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About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

Colonialism is not dead

MINNEAPOLIS, MARCH 22, 2010* — Bill Gates and the biotech juggernauts are doing their best to keep Africa dependent on imported technology, just like in the bad old days of colonialism.

In the latest iteration of “the rich world knows best,” it is Bill Gates in the company of the few, huge private biotech firms that have joined the long (sorry) list of those that think they know best how Africa should grow its food. If the history of colonialism and subsequent development practice has taught us anything, it is that all interventions must strengthen resilience, encourage diversity and be locally appropriate. The biotech seed proposal for Africa fails on all three counts.

A February 17 Des Moines Register article implies that the U.S. model of crop production will be exported to African nations by giving biotech seed to African farmers. Exporting a model developed specifically for the U.S. to the 47 countries of sub-Saharan Africa is bad enough; worse, this model is focused largely on high inputs for monoculture corn and has caused enormous problems in the United States. Why would we want to export it?

Biotech corn is designed for monoculture production on large acreages like we have in the United States: African agriculture is overwhelmingly small-scale (on farms of less than one acre) and diverse, allowing for a more diverse diet as well as greater overall output given the dependence on rain-fed agriculture and very limited access to external expensive inputs such as fertilizer. It's often claimed that biotech seeds will yield larger crops: In fact, there is no evidence that crops from biotechnology seeds produce higher yields than do crops from conventionally bred seeds.

Both Pioneer and Monsanto claim they will make the seeds available royalty-free but nothing is said about providing seeds at cost. Nor is anything said about the biotech industry's stringent rules prohibiting saved seed. Biotech becomes a vehicle to introduce a need for a slew of expensive, and commonly fossil fuel-based, inputs. African farmers have historically, and for centuries, provided necessary inputs for themselves on-farm.

If Bill Gates is going to be responsible for spending hundreds of millions on agriculture in Africa, we need his foundation to do better. So, what are the alternatives to high-input agriculture in Africa?

The Nigerian National Variety Release Committee is set to release improved corn varieties that address drought, low soil fertility, pests, diseases and parasitic weeds. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) developed these varieties in partnership with other African plant breeding programs in Nigeria. These include 13 open-pollinated varieties with varying maturities and four hybrids with drought tolerance. They do not have the costs or legal hassles associated with genetic engineered varieties and will be suited for small farmers.

Another example is the work of Dr. Pedro Sanchez who spent his career working to develop low-cost and comprehensive soil rejuvenation programs for Eastern and Southern Africa and other food-deficit nations. Dr. Sanchez, the 2002 winner of the World Food Prize, has shown how biodiverse small farms can not only produce more local food but also build soil fertility and rural economies. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development—now endorsed by over 50 countries—reached similar conclusions.

In the United States, the biotech industry has dictated the terms of the technology, trampling over the interests and concerns of farmers and the public alike. Biotech crops have resulted in fewer farmers growing more agricultural raw materials and less food, exactly the opposite of what is needed in Africa.

We suggest the Gates Foundation support ongoing African research rather than import capital-intensive technology developed to address problems that are far from most Africans' concerns. The privately patented and tightly controlled model epitomized by biotechnology is all wrong for the estimated 33 million small farms that make up 80 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's agriculture.

*A version of this commentary appeared in the March 20, 2010 issue of the Des Moines Register.

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