

The Man Behind the Curtain:

The Gates Foundation's Influence on the UN Food Systems Summit



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In December 2019, Agnes Kalibata, president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), was appointed as Special Envoy to the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit by the Secretary General of the United Nations.¹ Following this event, 176 civil society organizations and farmer groups from 83 countries sent an open letter to the UN Secretary General António Guterres to withdraw the appointment of Kalibata due to her close ties to corporate actors.² This letter was followed up by a second statement signed by over 500 organizations, academics, and social movements, raising concerns about both this nomination, and about the overall approach of the Summit.³

Civil society organizations argue that the appointment of Ms. Kalibata reflects a clear conflict of interest given that AGRA promotes the interests of agribusiness. CSOs argue that her appointment “is fundamentally at odds with the UN Charter and with intergovernmental decisions on sustainable development, the climate emergency, and the eradication of poverty and hunger. It will provide transnational corporations (TNCs) preferential access to the UN system and permanently associate the UN with TNCs, some of whose core activities have caused and/or worsened the social, economic and environmental crises the world faces.”³ This concern over Kalibata’s nomination has been largely borne-out by Kalibata’s top-down approach to organizing the Summit and her exclusion of those most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition in the planning process.

In response to the two civil society letters, twelve individuals representing several development banks, academic institutions, and the private sector, sent a letter to the UN Secretary General to support Kalibata’s nomination to this position.⁴ This letter emphasized Dr. Kalibata’s leadership skills, work ethic, capacity to listen, and other qualities. AGRA Watch analyzed the signatories and found that out of 12 total signers, 11 had past or current connections to the Gates Foundation. In some instances, the organizations were directly funded by the Gates Foundation, and in others, the Gates Foundation funded specific programs in which the signers had played roles. One organization was funded by AGRA, which is funded by the Gates Foundation (see Figure 1).

These findings illustrate the influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) on global food and agricultural policy. AGRA Watch has continually documented the role of the BMGF in influencing agricultural development, which has grown immensely in recent years. That Gates Foundation seeks to exercise influence not only through its funding of projects and shaping of expertise, but also in funding the governance platforms that determine food and agricultural policy. This role of the BMGF in

¹ United Nations Secretary-General. 2019.

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2019-12-16/ms-agnes-kalibata-of-rwanda-special-envoy-for-2021-food-systems-summit>. Accessed 7 May 2020.

² Oakland Institute. 2020. <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/revoke-agra-agnes-kalibata-special-envoy-2021-un-food-systems-summit>. Accessed 7 May 2020. (CAGJ/AGRA Watch was one of the signers.)

³ CSOs Letter on UN Food Systems Summit. 2020.

https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EN_Edited_draft-letter-UN-food-systems-summit_070220.pdf. Accessed 7 May 2020.

⁴ “Reaffirming our Faith in a Leader Helping to Shape the Future of Global Food Systems”. 2020.

<https://cagj.org/wp-content/uploads/Letter-to-UNSG-Dr.-Kalibata.pdf>



driving policy decisions based on its proprietary and technological model of agricultural development is often overlooked. Below we describe the connections to the signatories of the letter and the Gates Foundation.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

AGRA Watch found three types of connections between signatories of the letter and the Gates Foundation. These include past and current affiliations. Each of these categories are outlined below.

1. Direct funding from Gates Foundation to organizations represented by signers.

The organizations affiliated with the following individuals have received direct funding from the Gates Foundation:

- Debisi Araba: The International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)
- Simeon Ehui: World Bank
- Peter Matlon: Cornell University
- Ousmane Badiane: African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF)
- Gordon Conway: Imperial College London
- Njuguna Ndung'u: African Economic Research Consortium (AERC)
- Martin Fregene: African Development Bank (ADB)
- Joyce Cacho: Corporate Council on Africa (CCA)
- Rhoda Tumusiime: African Union Commission (AUC)
- Sheryl Hendriks: Malabo Montpellier Panel

2. Indirect funding from Gates Foundation to specific programs affiliated with signers.

Ismahane Elouafi, Director General of International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA), initiated Arab Women Leaders in Agriculture (AWLA), a program supported by BMGF.⁵ Sheryl Hendriks was Program Chair at the University of Pretoria conference enabled by a BMGF grant, titled "Advancing agricultural transformation in Africa: Capacity strengthening in policy analysis".

3. Funding by AGRA to organizations represented by signers.

Rhoda Tumusiime is listed on IITA's Board of Trustees (International Institute of Tropical Agriculture), which is an organization funded by AGRA. IITA's 2017 Annual Report references investments made by AGRA to IITA amounting to \$285,000 in 2017, and \$587,000 in 2016.⁶

⁵ Arab Women Leaders in Agriculture. 2020. <https://www.awlafellowships.org/news/icba-celebrates-arab-women-scientists-graduation-regional-fellowship-program>. Accessed 10 May 2020.

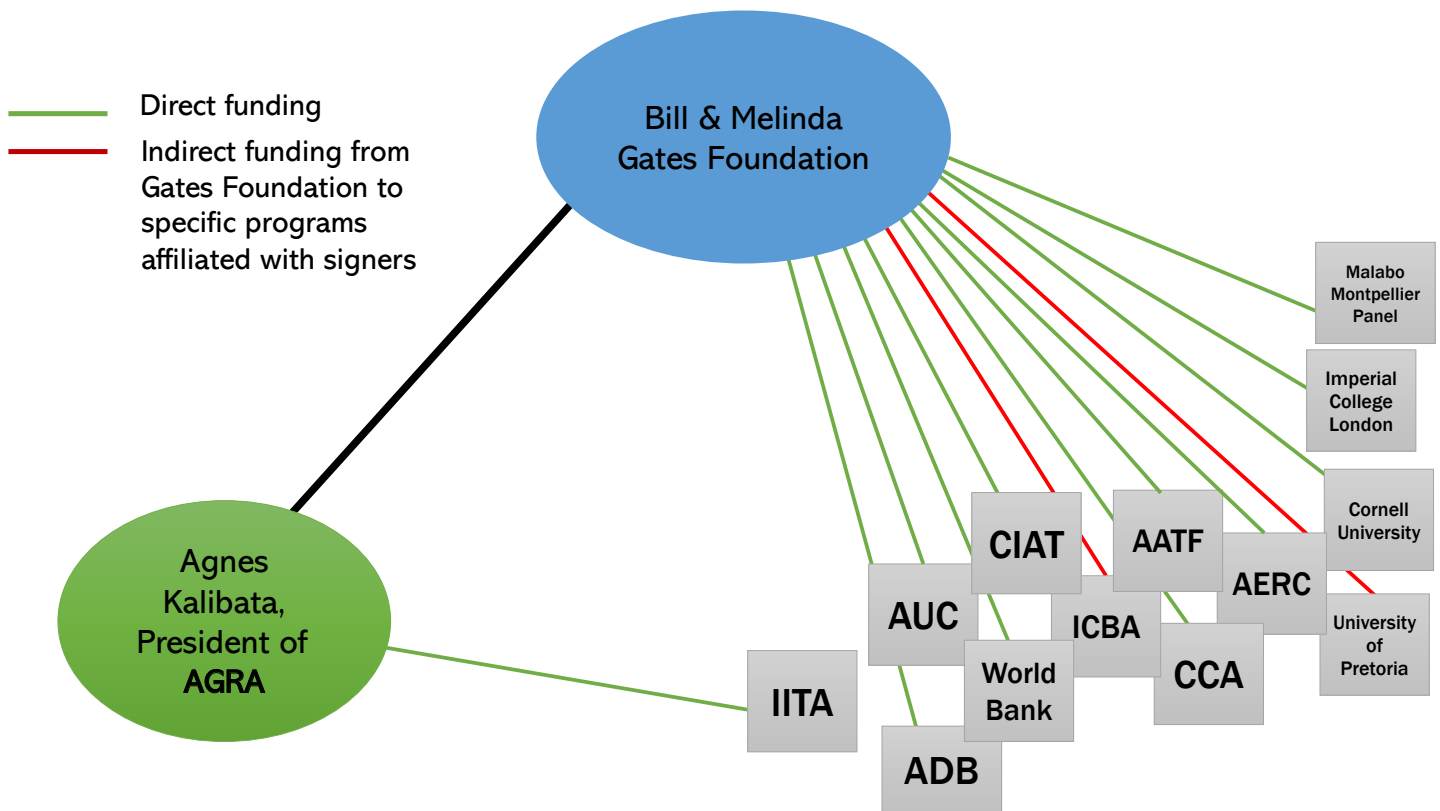
⁶ International Institute of Tropical Agriculture. 2017. <https://www.iita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2017-IITA-annual-report.pdf>. Accessed 10 May 2020.



CONCLUSION

In this report, we have demonstrated just some of the connections between the Gates Foundation and those who have supported Kalibata's appointment as head of the UN Food Systems Summit. While hundreds of civil society organizations called for her removal, only twelve signatories were willing to support her appointment, almost all of whom were direct beneficiaries of the Gates Foundation. This raises critical questions about the role of Bill Gates in shaping the agenda of the UN Food Systems Summit as well as its outcomes. As AGRA Watch and others have documented,⁷ the Gates Foundation has focused almost single-mindedly on a top-down approach to agro-industrial development on the African continent with little concern for the demands and desires of small-scale producers or food-chain workers. If this is the approach of the UN Food Systems Summit, it will ultimately act to further corporate influence on the global food system, threatening farmers and the ecological health of our planet.

Figure 1: Gates Foundation Influence on the UN Food Systems Summit



⁷ See Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development; IPES-Food. 2020. *Money Flows: What is holding back investment in agroecological research for Africa?* http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/Money%20Flows_Full%20report.pdf; Wise, T.A. 2020. *Failing Africa's Farmers: An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.* https://sites.tufts.edu/gdae/files/2020/07/20-01_Wise_FailureToYield.pdf



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About Community Alliance for Global Justice/AGRA Watch

AGRA Watch is a campaign of Community Alliance for Global Justice, a Seattle-based organization founded in 2001 dedicated to strengthening the global food sovereignty movement through popular education and mobilization. AGRA Watch was founded in 2008 to challenge the dominant development ideology for Africa pushed by governments, corporations, and philanthropic bodies, especially the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). Together, these actors are trying to transform the organization of African agriculture from a system of mostly smallholder production to a corporate-driven, industrial model much like the United States. Among these actors, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and their subsidiary, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), are playing a major role by funding new projects, aggressively lobbying for policy changes, and facilitating corporate development projects across the African continent.

As a “Friends” member of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), AGRA Watch works closely with partner organizations in African civil society to support sustainable, agroecological, socially responsible, and indigenous alternatives in Africa. Our Seattle location gives AGRA Watch a unique advantage for challenging the Gates Foundation. By facilitating the exchange of information concerning sustainable and healthy agricultural policies and practices across continents, we connect global movements to those in our local community and in the rest of the country through our membership in the US Food Sovereignty Alliance.

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