenneth C. Zirkel, is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>).

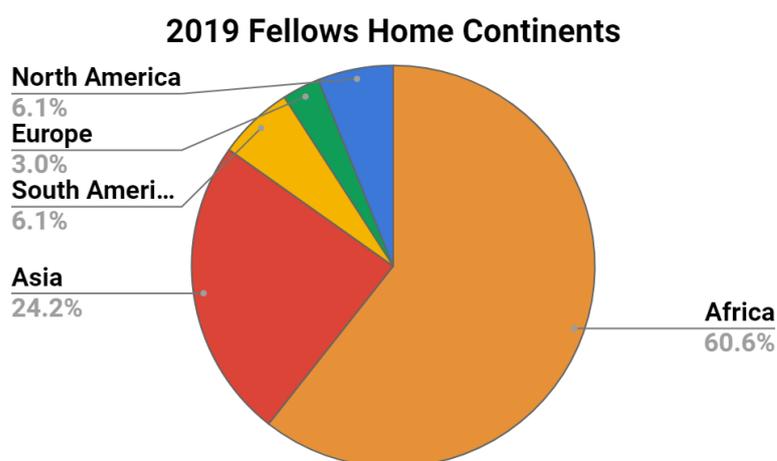
¹ Extracted from: "Messengers of Gates' Agenda: A Case Study of the Cornell Alliance for Science Global Leadership Fellows Program". *Community Alliance for Global Justice / AGRA Watch*, 2020. <https://cagj.org/2020/08/new-agra-watch-report-messengers-of-gates-agenda-a-case-study-of-the-cornell-alliance-for-science-global-leadership-fellows-program/>

Housed in Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in Ithaca, New York, the Cornell Alliance for Science (CAS) was launched in 2014 through a \$5.6 million endowment by the Gates Foundation “to promote access to scientific innovation as a means of enhancing food security, improving environmental sustainability and raising the quality of life globally.”² According to CAS director Sarah Evanega, CAS aims to “depolarize the GMO debate and engage with potential partners who may share common values around poverty reduction and sustainable agriculture, but may not be well informed about the potential biotechnology has for solving major agricultural challenges.”³ A second grant of \$6.4 million in 2017 brought the total contribution of BMGF to CAS to \$12 million. BMGF remains the primary funder of CAS to date, while fifteen additional institutional and individual contributors of \$1000 or more are listed on the CAS website.

CAS describes its main strategies as: a) establishing a global network; b) “training with a purpose”; c) developing multimedia communications on agricultural biotechnology.

These strategies come together through its Global Leadership Fellows Program, a 12-week intensive training course held each year at Cornell bringing together 20–30 young professionals, mainly from the Global South, and particularly Africa. While the geographical reach of the program has been broadening, the majority of fellows – 60.6% in 2019 – were of African origin, in keeping with prior years (See Figure 1). Upon examination of the fellows' affiliations, multiple linkages with BMGF become apparent. Cross checking the fellows' affiliations with grant disbursement data provided on the BMGF website, we can see that 34% of all the African fellows from 2015–2019 were associated with organizations that received funding from BMGF. Together, organizations connected to the fellows received over \$712 million from BMGF from 2003 through 2019.

Figure 1: Home continents of 2019 CAS Fellows



Source: authors' own, based on data from CAS website

² Cornell Alliance for Science. Our Mission. <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/about/mission/>

³ Shackford, S. 2014. New Cornell Alliance for Science gets \$5.6 million grant. <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2014/08/new-cornell-alliance-science-gets-56-million-grant>.

The strong overlap between the groups funded by BMGF for agricultural development and the CAS fellows gives additional meaning to the CAS strategy of building a global network, begging the question, *whom does this network serve, and toward what ends?* Given these linkages, it comes as little surprise that there are strong parallels between the types of technologies promoted by BMGF through its agricultural investments and the messages coming from CAS and its fellows – many of whom come from BMGF-backed organizations. In analyzing the work put out by CAS and its fellows, a striking pattern emerges of there being a singular focus and message running throughout almost all of it: an uncritical promotion of biotechnology. Furthermore, in a distortion of scientific methodology, this position is not vetted against any diverging ones. What adds power to the narratives of CAS it is that its messages are not coming from BMGF or from its agribusiness partners directly, but from mostly young, African voices that make up its Fellowship Program, ostensibly informed by their lived experiences and claimed scientific rigor, given the affiliation with Cornell.

Through its funding for the Cornell Alliance for Science, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is seeking to shape public opinion in favor of adopting GMOs and corporate agriculture. CAS is building a new generation of leaders to carry out BMGF's mission of spreading corporate biotechnology across the Global South, particularly Africa. A key communications strategy of CAS is to promote narratives in which biotechnology is equated with 'science' and critique of biotechnology is equated with being 'anti-science.' That the attacks on agroecology by CAS are coming at the same time that there is a mounting global scientific consensus around the merits of agroecology is no coincidence. Studies have demonstrated that perceived scientific consensus is a key factor in influencing public support on a given issue and that this tends to encourage counter-efforts around "the 'manufacture of doubt' by political and vested interests."⁴ As momentum continues to build around agroecology, its advocates can be certain that further smear campaigns and other attempts to manufacture doubt will continue. Ultimately, analyzing the Gates Foundation's networks of influence points to the need for the food sovereignty movement to develop robust communication strategies of our own.



⁴ Lewandowsky, S., Gignac, G.E. and Vaughan, S., 2013. The pivotal role of perceived scientific consensus in acceptance of science. *Nature Climate Change*, 3(4), pp.399-404. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate1720>

Appendix I

Affiliations of 2019 African CAS Fellows

| Universities |
|---|
| <p>Ahmedu Bello University (Nigeria) Purdue University Cairo University Jimma University (Ethiopia) Wageningen University (Netherlands) University of California, Davis University of Callabar (Nigeria) University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) University of Ghana University of Ibadan (Nigeria) University of Rwanda Chalimbana University (Zambia) Makarere University (Uganda) Michigan State University Mississippi State University Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) (Tanzania)</p> |
| Research/Policy |
| <p>Institute of Research in Applied Sciences and Technologies (IRSAT) Environmental Institute for Agricultural Research - Burkina Faso (INERA) Ethiopian Biotechnology Institute French Agricultural Research Center for International Development (CIRAD) Leibniz Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) National Crops Resource Research Institute (NaCRRRI) National Resource and Land Management – Lake Zone Agricultural Research Development Institute (LZARDI) Uganda's National Agricultural Research Laboratories Institute (NARL) Virus Resistant Cassava (VIRCA), part of the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center</p> |
| Media organizations |
| <p>Ghana Agricultural and Rural Development Journalists Association (GARDJA) Radio Maisha (Kenya) Science and Development Network via Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CAB) TV7 (Rwanda)</p> |
| Startup companies/private organizations |
| <p>Real Green Gold Ltd - social enterprise specializing in organic farming of tropical fruits Rwanda Youth in Agribusiness Forum - a platform established to bring together different youth organizations, individual youth farmers and entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector Mnandi Africa - helps rural women combat poverty and malnutrition through skills development, market access and agro-technologies AGCO Corporation - supports high-tech solutions for farmers</p> |
| Government-related |
| <p>Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB via AATF) Chamber of Agribusiness Ghana (CAG) National Science and Technology Council</p> |

Source: authors' own, based on data from CAS website