



Does Africa Need a New Green Revolution to Fight Hunger?

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“Green Revolution” is the label for concerted initiatives to increase agricultural production and prevent hunger and starvation in major regions of the world. Earlier efforts transformed agriculture in Mexico, India, and the Philippines – by facilitating the use of new technologies and commercial seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides to produce high-yield cereal grains. In 2006 two of the world’s largest foundations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, joined forces to launch the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.

With the Gates Foundation alone contributing around one billion dollars by 2012, the stated goal is to reduce poverty by helping smallholder farmers, including women, gain greater access to markets, credit, and productivity-enhancing technologies to generate higher yields of staple food crops. In collaboration with African governments, multinational corporations, research institutes, and farmers’ organizations, the Gates Foundation is pushing market integration and the use of chemical fertilizers and commercial seeds (including hybrid and genetically modified seeds).

Scholars Debate the Pros and Cons

Not everyone is persuaded that this kind of new African Green Revolution is a good idea.

- Supporters argue that the Asian Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in higher yields of major staple crops, lowered food prices, and a reduction in hunger and malnutrition. They see a similar expansion of modern agriculture as the key to elimination of poverty and hunger on the African continent.
- But previous Green Revolutions also had downsides. India, which many consider to be a poster child of the first Green Revolution, did indeed improve agricultural yields and raise total agricultural outputs. Yet as Glen Davis Stone has pointed out, hunger in India continues apace, even as the government wrestles with the problem of overflowing granaries – because poor Indians, including many poor farmers and farm laborers, simply do not have the money to buy the food commercial agriculture has produced. Looking into one of the saddest downsides, A.R.Vasavi examined over 200,000 farmer suicides in India spanning more than a decade and found that indebtedness was a prime spur to such tragedies, as farmers get in over their heads trying to buy expensive commercial inputs. Most farmer suicides have taken place precisely in the regions where Green Revolution technologies were most heavily adopted. Some scholars of African agriculture have claimed that massive bankruptcies of small family farmers, faced with steadily rising costs for foreign produced seeds and fertilizers but volatile global prices for their crops, will pave the way for land grabs by foreign agribusiness investors.

Critics in Africa Voice Doubts

Powerful actors in Africa and the United States may be fully on board with the new Green Revolution, yet there is also a growing political debate about potential costs and how to counter-act them. Tanzania, for example, is one of the three main countries targeted by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. Yet in that country, several prominent non-government organizations – including *Haki Ardi* and the *Tanzania Gender Networking Programme* – are raising questions about the assumptions and policy proposals of the new transnational initiative. Critics point to a range of issues, including the potential social and environmental pitfalls of mono-crop agriculture, the dangers of encouraging farmers to use genetically modified seeds, and the likelihood that high-cost inputs will lead to growing inequalities within African farming communities. Is it really a good idea, critics wonder, to make African farmers more dependent on foreign inputs provided by multinational corporations?

At the most basic level, Tanzanian and other African-based critics question the underlying Green Revolution assumption that high-tech, commercial agriculture is the best solution to Africa's food security challenges. They point to threats to biodiversity when corporate producers of seeds, fertilizers, and other standardized commercial inputs move in and suppress traditional practices such as farmer-to-farmer seed exchanges. Such fears have substance, given that the Monsanto Corporation, a partner in the New Green Revolution effort, has a long track record in North America of fostering farmer's dependency on their commercial seeds.

Struggles for Independence

Looking through the lens of deep-seated worries about international dependence and the aspirations of African peoples for true independence, critics can see the new Green Revolution as merely the latest "land grab" by foreign powers, part of a "new scramble" for land and natural resources across the continent. Pointing to the ecological devastation of African forests by foreign bio-fuel companies and land purchases by China and oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, African critics wonder whose interests are really served by a Green Revolution sponsored by commercially oriented donors and western philanthropic organizations.

Worries about inequality are also at the heart of the debate. If land concentration and indebtedness grow, critics ask, would the Green Revolution's results really be beneficial to most Africans? Or would mono-crop agriculture based on the overuse of commercial fertilizers lead to negative consequences such as polluted water supplies, widespread soil degradation, and sharply rising poverty and economic inequality? Although poor, small-scale farmers may improve their yields, the higher costs they have to pay for externally produced commercial inputs may often reduce household incomes – and thus lead to even poorer nutrition, exactly the opposite of what Green Revolution proponents promise. Simply boosting agricultural production at the national level, in other words, does not guarantee food security and better nutrition for all families and households, as the history of India makes clear.

Looking for Alternatives

As an alternative or a supplement to Green Revolution efforts, critics call for policies that pay careful heed to the class relationships that shape the impact of new technologies. Ideally, land should be distributed to small-scale farmers who get new support for informal seed supply and cultivation systems. Improvements in rural health care, education, and sanitation are also vital, along with fair trade rules to insure that the benefits of lower staple food prices and labor-saving technologies are passed along. Not just multinational profits and incomes at the top, but the incomes and economic security of laborers and small owners must rise as improved production grows. Only in that way can Africa as a whole win its fight against hunger and disease.

