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Bill Gates: Playing with Lives and Cultures in Africa Solidarity America By John Funciello BC Columnist

Being among the unfathomably rich of the world, Bill Gates must feel that his hand is right up there with God's, as he surveys the world and decides who will be the beneficiaries of his largesse.

This time, he is pushing genetically modified crops, as he has done for some time and, this time, he is aiming at research which he apparently believes will produce maize (corn) that will fertilize itself by taking nitrogen from the air like soybeans, so African farmers will have one less major expense for their food crops.

A \$10 million grant has been made by the Gates Foundation to British scientists to experiment on creating this wonder corn that is sure to disrupt the lives and cultures of the people on whom this seed will be foisted. But, isn't it for the good of the African farmers, you say? Won't there be more food produced? Won't African peoples be happy about the benefits of Western culture? Isn't it good that transnational corporations have such an altruistic attitude toward the developing world?

Not so fast. Just a quick look at the use of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) will give even the casual observer a very different perspective. First, the laws of the U. S. have been written, at the behest of Corporate America, to make GMOs "intellectual property" and, therefore, something to be controlled by the corporations that own the patents. This is unlike anything the world has seen until very recently: Corporations own the life substance that provides the food

that allows humans to eat and survive. And, as owners, they can extract payment from farmers and the people who produce food.

Who cares who owns the property rights to the seeds of the world, as long as they are available to produce food? The answer, of course, is that anyone who farms to make a living and provide for a family cares. After all, they are becoming more and more dependent on the shrinking number of seed sources that are becoming a monopoly and an American company is the biggest seed house of all, Monsanto, the chemical and seed giant headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri.

Monsanto has been working for a few decades to buy up many of the old-line seed houses in the U.S. and elsewhere, but its biggest effort has been to push GMO seeds on the farmers of the world. Although their altruism is out there front and center in all that they do, it is mostly public relations, just as Gates' is mostly public relations. If it were not mostly PR, their products would not sell very well anywhere, including the developing world.

Right now, there is no guarantee of the safety of GMOs for humans or the planet, although the companies that own the patents of the various life forms that are GMOs claim that they not only are harmless, they will provide great benefits to those who buy and use them.

The benefits are yet to come for those who have bought into the GMO illusion. Monsanto claims (and Bill Gates echoes) that GMO crops are the answer to hunger, famine, food insecurity, pollution of the environment from pesticides and herbicides, and the economic development of the beneficiary nations...the list goes on. Although the mass press in the so-called developed world does not cover such things well, GMO crops have yet to deliver on most of the promises. In experiments in this country and elsewhere, the crop yields have not greatly increased over conventional seed and, in many cases, the use of chemicals to control weeds and pests has increased over conventional crops.

Then, how does that benefit small farmers in developing nations? There may be no benefit, but they are often forced to buy the seeds and chemicals through trade deals made by governments, not by organizations of farmers. The U.S. trade deals, made through use of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, or one of its own aid programs, might require that certain practices be followed, or the money doesn't flow. Millions of farmers are held hostage in aid deals that are made by governments, without ever consulting farmers.

Before Bill Gates plunged headlong into forcing GMO crops onto small farmers in Africa, he should have looked into what is happening in India, where foreign corporations like Monsanto control much of the seed (and, they sell untold amounts of agricultural chemicals, as well), not that he isn't aware of the problem already.

According to Vandana Shiva, who has been actively fighting the depredations of foreign corporations in India for many years, Monsanto controls most of the cotton seed in India, which is a major world producer of the fiber, and it controls much of the other seed stock in that country of 1.22 billion. The philosopher-author-environmental activist recently pointed out that, because of the insurmountable debt farmers have accumulated in some places, there have been some 250,000 farmer suicides over the past decade.

The accumulated debt of buying seed every year (farmers are not allowed to save seeds from year to year, under the patent laws) and buying the chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides the crops need to grow put farmers so profoundly in debt that they see no way out but suicide. Farmers have killed themselves by drinking the very poisons they had used on their crops. To a great degree, this is the price that is paid by families, cultural sectors, and nations, when an alien form is imposed by a greater power, in this case, an (economic) imperial power. However they want to couch it, the Bill Gates' of this world, along with the Monsantos of the world, are imposing on other peoples a form of life that conforms to the Western profit-seeking formula for development and survival.

Their corporate formula is not one that is likely to allow poor people of the world to survive, let alone thrive, for their aim is to make money from their "aid," nor will it help African or Indian farmers feed their families and develop their communities, in the manner of their customs, traditions, and cultures. Yet, they persist, because that is what corporations do. They make ever more money and they become more powerful.

When corporations like Microsoft and Monsanto are among the most powerful entities in the world's most powerful nation and can do what they wish with and to the people, what chance do smaller, less-developed, and poorer nations have in resisting what these corporations are forcing on them and calling it development?

What we are seeing in Gates' and Monsanto's intent to force GMOs on African nations and in India is nothing less than an overall attempt to force western style industrial agriculture on nations that should be assisted in making indigenous systems of agriculture flourish to benefit the people. The people should be in charge of their own development and destiny, and their labor should not be used to fill the coffers of Wall Street. If India, for example, were forced into the industrial model of food production, with its gigantic acreages and monster equipment, what would become of all the people involved in small farm agriculture? Of the more than 1.2 billion population, it is said that 600 million Indians are involved in agriculture in some way. Are they going to go to the cities to find work, when they are replaced in the countryside?

Some people do not see this as a problem, but the same thing has happened in the U.S. There has been a massive shift in population from the rural areas, to the cities and the suburbs in the past 50 years. As skills have been lost or replaced by robotics or other machinery, the unemployment numbers have grown steadily and now, with unemployment standing at about 8.2 percent, we are told that it is likely to stay at about that rate for a long time. Should we expect a different outcome in rural African nations or in India, as transnational corporations pursue the same goals?

Neither we nor Africans nor Indians can look toward benevolent policies from the U.S. government to mitigate the rapacious policies of its corporations in the rest of the world. Rather, the American people are little able to control corporations through their own government, since the government is complicit in virtually everything the corporations do, whether in domestic policy or in their dealings with other countries. Right now, Monsanto is powerful enough to get an amendment slipped into the 2013 Agriculture Appropriations Act, to allow, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, GMO crops to be planted, even though a court has ruled that that USDA allowed GMOs to be planted illegally. For years, citizen groups and watchdog non-profits have fought to have any foods containing GMOs to be labeled, so consumers can make the choice whether to buy or not buy. The power of the corporations has kept that labeling from happening, so we do not know when we are eating such substances.

Patenting of life forms is a moneymaker. When a farmer buys patented GMO seeds, he or she pays for the seed, and then pays a per-acre "royalty" to plant such a crop. It does not take a CPA to figure out what profits that means for Monsanto or any other company that

patents life forms. And, don't forget, seeds from that crop cannot be saved to plant next year, without the farmer being hauled into court for fines and damages by the patent holder. Trouble is, when those plants mature, the pollen goes into the environment and to any other plant of its kind. Therefore, conventional and organic crops in the vicinity are pollinated by the GMO crop and **those** farmers are liable to be hauled into court to pay fines and royalties, because the patented DNA could be found in their crops.

Another concern about GMOs is the health and safety of the people who eat the food that comes from those crops. One example is the genetic manipulation of a corn variety that produces its own pesticide, known as bacillus thuringiensis, or Bt, which had been used for decades by organic farmers as a safe and effective way of controlling some insect pests. Organic farmers feared that insects would develop immunity to Bt if it were produced by the corn itself, and planted on millions of acres. It was done, however, but there are fears that the Bt that is now contained in the corn, when eaten by supermarket shoppers, will continue to work in the human gut and destroy the balance needed there for good health.

The biggest reason for forcing GMOs on the world is profit and the job has been done in such a way that it is becoming nearly impossible to stop the rapid concentration of power in the food system. Now, though, the seed-and-food monopoly is being forced onto the peoples of the world who are not able to defend themselves as well as the developed, or post-industrial, countries. Europe does not want GMOs in their food and they have kept them out, for the most part, but the corporations are pushing to break open that market.

Monsanto and other corporations are sending their politicians to Congress and the state legislatures to make their products the only option in food. Their friends and supporters are powerful and they have unlimited funds for advertising, propaganda, and pay-offs, so it is a tough struggle.

A bright ray of hope is the opposition that springs up in these small countries. One is La Via Campesina, a worldwide organization of peasants, indigenous, and landless peoples, containing about 170 of their organizations. Its members know what is needed and they want access to the land and their traditional crops, so they reject GMO seeds, crops, and other GMO products offered by Monsanto and Bill Gates. If the latter wants to know what the people want, as opposed to what their government says they want, he should ask them. But

they need the support of people of good will around the world. It is a massive education project, then a massive organizing project. They cannot do it alone.

The whole problem of Gates (who, no doubt, believes his intentions are honorable), Monsanto, GMOs, and cultural and economic imperialism is perhaps summed up by Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biosafety in South Africa.

She said recently: "GM nitrogen-fixing crops are not the answer to improving the fertility of Africa's soils. African farmers are the last people to be asked about such projects. This often results in the wrong technologies being developed, which many farmers simply cannot afford. We need methods that we can control aimed at building up resilient soils that are both fertile and able to cope with extreme weather. We also want our knowledge and skills to be respected and not to have inappropriate solutions imposed on us by distant institutions, charitable bodies or governments."

Americans have a strange relationship with their disgracefully rich: They believe that, because someone has accumulated great wealth, he or she is an expert in virtually all things. And, they listen to them and heed their word. People who work with the earth are not so easily fooled by such nonsense. The people of Africa and India and all of the other places where people struggle to shake the fetters of old colonialism know what is best for them and they do not need advice from people whose main purpose in life is to hold on to their possessions and their wealth and, if anything, to accumulate more. What they do not need is a new form of colonialism or imperialism.

They need freedom and a little help to do the things *they* need to do.

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