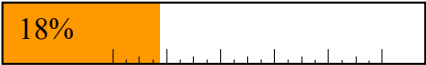


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Toxic Agriculture and the Gates Foundation

BY COLIN TODHUNTER



Chemical fertilizer plant, San Joaquin Valley. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was launched in 2000 and has \$46.8 billion in assets (December 2018). It is the largest charitable foundation in the world and distributes more aid for global health than any government. One of the foundation's stated goals is to globally enhance healthcare and reduce extreme poverty.

The Gates Foundation is a major funder of the CGIAR system (formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research) – a global partnership whose stated aim is to strive for a food-secured future. Its research is aimed at reducing rural poverty, increasing

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On release of the report, Polly Jones, the head of campaigns and policy at Global Justice Now, said:

“The Gates Foundation has rapidly become the most influential actor in the world of global health and agricultural policies, but there’s no oversight or accountability in how that influence is managed.”

She added that this concentration of power and influence is even more problematic when you consider that the philanthropic vision of the Gates Foundation seems to be largely based on the values of ‘corporate America’:

“The foundation is relentlessly promoting big business-based initiatives such as industrial agriculture, private health care and education. But these are all potentially exacerbating the problems of poverty and lack of access to basic resources that the foundation is supposed to be alleviating.”

The report’s author, Mark Curtis, outlines the foundation’s promotion of industrial agriculture across Africa, which would undermine existing sustainable, small-scale farming that is providing the vast majority of food across the continent.

Curtis describes how the foundation is working with US agri-commodity trader Cargill in an \$8 million project to “develop the soya value chain” in southern Africa. Cargill is the biggest global player in the production of and trade in soya with heavy investments in South America where GM soya monocrops (and associated agrochemicals) have displaced rural populations and caused health problems and environmental damage.

According to Curtis, the Gates-funded project will likely enable Cargill to capture a hitherto untapped African soya market and eventually introduce GM soya onto the continent. The Gates foundation is also supporting projects involving other chemical and seed corporations, including DuPont, Syngenta and Bayer. It is effectively promoting a model of industrial

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more than 80% of Africa's seed supply comes from millions of small-scale farmers recycling and exchanging seed from year to year. But AGRA is promoting the commercial production of seed and is thus supporting the introduction of commercial (chemical-dependent) seed systems, which risk enabling a few large companies to control seed research and development, production and distribution.

The report notes that over the past two decades a long and slow process of national seed law reviews, sponsored by USAID and the G8 along with Bill Gates and others, has opened the door to multinational corporations' involvement in seed production, including the acquisition of every sizeable seed enterprise on the African continent.

Gates, pesticides and global health

The Gates Foundation is also very active in the area of health, which is ironic given its promotion of industrial agriculture and its reliance on health-damaging agrochemicals. This is something that has not been lost on environmentalist Dr Rosemary Mason.

Mason notes that the Gates Foundation is a heavy pusher of agrochemicals and patented seeds. She adds that the Gates Foundation is also reported to be collaborating in Bayer's promotion of "new chemical approaches" and "biological crop protection" (i.e. encouraging agrochemical sales and GM crops) in the Global South.

After having read the recent 'A Future for the World's Children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission', Mason noticed that pesticides were conspicuous by their absence and therefore decided to write to Professor Anthony Costello, director of the UCL Institute for Global Health, who is the lead author of the report.

In her open 19-page letter, 'Why Don't Pesticides Feature in the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission?', she notes in the Costello-led report that there is much talk about greater regulation of marketing of tobacco, alcohol, formula milk and sugar-sweetened beverages but no mention of pesticides.

But perhaps this should come as little surprise: some 42 authors names are attached to the report and Mason says that in one way or another via the organisations they belong to, many

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“Our children are growing up exposed to a toxic cocktail of weedkillers, insecticides, and fungicides. It’s on their food and in their water, and it’s even doused over their parks and playgrounds. Many governments insist that our standards of protection from these pesticides are strong enough. But as a scientist and a lawyer who specialises in chemicals and their potential impact on people’s fundamental rights, I beg to differ. Last month it was revealed that in recommending that glyphosate – the world’s most widely-used pesticide – was safe, the [EU’s food safety watchdog copied and pasted pages of a report directly from Monsanto](#), the pesticide’s manufacturer. Revelations like these are simply shocking.”

Mason notes that in February 2020, Tuncak rejected the idea that the risks posed by highly hazardous pesticides could be managed safely. He [told Unearthed](#) (GreenPeace UK’s journalism website) that there is nothing sustainable about the widespread use of highly hazardous pesticides for agriculture. Whether they poison workers, extinguish biodiversity, persist in the environment or accumulate in a mother’s breast milk, Tuncak argued that these are unsustainable, cannot be used safely and should have been phased out of use long ago.

In his 2017 article, he stated:

“The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most ratified international human rights treaty in the world (only the US is not a party), makes it clear that states have an explicit obligation to protect children from exposure to toxic chemicals, from contaminated food and polluted water, and to ensure that every child can realise their right to the highest attainable standard of health. These and many other rights of the child are abused by the current pesticide regime. These chemicals are everywhere and they are invisible.”

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However, it seems that the profits of agrochemical manufacturers trump the rights of children and the public at large: a joint investigation by Uearthed and the NGO Public Eye has found the world's five biggest pesticide manufacturers are making more than a third of their income from leading products, chemicals that pose serious hazards to human health and the environment.

Mason refers to an analysis of a huge database of 2018's top-selling 'crop protection products' which revealed the world's leading agrochemical companies made more than 35% of their sales from pesticides classed as "highly hazardous" to people, animals or ecosystems. The investigation identified billions of dollars of income for agrochemical giants BASF, Bayer, Corteva, FMC and Syngenta from chemicals found by regulatory authorities to pose health hazards like cancer or reproductive failure.

This investigation is based on an analysis of a huge dataset of pesticide sales from the agribusiness intelligence company Phillips McDougall. This firm conducts detailed market research all over the world and sells databases and intelligence to pesticide companies. The data covers around 40% of the \$57.6bn global market for agricultural pesticides in 2018. It focuses on 43 countries, which between them represent more than 90% of the global pesticide market by value.

While Bill Gates promotes a chemical-intensive model of agriculture that dovetails with the needs and value chains of agri-food conglomerates, Mason outlines the spiraling rates of disease in the UK and the US and lays the blame at the door of the agrochemical corporations that Gates has opted to get into bed with. She focuses on the impact of glyphosate-based herbicides as well as the cocktail of chemicals sprayed on crops.

Mason has discussed the health-related impacts of glyphosate in numerous previous reports and in her open letter to Costello again refers to peer-reviewed studies and official statistics which indicate that glyphosate affects the gut microbiome and is responsible for a global metabolic health crisis provoked by an obesity epidemic. Moreover, she presents evidence that glyphosate causes epigenetic changes in humans and animals – diseases skip a generation then appear.

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drug companies while the impacts of agrochemicals remains conspicuously absent from the disease narrative.

She states that we are exposed to a lifetime's exposure to thousands of synthetic chemicals that contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested – “a global mass poisoning.”

Gates Foundation in perspective

As part of its hegemonic strategy, the Gates Foundation says it wants to ensure global food security and optimise health and nutrition.

However, Rosemary Mason alludes to the fact that the Gates Foundation seems happy to ignore the deleterious health impacts of agrochemicals while promoting the interests of the firms that produce them, but it facilitates many health programmes that help boost the bottom line of drug companies. Health and health programmes seem only to be defined with certain parameters which facilitate the selling of the products of the major pharmaceutical companies which the foundation partners with. Indeed, researcher [Jacob Levich](#) argues that the Gates Foundation not merely facilitates unethical low-cost clinical trials (with often devastating effects for participants) in the Global South but also assists in the creating new markets for the “dubious” products of pharmaceuticals corporations.

As for food security, the foundation would do better by supporting agroecological (agrochemical-free) approaches to agriculture, which various high-level UN reports have advocated for ensuring equitable global food security. But this would leave smallholder agriculture both intact and independent from Western agro-capital, something which runs counter to the underlying aims of the corporations that the foundation supports – dispossession and market dependency.

And these aims have been part of a decades-long strategy where we have seen the strengthening of an emerging global food regime based on agro-export mono-cropping linked to sovereign debt repayment and World Bank/IMF ‘structural adjustment’ directives. The outcomes have included a displacement of a food-producing peasantry,

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but by 2004 were importing US\$ 11 billion a year.

The Gates Foundation promotes a (heavily subsidised and inefficient – certainly when the externalised health, social and environment costs are factored in) corporate-industrial farming system and the strengthening of a global neoliberal, fossil-fuel-dependent food regime that by its very nature fuels and thrives on, among other things, unjust trade policies, population displacement and land dispossession (something which the Gates Foundation once called for but euphemistically termed “land mobility”), commodity monocropping, soil and environmental degradation, illness, nutrient-deficient diets, a narrowing of the range of food crops, water shortages, pollution and the eradication of biodiversity.

At the same time, the foundation is helping powerful corporate interests to appropriate and commodify knowledge. For instance, since 2003, CGIAR (mentioned at the start of this article) and its 15 centres have received more than \$720 million from the Gates Foundation. In a June [2016 article](#) in The Asian Age, Vandana Shiva says the centres are accelerating the transfer of research and seeds to corporations, facilitating intellectual property piracy and seed monopolies created through IP laws and seed regulations.

Besides taking control of the seeds of farmers in CGIAR seed banks, Shiva adds that the Gates Foundation (along with the Rockefeller Foundation) is investing heavily in collecting seeds from across the world and storing them in a facility in Svalbard in the Arctic – the ‘doomsday vault’.

The foundation is also funding Diversity Seek (DivSeek), a global initiative to take patents on the seed collections through genomic mapping. Seven million crop accessions are in public seed banks.

Shiva says that DivSeek could allow five corporations to own this diversity and argues:

“Today, biopiracy is carried out through the convergence of information technology and biotechnology. It is done by taking patents by ‘mapping’ genomes and genome sequences... DivSeek is a global project launched in 2015 to map the genetic data of the peasant diversity of seeds held in gene banks. It robs the peasants of their seeds and

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This process is the very foundation of capitalism – appropriation of the commons (seeds, water, knowledge, land, etc.), which are then made artificially scarce and transformed into marketable commodities.

The Gates Foundation talks about health but facilitates the roll-out of a toxic form of agriculture whose agrochemicals cause immense damage. It talks of alleviating poverty and malnutrition and tackling food insecurity but it bolsters an inherently unjust global food regime which is responsible for perpetuating food insecurity, population displacement, land dispossession, privatisation of the commons and neoliberal policies that remove support from the vulnerable and marginalised, while providing lavish subsidies to corporations.

The Gates Foundation is part of the problem, not the solution. To more fully appreciate this, let us turn to a [February 2020 article](#) in the journal Globalizations. Its author, Ashok Kumbamu, argues that the ultimate aim of promoting new technologies – whether GM seeds, agrochemicals or commodified knowledge – on a colossal scale is to make agricultural inputs and outputs essential commodities, create dependency and bring all farming operations into the capitalist fold.

To properly understand Bill Gates's 'philanthropy' is not to take stated goals and objectives at face value but to regard his ideology as an attempt to manufacture consent and prevent and marginalise more radical agrarian change that would challenge prevailing power structures and act as impediments to capitalist interests. The foundation's activities must be located within the hegemonic and dispossessive strategies of imperialism: displacement of the peasantry and subjugating those who remain in agriculture to the needs of global distribution and supply chains dominated by the Western agri-food conglomerates whose interests the Gates Foundation facilitates and legitimises.

The full text of Rosemary Mason's 19-page document (with relevant references) – [‘Why Don't Pesticides Feature in the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission?’](#) – can be accessed via the [academia.edu](#) website)

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher based in the UK and India.