

Monsanto's Man in the Obama Administration

The Return of Michael Taylor

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Michael R. Taylor's appointment by the Obama administration to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on July 7th sparked immediate debate and even outrage among many food and agriculture researchers, NGOs and activists. The Vice President for Public Policy at Monsanto Corp. from 1998 until 2001, Taylor exemplifies the revolving door between the food industry and the government agencies that regulate it. He is reviled for shaping and implementing the government's favorable agricultural biotechnology policies during the Clinton administration.

Yet what has slipped under everyone's radar screen is Taylor's involvement in setting U.S. policy on agricultural assistance in Africa. In collusion with the Rockefeller and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations, Taylor is once again the go-between man for Monsanto and the U.S. government, this time with the goal to open up African markets for genetically-modified (GM) seed and agrochemicals.

In the late 70s, Taylor was an attorney for the United States Department of Agriculture, then in the 80s, a private lawyer at the D.C. law firm King & Spalding, where he represented Monsanto. When Taylor returned to government as Deputy Commissioner for Policy for the FDA from 1991 to 1994, the agency approved the use of Monsanto's GM growth hormone for dairy cows (now found in most U.S. milk) without labeling. His role in these decisions led to a federal investigation, though eventually he was exonerated of all conflict-of-interest charges.

Taylor's re-appointment to the FDA came just after Obama and the other G-8 leaders pledged \$20 billion to fight hunger in Africa over the next three years. "President Obama is currently embedded in a bubble featuring some of the fervent promoters of the biotech industry and a Green Revolution in Africa," says Paula Crossfield in the Huffington Post. Before joining Obama's transition team, Taylor was a Senior Fellow at the D.C. think tank Resources for the Future, where he published two documents on U.S. aid for African agriculture, both of which were funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

The Rockefeller Foundation funded the first Green Revolution in Asia and Latin America in the 1960s, and in 2006, teamed up with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to launch the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). In Taylor's 2003 paper "American Patent Policy, Biotechnology, and African Agriculture: The Case for Policy Change," he states: "The Green Revolution largely bypassed sub-Saharan Africa...African farmers often face difficult growing conditions, and better access to the basic Green Revolution tools of fertilizer, pesticides, improved seeds, and irrigation certainly can play an important role in improving their productivity."

In an interview with AllAfrica.com, Obama echoed Taylor's sentiment: "I'm still frustrated over the fact that the Green Revolution that we introduced into India in the '60s, we haven't yet introduced into Africa in 2009."

Yet as Crossfield points out, "There are very good reasons why we have never introduced a Green Revolution into Africa, namely because there is broad consensus that the Green Revolution in India has been a failure, with Indian farmers in debt, bound to paying high costs for seed and pesticides, committing suicide at much higher rates, and resulting in a depleted water table and a poisoned environment, and by extension, higher rates of cancer. If President Obama is lacking this information, it is his cabinet that is to blame."

While AGRA may not benefit African farmers, it will certainly benefit Monsanto. Some estimate that Monsanto controls 90 percent of the global market for GM seeds. In Brazil, 54 percent of all soybeans are produced with Monsanto's GM Roundup Ready© seeds, and in 2008, the country began spraying more pesticides and herbicides than the U.S. There is evidence that in 2003, Monsanto sold a Brazilian senator a farm for one-third of its market value in exchange for his help to legalize the herbicide glyphosate (the world's most widely used herbicide), sold by the corporation as Roundup©. In 2008, Monsanto controlled 80% of the Brazilian market for glyphosate, having elevated the price by 50% since its legalization.

The "penultimate draft" of Taylor's 2002 paper was reviewed by Dr. Robert Horsch, a Monsanto executive for more than 25 years, who left in 2006 to work at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It states, "The ultimate concern of this report is how innovative seed technology derived from patented tools of biotechnology can be developed and disseminated for the benefit of small-scale and subsistence African farmers."

Taylor's 2005 paper "Investing in Africa's Future: U.S. Agricultural Development Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa," was co-authored by the executive director of the Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa (PCHPA). Founded in 2000 and based in D.C., PCHPA is a consortium of public-private interests (Gates is one of its primary funders) that includes, among many others, Halliburton, several African heads of state, administrators from several U.S. land grant universities, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Monsanto. According to its web site, Taylor and Horsch both sit on PCHPA's advisory committee. Horsch continues to be listed as Vice President for Product and Technology Cooperation for Monsanto, and a member of PCHPA's working group for Capacity Building for Science and Technology.

Taylor writes of the need to change "archaic, near-subsistence agricultural economies" with a "market-oriented approach and the promotion of thriving agribusinesses." His recipe is globalized, industrial agriculture: "applied agricultural research," "markets for agricultural inputs and outputs", "build rural roads and other physical infrastructure", and "build agricultural export capacity and opportunity." Taylor fails to adequately address how liberalized agricultural policies and unfair U.S. agricultural subsidies have been responsible for the bankruptcy of millions of African farmers. Instead, he maintains, "the financial impact of U.S. domestic cotton subsidies on Mali farmers dwarfs the impact of development assistance from USAID and other agencies."

"Private investment and entrepreneurship are widely understood to be essential. The role of public investment is to provide the critical public goods needed to make private effort attractive and rewarding."

Taylor maintains that due to the constraints of USAID, which has its funds allocated through congressional earmarks and is squeezed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. needs an alternative funding strategy for African agricultural development assistance. His proposal is to broaden the reach of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a U.S. government agency established in 2004 by President George W. Bush to implement the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). "MCC is a new government corporation that operates under a different institutional and policy framework and receives funds that are not earmarked," says Taylor. "The MCA was intended to depart sharply from traditional U.S. development assistance by providing large amounts of assistance to select countries that create an enabling environment for economic growth through market-oriented, pro-growth policies." African countries make up about half of the MCA-eligible countries.

In June 2008, the Rockefeller Foundation issued a press release about the "historic collaboration" between MCC and AGRA. "MCC's investments in agriculture and in public infrastructure such as roads and irrigation complement AGRA's investments in providing the rural poor with seeds and fertilizers to increase their incomes and production," said MCC's CEO Ambassador John Danilovich. The MCC-AGRA partnership focuses on five areas, including "advancing agriculture research, multiplication of seed, and distribution of inputs and technologies to small-scale farmers," and "building roads, irrigation and other agriculture-related infrastructure."

As it arrived in D.C., the Obama Administration received a report from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs titled "Renewing American Leadership in the Fight Against Hunger and Poverty: The Chicago Initiative on Global Agricultural Development." The report was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and co-authored by its senior fellow Catherine Bertini. "The United States should thus remain willing to support research on all forms of modern crop biotechnology by local scientists in Sub-Saharan Africa," it reads.

Taylor's 2007 paper, published by PCHPA and titled "Beating Africa's Poverty by Investing in Africa's Infrastructure," is cited in the Chicago Council report and listed as "key reading on African development" in its appendix. The Chicago Council report makes five specific recommendations, the third being to "increase support for rural and agricultural infrastructure, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa," with a related priority to "accelerate disbursement of the Millennium Challenge Corporation funds already obligated for rural roads and other agricultural infrastructure projects."

While people have been debating about whether Michael R. Taylor might support labeling of GM foods (as he is aware, a moot point in the U.S. due to widespread contamination by GM pollen), he has been literally writing the book on U.S. agricultural aid to Africa. While the motives, beliefs and interests of Taylor, the Obama administration, the Gates, Rockefellers and everyone in support of a Green Revolution in Africa are debatable, those of Monsanto are not.

"Once attached to a pool of foreign aid money, the pressure to open markets to biotechnology will be substantial," points out Food First policy analyst Annie Shattuck.

But what will be the human and environmental costs of unleashing a Green Revolution in Africa? According to the Chicago Council report, the "most respected science academies" have concluded that "genetically engineered crops currently on the market present no new documented risk either to human health or to the environment." Unfortunately, this is false, and the world cannot afford for Obama to follow the advice of those who support a Green

Revolution in Africa.

In May, the American Academy of Environmental Medicine called for a moratorium on GM foods: “several animal studies indicate serious health risks associated with GM food consumption including infertility, immune dysregulation, accelerated aging, dysregulation of genes associated with cholesterol synthesis, insulin regulation, cell signaling, and protein formation, and changes in the liver, kidney, spleen and gastrointestinal system.”

According to a study published by the Union of Concerned Scientists this year, GM seeds do not produce higher yields than conventional seeds. Yet they pose serious ecological risks, especially from genetic contamination from pollen. In the U.S., it is becoming impossible for the organic food industry to certify non-GM foods. In July in South Africa, three varieties of Monsanto’s GM corn produced seedless plants on over 200,000 hectares of land for about 250 farmers. Monsanto had sold some of the seeds to commercial farmers and also given some to resource-poor, rural families.

GM crops also require more chemical spraying than conventional crops, and weeds are developing tolerance to glyphosate, requiring higher and higher doses. According to a recent editorial in the New York Times, “Scientists are connecting the dots with evidence of increasing abnormalities among humans, particularly large increases in numbers of genital deformities among newborn boys...Apprehension is growing among many scientists that the cause of all this may be a class of chemicals called endocrine disruptors.”

Glyphosate is an endocrine disruptor. In March, a molecular biologist at the University of Caen named Dr. Gilles-Eric Seralini published the results of a study that found Roundup causes cells to die in human embryos. “Even in doses diluted a thousand times, the herbicide could cause malformations, miscarriages, hormonal problems, reproductive problems, and different types of cancers,” said Dr. Seralini. In April, Dr. Andrés Carrasco, an embryologist at the University of Buenos Aires, published his findings that even very low doses, glyphosate can cause brain, intestinal and heart defects in frog fetuses.

Taylor’s solution to halt hunger in Africa is for its farmers to industrially produce commodities for global markets in order to generate cash to purchase toxic food at a supermarket. Yet if his goal is to meet the immediate food and nutritional security needs of poor people in sub-Saharan Africa, and given that most of them live in rural areas, his perception of appropriate land use is flawed.

Critics of AGRA assert that the most effective approach to fighting hunger in Africa would be to prioritize the agroecological production of healthy food by and for small-scale, peasant farming families, who would sell their surplus to local, regional and national markets, without being subject to unfair global markets and trade policies, or Monsanto’s Green Revolution package.

Family farms employ more people per acre than industrial farms do, and diversified small and medium farmers are more ecologically and economically resilient than those cultivating a monoculture cash crop. Local food systems consume less fossil fuel. Whereas the patenting and planting of GM seeds threaten humanity’s collective agrogenetic heritage, in a world without Monsanto, millions of family farmers would be the guardians of agrobiodiversity and indigenous farming knowledge.

One has to ask: given its support for Taylor, Monsanto and a new Green Revolution in Africa,

does the Obama administration's foreign agricultural aid program truly represent 'change we can believe in'?

As Ben Burkett, president of the National Family Farm Coalition, a U.S. member of La Via Campesina, cautioned, "As an African American farmer who has visited farmers in Africa many times, I am deeply concerned that much of the Obama Administration's pledge to spend \$1 billion on agriculture research will be wasted on biotech research that benefits Monsanto more than it does small-scale farmers."

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