

# The Gates Foundation's "Corporate Merry-go-round": Spearheading the Neo-liberal Plunder of African Agriculture

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This important article by Colin Todhunter published more than five years ago (on January 21, 2016) analyses how the Gates Foundation had contributed to exacerbating social inequalities and "uprooting indigenous agriculture for the benefit of global agribusiness".

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*The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) is dangerously and unaccountably distorting the direction of international development, according to a new report by the campaign group Global Justice Now. With assets of \$43.5 billion, the BMGF is the largest charitable foundation in the world. It actually distributes more aid for global health than any government. As a result, it has a major influence on issues of global health and agriculture.*

*'[Gated Development – Is the Gates Foundation always a force for good?](#)' argues that what BMGF is doing could end up exacerbating global inequality and entrenching corporate power globally. Global Justice Now's analysis of the BMGF's programmes shows that the foundation's senior staff are overwhelmingly drawn from corporate America. As a result, the question is: whose interests are being promoted – those of corporate America or those of ordinary people who seek social and economic justice rather than charity?*

According to the report, the foundation's strategy is intended to deepen the role of multinational companies in global health and agriculture especially, even though these corporations are responsible for much of the poverty and injustice that already plagues the global south. The report concludes that the foundation's programmes have a specific ideological strategy that promotes neo-liberal economic policies, corporate globalisation, the technology this brings (such as GMOs) and an outdated view of the centrality of aid in 'helping' the poor.

The report raises a series criticisms including:

- 1) The relationship between the foundation and Microsoft's tax practices. A 2012 report from the US Senate found that Microsoft's use of offshore subsidiaries enabled it to avoid taxes of \$4.5 billion, a sum greater than the BMGF's annual grant making (\$3.6 billion in 2014).
- 2) The close relationship that BMGF has with many corporations whose role and policies contribute to ongoing poverty. Not only is BMGF profiting from numerous investments in a series of controversial companies which contribute to economic and social injustice, it

is also actively supporting a series of those companies, including Monsanto, Dupont and Bayer through a variety of pro-corporate initiatives around the world.

3) The foundation's promotion of industrial agriculture across Africa, pushing for the adoption of GM, patented seed systems and chemical fertilisers, all of which undermine existing sustainable, small-scale farming that is providing the vast majority of food security across the continent.

4) The foundation's promotion of projects around the world pushing private healthcare and education. Numerous agencies have raised concerns that such projects exacerbate inequality and undermine the universal provision of such basic human necessities.

5) BMGF's funding of a series of vaccine programmes that have reportedly lead to illnesses or even deaths with little official or media scrutiny.

Polly Jones the head of campaigns and policy at Global Justice Now says:

"The Gates Foundation has rapidly become the most influential actor in the world of global health and agricultural policies, but there's no oversight or accountability in how that influence is managed. This concentration of power and influence is even more problematic when you consider that the philanthropic vision of the Gates Foundation seems to be largely based on the values of corporate America. The foundation is relentlessly promoting big business-based initiatives such as industrial agriculture, private health care and education. But these are all potentially exacerbating the problems of poverty and lack of access to basic resources that the foundation is supposed to be alleviating."

The report states that that Bill Gates has regular access to world leaders and is in effect personally bankrolling hundreds of universities, international organisations, NGOs and media outlets. As the single most influential voice in international development, the foundation's strategy is a major challenge to progressive development actors and activists around the world who want to see the influence of multinational corporations in global markets reduced or eliminated.

The foundation not only funds projects in which agricultural and pharmaceutical corporations are among the leading beneficiaries, but it often invests in the same companies as it is funding, meaning the foundation has an interest in the ongoing profitability of these corporations. According to the report, this is "a corporate merry-go-round where the BMGF consistently acts in the interests of corporations."

#### Uprooting indigenous agriculture for the benefit of global agribusiness

The report notes that the BMGF's close relationship with seed and chemical giant Monsanto is well known. It previously owned shares in the company and continues to promote several projects in which Monsanto is a beneficiary, not least the wholly inappropriate and fraudulent GMO project which promotes a [technical quick-fix ahead of tackling the structural issues](#) that create hunger, poverty and food insecurity. But, as the report notes, the BMGF partners with many other multinational agribusiness corporations.

Many examples where this is the case are highlighted by the report. For instance, the

foundation is working with US trader Cargill in an \$8 million project to “develop the soya value chain” in southern Africa. Cargill is the biggest global player in the production of and trade in soya with heavy investments in South America where GM soya mono-crops have displaced rural populations and caused great environmental damage. According to Global Justice Now, the BMGF-funded project will likely enable Cargill to capture a hitherto untapped African soya market and eventually introduce GM soya onto the continent. The end markets for this soya are companies with relationships with the fast food outlet, KFC, whose expansion in Africa is being aided by the project.

Specific examples are given which highlight how BMGF is also supporting projects involving other chemicals and seed corporations, including DuPont Pioneer, Syngenta and Bayer.

According to the report, the BMGF is promoting a model of industrial agriculture, the increasing use of chemical fertilisers and expensive, patented seeds, the privatisation of extension services and a very large focus on genetically modified seeds. The foundation bankrolls the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) in pushing industrial agriculture.

A key area for AGRA is seed policy. The report notes that currently over 80 per cent of Africa’s seed supply comes from millions of small-scale farmers recycling and exchanging seed from year to year. But AGRA is promoting the commercial production of seed and is thus supporting the introduction of commercial seed systems, which risk enabling a few large companies to control seed research and development, production and distribution.

In order for commercial seed companies to invest in research and development, they first want to protect their ‘intellectual property’. According to the report, this requires a fundamental restructuring of seed laws to allow for certification systems that not only protect certified varieties and royalties derived from them, but which actually criminalise all non-certified seed.

The report notes that over the past two decades a long and slow process of national seed law reviews, sponsored by USAID and the G8 along with the BMGF and others, has opened the door to multinational corporations’ involvement in seed production, including the acquisition of every sizeable seed enterprise on the African continent.

At the same time, AGRA is working to promote costly inputs, notably fertiliser, despite evidence to suggest chemical fertilisers have significant health risks for farm workers, increase soil erosion and can trap small-scale farmers in unsustainable debt. The BMGF, through AGRA, is one of the world’s largest promoters of chemical fertiliser.

Some grants given by the BMGF to AGRA have been specifically intended to “help AGRA build the fertiliser supply chain” in Africa. The report describes how one of the largest of AGRA’s grants, worth \$25 million, was used to help establish the African Fertiliser Agribusiness Partnership (AFAP) in 2012, whose very goal is to “at least double total fertiliser use” in Africa. The AFAP project is being pursued in partnership with the International Fertiliser Development Centre, a body which represents the fertiliser industry.

Another of AGRA’s key programmes since its inception has been support to agro-dealer networks – small, private stockists of transnational companies’ chemicals and seeds who sell these to farmers in several African countries. This is increasing the reliance of farmers on chemical inputs and marginalising sustainable agriculture alternatives, thereby undermining

any notion that farmers are exercising their 'free choice' (as the neo-liberal evangelists are keen to tell everyone) when it comes to adopting certain agricultural practices.

The report concludes that AGRA's agenda is the biggest direct threat to the growing movement in support of food sovereignty and agroecological farming methods in Africa. This movement opposes reliance on chemicals, expensive seeds and GM and instead promotes an approach which allows communities control over the way food is produced, traded and consumed. It is seeking to create a food system that is designed to help people and the environment rather than make profits for multinational corporations. Priority is given to promoting healthy farming and healthy food by protecting soil, water and climate, and promoting biodiversity.

Recent evidence from [Greenpeace](#) and the [Oakland Institute](#) shows that in Africa agroecological farming can increase yields significantly (often greater than industrial agriculture), and that it is more profitable for small farmers. In 2011, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (Olivier de Schutter) [called on countries to reorient their agriculture](#) policies to promote sustainable systems – not least agroecology – that realise the right to food. Moreover, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) was the work of over 400 scientists and took four years to complete. It was twice peer reviewed and states we must look to smallholder, traditional farming to deliver food security in third world countries through agri-ecological systems which are sustainable.

In a January 2015 piece in [The Guardian](#), Director of Global Justice Now said that 'development' was once regarded as a process of breaking with colonial exploitation and transferring power over resources from the 'first' to the 'third world', involving a revolutionary struggle over the world's resources. However, the current paradigm is based on the assumption that developing countries need to adopt neo-liberal policies and that public money in the guise of aid should facilitate this.

If this new report shows anything, it is that the notion of 'development' has become hijacked by rich corporations and a super-rich 'philanthrocapitalist' (whose own corporate practices have been questionable to say the least, as highlighted by the report). In effect, the model of 'development' being facilitated is married to the ideology and [structurally embedded power relations of an exploitative global capitalism](#).

The BMGF is spearheading the ambitions of corporate America and the scramble for Africa by global agribusiness.

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