

Organizational Sign-On Letter to The Gates Foundation

Sponsored by AGRA Watch/Community Alliance for Global Justice & La Via Campesina North America
December 7, 2010

Dear Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,

Although we share a recognition that hunger, poverty, and climate change are inter-related through the medium of agricultural policies, we are writing to express our strong concerns that the Foundation's approach to these issues—directly and through its Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) subsidiary—is unlikely to adequately address them and may well aggravate their underlying causes. We note that your activities give a nod to agroecological methods, but believe your grant funding to be heavily distorted in favor of supporting inappropriate high-tech agricultural activities, thereby ignoring the many highly credible and comprehensive scientific studies that confirm the value of small-scale agroecological approaches. We are civil society organizations, farmworkers, farmers and farmer organizations, grassroots groups, health and consumer organizations, environmental groups, scientists, and academics, and we feel it is imperative to call your attention to the following bases for our concerns:

Many of the findings of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) are of particular relevance to your work in Africa. An unparalleled survey of global agriculture commissioned and funded by the UN and World Bank, the IAASTD was conducted with the participation of more than 400 international scientists and development experts, and approved by 58 governments. The resulting 2008 report frames hunger as a fundamentally social and economic problem and warns that continued reliance on high-tech solutions (including transgenic crops) is unlikely to reduce persistent hunger and poverty and may in some cases exacerbate social inequities and environmental degradation. More importantly, the IAASTD unequivocally concludes that feeding the hungry and protecting the environment will require moving away from resource-extractive industrial agriculture and toward agroecological methods of farming. These results are echoed by UNEP and UNCTAD's report on Organic Farming and Food Security in Africa and the Rodale Institute's Farm System Trial (FST) project in the United States. The latter resoundingly established that organic crop yields rival chemical yields in years of average precipitation and surpass them in times of drought and flooding. Furthermore, the FST has proven that organic production is more energy efficient (30% less energy), creates more jobs (15% greater labor demand), and stores vast amounts of carbon in the soil (which industrially-farmed soil is unable to retain). We believe these results are relevant to African agriculture, as well.

Together, such studies provide compelling and definitive scientific evidence that agroecological agriculture has the potential to revitalize rural economies, mitigate climate change and its effects, restore and preserve the environment, eradicate poverty, and provide healthy, culturally appropriate food for all. Yet instead of pursuing this potential, we believe the Foundation is mistakenly funding an antiquated thrust to industrialize agriculture in Africa—including chemical fertilizers, pesticides, monocropping of "improved" and genetically engineered (GE) crop varieties, further deregulation of trade, and regulatory frameworks that will privatize seed—which science and historical precedent indicate will come at the expense of the hungry, small farmers, consumer health, and the environment. Patented agro-chemicals, seed, and GE products are both environmentally harmful and expensive. Combined with the aggressive expansion of intellectual property rights, which facilitate corporate rather than farmer control of inputs, corporations stand to gain far more than small farmers. Similarly, trade liberalization in recent decades has been catastrophic for small farmers. Ultimately, this package will drive many small-scale farmers into debt, off their land, and into urban slums with no employment opportunities—a recipe for increased corporate profits and hunger, not food security.

We also find the Foundation's involvement in GE research and development and lobbying for its use in Africa to be particularly problematic and misguided; indeed, GE is a largely problematic science. Considerable independent research demonstrates some of the risks GE poses to the environment, agricultural systems, and human health, while many consequences still remain insufficiently researched

(often due to pressure from the biotech industry). Yet in spite of known and unknown threats, the development, commercialization, patenting, and distribution of GE seed continue at an alarming pace, with little or no public knowledge or participation. The merits of GE as a technology are also unproven. Evaluation of research and actual productivity in commercial operation has shown that there have been no intrinsic increases in yield and further that any gains in productivity of GMO crops have been short termed at best. In fact, genetic contamination of indigenous varieties poses an enormous threat to already declining biodiversity—the foundation of resilient traditional and organic farming systems that promise real solutions to contemporary problems.

To reach our shared goal of a future without hunger, we believe the Foundation should direct its funding to agroecological research and programs and provide assistance to farmer organizations, governments, and international institutions in support of agroecological agriculture in Africa. Scientific research has proven their superior potential, and now you are positioned to contribute to their expansion. For your efforts to be successful, however, the Foundation must listen to the voices of small farmers, farmer organizations, consumer groups, and other civil society organizations in Africa who will be most impacted by your work and who are most familiar with their own problems and how best to solve them. To date, the extent of your consultation and collaboration with Africans has been limited to those who belong to elite strata of society or are involved in only large-scale projects, while just three individuals control the issuing of AGRA grants.

Instead, your funding decisions and strategies should be determined through a real and open consultation with African communities and farmer organizations in accordance with the principles of food sovereignty—a framework being embraced throughout the world which asserts the right of peoples to define and control their own food and agriculture systems. To increase accountability, the Foundation should consider contributing to grant makers independent of governments and foundations such as the trust fund being considered by the United Nations under the auspices of the Committee on World Food Security, which would then issue grants to farmers and projects.

At this time when food issues and growing world hunger are becoming central international concerns, increasing numbers of people in the US and across the globe are mobilizing to strengthen local food systems and transform the currently dysfunctional global food regime. We urge the Gates Foundation to rethink its role in the efforts to eradicate hunger and to work in collaboration with people on the ground in order to bring about a world that will better provide for future generations. We will be watching your work with great interest, as well as continuing to support the self-determination of African peoples on these issues.

Sincerely,

Organizations

African Biodiversity Network – Kenya
African Centre for Biosafety – South Africa
Africa Network for Animal Welfare – Kenya
AGRA Watch/Community Alliance for Global Justice – Washington
Agricultural Missions, Inc – New York
AS-PTA Agricultura Familiar e Agroecologia – Brasil
Big Carrot Natural Food Market - Canada
Biowatch South Africa – South Africa
California Food & Justice Coalition – California
Canadian Biotechnology Action Network – Ontario
Cascadian Edible Landscapes – Washington
Center for Food Safety – Washington, D.C.
CIP Americas Program – Mexico

Corner House - UK
Cumberland Countians for Peace & Justice – Tennessee
Edible Plant Project – Florida
Family Farm Defenders – Wisconsin
Farmworker Association of Florida – Florida
Food Chain Workers Alliance – California

- *Brandworkers International – New York*
- *Center for New Community – Illinois*
- *Coalition of Immokalee Workers – Florida*
- *Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas – New Jersey/Pennsylvania*
- *International Labor Rights Forum – Washington, D.C.*
- *Just Harvest USA – California*
- *Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center – Arkansas*
- *Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York – New York*
- *Restaurant Opportunities Centers United – New York*
- *United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500 – New York*
- *Warehouse Workers for Justice – Illinois*

Food Democracy Now! – Iowa
Food First – California
Food for Maine’s Future – Maine
Food Systems Integrity – Massachusetts
Friends of the Earth International – Uruguay
Gaia Foundation - UK
GMWatch – UK
Grassroots International – Massachusetts
Green Belt Movement International, Europe – UK
GREEN Foundation - India
Growing Power – Wisconsin
Hilltop Urban Gardens – Washington
Indaloyethu Environmental Cooperative – South Africa
Institute for Sustainable Development – Ethiopia
International Society for Ecology and Culture - California
Kenya Biodiversity Network – Kenya
Kenya Debt Relief Network – Kenya
La Via Campesina – North America
Lia BD Consulting – Washington
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns – Washington, D.C.
National Family Farm Coalition – Washington, D.C.
Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance - Maine
Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility – Oregon
Organic Consumers Association – Minnesota
People-Centered Development Forum – New York
Pesticide Action Network North America – California
Partners for the Land & Agricultural Needs of Traditional Peoples – West Virginia
Practical Action – UK
Safe Alternatives for our Forest Environment - California
South African Freeze Alliance on Genetic Engineering – South Africa
Save Our Seeds - Germany
Say No to GMOs! – Texas
Second Chance Foundation - NYC
Slow Food USA – New York
Sustainable Living Systems – Montana
Sustainable West Seattle – Washington
Third World Network - Malaysia

Thirdworld Investment Gateway Trust – South Africa
Uganda Environmental Educational Foundation - Uganda
Washington Biotechnology Action Council – Washington
Washington Fair Trade Coalition – Washington
WhyHunger – New York
Witness for Peace NW – Washington
World Family - UK

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