The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Biotechnology and Intensive Farming (Summary)

October 2011

The Gates Foundation committed US$521,469,591 to agriculture research between 2005 and 2011 to address poverty and malnutrition, but remains committed to transgenic crops as part of their strategy for agricultural development and spending US$213,915,581 (41% of the total agricultural research expenditure) on the use of genetic modification.

A key area of agricultural R&D, soil science, is allocated just 4% of the total expenditure (just over US$20 million), yet through its support for the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA) the Gates Foundation has allocated over US$164 million to deliver 187,000 tons of fertilizer “to small farmers through wholesale and retail networks by December 2012.”

The Gates Foundation has formed strategic collaborations with most of the world’s agri-chemical and biotech corporation (including Monsanto, BASF, Du Pont, Dow and the Syngenta Foundation) in projects to develop GM seeds and promote fertilisers, pesticides and hybrid seeds to small African farmers. The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) co-funds several of these projects and has joined the Gates Foundation in a new strategic collaboration (February 2011), which the “the foundation’s Agricultural Development initiative will manage”. DFID have so far committed US$32 million against the Gates Foundation’s US$44 million.

Projects planned include the “silver bullet” of making rice more drought tolerant by switching its photosynthetic pathway from Carbon 3 to Carbon 4 using genetic modification, an approach described by the Royal Society as “high risk” because it may not succeed due to the complexity of the genetic and biochemical changes required.

The Gates Foundation does not have a clear commitment to fund research and development into agroecological approaches to food production despite this being one of the Key Findings of the global report by the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) published in 2008, a document The subsequently supported by reports from the UN and EU.

The Gates Foundation, supported by DFID, have adopted a strategy for African agriculture largely based on the discredited model used in northern countries of fossil fuel based chemical inputs with the addition of GM crops. This is a high-risk strategy that could lead to degradation of soils, water supplies and biodiversity and ultimately undermine Africa’s ability to feed itself and its environment.

The Gates Foundation and DFID organisation urgently need to re-assess their approach and focus on developing agroecological techniques that have already been demonstrated as effective at providing environmental, social and economic solutions to hunger, poverty and environmental degradation.

The Gates Foundation and DFID must quickly recognise that in a world challenged by climate change, degraded soils and biodiversity and social and gender inequity “business as usual is not an option”.