

The Agri-Food Model, Unregulated Gene Editing Technologies

Four Words Gates and His Pals Despise: Democracy and Minimum Support Price

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and an assortment of high-profile figures and policy makers are pushing for unregulated gene-editing technologies, the rollout of bio-synthetic food created in laboratories, the expanded use of patented seeds and the roll back of subsidies and support for farmers in places like India.

These neoliberal evangelists despise democracy and believe that state machinery and public money should only facilitate the ambitions of their unaccountable mega-corporations.

Corporations are jumping on the ‘sustainability’ bandwagon by undermining traditional agriculture and genuine sustainable agrifood systems and packaging this corporate takeover of food as some kind of humanitarian endeavour.

[The watchdog organisation Corporate Europe Observatory](#) (CEO) notes that the European Commission has committed to a fundamental shift away from industrial agriculture. With a 50 per cent pesticide reduction target and a 25 per cent organic agriculture goal by 2030, CEO argues that business as usual is no longer an option. In effect, this creates an existential crisis for corporate seed suppliers and pesticide manufacturers like Bayer, BASF, Corteva (DowDupont) and Syngenta (ChemChina).

However, these corporations are fighting back on various fronts, not least by waging an ongoing battle to get their new generation of genetic engineering techniques excluded from European regulations. They do not want plants, animals and micro-organisms created with gene-editing techniques like CRISPR-Cas to be subject to safety checks, monitoring or consumer labelling. This is concerning given the real dangers that these techniques pose.

For example, a [new paper](#) published in the journal Environmental Sciences Europe, authored by Dr Katharina Kawall, indicates the negative effects on ecosystems that can result from the release of gene-edited plants. These unintended effects come from the intended changes induced by genome editing, which can affect various metabolic processes in the plants.

The new paper adds to a [growing body of peer-reviewed research](#) that calls into question industry claims about the 'precision', safety and benefits of gene-edited organisms.

[Recent research](#) by the Greens and the European Free Alliance in the European Parliament indicates that 86 per cent of Europeans who have heard of genetically engineered (GE) food want products containing GE organisms to be labelled as such. Some 68 per cent of respondents that have heard of new genetic engineering methods demand that food produced with these techniques, such as CRISPR, to be labelled as GE. Only three per cent agreed with the industry's proposal to exempt these products from safety testing and labelling.

Regardless, with the help of 1.3 million euros from the Gates Foundation, the industry is paving the way for deregulation by widespread lobbying of policy makers and promoting these technologies on the basis of them protecting the climate and 'sustainability'. Through greenwashing, the industry hopes its 'save-the-planet' products can dodge regulation and gain public acceptance in an era of 'climate emergency'.

Not for the first time, the lobbying that the Gates Foundation is engaging in displays complete contempt for democratic processes or public opinion. In 2018, The European Court of Justice ruled that new genetic engineering technologies should be regulated. As described by Marie Astier and Magali Reinert in the French publication [Reporterre](#), Gates is very much at the centre of trying to bypass this ruling.

Of course, it is not just the European agrifood sector that is being targeted by Bill Gates and global agrifood players. India has very much been in the news in recent months due to the ongoing mass protest involving farmers who want three recent farm acts repealed.

Environmentalism Vandana Shiva has described on numerous occasions how the Gates Foundation through its 'Ag One' initiative is pushing for one type of agriculture for the whole world. A top-down approach regardless of what farmers or the public need or want. The strategy includes digital farming, in which farmers are monitored and mined for their agricultural data, which is then repackaged and sold back to them.

Along with Bill Gates, this is very much the agrifood model that Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Bayer, Syngenta, Corteva and Cargill have in mind. The tech giants recent entry into the sector will increasingly lead to a mutually beneficial integration between the companies that supply products to farmers (pesticides, seeds, fertilisers, tractors, drones, etc) and those that control the flow of data (on soil, weather, pests, weeds, land use, consumer preferences, etc) and have access to digital (cloud) infrastructure. A system based on corporate concentration and centralisation.

Those farmers who remain in the system will become passive recipients of corporate directives and products on farms owned by the Gates Foundation (now one of the largest owners of farmland in the US), agribusiness and financial institutions/speculators.

The three pieces of farm legislation in India (passed by parliament but on hold) are essential for laying the foundation for this model of agriculture. The legislation is The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act.

The foreign and home-grown (Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani) billionaires who have pushed for these laws require a system of contract farming dominated by their big tech, big agribusiness and big retail interests. Smallholder peasant agriculture is regarded as an impediment to what they require: industrial-scale farms where driverless tractors, drones and genetically engineered seeds are the norm and all data pertaining to land, water, weather, seeds and soils is controlled by them.

It is unfortunate that prominent journalists and media outlets in India are celebrating the legislation and have attempted to unjustifiably discredit farmers who are protesting. It is also worrying that key figures like Dr Ramesh Chand, a member of NITI (National Institute for Transforming India) Ayog, recently stated that the legislation is necessary.

When these figures attack farmers or promote the farm acts, what they are really doing is cheerleading for the destruction of local markets and independent small-scale enterprises, whether farmers, hawkers, food processors or mom and pop corner stores. And by implication, they are helping to ensure that India is surrendering control over its food.

They are doing the bidding of the Gates Foundation and the global agrifood corporations which also want India to eradicate its buffer food stocks. Some of the very corporations which will then control stocks that India would purchase with foreign exchange holdings. At that stage, any notion of sovereign statehood would be bankrupt as India's food needs would be dependent on attracting foreign exchange reserves via foreign direct investment or borrowing.

This would represent the ultimate betrayal of India's farmers and democracy as well as the final surrender of food security and food sovereignty to unaccountable global traders and corporations.

The farm legislation is regressive and will eventually lead to the country relying on outside forces to feed its population. This in an increasingly volatile world prone to conflict, public health scares, unregulated land and commodity speculation and price shocks.

MSP, malnutrition and helping farmers

Consider that India has achieved self-sufficiency in food grains and has ensured that, in theory at least, there is enough food available to feed its entire population. Yet hunger and malnutrition are still major issues.

Initial results from the National Family Health Survey round 5 (NFHS-5) released in January indicate a stagnation or deterioration in most factors related to the nutrition status of the Indian population. These findings have not accounted for the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, which could see severe long-term adverse impacts on poverty, health and nutrition.

The survey findings suggest that people's ability to access good quality diets has been impacted by the economic slowdown in recent years and a subsequent deterioration in poverty and consumption. Such a conclusion might not be too far off the mark given the findings of the consumption expenditure survey of the National Statistical Office (2017-18).

In a December 2019 article, economist S Subramanian [writes](#):

“Employing the modest Rangarajan Committee poverty line... we find that the... proportion of the population in poverty, has climbed up from 31% to 35%, thus inverting a long trend of declining poverty ratios. If the poverty line is raised by 20% to a less modest but still modest level, then we find... [poverty]... rises precipitously from 42% to 52%.”

Supporters of the farm legislation are fond of saying the impact will be higher income for farmers and greater efficiency in food distribution. They fail to acknowledge that the neoliberal policies they have backed over the years have driven many farmers out of agriculture, into debt or to the edge of bankruptcy. They are now pushing for more of the same under the banner of helping farmers.

These policies mainly stem from India's foreign exchange crisis in the 1990s. In return for up to more than \$120 billion in World Bank loans at the time, India was directed to dismantle its state-owned seed supply system, reduce subsidies, run down public agriculture institutions and offer incentives for the growing of cash crops to earn foreign exchange.

The plan involves shifting at least 400 million from the countryside into cities. We have seen the running down of the sector for decades, spiralling input costs, withdrawal of government assistance and the impacts of cheap, subsidised imports which depress farmers' incomes. The result is an acute agrarian crisis.

Through the new farm laws, the Modi government is now trying to accelerate the planned depopulation of the countryside by drastically reducing the role of the public sector in agriculture to that of a facilitator of private capital.

There is a solution to poverty, hunger and rural distress. But it is being side-lined in favour of a corporate agenda.

The [Research Unit for Political Economy \(RUPE\) notes](#) that minimum support prices (MSP) via government procurement of essential crops and commodities should be extended to the likes of maize, cotton, oilseed and pulses. At the moment, only farmers in certain states who produce rice and wheat are the main beneficiaries of government procurement at MSP.

RUPE says that since per capita protein consumption in India is abysmally low and has fallen further during the liberalisation era, the provision of pulses in the public distribution system (PDS) is long overdue and desperately needed. RUPE argues that the 'excess' stocks of food grain with the Food Corporation of India are merely the result of the failure or refusal of the government to distribute grain to the people.

(For those not familiar with the PDS: central government via the Food Corporation of India (FCI) is responsible for buying food grains from farmers at MSP at state-run market yards or mandis. It then allocates the grains to each state. State governments then deliver to the ration shops.)

If public procurement of a wider range of crops at the MSP were to occur – and MSP were guaranteed for rice and wheat across all states – it would help address hunger and malnutrition as well as farmer distress.

Instead of rolling back the role of the public sector and surrendering the system to foreign corporations, there is a need to further expand official procurement and public distribution. This would occur by extending procurement to additional states and expanding the range of

commodities under the PDS.

Of course, some will raise a red flag here and say this would cost too much. But as RUPE notes, it would cost around 20 per cent of the current handouts ('incentives') received by corporations and their super-rich owners which do not benefit the bulk of the wider population in any way.

Furthermore, if policy makers were really serious about 'sustainability' and boosting the rural economy, they would reject the fake high-tech corporate controlled 'sustainability' agenda and a reliance on rigged and unstable global markets. They would embrace an approach to agriculture based on agroecological principles, short supply chains and local markets. If the last 12 months have shown anything, it is that decentralised regional and local community-owned food systems are now needed more than ever.

But a solution that would genuinely serve to help address rural distress and malnutrition does not suit the agenda of the Gates Foundation and its corporate entourage.

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