

Standing Up for Food Sovereignty: AGRA Watch Position Paper on Lugar-Casey Global Food Security Act, Genetic Engineering, and the Gates Foundation

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AGRA Watch formed in 2008 to challenge the Gates Foundation's participation in the problematic Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, and to support sustainable, agro-ecological alternatives already practiced in Africa. We have witnessed an acceleration in the push for genetic engineering as a "solution" to hunger in Africa, a criminalization of GE's opponents as eco-imperialists unwilling to accept scientific advancements, and a deification of philanthropic support for corporate solutions to global food issues. The Lugar-Casey bill is a case study in the interlocking interests of big business, big philanthropy, US foreign policy and US aid. Furthermore, several new developments in Kenyan legislation and in the international political economy threaten to use the global food crisis as an opening to solidify genetic engineering as a necessary part of food security strategies.

In 2009, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the Lugar-Casey Global Food Security Act (S. 384), which seeks to reform aid programs to focus on long-term agricultural development and the restructuring of aid agencies for better crisis response.¹ As part of this new reorganization, Lugar-Casey mandates funding for genetic engineering (GE) research.² The bill is supported by CARE, Oxfam, Bread for the World, ONE, and US land grant colleges.³ In his opening statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Lugar argued that worldwide food security is critical to US national security, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan where he says hunger has fueled conflict and extremism.⁴ Lugar believes that agricultural development in these "troubled" regions will ensure more peaceful conditions. He states specifically that he is "excited by [the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's] vision" and their "beneficence."⁵ Bill Gates and Bill Clinton expressed their support for the highly controversial, pro-GE Lugar-Casey bill before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁶

In appeasing national security priorities and corporate interests, the Lugar-Casey bill overlooks key findings of the peer-reviewed International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), which was initiated by United Nations agencies and the World Bank, and involved over four hundred scientists from around the world.⁷ The IAASTD found that agro-ecological methods (research, extension and farming) offer enormous potential, and that a multi-faceted approach to agriculture is needed, rather than a narrow focus of GE technologies on higher yield and nutritional enhancement.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has powerful sway in Seattle over employment (through Microsoft), the global development industry, and local non-profits, in a way that parallels their dominance in African agricultural and health sectors. AGRA Watch's proximity to the Foundation places us in a prime position to challenge the undemocratic nature of its philanthropic stranglehold and its impacts, both locally and globally. The Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation are partners in the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), and are also involved in numerous other projects that are aimed at spreading the purported benefits of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Africa. The International Fund for Agricultural Development works closely with the Gates Foundation, ostensibly helping small farmers improve their livelihoods through more productive agriculture, breakthrough technologies, and better markets.⁸ Their shared goals pertain to the idea that, "Small farmers often need ... access to markets, better seeds and more fertile soil, to better farm management practices, storage and transport facilities and market information. Technologies and innovations must be developed to meet the needs of the poorest people."⁹

The Gates Foundation, like other mega-philanthropies, use their financial power to push policies that they have decided are "needed." In this case, Gates has decided that GMOs are the solution for African agriculture. In 2009, the Gates Foundation gave \$5.4 million to the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, as part of its Grand Challenges in Global Health initiative.¹⁰ This funding went to the creation and management of the BioSafety Resource Network (BRN), and to research under the Gates' Grand Challenges #9 Project, which seeks to develop nutritionally "enhanced" crop varieties of cassava, banana, sorghum and rice for subsistence farmers in the Global South. The Danforth Center states that the, "Results of this research will help to reduce the burden of malnutrition and ... will support the creation and management of a resource network that will help African scientists incorporate biotech advances into subsistence farming."¹¹

Among the key funders of The Danforth Center is the Monsanto Fund, the “philanthropic” arm of the Monsanto Company.¹² One of the Fund’s main goals is, “Nutritional Improvement through Agriculture: Working to implement sustainable agricultural improvements through education and research. Focus areas include field techniques, education in the areas of nutrition and vitamin deficiency and reducing the impact of pest and virus’ on subsistence crops,” and to do this philanthropic work in areas where the company has important interests. This means that, like most philanthropic organizations set up by corporations, their business interests are barely distinguishable from their charitable ones. Monsanto—like other agri-corporations—has re-branded genetic engineering with a softer touch. Namely, they have painted themselves as concerned with the welfare of the world’s poor. In truth, these corporations are concerned with social responsibility only to the extent that it allows them to maintain good public relations and their bottom-line. At a deeper level, corporate agendas and philanthropic agendas are linked to US policy, and are thereby granted legitimacy and enormous influence over global political systems.

Yet, genetic engineering is politically, socially, and environmentally problematic. It poses risks to health, ecology, and biodiversity, and remains a highly uncontrolled experiment that impacts the lives and livelihoods of the world’s farmers while enriching corporations rooted in reckless violence and exploitation. (Monsanto, for example, still has not taken responsibility for manufacturing the chemical Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and has never renounced any of the enormous profits it made off of related deaths and deforestation in Vietnam.)¹³ Genetic engineering does not remedy the root causes of global hunger, which lie in the politics of food distribution and poverty that keeps millions unable to buy adequate nourishment, rather than in insufficient global production. Furthermore, it often does not accomplish its basic goal of improving yield: there is growing evidence (even with huge corporate control over research universities) that GMOs do not work. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman of the Pesticide Action Network North America (PANNA) states that, “Despite twenty years of research and thirteen years of commercialization, genetic engineering has failed to increase US crop yields, while driving up costs to farmers....”¹⁴ In challenging the Lugar-Casey bill, Eric Holt-Gimenez, Executive Director of Food First, said, “Past public-private partnerships on GM crops for Africa have proven to be colossal failures. The failed GM sweet potato project between Monsanto, USAID and a Kenyan research institute is a good example of fourteen years’ worth of wasted money and effort.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Syngenta Foundation jointly fund the Insect Resistant Maize for Africa Project (IRMA), a project of the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI).¹⁶ IRMA, KARI, and the International Maize and Wheat Centre (CIMMYT) are currently preparing to release genetically modified maize on a large-scale to Kenyan farmers in 2011, with a “pre-release” set for 2010.¹⁷

Given scientific data that discount the claims of genetic engineering, why would the “beneficent” structures of food aid and philanthropy remain tied to claims of GE’s usefulness in the Global South, particularly in Africa? According to numerous academics, policy observers, and activists, these structures are not about hunger. They are about capitalism and philanthro-capitalism: the opening of markets, the spending of wealth through tax-free foundations in order to surround wealthy principals with the aura of altruism, the expropriation of valuable resources at the lowest cost, the perpetuation of the myth that technology solves all problems, even social ones, and the intentional obfuscation of the exploitative roles of corporations.

This troubling trend in support for GE diffusion is evident in a recent Kenyan GM maize scandal. In January 2010, Dreyfus Commodities Ltd., an international grain handling company, received an export permit from South Africa to bring 40,000 metric tons—500,000 bags—of GM maize varieties into Kenya. In April, South Africa authorized another 240,000 tons after GM opponents blocked the initial shipment in the port of Mombasa.¹⁸ When the Kenyan government opened a window for importation of duty-free maize in late 2009, it was predicated on an anticipated food shortage.¹⁹ However, at the time of this recent importation, Kenya was experiencing a bumper harvest of cereals. In early April 2010, MP John Mututho, chairman of the parliamentary committee on agriculture, protested the importation, arguing that “The government should buy the surplus maize from the farmers. We have maize rotting in farms...As the Parliamentary Select Committee chairman on agriculture, I will lead a protest and the people who are importing ... should take back this maize.”²⁰ . Mututho echoes the concerns of civil society groups: Kenya does not need to import grain, and there has not been an adequate assessment of the potential risks of GMOs to human and environmental health.

The Kenya Biodiversity Coalition (KBioC), an alliance of nearly seventy organizations from farming, animal welfare, youth and other sectors, have expressed similar concerns. In response to the major influx of imported grain, the KBioC posed the question, “Why did the government extend the

window to import duty free maize when farmers in Kenya are struggling with lack of storage facilities and low prices of their recently harvested cereals?"²¹ This question supports the repeated calls for a critical exposé of the political and economic forces involved in GE technology, food aid, and agricultural development in Africa.

The recent importation of GM grains into Kenya is not unlike earlier uses of food aid in the service of corporations and industry. Proponents of genetic engineering often seek ingenious means of creating markets for biotechnology, with hopes of circumventing controversy and debate and intentionally fostering contamination of non-GM production. In 2002, USAID used the looming famine in Southern Africa as an opening for genetic engineering—they assumed that starving people would readily accept anything and everything that was sent, even if it was genetically engineered.²² The same year, Emmy Simmons, assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), said, "In four years, enough GE crops will have been planted in South Africa that the pollen will have contaminated the entire continent."²³ When the governments of Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique resisted the GM maize, the responses of pro-GM officials in the US led Professor Noah Zerbe to argue that, "the promotion of biotechnology has nothing to do with ending hunger in the region...US food aid policy following the 2002 crisis was intended to promote the adoption of biotech crops in Southern Africa, expanding the market access and control of transnational corporations and undermining local smallholder production thereby fostering greater food insecurity on the Continent." Similarly, the shipment to Kenya is taking numerous and dangerous shortcuts with the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the African Model Law on Biosafety, and even Kenya's own Biosafety Act, newly signed into effect by President Kibaki in 2009. And like the USAID shipment to Southern Africa in 2002, it has very little to do with hunger, and very much to do with politics.

The pro-GM lobby has frequently used the specter of hunger to disenfranchise Africans of their rights to make meaningful decisions about their lives. At the same time the World Bank and IMF push for "good governance" on the part of African governments, they and their partners support projects that suppress democracy and self-determination. Against this international political economy of powerful interests, grassroots civil society organizations are attempting to represent the demands of small farmers, pastoralists, and the poor. In response to the Lugar-Casey Bill, Ishii-Eitemann stated that, "The bigger, more fundamental challenge today is about restoring fairness and democratic control over our food systems. It is about increasing the profitability, well-being and resilience of small-scale and family farmers in the face of massive environmental and global economic challenges."²⁴ Similarly, AGRA Watch aims to re-center the debate on agricultural development in Africa within these larger challenges.

This resiliency depends in part on the wealth of biodiversity in African agriculture. It depends on the cultivation of a diversity of crops that are communally shared and saved, and are traditionally less susceptible to pests, droughts, and diseases than the very few varieties of staple crops consumed in the US. It depends on access to a varied, nutritional diet of locally available foods. The model of agriculture in the US does not promote safe and nutritious food for consumers, nor does it promote sustainable farming practices—it should not be upheld as a model for the world. Smallholders' agricultural and economic resiliency must be ensured and protected by political and legislative channels as well: through strong national biosafety laws that follow the recommendations of the Cartagena Protocol and the African Model Law on Biosafety; through international trade relationships that do not privilege corporate and Global North interests over the demands of the Global South; and through national political arenas that recognize and reflect the needs of the electorate.

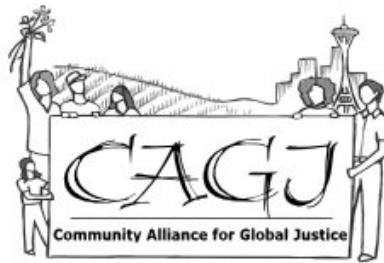
Groups such as KBioC draw from broader demands made by civil society organizations, which refute those in the pro-GM lobby who argue that resistance to genetic engineering is primarily a form of imperialism in which Global North activists attempt to deny Africans life-saving food and seed, or that the opposition within Africa is driven by the European bans on genetic engineering and the European desires not to lose market access. In response to the Southern Africa famine of 2002, Robert Zoellick—then US Trade Representative, now World Bank president—argued that the "dangerous effect of the EU's moratorium became painfully evident last fall when some famine-stricken African countries refused US food aid because of fabricated fears stoked by irresponsible rhetoric about food safety."²⁵ The demands of KBioC and other GE opponents within Kenya indicate that despite concerns about "imperialism" on the part of the Global North activists, the more paramount and urgent concerns focus on contamination and destruction of biodiversity, and the associated lack of democracy and accountability in terms of biosafety. In response to the case of Southern Africa in 2002, Noah Zerbe said, "...the decision to reject US food aid was based not merely on the environmental and health considerations typically raised by biotech's critics,

but focused more directly on questions of domestic and international political economy, and on market access to the European Union and the potential premium paid for certified non-GM agriculture in particular.”²⁶ Yet mainstream understandings of genetic engineering portray Africans as passive recipients of development, food aid, technology, and the controversies around them, rather than as actors in forming and articulating these international debates.

As KBioC and other small farmer organizations have shown, external forces will never solely determine the fate of African farming. Organizations working for food sovereignty have persistently and successfully stood up to some of the most powerful alliances in the world, and have asserted the rights of small farmers to determine agricultural policies that work for their own local and regional communities, rather than for the global market. We stand with them.

Comments are welcome. Please contact AGRA Watch, a campaign of the Community Alliance for Global Justice: agrawatch@seattleglobaljustice.org

Find us on the web: <http://www.seattleglobaljustice.org/agra-watch/>



¹Endnotes:

¹ http://www.foodfirst.org/files/pdf/PB_18_Lugar-Casey_Full_15Apr09.pdf, <http://www.panna.org/files/Press-Release-G8-16May09.pdf>.

² <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/2412>

³ <http://lugar.senate.gov/food/legislation/>

⁴ <http://lugar.senate.gov/food/legislation/>

⁵ <http://lugar.senate.gov/food/legislation/>

⁶ <http://globalfoodforthought.typepad.com/global-food-for-thought/2010/03/twin-bill.html>

⁷ <http://www.panna.org/files/Press-Release-G8-16May09.pdf>

⁸ http://www.ifad.org/media/press/2009/nwanze_gates.htm

⁹ http://www.ifad.org/media/press/2009/nwanze_gates.htm

¹⁰ http://www.danforthcenter.org/NEWSMEDIA/leaflet/Danforth_Leaflet_Feb_2009.pdf

¹¹ http://www.danforthcenter.org/NEWSMEDIA/leaflet/Danforth_Leaflet_Feb_2009.pdf

¹² <http://www.danforthcenter.org/about/mission.asp>

¹³ http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto_today/for_the_record/agent_orange.asp

¹⁴ <http://www.panna.org/files/Press-Release-G8-16May09.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.panna.org/files/Press-Release-G8-16May09.pdf>

¹⁶ Mbaria, John. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200810060873.html>

¹⁷ Mbaria, John. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200810060873.html>

¹⁸ http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?art_id=nw20100412223452635C732103, Reuters pdf

¹⁹ <http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Company%20Industry/-/539550/668996/-/u6gpadz/-/index.html>

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²¹ [KBioC Press Release](#) Tuesday, March 23, 2010

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²³ Bereano, Philip <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20021119&slug=bereano19>

²⁴ <http://www.panna.org/files/Press-Release-G8-16May09.pdf>

²⁵ Zerbe, Noah. http://www.humboldt.edu/~nrz3/research/zerbe_feeding.pdf

²⁶ Zerbe, Noah. http://www.humboldt.edu/~nrz3/research/zerbe_feeding.pdf