

COLONISING AGRICULTURE THROUGH THE FAILED GREEN REVOLUTION

BILL & MELINDA GATES: THE DYSTOPIA OF THE GREEN REVOLUTION IN AFRICA¹

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In 2006, just one year before food prices skyrocketed, the Gates Foundation launched the Global Development Programme, whose main focus was agriculture. The money to fund the operation came from the giant and unexpected mountain of money given to him by Warren Buffet, who in turn had been flooded with cash by the activities engaged in during the speculative bubble that would soon burst in the United States. It was enough to cross the sensitivity of the Rockefeller Foundation, and to launch together an invincible proposal: the gospel of the Green Revolution, Rockefeller's old warhorse, and bring it to the underdeveloped African continent.

This is how the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) was born². The basic concept is always the same. Hunger in Africa is the result of the lack of modernisation of agriculture and the absence of functioning markets. AGRA must fill this gap, it must develop synergistic action with the private sector, it must promote access to markets and disseminate agricultural innovation as a propellant capable of increasing rural productivity. Gates and Rockefeller are AGRA's main sources of funding. As such, they are the ones who identify the problem, direct its solution, place their staff in key positions, and establish the entire approach to the work.

As early as 2001, Gates had already tackled nutrition through seminal funding to the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN³), the first in a series of new public-private alliances on food. GAIN had just been born when it was able to obtain a hasty blessing from the United Nations Assembly meeting in a special session dedicated to children in 2002⁴. The Seattle couple's decision to fund this new reality was a desire "to champion the concept of a major new push for improved nutrition on a global scale, initially through *food fortification, working closely together with the private sector* and leveraging partnerships to achieve the maximum possible scale of impact"⁵. Not only did support for GAIN never stop

¹ Extracted from: Dentico N., *Ricchi e buoni? Le trame oscure del filantropocapitalismo* (2020), Editrice Missionaria Italiana, ISBN: 978-88-307-2433-4, <https://www.emi.it/ricchi-e-buoni>

² "AGRA." <https://agra.org/>

³ "Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)." <https://www.gainhealth.org/homepage>

⁴ Moench-Pfanner R. e Van Ameringen M., "The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN): A decade of partnerships to increase access to and affordability of nutritious foods for the poor", in *Food & Nutrition Bulletin*, Vol. 33, supplement 3, pp. 373-380.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

- from 2002 to 2014 the alliance received \$251 million from the Gates Foundation out of a total spending budget of \$284 million⁶ - but in 2003 Gates also began funding the research on the Golden Rice project, the genetically modified rice that "can save the lives of millions of children"⁷. The project is definitely of great value to Gates because it experiments with the idea of a "humanitarian licence", granted by Syngenta, as a donation to public institutions and farmers for the cultivation of this rice. This served as the first instance of a *humanitarianisation* of the right to food⁸ which serves to institutionally redefine practices around access to proprietary knowledge, so as to enhance the role of the industrial "donor" as a benefactor, while completely redefining the terms of the GMO debate.

AGRA points in the same direction⁹. AGRA's roots can be traced to a 2006 Rockefeller Foundation document¹⁰ that launched the concept of a dynamic, African-led alliance to help small producers and their families fight poverty and hunger.

AGRA defines Africa's agricultural problem as an issue arising from poor seed varieties, inadequate access to technology, and poor country infrastructure. Reproducing the mechanistic model that had already inspired the first Green Revolution in Asia and Latin America, AGRA was born in September 2006 "to fulfill the vision that "Africa can feed itself and the world, transforming agriculture from a solitary struggle to survive to a business that thrives"¹¹. The purpose is to promote this market ideology as a solution to the productivity deficit of African crops, which philanthropists consider to be the reason why there is a lack of food to feed the growing population of the continent, which is obviously *their* definition of the problem.

AGRA claims to be the largest entity dedicated to eradicating hunger in Africa. The Gates Foundation considers it an "African face and voice of our work". Indeed, it is a subsidiary of the foundation on the continent, given the amount of money invested - about 630 million dollars, since its establishment to date. Its faith in genetic engineering is associated with the plan to develop an intensive industrialized system for Africa involving seed companies and small farmers through agro-dealers platforms. These platforms interact with small and medium-sized companies for the supply of hybrid seeds (maize, sorghum, cassava, soya, bananas, rice, sweet potatoes, beans - the main AGRA plants), chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers to farmers. The case of Malawi offers an

⁶ Martens J., and Saetz K., *Philanthropic Power and Development: who shapes the agenda?*, p. 42.

⁷ Brooks S., "Investing in Food Security? Philanthrocapitalism, Biotechnology and Development", in Science and Technology Policy Research, Working Papers Series, SWPS 2013-12, University of Sussex, November 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁹ AGRA, *Planting the Seeds of a Green Revolution in Africa*, 2014, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/agrapasreportthires.pdf>

¹⁰ Rockefeller Foundation, "Africa Turn: the Green Revolution for the 21st Century", White Paper, Rockefeller Foundation, 2006.

¹¹ *Ibidem*

eloquent example. With \$4.3 million, AGRA financed the Malawi Agro-Dealer Strengthening Programme (MASP), conceived by the American organization Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture (CNFA)¹², which is in turn financed by Gates. It is an entity that works to promote the private sector - from large corporations to small local entrepreneurs - as a strategy of choice for the spread and development of agricultural markets and the adoption of market-oriented solutions in agriculture¹³. The giant Monsanto is one of the main beneficiaries - if not the main beneficiary - of this programme. Monsanto's own country manager in Malawi has admitted that all of their herbicide and seed sales are channelled through the platform, with an 85% increase in 2007¹⁴ ¹⁵. Through its network of agricultural dealers, these giants thus become the only channel of training and information for African farmers who, absurdly enough, cease to be food producers and become consumers of goods, engines of a powerful agrochemical machine imposed, as in a new civilizing mission, by the private sector (according to World Bank reports in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda)¹⁶.

About 75% of seed supply in Africa comes from recycling and exchange between millions of small farmers from one year to the next but, as the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACBIO) reports, "a battle against the African seed system is underway"¹⁷. A concern shared to a large extent, also, by Action Aid. In a 2009 report, the NGO warns against AGRA's overly technical orientation, which completely ignores the complex social system of agricultural production on the continent. The report considers that there is a dangerous asymmetry in the field between small producers (with their seeds) and the multinationals involved in AGRA, with their monopolistic control over seed technology. Finally, it points out the decisive issue of intellectual property rights of seeds, and the transfer of local seeds to private individuals - as was the case in Zambia and Zimbabwe¹⁸.

That, in a nutshell, is the black box of philanthropy. While preaching about "boosting the productivity and income of smallholder farmers across the

¹² "Malawi Agrodealer Strengthening Program." CNFA. <https://www.cnfa.org/program/malawi-agrodealer-strengthening-program/>

¹³ "About Us." *Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture (CNFA)*. <https://www.cnfa.org/about-us/>

¹⁴ Curtis M., e Hilary J., *The Hunger Games: How DFID support for agribusiness is fuelling poverty in Africa*, edited by War on Want, 2012, pp. 4-7,

<https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/The%20Hunger%20Games%202012.pdf>.

¹⁵ Bennet N., "Government ministers should ban Roundup – not sing its praises", in *The Guardian*, 14 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/14/roundup-government-uk-minister-ban-glyphosate>. On the same subject, see also: Gillam C., "Formulations of glyphosate-based weed killers are toxic, tests show", in *The Guardian*, 23 gennaio 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/23/formulations-glyphosate-based-weedkillers-toxic-tests>.

¹⁶ Curtis M., *Gated Development. Is The Gates Foundation Always a Force for Good?*, Global Justice Now Report, second edition, June 2016, p. 29. Accessible at https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/resources/gjn_gates_report_june_2016_web_final_version_2.pdf

¹⁷ "Crunch Time for the Seed Treaty." African Centre for Biodiversity (ACBIO), October 8, 2019. <https://www.acbio.org.za/en/crunch-time-seed-treaty>

¹⁸ Action Aid, *Assessing the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa*, Action Aid International Report, 2009, p. 14.

continent"¹⁹, it is spreading opportunities for major economic interests, while undermining any in-depth analysis of African agriculture and respect for local practices and knowledge.

AGRA declares on its website that it embraces a model of participatory and self-determined development (home-grown), calling itself an "alliance led by Africans with roots in farming communities across the continent"²⁰. Too bad that there is no trace of indigenous participation at all.



"A dry seed pod of the *Moringa oleifera* tree", by T.K. Naliaka, is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>).

The Gates Foundation provides subsidies to biotechnological research programmes and uses this economic leverage to finance research circuits that have little or no participation. Farmers are merely recipients of technologies developed in laboratories and sold to them by large companies.

The critical voices on the continent were not long awaited²¹, however.

¹⁹ "Agricultural Development." *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*. <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/Global-Growth-and-Opportunity/Agricultural-Development>

²⁰ "Our Story." AGRA. <https://agra.org/our-story/>

²¹ Daño E., *Unmasking the New Green Revolution in Africa: Motives, Players and Dynamics*, paper by Church Development Services (EED), Third World Network and African Centre for Biosafety, published by Third World Network, 2007, <https://www.twn.my/title2/books/green.revolution.in.africa.htm>

Taking advantage of the World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007, a composite platform of African associations, immediately manifested their collective dissent against AGRA, the continent's largest industrial agricultural war machine.²²

The GMO case is in fact the other tricky issue²³. In 2007, AGRA released an official communiqué saying that GMOs are not currently part of its programs, but that they could become part of a long-term strategy if African governments would welcome the use of GMOs in their countries. The Rockefeller Foundation had already taken early action to clear the ground with governments, organizing the 'Biotech, Breeding and Seed Systems for African Crops', an initiatory meeting, where participants were given a substantial dose of presentations on GMO research in Africa, and on experiments already underway in the continent. A small consortium of very powerful corporations - Monsanto, Dupont and Syngenta - promptly engaged AGRA to promote this agenda and enter into agreements with several national research centers, so as to establish their activity in Africa with the irrefutable humanitarian excuse. It takes nothing to seduce African scientists by funding their research, convincing decision-makers by glorifying the benefits of GMOs and then imposing them on farmers, who will certainly have no say in the matter. AGRA recruits several of them, more or less well known. Among them the famous Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI): now practically a subsidiary of Syngenta.

According to Bill Gates, GMOs are important innovations in the fight against hunger. Already in 2009, in a famous World Food Prize speech, he admitted that "some of our grants [in Africa] do include transgenic approaches, because we believe they have the potential to address farmers' challenges more efficiently than conventional techniques"²⁴.

On this basis, the foundation continues with relentless activism in financing the creation of new institutions. The African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF)²⁵, with 169 million dollars in funding over the last ten years, was created - so to speak - to instigate the illusion of African demand for GMOs. AATF acts as a broker between seed multinationals and the scientific communities of these countries to facilitate experiments aimed at developing GM monocultures, sold in the context of humanitarian programs such as Wema (Water Efficient Maize of Africa), and has the negotiating mandate on the management of corporate patents. It promotes food bio-fortification and the digitization of agriculture to bring "prosperity through technology" in the framework of the One Agriculture, One Science initiative²⁶: This involves forty-two African universities, working closely

²² *Voices from Africa: African Farmers & Environmentalists Speak Out Against a New Green Revolution in Africa*. Oakland Institute, 2009. <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/voices-africa-african-farmers-environmentalists-speak-out-against-new-green-revolution-africa>

²³ As the Action Aid International report explains, Cfr. Action Aid, *Assessing the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa*, p. 15-16.

²⁴ Philpott T., "Bill Gates reveals support for GMO", in *Grist*, 22 October 2009, <https://grist.org/article/2009-10-21-bill-gates-reveals-support-for-gmo-ag/>.

²⁵ "African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) ." <https://www.aatf-africa.org/>

²⁶ "One Agriculture-One Science': A New Partnership to Revitalize Global Agricultural Education ." | | ICRISAT | | *Press Releases 2014*. Last modified July 21, 2014. <http://www.icrisat.org/newsroom/news-releases/icrisat-pr-2014-media22.htm>

with the giants of the computer industry, starting with Microsoft. In just a few years, AATF has gained enormous importance. It is designed to expand the freedom of manoeuvre of companies, which actually have control over it²⁷, and at the same time it is accredited to participate in the definition of regional policies.

It therefore lobbies governments to persuade them to adopt biosafety laws - a prerequisite for the marketing of genetically modified products. Not surprisingly, the number of countries that have undertaken GMO research or cultivation has risen from 2 to 9 in less than a decade²⁸.

New institutions, new programmes that intersect and belong to the same core of monopolies²⁹. The thread of these processes develops through the classical patterns of the most invincible colonialist interference. AGRA has all the room for manoeuvre it needs in the domestication of governments, starting with financial lubrication. Through its policy and advocacy program, AGRA provides African governments with data collection and analysis on agricultural policies. It unleashes consultants and officials to formulate or reform national policies under the pretext of shaping "home-grown agricultural policies that provide comprehensive support to smallholder farmers"³⁰.

In this way AGRA avoids the risk of regulatory barriers in advance and adapts the laws of individual countries to its own objectives on issues such as seeds, soil quality, market access, land ownership rights, environmental regulations and digitization of processes. An interesting case in this respect is the reform of seed policies in Ghana in 2011, which allowed the introduction of GMOs and genetic research in agriculture (Ghana Biosafety Act 831)³¹. Similar pathways have been conducted in Egypt, Burkina Faso and South Africa, countries that have already completed GMO approval processes. In a network of synergies with other foundations and the corporate sector, the Gates Foundation's goal is to establish GMOs throughout Africa, with the blessing of multilateral institutions and national governments, in the name of food security by 2030³². It is no coincidence that Gates is one of the main financiers of the International Finance Corporation (IFC)³³, the right arm of the private sector within the World Bank, which commits 6% of its portfolio to support the agribusiness agenda. It calls for Sub-Saharan Africa to

²⁷ Martens J. e Seitz K., *Philanthropic Power and Development*, op. cit. pp. 50-52.

²⁸ Rock J., "We are not starving". Challenging Genetically Modified Seeds and Development in Ghana", in *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment. The Journal of Culture and Agriculture*, Vol. 41, Issue 1, June 2019, pp. 15-33, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cuag.12147> .

²⁹ McKeon N., *Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, pp. 13-30.

³⁰ In October 2009, the Gates Foundation announced the release of \$15 million in funding for the definition of new agricultural policies in Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania, with activities aimed at training policy analysts in the agricultural sector, creating think tanks, building databases to support evidence-based policy development, etc: <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2009/10/AGRA-Launches-Policy-Initiative-to-Empower-Africa-To-Shape-Agricultural-Policies>

³¹ "Ghana Has New Biosafety Law." *Afri-Law*, May 31, 2015. <https://www.afri-law.com/ghana-has-new-biosafety-law/>

³² Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *Agricultural Development Grant Overview*, 2011, <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/agricultural-development-grant-overview.pdf>

³³ Curtis M., *Gated Development*, op. cit, p. 36.

"accelerate change on the continent"³⁴ AGRA is the powerful apparatus that consolidates this agenda. A rather irresistible form of market domination. Every scientific thought based on the recognition of the Earth as living nature is relegated to the rank of "a tradition to be emancipated", that is not science, if not even downright considered anti-science to be fought in the name of innovation.

Yet, contrary to the notion that it is industrial agriculture that feeds the planet, even today only 30% of the food comes from mega farms, and 75% of the corn and soya produced with monocultures are used for fossil fuels and animal feed. 70% is instead the result of the complex knowledge, the ancient and always new work of small farmers who cultivate biodiversity, develop better varieties, in a constant discipline of relationship between soil and food.

The scientific alternative to genetic engineering that inoculates toxic genes in food is agroecology, as recognized by the international IAASTD study³⁵. Food sovereignty, freedom from hunger, passes through this route. And this is the path towards justice.



Photo: Food Sovereignty Ghana, April 2015

³⁴ International Financial Corporation (IFC),) *Investing for Impact*, IFC Annual Report 2019, p. 50. <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/4ffd985d-c160-4b5b-8fbe-3ad2d642bbad/IFC-AR19-Full-Report.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mV2uYFU>

³⁵ McIntyre, Beverly & Herren, Hans & Wakhungu, Judi & Watson, Robert. (2009). *Agriculture at a Crossroads: The Global Report*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258099731_Agriculture_at_a_Crossroads_The_Global_Report