

Monsanto and Gates Foundation Push Genetically Engineered Crops on Africa

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Skimming the Agricultural Development section of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [web site](#) [5] is a feel-good experience: African farmers smile in a bright slide show of images amid descriptions of the foundation's fight against poverty and hunger. But biosafety activists in South Africa are calling a program funded by the Gates Foundation a "Trojan horse" to open the door for private agribusiness and genetically engineered (GE) seeds, including a drought-resistant corn that Monsanto hopes to have approved in the United States and abroad.

The Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) [program](#) [6] was launched in 2008 with a \$47 million grant from mega-rich philanthropists [Warren Buffet](#) [7] and Bill Gates. The program is supposed to help farmers in several African countries increase their yields with drought- and heat-tolerant corn varieties, but a report released last month by the [African Centre for Biosafety](#) [8] claims WEMA is threatening Africa's food sovereignty and opening new markets for agribusiness giants like Monsanto.

The Gates Foundation claims that biotechnology, GE crops and Western agricultural methods are needed to feed the world's growing population and programs like WEMA will help end poverty and hunger in the developing world. Critics say the foundation is using its billions to shape the global food agenda and the motivations behind WEMA were recently called into question when [activists discovered](#) [9] the Gates foundation had spent \$27.6 million on 500,000 shares of Monsanto stock between April and June 2010.

Water shortages in parts of Africa and beyond have created a market for "climate ready" crops worth an estimated \$2.7 billion. Leading biotech companies like Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer and Dow are currently racing to develop crops that will grow in drought conditions caused by climate change, and by participating in the WEMA program, Monsanto is gaining a leg up by establishing new markets and regulatory approvals for its patented transgenes in five Sub-Saharan African countries, according to the Centre's report.

Monsanto teamed up with BASF, another industrial giant, to donate technology and transgenes to WEMA and its partner organizations. Seed companies and researchers will receive the GE seed for free and small-scale farmers can plant the corn without making the royalty payments that Monsanto usually demands from farmers each season.

Monsanto is donating the seeds for now, but the company has a reputation for aggressively defending its patents. In the past, Monsanto has [sued](#) [10] farmers for growing crops that cross-pollinated with Monsanto crops and became contaminated with the company's patented genetic codes.

In 2009, Monsanto and BASF discovered a gene in a bacterium that is believed to help plants like corn survive on less water and soon the companies developed a corn seed known as MON 87460. It remains unclear if MON 87460 will out-compete conventional drought-tolerant hybrids, but the United States Department of Agriculture could [approve](#) [11] the corn for commercial use in the US as soon as July 11. Monsanto plans to make the seed available to American farmers by next year.

GE crops like MON 87460 can only be tested and sold in countries that, like the US, are friendly toward biotech agriculture. WEMA's target areas could add five countries to that list: South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. The Biosafety Centre reports that WEMA's massive funding opportunities pressure politicians to pass weak biosafety laws and welcome GE crops and the agrichemical drenched growing systems that come with them. Field trials of MON 87460 and other drought-tolerant varieties are already underway in South Africa, where Monsanto already has considerable [political influence](#) [12]. Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are expected to begin field trials of WEMA corn varieties in 2011.

The agency that is implementing WEMA is the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), a pro-biotechnology group funded completely by the US government's USAID program, the United Kingdom and the Buffet and Gates foundations. The AATF is a nonprofit charity that lobbies African governments and promotes partnerships between public groups and private companies to make agricultural technology available in Africa. The Biosafety Centre accuses the AATF of essentially being a front group for the US government, allowing USAID to "meddle" in African politics by [promoting](#) [14] weak biosafety regulation that makes it easier for American corporations to export biotechnology to African countries.

WEMA and AATF swim in a myriad [alphabet soup](#) [15] of NGOs and nonprofits propped up by Western nations and wealthy philanthropists that promote everything from fertilizer to food crops with enhanced nutritional content as solutions to world hunger. Together, these groups are promoting a [Second Green Revolution](#) [16] and sparking a worldwide debate over the future of food production. The Gates Foundation alone has committed \$1.7 billion to the effort to date.

There was nothing "green" about the first Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. As population skyrocketed during the last century, multinationals pushed Western agriculture's fertilizers, irrigation, oil-thirsty machinery and pesticides on farmers in the developing world. Historians often [point out](#) [17] that promoting industrial agriculture to keep developing countries well fed was crucial to the US effort to stop the spread of Soviet Communism.

The Second Green Revolution, which is focused on Africa, seeks to solve hunger problems with education, biotechnology, high-tech breeding, and other industrial agricultural methods popular in countries like the US, Brazil and Mexico.

Africa has landed in the center of a global food debate over a central question: with the world's growing population expected to reach nine billion by 2045, how will farmers feed everyone, especially those in developing countries? The lines of the debate are drawn. The Second Green Revolutionaries are now facing off with activists and researchers who doubt the West's petroleum and technology-based agricultural systems can sustainably feed the world.

The African Centre for Biosafety and its allies often point to a report recently released by

IAASTD, a research group supported by the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization, and others. IAASTD found that industrial agriculture has been successful in its goal of increasing crop yields worldwide, but has caused environmental degradation and deforestation that disproportionately affects small farmers and poorer nations. Widespread use of pesticides and fertilizer, for instance, cause dead zones in coastal areas. Massive irrigation projects now account for 70 percent of water withdrawal globally and approximately 1.6 billion people live in water-scarce basins.

Increasing crop yields is the bottom line for groups like the Gates Foundation, but the IAASTD recommends that sustainability should be the goal. The report does not rule out biotechnology, but suggests high-tech agriculture is just one tool in the toolbox. The report promotes “[agroecology](#) [18],” which seeks to replace the chemical and biochemical inputs of industrial agriculture with resources found in the natural environment.

In March, a UN expert released a report showing that small-scale farmers could double their food production in a decade with the simple agroecological methods. The report flies in the face of the Second Green Revolutionaries.

“Today’s scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods outperform the use of chemical fertilizers in boosting food production where the hungry live – especially in unfavorable environments,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and author of the report. “Malawi, a country that launched a massive chemical fertilizer subsidy program a few years ago, is now implementing agroecology, benefiting more than 1.3 million of the poorest people, with maize yields increasing from 1 ton per hectare to 2 to 3 tons per hectare.”

De Schutter said private companies like Monsanto will not invest in agroecology because it does not open new markets for agrichemicals or GE seeds, so it’s up to governments and the public to support the switch to more sustainable agriculture. But with more than a billion dollars already spent, the Second Green Revolutionaries are determined to have a say in how the world grows its food, and agroecology is not on their agenda. To them, sustainability means bringing private innovation to the developing world. The Gates Foundation can donate billions to the fight against hunger, but when private companies like Monsanto stand to benefit, it makes feeding the world look like a for-profit scheme.

Links:

[5] <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/agriculturaldevelopment/Pages/default.aspx>

[6] <http://www.monsanto.com/ourcommitments/Pages/water-efficient-maize-for-africa.aspx>

[7] <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/leadership/Pages/warren-buffett.aspx>

[8] <http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/>

[9] http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2012751169_gatesmonsanto29m.html

[10] <http://www.percyschmeiser.com/conflict.htm>

[11] http://www.aphis.usda.gov/newsroom/2011/05/ea_corn.shtml

[1 2]

<http://www.biosafetyafrica.org.za/index.php/20110516358/Activists-approach-Competition-Commission-to-Investigate-Monsantos-dominance-in-South-Africa/menu-id-100026.html>

[1 4]

http://www.aatf-africa.org/news/ministers_researchers_identify_benefits_of_biotechnology_cavass_passage_of_biosafety_bill/en/

[15] <http://www.cgiar.org/centers/bios.html>

- [16] <http://www.bayer.com/en/second-green-revolution.aspx>
[17] http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe50s/crops_13.html
[18] <http://www.agroecology.org/>

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