Wageningen University and Research Foundation and the Gates Foundation: A Case Study

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Wageningen University and the Wageningen Research Foundation (known as Wageningen University & Research, hereafter WUR) comprise a public higher education and research conglomerate located in Wageningen, in the Netherlands. It claims to be a leading research organization in the areas of food and nutrition, health, sustainable agricultural systems, durable green environments and social change processes.

WUR is of interest to AGRA Watch, a grassroots organization based in Seattle, Washington, USA that monitors the activities of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (hereafter Gates Foundation) and its subsidiary, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) for the following reasons:

• WUR is a recipient of significant Gates Foundation grants for agricultural development, many of which claim to assist small farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. From the Gates Foundation’s inception to the time of this writing in November 2016, these grants to WUR amount to over $57 million (this and all subsequent values in US dollars).

• WUR is a major depositor of seeds in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway. To date, the Center for Genetic Resources of the Netherlands, an independent research unit of WUR, has submitted 7,668,250 seeds of 388 taxa from 152 countries of 7 continents. Svalbard Global Seed Vault was established in 2008 with approximately $30 million from the Gates Foundation with a stated purpose of safe-guarding seed varieties in case of catastrophes and disasters that destroy wild and cultivated seeds around the world. However, consistent with the Convention of Biological Diversity that designates ownership of the seeds to the country where they are located, the operating agreement of the Seed Vault is problematic because only the depositors, such as WUR, would have access to the saved seeds. In an event of a loss of local seeds, farmers and indigenous people would not have access to the traditionally cultivated seeds that might have been collected in their own field.

• WUR has an extensive global network of partners, many of whom are also recipients of Gates Foundation grants. Within this network, it appears that WUR has been chosen by the Gates Foundation as the key actor in advancing the Foundation’s agricultural policy in Africa. Following Bill Gates’ belief that high-tech agricultural practices and free market capitalist economy comprise the best, or only, solution to food insecurity and poverty in Africa, WUR provides technical expertise while the Gates Foundation provides funding.

This case study further highlights the Gates Foundation’s mode of “philanthropic” operation: while claiming to assist small farmers in the Global South, the Gates Foundation focuses much of its funding on technocratic centers in the North and uses its enormous financial power to advance its own interests.

Methodology

All information used in this case study was obtained from publicly available sources, including the Gates Foundation’s website and WUR’s annual report. Based on this information, this study maps the networks of partners and flow of money among the Gates Foundation, WUR, and their partners.
**Findings**

**Institutional partners**

WUR's 2015 annual report names 27 educational institutions, research consortia, and international and regional organizations as its institutional partners. Among those partners, seven are recipients of Gates Foundation grants in agricultural development and policy, receiving amounts to date ranging from approximately $1.5 million to $415.5 million each.

*Diagram 1: WUR's Institutional Partners and the Gates Foundation Grant Flow*

Keys: *Blue = partnership, Green = Gates Foundation grants, Brown = seed deposit*

The partner organizations include the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR), AGRA, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), UC Davis, Cornell University, and the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences.

**Project based partners**

In addition to the institution-wide partners, various project groups and departments in WUR work with project-specific partners.

*N2Africa:*

The Plant Production Systems Group of WUR hosts a Gates Foundation-sponsored large-scale initiative called N2Africa. N2Africa aims to introduce certified nitrogen (N2)-fixating legume seeds, the use of fertilizer, and market-oriented agricultural practices to small farmers. By November 2016, it has been operating in 11 African countries. The project's name, probably unwittingly, suggests that this may be an imperialistic incursion "into Africa."
The chair of the WUR Plant Production System Group, Ken Giller, also serves on the five-person leadership team of N2Africa. The majority of advisory committee members consist of representatives from AGRA and the Gates Foundation, demonstrating Gates’ strong influence in the initiative.

**Diagram 2: N2Africa Partners and the Gates Foundation Grant Flow**

![Diagram 2: N2Africa Partners and the Gates Foundation Grant Flow](image)

**Keys: Blue = partnership, Green = Gates Foundation grants, Brown = seed deposit**

The WUR Plant Production Systems Group received close to $22 million in 2009 and an additional $31 million in 2013 from the Gates Foundation. Among numerous N2Africa project partners are some of the large Gates Foundation grantees such as the Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility Institute of the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (TSBF-CIAT, CGIAR member), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA, CGIAR member), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI, CGIAR member), the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, and AGRA. It is worth noting here that the Clinton Foundation, whose major funding source is the Gates Foundation, also joins the list of N2Africa partners.

**ISSD Africa:**
Integrated Seed Sector Development in Africa (ISSD Africa) is another Gates-sponsored project at WUR. This is an Africa-wide program designed to develop a market-oriented seed sector with emphasis on entrepreneurship. It is also funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands and operated by four entities: the Center for Development Innovation (CDI) of WUR, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT, formerly the Dutch Colonial Institute), the Future Agricultures Consortium (a consortium of research organizations), and the Tegemeo Institute of Agricultural Policy and Development of Egerton University in Kenya.
For this project, the Gates Foundation provided $1.5 million to CDI in 2014, $3.5 million to KIT in 2015, and $1.6 million to Tegemeo Institute in 2015. The Future Agricultures Consortium has a world-wide network of partners that include some of the Gates Foundation’s large grantees, namely the International Institute for Environment and Development (UK), the Overseas Development Institute (UK), the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, and Ahmadu Bello University (Nigeria).

Conclusions
The amount of money flowing from the Gates Foundation to WUR and its various partners is of significant concern. With more than $700 million of grants channeled in this single entity, both the Foundation and WUR possess disproportionate influence on African agriculture. The grants are made to a wide range of actors including international regulatory organizations, national and international policy think tanks, prestigious agricultural research institutions, seed banks, and other infrastructure and training facilities. This practice of partnership and money flow is designed to consolidate high-tech agriculture and market-oriented economics as the predominant solutions to poverty and food insecurity in Africa. It is a clear threat to the food sovereignty of African farmers.

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