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How “philanthropic” is global philanthropy?

A little more than one year after GRAIN's report on [“How does the Gates Foundation spend its money to feed the world?”](#), two German NGOs (Misereor and Brot für die Welt) and the independent Global Policy Forum publish a new report entitled [“Philanthropic Power and Development - Who shapes the agenda?”](#) written by two researchers, Jens Martens and Karolin Seitz.

Those of you who are familiar with our views at hungerexplained.org [read in particular our article on [“Large private Foundations: the lost opportunity of the Gates Foundation”](#)] will not be surprised by those presented in this well documented report.



Here is a summary of what the report says

A global landscape of philanthropic foundations

The report provides a general overview of the philanthropic landscape and explains how large foundations, long essentially financed by US billionaires who have no democratically granted mandate, have increasingly taken up a role in the global development agenda. They have mobilised a fast growing mass of resources, partly at least as a result of ineffective and regressive fiscal policies [\[read here\]](#) and have been recognised by the UN as sources of valuable development knowledge and actors of social, economic and political change in the last five years. They have played an active role in the discussion of the post-2015 Agenda and have been the champions of a market-based business model of development. Bill Gates was even appointed as member of UN

Secretary-General's MDG Advocacy Group and a representative of the Foundation was granted the opportunity to speak at a Special Event of the UN General Assembly. This, and many other events, show that wealthy so-called philanthropists have taken a considerable role in global development thinking and in field level development work. They can be seen on the media as received by world leaders, parading with them at major international events (as did Bill Gates at the Paris Climate Conference). And everywhere on the ground, their teams work to promote their development paradigms, sometimes sidelining local governments, often uncontrolled and unmonitored by anyone, while at the same time the UN is facing increasing difficulties in securing funding for its activities and that of its specialised agencies, even though they have been discussed and approved by their member-governments in their statutory meetings. Moreover, for lack of funding, UN agencies themselves - in particular WHO and FAO - turn to foundations to obtain the necessary funding they cannot get from their members, thus becoming vulnerable to private influence.

Shaping the health agenda

The report also details how the Rockefeller Foundation was able to shape the global health agenda and health policies during the 20th Century which are based on *"Vaccines... quick-win solution to global health challenges"*. From the start of the 21st Century, the Gates Foundation appeared on the scene and made available unprecedented amounts of money to finance global vaccination programmes that rest on *"advances in science and technology to save lives in developing countries... [and] proven tools—including vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics"*, rather than supporting weak and failing health systems. The Foundation works in close collaboration with major pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) who have received more than \$1 billion in recent years. It is also the driving force behind a myriad of private-public health partnerships.

Critiques recognized that lives were saved in the process, but they point at a 68 fold increase of the cost of immunization between 2001 and 2014... The report highlights that Gates also invested considerable resources in private corporations active in the biotechnological and pharmaceutical industry: philanthropy does not exclude profit-making.

Repackaging the Green Revolution

Despite its widely recognised shortcomings, wealthy so-called philanthropists are still promoting with millions of dollars the old recipe of the Green Revolution in Africa, although prior attempts failed in a spectacular way. Starting from the *"fundamental belief that hunger and malnutrition in the southern hemisphere are primarily caused by a lack of technology, knowledge and access to markets"* the Rockefeller Foundation first and now the Gates Foundation have spared no efforts to establish a private technology-based solution to food production in the South, leaving aside millions of resourceless farmers who are the very victims of undernourishment. Several foundations were part of the initiative that led to the creation of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) at world level, and now efforts are focussed on Africa, with the creation of AGRA with which readers of hungerexplained.org are well familiar.

Food fortification, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, GMOs are the key ingredients of the recipe proposed, along with privatisation of land, 'modern' seed legislation and support to Foreign Direct Investment. Gates used some resources to finance and influence the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the bulk of the money provided has been to finance international NGOs, agencies and research centers, little going actually directly to those who are supposed to be the main beneficiaries [[read](#)]. A good share of limited

local spending has been directed towards developing private agro-dealers who sell large agrochemical multinationals' products and to influencing local legislation on GMO seeds. This approach has been widely criticized by African civil society organisations, as detailed in Martens' and Seitz' report.

Moreover, with its resources, the Gates Foundation has been able to attract several high caliber food and agriculture experts, either transferred from large multinationals or from international organisations, while placing its own staff in key international or regional positions.

The report sums up this strategy for food and agriculture: *"In short, through its strategy mix of grant-making, personal networking and advocacy, the Gates Foundation has successfully positioned itself in the centre of an epistemic community that is promoting market-based techno-fix solutions to the complex global problems of hunger and malnutrition"*.

The authors conclude their work by formulating the following question: *"How 'philanthropic' is global philanthropy?"* and warn on the need to better understand what the emergence of these new players actually means for development.

'Philanthropists' have been given "access and influence in many programme areas, with little or no governing framework or oversight to show how they operate or what results have been achieved".

This raises, according to the report, three issues:

1. *"The absence of any framework for measuring results, not so much in terms of how well the programme meets donor-defined goals, but in terms of how well it meets the broader, more long-term goals, such as improving health outcomes or ensuring nutrition for all"*
2. The absence of a clear framework that ensures that foundations money contributed by supports beneficiarie goals rather than donor interests
3. To what extent *"does the creation of and support to multi-stakeholder partnerships, which no longer privilege the role of governments and intergovernmental bodies in setting standards and shaping the development agenda, risk undermining the credibility of publicly accountable decision-making bodies and weakening democratic governance"*?

Part of the answer is in the pursuit of short-term results that leads to *"managing' the poor rather than empowering them"*, in changing priorities in WHO and undermining of the pro-poor and bottom-up approach advocated by the [International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development \(IAASTD\)](#) and in the fragmentation of global governance for health, food and agriculture. And other examples could be added to this short illustrative list.

This report is a must read for whoever is interested in development issues.

To know more:

- Martens, J. and K. Seitz, ["Philanthropic Power and Development - Who shapes the agenda?"](#), Misereor, Brot für die Welt, Global Policy Forum, Aachen/Berlin/Bonn/ New York, November 2015

- [Behind the Mask of Altruism: Imperialism, Monsanto and the Gates Foundation in Africa](#) , Global Research, October 2014

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [Intergenerational equity is possible, provided there is a fundamental change in the principles that govern the world](#), May 2015
- [Large private Foundations: the lost opportunity of the Gates Foundation](#), November 2014
- [Green revolution in Africa: more improved seeds for the continent](#), May 2014
- [The Africa Progress Panel proposes more of the same old recipes to tackle hunger and poverty in Africa](#), May 2014.

Comment by Thomas Osborn (28/1/2016):

This is an important topic particularly with the high profile and amount of funding from Gates and a few other mega foundations. I have not read the other articles but I will. What I am saying is based on personal experience. I would just like to widen and deepen the discussion a bit with a few points.

1. Transparency: even in the 80s a few African were asking me about the INGOS, who is making the decisions and where is the transparency. This is a key difference with the UN organizations who are required to be transparent but I don't want to imply that UN organizations are great success stories either. Now those INGO 30 years later are bureaucratic organization providing services as if they were the government. With Gates and other there is a lack of transparency that is not helpful for learning. They need to learn and quick and we all need to learn from each other. This is not the tech sector where all the companies guard their IPR, development should be an open and transparent environment for maximum learning to work towards the greatest benefits for target populations.
2. On the ground: Gates are donors, almost all the staff are based in Seattle and fly back and forth, this has been referred to as development tourism. I consider this a very difficult business model because you need to develop relationships and really be there to know what is happening. Development is extremely complex and silver bullets of technology of seed or input dealers etc miss the complexity of the situation. Again this mean you have to be there.
3. Learning curve: Even though Gates has tried to hire the best and the brightest it is still a very young organization and at the beginning of the learning curve. Private sector people can bring relevant experience to the table but they don't appreciate the complexity of development issues. We saw this happen with Global 2000 using Jimmy Carter, out to prove something we have known for a long time, good seed plus fertilizer means increase production, so what? This comes back to the issue of complexity of development, no silver bullets.
4. Safe hands: Gates has big money that they have to move but they need safe hands to put it in so they have to provide large amounts of funding to big well established institutions. This is where the CGIAR comes in that matches their interest in technology as solutions to problems. Also the AGRA partnership with Rockefeller. If they try to fund smaller organization they have to change their model and provide more supervision in the field and increased overhead costs.