

Whats wrong with philanthrocapitalism

The Gates Foundation's African programmes are not charity

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The activities of the Gates Foundation are a major example of what has come to be called 'philanthrocapitalism'. Philip L Bereano argues that philanthrocapitalism is an attempt to use market processes to do good, and therefore problematic as markets are ill-suited to producing socially constructive ends.

At the biennial meeting of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity in Mexico in 2016, responding to calls from nations of the Global South and 170 civil society organisations, the international community set up an 'Online Forum on Synthetic Biology'.

Synthetic biology could be a cornucopia of important developments or might harbour an unpleasant Pandora's Box of surprises. These startling new genetic techniques have opened up a myriad of possibilities for altering - and maybe even creating or extinguishing - life forms. The Forum will be a place where experts could discuss such concerns. Of particular interest is a phenomenon called 'gene drives' in which the inheritance of certain genes is favoured. 'SynBio' offers means of manipulating gene drives and thus altering the character of whole species, even with the possibility of eliminating noxious ones. Who should decide such awesome matters?

Because commercial pressures could easily lead to reckless applications of these techniques without the potential negative consequences being adequately assessed, one might be thankful that experts are going to scrutinise SynBio. But it is disturbing to learn that a recent Freedom of Information Act request uncovered documents showing that attempts were being made to stack the panel with scientists associated with the genetics industries. Governments heavily promoting genetic engineering, including the US, were involved in this effort to manipulate the panel's outcomes. And so was the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

The Gates Foundation's website indicates that in 2017 it granted \$1.6 million as seed money 'to increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of possible gene drive applications for public good purposes'. The recipient was Emerging Ag Inc, a PR firm for the agribusiness and biotech companies which is putting together a covert 'advocacy coalition' trying to bend the UN Forum to a particular view of what are 'public good purposes'. The firm will also help coordinate opposition to calls for a temporary moratorium on these unprecedented techniques until they can be better understood. It seems that the rush to profits is trying to block oversight that could assure safety and prevent misuse.

Why would a charitable organisation such as the Gates Foundation be interested in biasing this international panel? To get behind this, one needs to appreciate that the Foundation has always been a promoter of genetic engineering, claiming that the technology is necessary 'to feed the world'. In fact, such claims were reiterated by its two principals in February 2018 in their Annual Letter to the world. Even though there has been little evidence of any sustained increases in yields from genetic engineering, they remain true believers.

In addition, the Foundation particularly believes that it should be the private sector which guides these technologies (despite the public investments in their research). In their Letter, Bill and Melinda Gates specifically praised their partnering with Monsanto in this regard. In fact, an examination indicates that frequently the charitable activities of the Foundation have been designed with a goal of promoting capitalist profits, although it cultivates an image of merely pursuing good works. This is very true in the Foundation's agricultural development programme in Africa.

From 2009 to 2011, the Foundation spent \$478,302,627 on African agricultural development. Adding in the value of grants since then, the Foundation's outlay, directly and indirectly, to influence African agriculture so far may have reached around \$2 billion. Of course, Bill Gates is not an African, not a scholar of Africa, not a farmer and not a development expert. But he is a very rich man, and he knows how he wants to remake the world.

The Foundation's support for agricultural development favours industrial, high-tech, capitalist market approaches. In particular, its support for genetically engineered crops as a solution for world hunger is of concern to those of us - in Africa and the US - involved in promoting sustainable, equitable agricultural policies. Studies by the World Bank and the United Nations have repeatedly concluded that high-tech agriculture will not be the way to 'feed the world'.

Philanthrocapitalism

'Tech's elite, lauded for their originality, are influencing media, politics and society at large with a kind of venture philanthropy, much as their industrial predecessors did more than 100 years ago.' - Susan Cagle, New York Times, 29 May 2016

The activities of the Gates Foundation are a major example of what has come to be called 'philanthrocapitalism'. This term summarises attempts by philanthropies to use market processes to do good, although this strategy is actually problematic, as markets are ill-suited to produce socially constructive ends. Its advocates often expect financial returns or secondary benefits over the long term from their investments in social programmes. Philanthropy becomes another part of the engine of profit and corporate control. The Gates Foundation's strategy for 'development' actually promotes neoliberal economic policies and corporate globalisation:

'It is ... likely that Bill Gates, who has regular access to world leaders and is in effect personally bankrolling hundreds of universities, international organisations, NGOs and media outlets, has become the single most influential voice in international development. Closer examination of the BMGF is critical given that its influence is vast, indeed greater than most donor governments. The BMGF provides more aid to global health than any country donor and is the fifth largest donor to agriculture in developing countries. In 2013, only 11 countries spent more on aid than the BMGF, making it the world's 12th largest donor. The Gates Foundation has become a bigger donor than countries such as Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ireland and Italy.'¹

'[T]he trend to involve business in addressing poverty and inequality is central to the priorities and funding of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We argue that this is far from a neutral charitable strategy but instead an ideological commitment to promote neoliberal economic policies and corporate globalisation. Big business is directly benefitting, in particular in the fields of agriculture and health, as a result of the foundation's activities, despite evidence to show that business solutions are not the most effective.'²

High tech vs agroecology

Bill Gates has a worldview coloured by his own personal experiences - that high tech provides the

preferred, if not the only, solutions to social problems - not just as regards his faith in genetic engineering but for a wholly industrialised agricultural system. However, his technocratic ideology runs counter to the best-informed science.

The World Bank and the UN funded 400 scientists over three years to compile the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). Its conclusions in 2009 were diametrically opposed, at both philosophical and practical levels, to those espoused by Gates. It recommended research that 'would focus on local priorities identified through participatory and transparent processes, and favour multifunctional solutions to local problems', and it concluded that biotechnology alone will not solve the food needs of Africa.

The IAASTD suggests that 'agroecological' methods, not industrial farming models, provide the most viable, proven and reliable means to enhance global food security, especially in light of climate change. These include implementing practical scientific research based on traditional ecological approaches, so farmers avoid disrupting the natural carbon, nitrogen and water cycles as conventional agriculture has done.³

Olivier De Schutter, formerly the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, has reinforced the IAASTD research. He too concluded that agroecological farming has far greater potential for fighting hunger, particularly during economic and climatically uncertain times.⁴

However, '[i]n February 2012, the Gates Foundation announced it was giving \$200 million to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), one of the three Rome-based agricultural organisations of the UN. On the day of the announcement, Bill Gates had also been invited to speak at IFAD's Governing Council. In his speech, Gates implored countries to bring "agricultural science and technology to poor farmers", for which "the real expertise lies with private sector companies". This was a reference to [genetic engineering] and biotechnology...'⁵

Agroecological practices have consistently proven capable of sustainably increasing productivity. Conversely, the present genetically modified (GM) crops, based on industrial agriculture, generally have not increased yields over the long run, despite their increased input costs. The Union of Concerned Scientists detailed GM crops' underperformance in their 2009 report, 'Failure to Yield'.⁶ These conclusions were reiterated in a 2016 story in The New York Times.⁷

Using the guidelines that the agroecologist Miguel Altieri has proposed, agroecology consists of 'broad performance criteria which [include] properties of ecological sustainability, food security, economic viability, resource conservation and social equity, as well as increased production ... To attain this understanding agriculture must be conceived of as an ecological system as well as a human dominated socio-economic system.'⁸ This goes far beyond the pallid definition used by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): 'the study of the relation of agricultural crops and environment'. In other words, in addition to embodying the idea of sustainability, agroecology includes principles of democracy. It is qualitative as well as quantitative. Ironically, the Gates Foundation's dominant approach is qualitative also, embodying a particular ideology, but this is not acknowledged (or it is denied).

The BMGF makes claims to support agroecology, but when I was part of a team that analysed the first five grants they promoted this way, we found that none of them met any of the accepted (and acceptable) criteria.

For example, the Gates Foundation touted a \$10 million grant to Conservation International in 2012 as 'agroecological'. However, this grant was merely a programme of monitoring what was happening on the ground in African agriculture. The Foundation's press release described it as follows:

'[Providing] tools to ensure that agricultural development does not degrade natural systems and the services they provide, especially for smallholder farmers. It will also fill a critical unmet need for integrating measurements of agriculture, ecosystem services and human well-being by pooling near real-time and multi-scale data into an open-access online dashboard that policy makers will be able to freely use and customise to inform smart decision making. The raw data will be fully accessible and synthesised into six simple holistic indicators that communicate diagnostic information about complex agro-ecosystems, such as: availability of clean water, the resilience of crop production to climate variability or the resilience of ecosystem services and livelihoods to changes in the agricultural system.'

This is really a top-down technocratic programme, hardly qualifying as agroecological. In fact, while it might be a beneficial activity, it was tagged with an appealing label to whitewash its true nature. A Gates Foundation official claimed that this high-tech tool would be 'for decision-makers', but these users would be agricultural elites, not smallholder farmers - who are not likely to have 'an open-access online dashboard' in their fields.

Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biodiversity said of a Gates Foundation grant, '[Genetically modified] nitrogen-fixing crops are not the answer to improving the fertility of Africa's soils. African farmers are the last people to be asked about such projects. This often results in the wrong technologies being developed, which many farmers simply cannot afford.'

She said farmers need ways to build up resilient soils that are both fertile and adaptable to extreme weather. 'We also want our knowledge and skills to be respected and not to have inappropriate solutions imposed on us by distant institutions, charitable bodies or governments,' Mayet said.

Genetic contamination is also a strategy of the promoters of GM crops. In 2002, Emmy Simmons, then-assistant administrator of the US Agency for International Development, stated to me that 'in four years, enough [genetically engineered] crops will have been planted in South Africa that the pollen will have contaminated the entire continent'. Biotechnology cannot coexist with agroecological techniques and traditional knowledge or seed varieties.

Yet the Gates Foundation has become the world's leading funder of research into the genetic modification of crops. Simultaneously, the Foundation and its grantees fund civil society organisations in Africa as front groups that support this high-tech vision, a tactic that makes it seem as if there is great demand for these technologies on the ground. And the BMGF also pressures governments to enact national legislation and policies favourable to the implementation of GM crops (for example, in Kenya and Uganda most recently). These GM seeds require massive increases in the use of chemicals and the Foundation is promoting their use as well.

In addition, the Foundation is involved in the privatisation of seed production by leaning on African nations to pass new intellectual property laws restricting the saving, trading, exchange and sale of seed and to join strict international intellectual property systems. Thus, these ancient practices of farmers will be criminalised, turning seeds wholly into private commodities to be bought and sold, mainly benefitting US and European agribusiness.

However, there is considerable opposition in Africa to these Foundation priorities which threaten conventional and organic production as well as the autonomy of African producers and nations. Movements in support of food sovereignty and agroecological farming in Africa (for example, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, <http://afsafrica.org/>) are directly challenging the Foundation's high-tech mentality.

Business opportunity

A major mechanism by which the Gates Foundation exercises influence is through its funding of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Its work with Monsanto and other multinational agricultural corporations directly undermines existing grassroots efforts at improving African agricultural production. Thus the Foundation has become a stalking horse for corporate proponents promoting industrial agricultural paradigms which view African hunger simply as a business opportunity. It has targeted the world's poor as presenting 'a fast-growing consumer market'. Referring to these people as 'BOP' (bottom of the pyramid), Gates has insisted that they be subsumed into a global capitalist system (one which has done so well to enrich him). The Foundation has referred to the inevitable displacement of smallholder farmers as promoting 'urban mobility'. Such class impacts of its policies are further proof that the BMGF is engaged in philanthrocapitalism.

By and large, the Foundation's grants do not support locally defined priorities, do not fit within the holistic approach urged by many development experts, and do not investigate the long-term effectiveness and risks of genetic modification. The choice of a high-risk, high-tech project over more modest but effective agricultural techniques is problematic, offering no practical solutions for the present and near-future concerns of the people who run small farms.

'A rich Bill Gates spending money on the poor in a high-profile, technology-fixated way reinforces the notion that development is about charity and "delivering solutions" to the poor. Charity can certainly help promote development, but when this approach becomes the development model, as it will tend to when "donors" have so much influence over policies, the "poor" become dependent on the "rich", and the latter are seen as saviours while the poor are simply recipients of favours. In this sense, philanthropy is the enemy of justice.'¹⁰

'Despite the impression that Bill Gates is "giving away" his fortune to charity, his estimated net worth is constantly increasing. According to Forbes, Gates' personal wealth has risen from \$56 billion in 2011 to \$78.9 billion in 2015 - an increase of \$23 billion in four years, roughly the same amount of money that the BMGF has disbursed since its inception. In January 2014, the Guardian reported that a 40 per cent increase in Microsoft shares boosted Bill Gates' fortune by \$15.8 billion in 2013. That same year, the BMGF gave out grants worth \$3.6 billion ... much of the money the BMGF has to spend derives from investments in some of the world's biggest and most controversial companies; thus the BMGF's ongoing work significantly depends on the ongoing profitability of corporate America.'¹¹

Conclusion

While successful in his chosen field, Bill Gates has no expertise in the farm field. This is not to say that he and his fellow philanthropists cannot contribute to addressing problems of agricultural development - they certainly can. However, some circumspection and humility would go a long way towards healing the rifts they have opened.

African farmers never asked to be beaten with the big stick of high-input proprietary technology; doing so constitutes neo-imperialism and the perpetuation of foreign-imposed African 'failure'. Africans have urged the Gates Foundation to engage with them in a more broadly consultative, agroecological approach. The Foundation is certainly a powerful force, but so are people when united for justice, democracy and food sovereignty.

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Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety held in Cancun, December 2016. The author is grateful to Dr Matthew Canfield for his review assistance.

Notes

1. Global Justice Now (2016), 'Gated Development: Is the Gates Foundation always a force for good?', January.
2. Ibid.
3. International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (2009), Agriculture at a Crossroads, Global Report, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/est/Investment/Agriculture_at_a_Crossroads_Global_Report_I_AASTD.pdf
4. See, for example, <http://www.srfood.org/en/report-agroecology-and-the-right-to-food>
5. Global Justice Now, op. cit.
6. http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/our-failing-food-system/genetic-engineering/failure-to-yield.html
7. Danny Hakim (2016), 'Doubts about the promised bounty of genetically modified crops', New York Times, 29 October, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/business/gmo-promise-falls-short.html?_r=0
8. http://nature.berkeley.edu/~miguel-alt/what_is_agroecology.html
9. http://www.conservation.org/newsroom/pressreleases/Pages/Global_Tool_to_Gauge_Earths_and_Humanitys_Vital_Signs_Launches_in_Africa.aspx
10. Global Justice Now, op. cit.
11. Ibid.

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