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Open letter to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation from the SAFCEI and faith community representatives from the African continent.

We, a collective of faith leaders from Africa, are experiencing first-hand how the Covid-19 pandemic is making visible failing food systems and fuelling hunger and poverty in Africa. Alongside our responsibility to be custodians of the Earth, faith networks are entrusted to ensure the just distribution and sharing of resources for all in need.

While we are grateful to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (the Gates Foundation) for its commitment to overcoming food insecurity, and acknowledging the humanitarian and infrastructural aid provided to the governments of our continent, we write out of grave concern that the Gates Foundation's support for the expansion of intensive industrial scale agriculture is deepening the humanitarian crisis.

- **The Gates Foundation promotes a model of industrial monoculture farming and food processing that is not sustaining our people.** It reduces our resilience by depleting and destroying natural soil fertility, water resources and our rich biodiversity and genetic capital. It undermines community-spirited farming traditions of selecting, saving and sharing seed and it ignores indigenous knowledge regarding diversity and multi-cropping. Industrialised food systems cannot provide the people of Africa with an affordable, nutritious, diverse, chemical-free and culturally appropriate diet.
- **The Gates Foundation encourages African farmers to adopt a high input–high output approach** that is based on a business model developed in a Western setting. This has already rendered people landless and undermines human and environmental resilience. It puts pressure on farmers to grow just one or a few crops based on commercial high-yielding or genetically modified (GM) seeds. As smallholders become dependent on growing only a few cash crops, nutritional health in households declines and farmers are forced to sell off their land or scale up single crop production.
- **Aggressive frontier expansion of farmable land breaches human-nature barriers**. This practice erodes Africa's biodiversity and weakens ecosystem resilience. It enhances the opportunistic transmission of pathogens from reservoirs in wild animal populations to humans. This potential source of pandemics is a frightening prospect for people who have a reduced capacity to deal with such catastrophes. These challenges intensify the growing uncertainty and risks associated with a changing and unpredictable climate. Millions of young Africans, who depend on farming for their livelihoods, face future land and food insecurity.

African governments that provide tariff agreements and tax incentives to subsidise large agribusiness are aggravating the situation. By centralising control of production systems, land and profits end up in the hands of a small elite minority. This removes agency from those who have a historical and cultural knowledge and understanding of their ecological landscapes and local nutritious foods and medicines. It leaves communities critically

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vulnerable to the currents and exploitation of the global market and with fewer resources in the face of global crises like Covid-19 and climate change.

Widespread hunger in the region during the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the systemic failings of the current profit-driven system. The needs of the poor and the Earth are not being met in spite of the Gates Foundation's slogan that *"all lives have equal value"* and the vision of intent that *"by giving people the tools to lead healthy, productive lives, we can help them lift themselves out of poverty."*

Faith-based and civil society organisations are not alone in their unease about an industrial approach to food production. The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems[1] and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, who are intent on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agree:

> *… past efforts focused on boosting agricultural output … demand a new approach. A transition is needed to more sustainable food systems that produce more, with more socio-economic benefits and with less environmental consequences. In many countries agriculture has been seen as an enemy of the environment, but there is increasing recognition that a regenerative, productive farming sector can provide environmental benefits and services while creating rural employment and sustaining livelihoods.* [2]

If global food systems are to become sustainable, input-intensive crop monocultures and industrial-scale feedlots must become obsolete. The report *From uniformity to diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems*[3] articulates the change needed.

The Gates Foundation can support this transition in the following ways:

- Support regenerative farming and food systems and stop promoting the use of toxic pesticides and herbicides, synthetic fertilisers and biotechnology.
- Shift investment to interventions, technologies and support packages that enable regenerative farming, and encouraging African governments to do the same.
- Work to ensure that seed and agriculture laws and policies are realigned to support farmers' rights over profits for agri-corporations.
- Promote the use and conservation of the genetic diversity of seed as a common good and not for corporate profit.
- Boost local farmer support and enabling short market supply chains to help farmers save money, keep money circulating in communities and reduce indebtedness. Flourishing local economies will ensure greater food security for all.

In the light of evidence that community-based agroecological approaches with minimal inputs will strengthen local and informal food network systems and bring about greater

[1] http://www.ipes-food.org/about/

[2] http://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/en/

[3] http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/UniformityToDiversity_FULL.pdf

ecological integrity and social and gender justice, we appeal to the Gates Foundation to fundamentally revise how it promotes "food security".

We ask that it stops funding green revolution technologies in Africa through the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the N2Africa project and genetically modified (GM) seed, including the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project.

We ask that it respects and supports locally-defined, holistic approaches that enable agroecological transitions to sustainable food systems in Africa. These are based on regenerative farming methods that work with, rather than against biodiversity, for the equitable production and local marketing of nutritious food.

This is a vision the faith traditions of the continent long for as we strive to ensure the just distribution and sharing of resources for all in need. It can only happen if we restore our relationship with the Earth and the community of life upon which we depend.

September 2020

Please endorse this letter by 16th November 2020.

Appendix:

Rationale for Africa's faith community concerns:

AGRA

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa's (AGRA's) interventions focused on seed systems on the continent are highly problematic and of the greatest concern for the following reasons:

- AGRA's approach supports commercial seed systems, in which a few large companies control seed research and development (R&D), production and distribution. Particularly problematic is AGRA's support of the fundamental restructuring of seed laws, which protect certified varieties, but criminalise non-certified seed, 80% of which come from millions of smallholder farmers who recycle and exchange seeds from year to year. This approach threatens seed system diversity and thus the agrobiodiversity that is critical for human and ecosystem health.
- AGRA supports agro-dealers as disseminators of agricultural information instead of the much-needed public sector extension services. Unlike extension services, agro-dealers are sponsored by government or private companies that wish to support their own technologies. They have no backward links to R&D that facilitate direct farmer engagement. Agro-dealers do not play a facilitative role, but rather offer narrow advice for specific, mostly corporate products.
- AGRA's approach undermines existing farmer knowledge and potential.

We appeal to the Gates Foundation and AGRA to stop promoting failed technologies and outdated extension methods and start listening to the farmers who are developing appropriate solutions for their contexts.

AGRA and the N2Africa project

The N2Africa project, started with funding from the Gates Foundation, is oriented towards exclusively supporting a modernisation agenda that can only benefit a few. Although soil health and nutritional benefits are used to justify investment in legume commercialisation, the real baseline measurement is production for external markets. As a result, local legume crops and varieties are bypassed in favour of imported varieties developed for industrial feed and processing markets. This threatens local varieties that farmers and consumers prefer.

Cargill and the soybean market

Of grave concern is the possible expansion of massive GM soybean production on the sub-continent. The Gates Foundation's support for Cargill, a US based global food corporation with a damaging record in South America, makes the development of this value chain a serious threat in Africa.

Genetically modified seed

The Gates Foundation invests heavily in genetically modified (GM) R&D on the continent. While this research is said to focus on drought and salt tolerance, nitrogen-use efficiency, resistance to tropical pests and diseases and nutritional enhancement (biofortification), those who stand to benefit are the multinational companies that own the patented GM traits used. The genesis of GM research in Africa was from royalty-free donations for patented GM traits by several multinational companies, including Monsanto, DuPont and Pioneer Hi-bred, to experimental programmes undertaken by African scientists employed by government ministries.

By focusing the research on traits meant to "benefit" farmers and malnourished populations, through inter alia, biofortification, the industry is effectively giving a humanitarian face to vested interests and expanding the influence of multinational companies in African agriculture. The focus on biofortification is problematic given the need to move away from an over-emphasis on food fortification strategies towards a permanent solution such as diet diversity derived from locally available foods. This was recognised as early as 1992 by the United Nations' International Conference on Nutrition.

GM-based technology is costly. Even if gene sequences and constructs are donated, the accompanying requisite GM inputs will be expensive for farmers. GM crops are highly likely to increase the costs of production for farmers and lead them into indebtedness and dependency. GM varieties are also likely to be subject to plant breeders' rights and GM-certified seed will be sold to farmers by local seed companies that will expect a profit or royalty payments. This scenario becomes more problematic when applied to

traditional crops, which are the common heritage of African farmers and often the last defence against hunger in poor communities.

GM projects divert both financial and human resources, policies and practices away from implementing solutions that can be found within the diversity of natural foods and farming.

The solution

We urge the Gates Foundation to stop pushing a green "revolution" that imposes technologies and seeds that are controlled by companies with vested interests. Rather, it should be looking at and learning from small-scale farmers around the world who are working to build alternative food systems that are socially just and ecologically sustainable.

Such an approach includes assisting governments to implement holistic strategies to support smallholder farmers. Agroecological strategies such as intercropping, the "push-pull" system and integrated pest management are already showing efficacy in the field. These are being implemented in both the Americas and Africa and do not further indebt farmers or compromise their health or that of their environment.

Using the N2Africa project as an example, a better starting point would be to understand the level of diversity, in this case of legumes, in a given area. Based on farmer priorities, support can then be oriented towards re-establishing or strengthening the presence of these legumes. What is needed is a development programme that integrates farmers into seed enhancement and production and develops appropriate quality control systems based on farmer priorities and under their control. This approach would be sustainable and inclusive, and not driven by the motivation for profit. Similarly, with biofortification, the real solution to address vitamin and mineral deficiencies can be found in ecological farming systems and traditional kitchen and home gardens. These systems are better able to contribute to healthy and diverse diets and they give agency to people to access and produce their own healthy and varied food.

Conclusion

We believe the Gates Foundation approach is not helping to alleviate hunger and poverty. Rather, it is harming both farmers and the environments on which African food production systems depend. The Foundation's approach supports the dominance of multinational corporations over African food production systems.

People of faith are called to be custodians of all creation, of the web of life. We appeal to the Gates Foundation to look to and promote regenerative and agroecological approaches that do not destroy biodiversity on the African continent and that will provide a just distribution of food for all. Such an approach requires the Gate's Foundation to look for solutions not only from science, but also in the knowledge, heritage, experience and needs of African farmers.