

African Faith Leaders Demand Reparations from the Gates Foundation

An Open Letter to the Gates Foundation

27 August 2024

Dear Gates Foundation,

We, a collective of faith leaders from Africa, are calling on the Gates Foundation, to acknowledge that their interventions in Africa's food and farming systems have failed. As a result, we are demanding reparations for the ecological and social damage caused. Building from our call in February 2021 for the Gates Foundation to stop funding Green Revolution initiatives in Africa (see our [previous letter](#)), the foundation has since failed to offer an appropriate response.

As faith leaders, we have a responsibility as custodians of the Earth and of our faith communities to call out injustice and ensure the equitable sharing of resources for all, particularly the most vulnerable.

While we note that the Gates Foundation has committed itself to ending food insecurity and poverty in Africa, we are gravely concerned about the approach it continues to take, through its support of AGRA (until recently known as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa). AGRA was founded in 2006 by The Gates Foundation and other donors. Gates is by far its largest funder, providing nearly \$1 billion since 2006. It provided \$200 million recently despite [its own commissioned evaluation](#), which documented AGRA's failures.

Their interventions are further pushing Africa's food system towards a corporatized model of industrial agriculture, diminishing our people's right to food sovereignty and threatening ecological and human health.

Our concerns are:

- The Gates Foundation promotes an [industrial model](#) reliant on costly synthetic inputs (fertilisers and seeds). This places smallholder farmers at the mercy of volatile global prices to maintain their yields, while simultaneously diminishing their resilience to external shocks.
- The use of [synthetic fertilisers reduces soil fertility](#) and pollutes the ecosystem through leaching and run-off. Their use is linked to increased pest and disease occurrences, as the soil ecosystem becomes unbalanced.
- As ecosystems degrade, [farmers move onto new land](#), lacking the resources to rehabilitate what has been destroyed. This places further pressure on natural resources, compounding the likelihood of ecosystem collapse.
- Most of Africa's peoples are reliant on natural resources for their food, fuel, medicine and raw materials. Any intervention that threatens ecosystem

health or [removes agency](#) from already strained communities is not acceptable.

- Interventions that aim to shift Africa's food models towards [Industrial models](#) diminishes the role that food and its production play in community systems and ignores the significant body of related indigenous wisdom, which is recognised as a key element in climate change adaptation.
- The focus on entry of the private sector into food and farming systems in Africa weakens resilience and biodiversity by favouring the production of commodity crops. This immediately [reduces the value of diversity of crops](#) planted, and thus the diversity of diets.

AGRA's bold vision to double the yields and incomes of smallholder farmers and halve the number of people in hunger has simply not worked and [caused documented damage](#) as a [new report on Zambia's food crisis](#) makes clear.

We call on the Gates Foundation to cease funding AGRA and other such programs and make reparations through:

- **Supporting** the agroecology movement on the continent in its work to bring about sustainable, inclusive and equitable food systems in Africa.
- **Promoting** the adoption of policy frameworks for agroecology; including seed and agricultural laws that favor the rights of African communities over corporations.
- **Funding** African-based efforts that center on local knowledge systems and communities.
- **Investing** in agroecology, namely the scaling up of the organic input supply chain, supporting the scaling up of participatory farmer-led research and community seed banking.

It's time for international funders to transition towards agroecology through respecting and supporting locally defined holistic approaches in Africa, by Africa.

As faith leaders, we must advocate for the restoration of our relationship with the Earth and the community of life on which we all depend.

Sincerely,

Faith Leaders of Africa

Appendix: Rationale for Africa's Faith Community Concerns

A 2020 independent review of the performance of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa's (AGRA's) programmes highlights the failure of its approach and documents the significant negative effects on smallholder farming systems, including ecological damage. This review is based on a study undertaken by Tufts University researchers, who used national-level data from 13 target countries of the AGRA programme, poverty and hunger statistics and four case studies in Mali, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia to gain insights into the impact of AGRA in Africa.[i]

Launched in 2006 by the Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, AGRA aimed to reduce hunger and poverty through the modernisation of African smallholder farming systems. This approach encourages input and resource intensive farming practices that encourage dependence on external (mostly global markets). AGRA works at four levels to influence farming systems: policy and advocacy, seed systems, farm-level and markets and trade.

An independent review commissioned by AGRA notes that AGRA actively promotes policies that enable the entry of Green Revolution inputs (seeds and pesticides) to the continent.[ii] These seeds and synthetic fertilisers are then 'pushed' onto smallholder farmers through government-funded Farm Input Subsidy Programmes (FISPs), which, in most cases, do not allow farmers to choose agroecological or organic inputs. Of the 13 AGRA countries reviewed in the study, 10 had seen significant uptake of FISPs.

AGRA's stated goal to double yields and incomes for 30 million farming households by 2020 has not been realised, and the review notes that this statement was deleted from its website in 2020; this aligns with the general lack of accountability displayed by AGRA in not releasing its monitoring and evaluation of its programmes. [iii]

The review of AGRA's performance in the 13 target countries found: [iv]

- Little evidence of significant increases in the incomes or food security of small-scale food producers, but there has been an average of 30% increase in the number of hungry people.
- Little evidence that productivity has grown by any significant amount – the difference pre- and during AGRA programmes was 1.5%; and productivity declined in 8 of the 13 programmes. AGRA had predicted 100% yield increases in maize, but achieved, on average, 29% increases. It must also be noted that production increases are also driven by farmers moving onto new land, as their existing fields are depleted of nutrients from successive use of synthetic fertilisers.[v]

- Minimal reduction in rural poverty even in cases where there had been increased production and a further erosion of food security and nutrition, particularly for poorer food producers.
- Strong evidence for negative impacts on farming soils, including acidification due to adoption of monoculture planting and use of synthetic fertilisers.

The negative effects of continued use of synthetic fertilisers – promoted through Green Revolution programmes and projects – are well known. It is linked to reduced levels of organic matter in the soil, hardening of the soil, lowered soil fertility, loss of nutrients and pollution of both soil and water bodies.[vi]

The focus of Green Revolution programmes, such as those supported by AGRA, is on the development of the market model, facilitating the entry of private-sector companies into smallholder farming systems. This creates a market dependency that many farmers cannot afford.[vii] And it weakens the resilience of farming communities, as planting turns to commodity crops or those grown from hybrids or genetically modified seeds (as these seeds enjoy intellectual property protection and are able to generate profits for agri-chemical companies). The result is indebtedness and a steep reduction in the diversity of food available in a community.[viii] In AGRA projects, participants are often not able to select their crops, but must practice monoculture farming using specified seeds and synthetic fertilisers.[ix] Data from countries in the AGRA programme shows that local crop production fell significantly, including for millet (24%) roots and tubers (7%) and groundnuts (23%).[x]

This Green Revolution approach has been identified by leading global organisations – including the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems services – as being a significant driver of climate change and ecological destruction. [xi]

AGRA's independent evaluators point to farmers' binding constraints, such as the ability to afford both seeds and fertilizers. Some farmers cannot buy inputs at all due to a lack of financing. AGRA's support focused on providing extension, demonstration on seeds and fertilizers use and support to proximity of and choices of inputs in village shops (agrodealers) – but do not fund individual farmer's access to inputs.[xii] The above coupled with AGRA's imposing influence on policies cripples the same farmers that it does not fund to access the inputs. "In the linkages with commercial banks, we did not succeed because of the high interest rates. At the level of producers very little has been done, financial institutions have been intervening in the region, but the products still do not meet the needs of smallholder farmers." –AGRA partner in Mozambique.

Finally, farmers in Kenya, where policies have been changed, can no longer freely exchange seeds as this is outlawed by the laws. This is according to the

revised Seeds and Plant Varieties Act of 2012, Part 2(8) on restrictions on sales of seeds of unindexed plant varieties. The Kenyan Seed and Plant Varieties Act discourages farmers from selling or sharing seeds. [xiii]

[i] Timothy A. Wise, *Failing Africa's Farmers: An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa*, GDAE Working Paper No. 20-01. 2020. [online]
https://sites.tufts.edu/gdae/files/2020/07/20-01_Wise_FailureToYield.pdf.

[ii]. Mathematica. Partnership for Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in Africa, Final Evaluation, Volume I – Final Evaluation Report. 2021. [online]
<https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PIATA-Final-Evaluation-Report-Volume-I.pdf>

[iii] Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa. 2020. *False promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*. [Online]
https://afsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/false-promises_agra_engl_20200706_web_compressed.pdf

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Sentinel. 2021. *Agricultural expansion in Zambia: What are the drivers and implications?*
www.sentinel-qcrf.org/sites/sentinel/files/resources/2021-07/Sentinel%20Zambia%20RS%20briefing_Final%20published%20Jul21.pdf.

[vi] Antony Chapoto, Darlington Sabasi, and Collins Asante-Addo. 2015. *Fertilizer Intensification and Soil Fertility Impact on Maize Yield Response in Northern Ghana*. 2015 AAEA & WAEA Joint Annual Meeting, July 26-28, San Francisco, California. Agricultural and Applied Economics Association.
<https://ideas.repec.org/p/ags/aaea15/205694.html>.

[vii] CARE (2010), "The ADAPT Project in Zambia: Successes and Lessons in Building a Scalable Network of Rural Agro-Dealers to Serve Smallholders"
https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_ADAPT_Case_Study.pdf

[viii] Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa. 2020. *False promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*. [Online]
https://afsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/false-promises_agra_engl_20200706_web_compressed.pdf

[ix] Ibid.

[x] FAOSTAT for the 13 AGRA main target countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.
<https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>

[xi] Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem

Services (IPBES). 2019. *The Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. [online] <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

[xii] AGRA Independent Evaluation Management Response. 2022. [online] [AGRA-management-response-to-Mathematica-Evaluation_2.pdf](#)

[xiii] Kenya Law. 2012. *Seeds and Plant Varieties Act*. http://kenyalaw.org:8181/exist/kenyalex/actview.xql?actid=CAP.%20326#part_I
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