African Agricultural Development ... for the US?

An Analysis of the Distribution of Gates Foundation Grants

An AGRA Watch Report

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Highlights:

We examine Gates Foundation funding specifically dedicated to African agricultural development, building on analyses of the Foundation's agricultural development work more generally. We find that:

- The majority of the Gates Foundation's grant money designated for African agricultural development has gone to North America and Europe, not to Africa.
- The grant money that *has* ended up in Africa has gone to three main institutions–-AGRA, AATF, and CGIAR centers—rather than to organizations with strong roots in African communities.
- The Gates Foundation has funded very few projects focused on organic or agroecological approaches, but has funded numerous projects focused on "sustainability," framed in a productivist and corporate-friendly way.

1. Introduction

The Gates Foundation has spent over $6 billion over the past fifteen years on agricultural development—the vast majority of which has focused on Africa, according to the Foundation's claims. But have the grants, specifically described as funding African agricultural development, actually made it to Africa? By analyzing the geographical distribution of grants earmarked for African agricultural development, we find that in fact over half of this funding went to institutions based in North America (especially the US) and Europe.

In addition, an analysis of the organizational distribution of these grants indicates that very little of the Gates Foundation's money has gone to organizations directly serving or rooted in African communities. A small fraction of agricultural development grants has gone to African nonprofit organizations, with much larger amounts going to large institutions like the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), which though based in Kenya, were created by US philanthropic organizations. Another target of significant funding is the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR)--research institutions that were created during and after the first Green Revolution from the 1940s to 1970s, in multiple countries around the world.

Our results are broadly consistent with the findings of two earlier reports examining the Gates Foundation's agricultural development spending: GRAIN's 2021 report How the Gates Foundation is Driving the Food System, in the Wrong Direction, and the 2020 Money Flows report by Biovision and IPES-Food. Yet our methodology

departs from these studies in some key ways. While GRAIN examined all agricultural development grants worldwide, we focused specifically on grants earmarked for Africa. And Money Flows did not include AGRA (due to data limitations at the time of writing) and focused specifically on funding of what the report terms “agricultural research for development.” As such, this emphasized research-based funding rather than project-based funding. In spite of these methodological differences and resulting differences in statistical figures, our findings support the conclusions of these reports that most of the Foundation’s agricultural development grants: 1) go to the Global North, 2) focus on a handful of institutions, many of which were created and/or heavily influenced by the Gates Foundation itself, and 3) tend to support high-input, industrial models of agriculture.

2. Methodology

We downloaded the grants database from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s website in June 2021, which provided a comprehensive list of grants in all program areas. We created a separate spreadsheet applying filters to limit the grants to those that include only “Agricultural Development” in the topic field and only “Africa” in the region field. These categories are provided in the Foundation’s database.

We then added a column to the database to include the project continent (in addition to country, provided by the Foundation), and a column for institution type (e.g. university, nonprofit organization, etc.). In grouping these institutions, we largely relied on the categories used by GRAIN in their 2021 report. Namely, we included the following categories:

CATEGORY	INCLUDES:
AATF	AATF
AGRA	AGRA
CGIAR	International Livestock Research Institute, Africa Rice, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, World Agroforestry Center, etc.
Universities	African universities and foreign universities’ African campuses
National research centers	national agricultural research centers (e.g. NARO in Uganda)
African Union	African Union
International organizations	World Bank, United Nations
Governmental organizations	government ministries and agencies
Nonprofit organizations	professional associations, think tanks, foundations, non-governmental organizations, social enterprises (e.g. One Acre Fund)
Corporate entities	companies and other for-profit organizations

We used Google searches for this and followed the classifications that organizations use for themselves. Unlike GRAIN, we classified as nonprofits certain organizations that are technically not-for-profit but are industry-backed, such as the World Cocoa Foundation and the African Fertilizer and Agribusiness Partnership, which GRAIN classified as "corporate." (Of note: AATF, AGRA, and CGIAR, are also technically nonprofits, but because they are singularly important as recipients of grants, we isolated them as their own categories.) This means that nonprofits are likely overestimated and overrepresented in our analysis, compared to GRAIN's. We made this choice in order to have a consistent and reproducible methodology, rather than relying on subjective judgments or inside knowledge about certain nonprofits. To partially address this, we have included a breakdown of nonprofit funding by these more subjective and fluid categories within the overall nonprofit category (see Figure 5).

In our analysis, we added up the amounts of grants for each country, continent, and type of institution. Below, we report percentages of grants by total dollar amount, rather than by number of grants, as we believe that the total amounts are the more significant indicator of priority and influence.

We were also interested in the topical focus of the grants and projects being funded. To examine this, we searched the African agricultural development grants for occurrences of particular words relating to topics of interest (including "biotechnology," "GMOs", "sustainability", and "economics"). We recorded the number of grantees and projects for which each word appeared, and we created a spreadsheet that sorted grants under their respective word categories. We also identified and counted co-occurrences of certain words (for example, "sustainable" and "productivity" in the same description), to identify relationships between topics and broader discourses. For example, this helps to understand whether "sustainability" is primarily discussed in relation to environment-related words or economy-related words, which can tell us about how the Foundation frames sustainability.

It is worth addressing some potential counterpoints to and limitations of the present study. First, one could argue that an analysis such as this should correct grant amounts for purchasing power parity (PPP), given the relative weights of the US dollar across different countries. This correction might mean that African countries received a considerably greater share of the grants, in terms of impact.

However, while such an analysis would be interesting, it would also be extremely complicated given that some things—such as imported goods, supplies, or farming inputs—would be considerably more expensive, proportionally. We also have two broader arguments related to this: 1) we believe that to truly support African agricultural development,

a significant majority of African agricultural development grants should be directed toward African institutions with strong roots in African communities, and 2) if it is true that the money would go further and have more impact in African countries, then this is justification for spending even more grants there—not fewer.

Second, there is a possibility that we underestimate pass-through grants that the Foundation is giving to local African institutions (via grants to AGRA and AATF). However, this data is not accessible to the public. Neither AATF nor AGRA provide public information about their budgets and grants. Though these organizations may provide funding to African universities, nonprofits, or community groups, they lack transparency and therefore we cannot include this information within our analysis.

3. Findings

3.a. Geographical breakdown

Our analysis found that over half of the Gates Foundation's African agricultural development grant monies went to institutions based in North America (especially the US) and Europe (see Figure 1). Specifically, 36.4 percent went to North America (with 29.9 going to the US, which is the single largest recipient at the country level) and 18.8 percent went to European countries. Africa is the single largest recipient of grant monies at the continental level, with 38.6 percent of the total grant amount. However, the distribution of these grants is highly unequal across countries within Africa: 27.5 percent of grant monies went to Kenya alone, with the second largest African recipient being Nigeria, with 4.8 percent (see Figure 2).

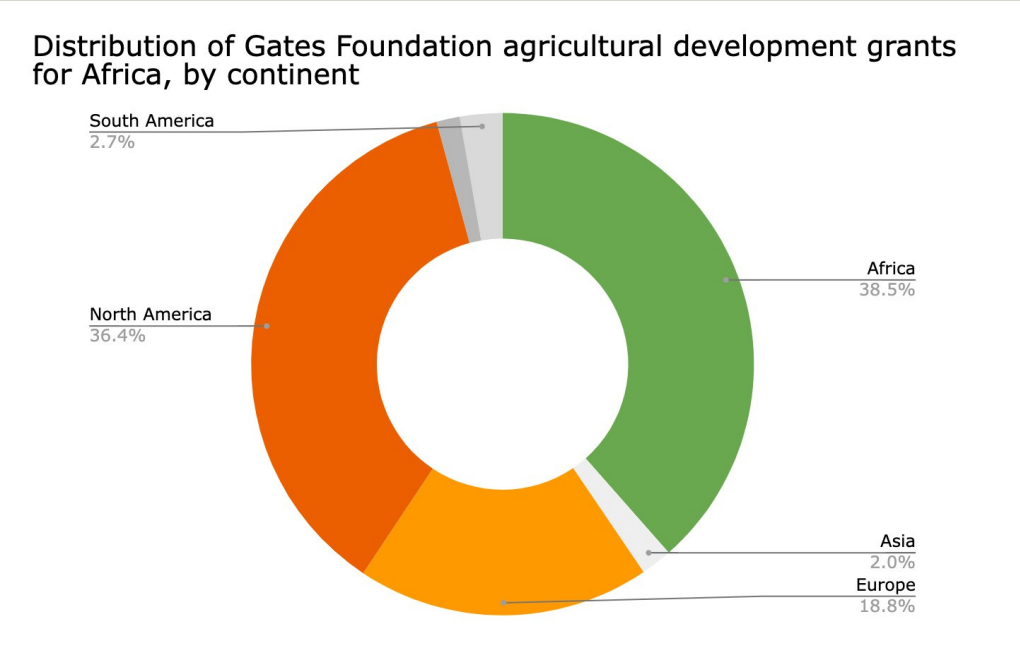

Figure 1: Grant money distribution by continent

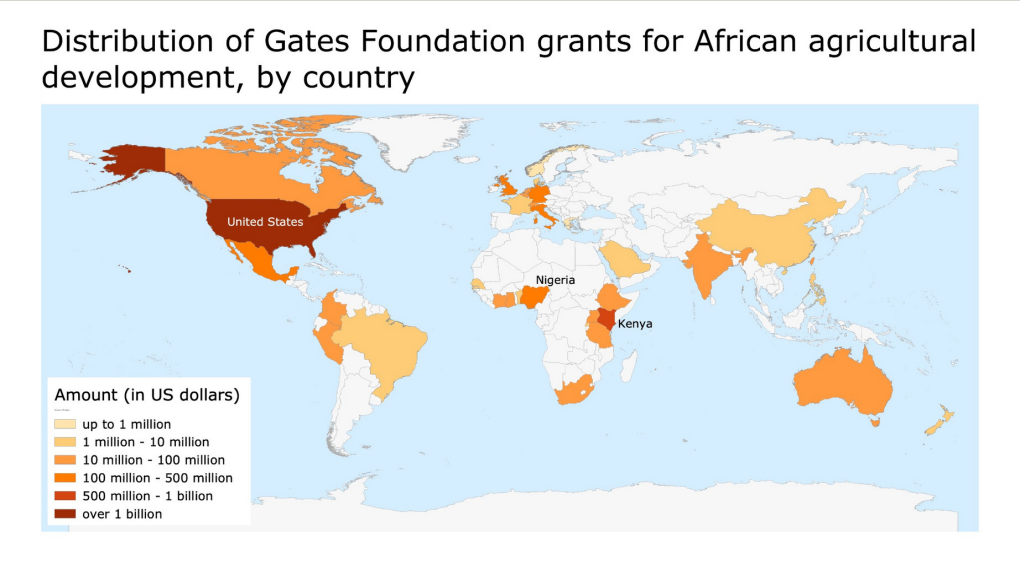

Figure 2: Grant money distribution by country (map by Ashley Fent)

The dominance of Kenya as a grant recipient is accounted for by grants to two institutions: the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which are both headquartered there. As discussed in more detail below, these two institutions are major recipients of all Gates Foundation grant money for African agricultural development. Although both organizations claim to be "African-led" and indeed have staff from Africa, they were created by institutions outside of the continent (the Rockefeller Foundation, USAID, and agribusiness corporations in the case of AATF, and the Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation in the case of AGRA).[5] AGRA is also registered in the US for taxation purposes.[6] Until recently, less than half of AGRA's board was African, and to date no board members represent farmers or farmers' organizations.

In other words, the fact that a considerable amount of grant funding has gone to institutions *based* in Kenya does not mean that it has gone to organizations with strong roots in Kenyan communities, as we demonstrate in the following section.

Why Kenya?

Nairobi is a critical center for international development infrastructure, and is a gateway to Anglophone Africa, and the continent more widely. Since at least the 1990s, when NGO registration began in Kenya, international NGOs have proliferated across the country, with most centered in and around Nairobi. Kenya distinguishes between community-based organizations (*harambee*) and NGOs, the latter of which gain numerous benefits from registering with the government. Organizations are able to self-identify as NGOs, "regardless of their origin, size, revenue or expenditure." Further, they receive additional incentives, including tax breaks.[8] These tax breaks offered to non-governmental organizations—like the AATF and AGRA—enable them to import cars and other materials. Some critical analyses suggest that NGO-ification in Kenya, as elsewhere, has increasingly taken over some of the key functions of government and the state. [9]

3.b. Organizational breakdown

Of the grant money that *did* end up in Africa, the vast majority went to three main organizations: 1) AGRA, 2) research institutes that belong to the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR), and 3) AATF (see Figure 3). AGRA received 48.1 percent of the total grant amount to African institutions, totaling $638.4 million. CGIAR centers received 19.2 percent, totaling $255.2 million, with the majority going to the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). Finally, AATF received 12.8 percent, totaling $170.2 million.

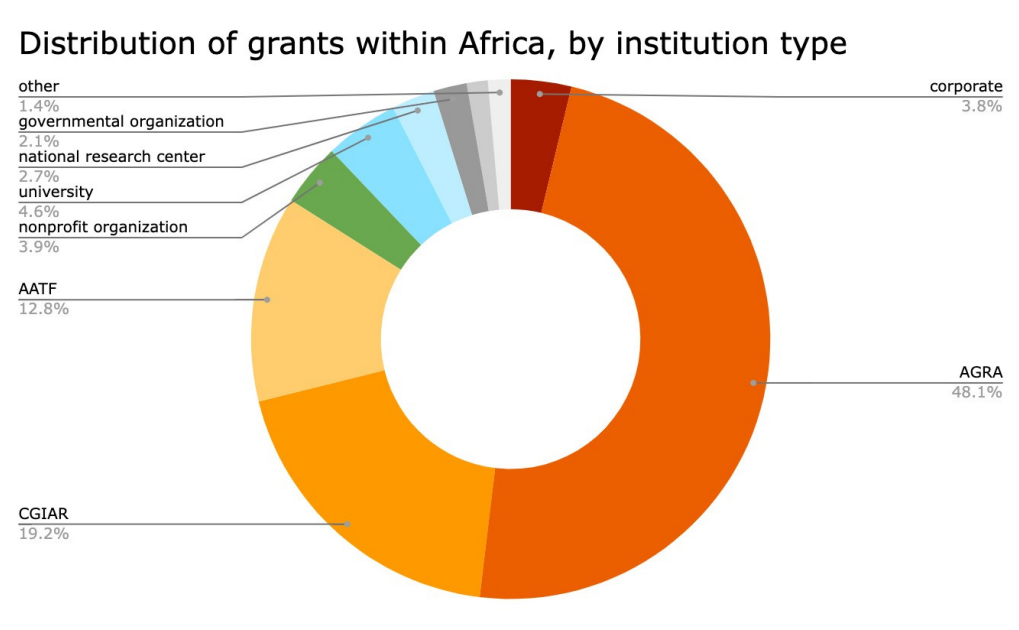

Figure 3: Grant money distribution to African institutions

As mentioned previously, AGRA and AATF are both institutions created with considerable outside influence from US philanthropic foundations and agribusiness companies. Of the CGIAR centers, IITA is by far the largest recipient of grant monies, receiving $151.6 million in total (11.4 percent of all agricultural development grant monies that went to Africa–over two times more than all African universities combined). It implements various projects funded by the Gates Foundation, many of which focus on biotechnology research and diffusion within Africa, plant breeding techniques, and the expansion of industrial agriculture. It often partners with AGRA, CGIAR, CIMMYT, Wageningen and Cornell Universities [10], national agricultural research centers, and agribusiness companies like Bayer (which now owns Monsanto) and Syngenta. It also receives funding from USAID and other major governmental development agencies in the Global North, as well as the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and World Bank.

Compared to these large institutions, nonprofit organizations in Africa only received 4 percent of the grant monies that ended up on the continent, and universities only received 4.6 percent. As such, it is clear that the Gates Foundation's grantmaking heavily

focuses on those African institutions created, sustained, and/or influenced in large part by foreign institutions.

If we zoom out to look once again at the institutional breakdown across all African agricultural development grants (including those that went to institutions in the Global North), a greater percentage of recipients can be categorized as nonprofit organizations. Nonprofits received 22.2 percent of the total amount of grant money earmarked for African agricultural development (see Figure 4).

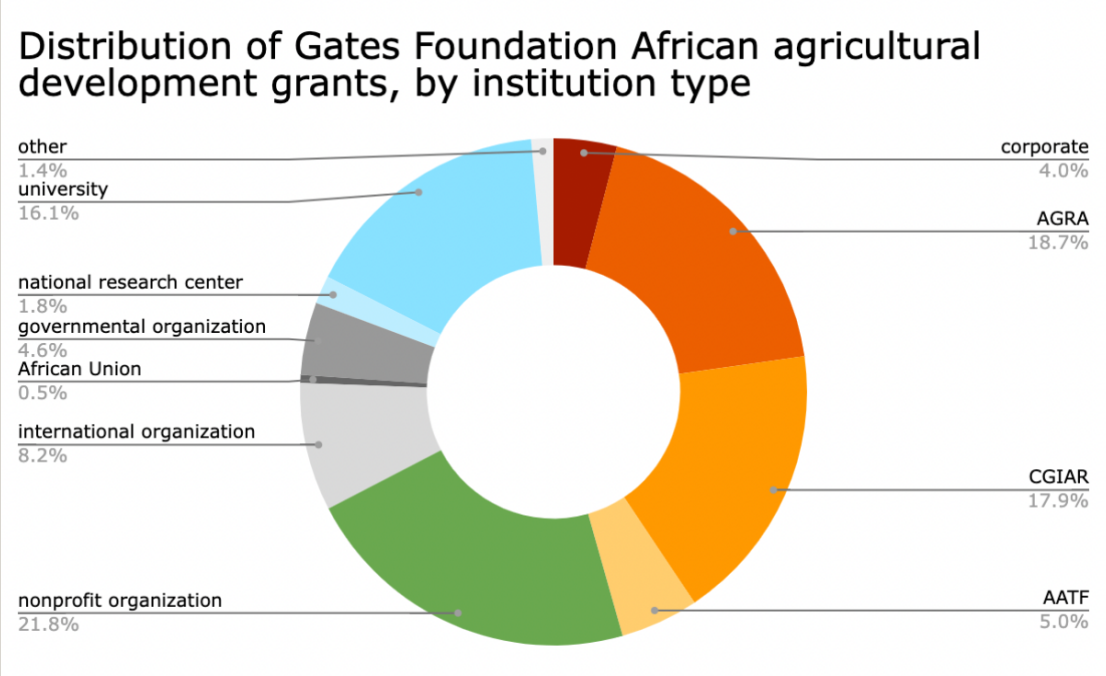

Figure 4: Overall grant money distribution among institutions

However, as noted previously, we defined these organizations as they describe themselves—this therefore includes a number of industry-backed nonprofit organizations, such as the World Cocoa Foundation and the African Fertilizer and Agribusiness Partnership, and other organizations that reflect agribusiness and corporate interests and leanings, such as TechnoServe. When nonprofits are further disaggregated by type (e.g. think tanks, foundations, NGOs, etc.), an estimated 21.9 percent of grant money for nonprofits went to organizations that we would categorize as corporate-influenced (see Figure 5). (It is worth noting that this designation is fluid, and might include other nonprofit organizations on the list that we are less familiar with.)

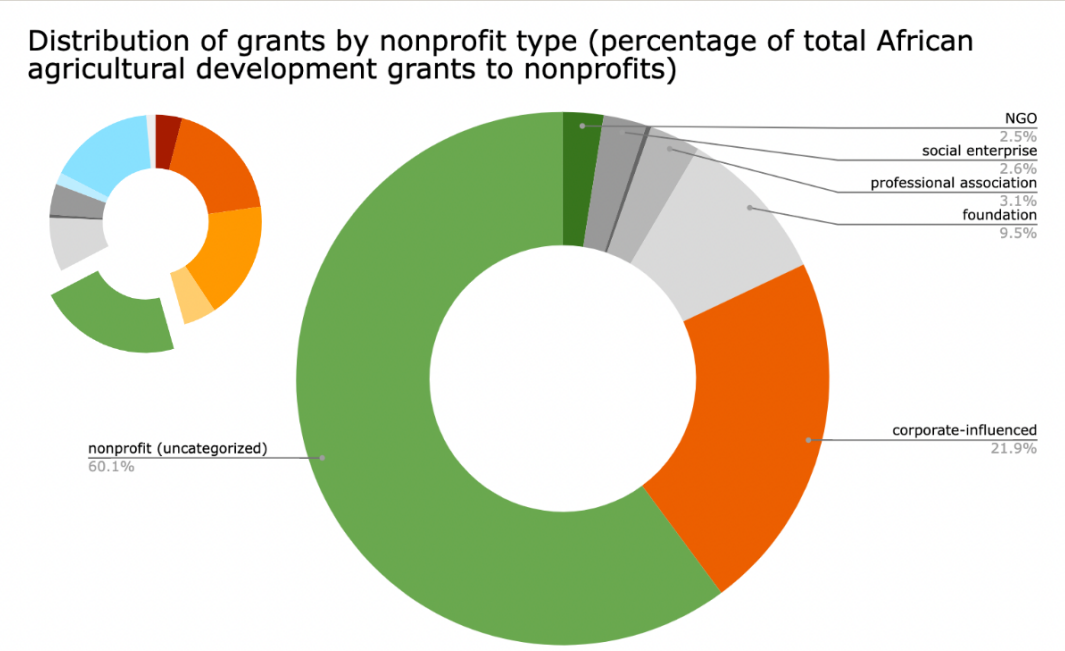

Figure 5: Grant money distribution among nonprofits

We also examined what *kinds* of projects the Gates Foundation primarily funds, based on a content analysis of grantee project descriptions. “Yield,” “productivity,” and “income” occur frequently (with counts of 35, 76, and 62 grants, respectively), as do “gene” and “genome”/”genomic”--reflecting the research priorities and interests of the Foundation (see Figure 6).

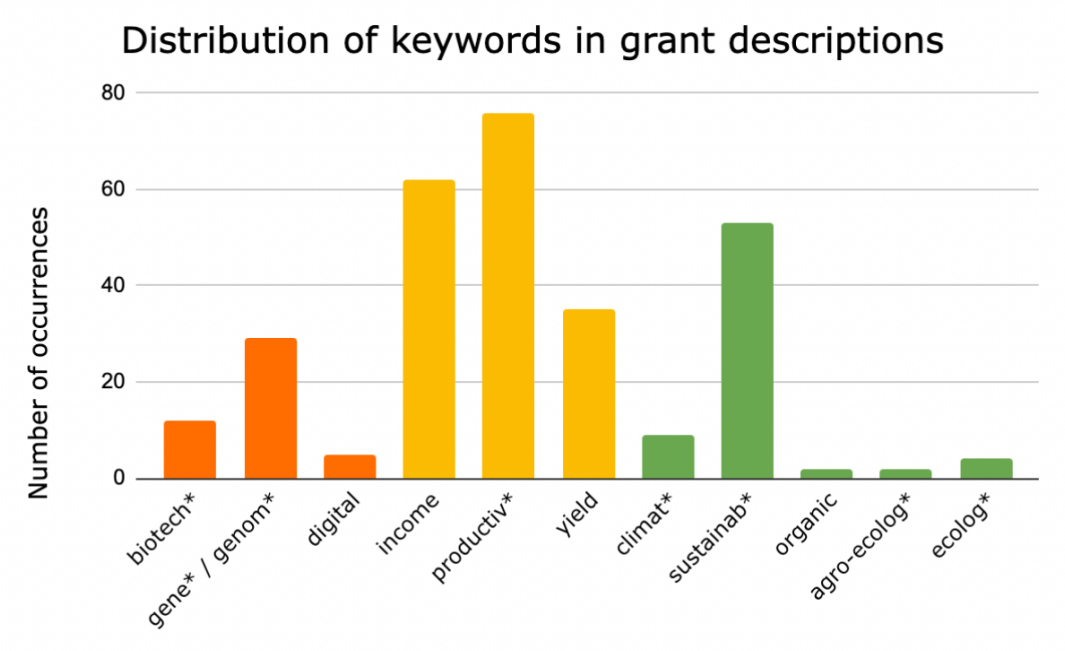

Figure 6: Keywords in grant descriptions

“Agroecology,” “agroecological,” or “agroecosystem” only appear in two grant descriptions in the list (one of which is referring to “agro-ecological zones”), while “organic” also appears in two and “ecology” / “ecological” appears in four. By contrast, “sustainability” or “sustainable” are used at a high frequency, with 53 occurrences in grant descriptions.

Given how widely the term sustainability is used—and often for widely divergent practices and frameworks—it is worth noting specifically how these grants are described as sustainable. Sustainability is often used in a generic economic sense—for example, a grant of $5.3 million to the Rainforest Alliance in 2007 to develop “new business models that enable smallholder farmers to participate in *sustainable trading relationships* with multinational business,” or a grant of $14.3 million to IITA in 2020 “to develop *economically sustainable* seed systems for cassava farmers in Africa,” or another grant to IITA in the amount of $13.5 million in 2011 to “stimulate *sustainable increase in incomes*” by doubling the productivity of yams in Ghana and Nigeria (emphasis added). In 14 instances, sustainability co-occurs with productivity.

Sustainability is also used as a justification for developing “safer” chemical products that can act as “alternatives” to those currently on the market. For example, the Gates Foundation gave $1.1 million to the company Exosect in 2012 to create and market "safe, sustainable, and easy to apply insect control products for the protection of stored maize and other staple grains in Sub-Saharan Africa.” Exosect developed patents for new products involving biologic and synthetic active ingredients geared toward crop protection; the company and its portfolio of 134 patents and patent applications was acquired by the Canadian firm Terramera in 2019, which sells bio-pesticides and seed treatments and includes a company run by a former Monsanto executive among its investors. [11]

The Gates Foundation has also funded projects designed to increase sustainability by developing new crop varieties, especially through genetic engineering. For example, it provided $6.2 million to IITA in 2012 “to improve cassava productivity, sustainability, and food security in Eastern and Southern African regions by deploying virus-free cassava varieties with dual resistance to cassava mosaic disease and cassava brown streak disease” and $10.7 million to the John Innes Center in 2012 “to test the feasibility of developing cereal crops capable of fixing nitrogen as an environmentally-sustainable approach for small farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.” These approaches to “sustainability” are focused on maintaining or increasing production of singular crops and products, operating seemingly in isolation, rather than addressing any kind of holistic, ecosystem-level systems. As such, they are not and cannot be truly ecologically sustainable.

Therefore, while sustainability appears as one of the most cited words in the grants, it is clear that the Gates Foundation's vision of sustainability is focused on profit, productivity, and yields, rather than on the protection of biodiversity, the support of healthy ecosystems, or even climate change mitigation. It is especially surprising how only 9 grants are dedicated to fighting climate change, given the emphasis placed on the issue by both the Foundation and Bill Gates himself.

4. Conclusions

From our analysis, we can conclude the following:

- Overall, most of the Gates Foundation's grant money designated for African agricultural development has not gone to Africa, but to North America and Europe (combined).
- The grant money that has ended up on the continent has gone to three main institutions—-AGRA, AATF, and CGIAR centers—that were created by and/or heavily influenced by external actors, including US philanthropic foundations and agribusiness companies.
- Institutions with strong roots in African communities (including some universities, nonprofits and community-based organizations) have received very limited funding or support.

In our interpretation, this pattern exemplifies **neocolonialism**: using money ostensibly for "charitable" purposes to further enrich the interests of corporations and institutions based in the Global North. Further adding to this definition, these institutions have gained considerable political influence within individual African countries and at the level of the African Union.

In terms of what is being funded, we find that the Gates Foundation has funded very few projects on organic or agroecological approaches, instead entrenching pro-corporate, industrial, and technology-focused models of agriculture—which, again, largely serve foreign corporations by creating new market and product development opportunities.

Endnotes

[1] GRAIN (2021), How the Gates Foundation is driving the food system, in the wrong direction; Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development and IPES-Food. 2020, Money Flows: What is holding back investment in agroecological research for Africa?

[2] Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (nd), Committed Grants (downloaded June 2021)

[3] As a check, we also created a third spreadsheet applying filters to limit the grants to those that include "Agricultural Development" in the topic field and "Africa" in the region field *in addition* to other topics and regions. For example, this would include a project categorized as agricultural development and women's empowerment, operating in both Africa and Asia. This was used to verify whether results would be different if examining a broader set of grants of interest; the results were highly consistent, so statistics provided here are based on the more restrictive grouping: those grants earmarked specifically for agricultural development in Africa. We focused on this more restrictive grouping to examine whether grants earmarked specifically and exclusively for Africa went primarily to African institutions.

[4] Although we appreciate the Foundation's public listing of grants, there is not much transparency in its internal coding of these grants. Additionally, it is worth noting that there is even less transparency in what some of the Foundation's major grantees—including AGRA—actually do with the money and with their own grantmaking. There are thus a number of limitations in relying on the categories provided by the Foundation in the database.

[5] Rachel Schurman (2017), Building an Alliance for Biotechnology in Africa, in the *Journal of Agrarian Studies*; Joeva Rock and Rachel Schurman (2020), The complex choreography of agricultural biotechnology in Africa, in *African Affairs*; Bill & Melinda Gats Foundation (Sept 2006), Bill & Melinda Gates, Rockefeller Foundations Form Alliance to Help Spur "Green Revolution" in Africa [press release]

[6] see AGRA's tax returns via the Internal Revenue Service

[7] Jennifer Brass (2012), Why Do NGOs Go Where They Go? Evidence from Kenya, in *World Development*

[8] ibid.

[9] Jennifer Brass (2012), Blurring Boundaries: The Integration of NGOs into Governance in Kenya, in *Governance*; Korbla P. Puplampu and Wisdom J. Tettey (2000), State-NGO relations in an era of globalisation: the implications for agricultural development in Africa, in *Review of African Political Economy*

[10] Both universities have been very involved in genetic engineering work, as well as more recent work on digital agriculture, which the Foundation is increasingly supporting.

[11] Terramera (14 May 2019), Terramera Acquires Exosect Crop Protection Technology & IP [press release]; Jonathan Schieber (5 Sept 2019), Terramera raises $45 million for its technology to reduce the use of chemicals in agriculture