

The 'keepers of seed': The impact of the 'Green Revolution' in Africa on female farmers

Written by Katherine Austin-Evelyn (1) Thursday, 16 June 2011 05:20

The 'Alliance for A Green Revolution' (AGRA), spearheaded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to increase agricultural outputs and alleviate poverty and hunger in Africa. It has been touted as an ambitious poverty alleviation program that spans across all regions of sub-Saharan Africa. While some have welcomed such a mainstream development program focused on agriculture and small-scale farmers, often women, others wonder if AGRA is the appropriate approach. Critiques include the lack of locally devised solutions for local problems, very little focus on structural issues facing female farmers and providing genetically modified seeds through the involvement of Monsanto, a large agri-business firm.

Given the vital role women play in agriculture all over Africa, this CAI paper explores some of the ways in which this agricultural 'revolution' includes and excludes women and the interesting local counter-efforts and initiatives women farmers have adopted in response to this initiative.

The key players and the evolution of 'Africa's Green Revolution'

The green revolution began by modelling itself on a template created by former Rockefeller Foundation President Gordon Conway in his book *"The Doubly Green Revolution: Food for All in the 21st Century"* published in 1997. The formula was applied in Asia and while contentious, it is generally a celebrated strategy in the field of mainstream international development practitioners. In 2006, the Rockefeller Foundation joined with the Gates Foundation to create The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). The main objective of AGRA is to build the capacity of small-scale farming through technological, policy and institutional innovations that are environmentally friendly and sustainable.(2) Former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, chairs AGRA and the initiative focuses on eight agricultural areas: seeds, soils, water, markets, agricultural education, African farmer knowledge, supportive agricultural policies, and monitoring and evaluation. The Gates Foundation hired Dr. Robert Horsch, former Vice-President of Monsanto Corporation, one of the biggest multinational biotechnology companies and perhaps the most fervent in promoting genetically modified (GM) crops, as a Global Development Officer.(3) This appointment was alarming to those who see GM seeds as damaging to both the environment and local seed practices.

In addition to the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations, key players such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the African Development Bank have been involved in AGRA's implementation in sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to reportedly 16 of the 18 most undernourished countries in the world. It is the only region where per capita food production continues to worsen every year.(4) AGRA's new strategy differs from the one applied in Asia as it acknowledges the environmental impact of the Asian Green Revolution technology package, which has resulted in serious soil and water degradation.(5) However, in the Oakland Institutes "Voices From Africa" report, the authors explain that despite outward intentions, the Gates Foundation's "vision for agricultural development was not drawn up by African voices, nor does it take into account developing countries' experience with the first Green Revolution."(6) This is evidenced by the Conway authored framework for the program.(7)

Furthermore, there has been criticism of the program by a variety of international development actors on a number of different levels. A burgeoning movement that critiques AGRA is developing globally, which includes local farmers, grassroots coalitions, community groups and academics. The primary concern is whether the involvement of big agri-business companies will deliver sustainable and equitable outcomes, especially for vulnerable farmers and communities such as small-scale female farmers in an African context.(8)

Implications for women farmers

Often called "keepers of seed," many small-scale farmers are women who farm less than one hectare of land. Whilst male farmers typically focus on cash crop production, women farmers often garden food for local or family consumption.(9) AGRA shifts the food base away from the "keepers of seed" and instead farmers are required to purchase seeds each season. This loss of control over seed reduces the control female farmers have over production, which can increase food insecurity and runs the risk of damaging nutrition. Pascal Sanginga of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), authored a briefing

paper entitled 'Towards an African Green Revolution?' In this paper he highlights that rural women in Africa produce 80% of the food, yet own only 1% of the land, receive 7% of the agricultural extension services and less than 10% of the credit given to small-scale farmers.(10) The marginalisation of female farmers is widespread. Traditional social norms regarding women and land ownership are evident in the local legal frameworks of many African countries. These have a major impact on women's decision-making ability in terms of farming practices.

Women's underrepresentation and lack of input in all forms of agricultural decisions is common. For example, in the Zimbabwe Farmers Union 75% of members are female, yet only 5% of officers are women.(11) AGRA and other large-scale poverty alleviation efforts focused on the agricultural sector rarely focuses on the overall empowerment of women in attaining better outcomes. According to Sanginga, such programmes "do not address gender-specific causes of poverty, such as inequalities in ownership of land and assets, decision making, education and social norms."(12)

The response: Local voices for local solutions

Despite the challenges, women's farming organisations have organised across the continent. These women's farming organisations and unions assert that women's empowerment in agriculture is dependent on transforming gender relations and encouraging women's voices to be spoken and heard. For instance, Harriet Ssali of the African Women Agribusiness Network and J.H Floricultural Growers, points out that the solution to a gender revolution in African agriculture lies in building women's capacity, particularly through training in business management. "Women can better manage their agricultural businesses if they have the appropriate skills."(13) Sanginga agrees, and argues that if women's negotiating and management skills were developed production could increase by 24% in Kenya.(14)

Women-focused agricultural research and development should be lauded, yet there is a need to address the structural issues mentioned above alongside the scientific aspect of agricultural practice.(15) While there are programs that aim to assist women farmers in Africa, they are small in number, size and scale. For example, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CIGAR) recently announced that they are sponsoring a fellowship programme for 60 female agricultural scientists in Africa. These awards offer a specific agricultural education for The African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) programme for African women conducting research in crop sciences, including horticulture, to help fight hunger and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.(16)

There are promising developments to address these structural issues from within the women's farming movement itself. The grassroots opposition to AGRA from women has been widespread and recently, women farmers have been active in speaking out against this approach. A women-lead campaign was launched at the 2011 World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal, with the titled 'We are the solution: Celebrating African family farming.'(17) The Dakar Declaration, issued on 7 February 2011 by the campaign's Women's Group composed of leaders from 12 rural African women's associations from six West African countries, demands locally grown solutions to African farming issues.(18) This declaration outlines key points that are important to women farmers, such as retaining traditional farming practices created by women and increasing the communication amongst rural women farmers to implement ecological solutions as opposed to genetically modified production.(19) The campaign will run for three years and will focus on capacity building through traditional knowledge and leadership development activities.(20)

Food security through food sovereignty

The idea of food sovereignty was developed and presented by the peasant movement La Via Campesina, which was raised on the public stage at the World Food Summit in 1996 as an alternative framework for food and agriculture in the developing world. This platform has grown and developed in local contexts and organisations all over the globe, including Africa. Those who support the Food Sovereignty approach point out that agriculture is about more than trade and market value – it is about local growth, livelihoods and nourishment.(21)

AGRA distributes genetically modified seed and makes it difficult to use indigenous seeds and practices, which have been identified as an important issue to small-scale female farmers. In response to this, farming groups in Kenya have suggested initiating community seed banks as a source of a healthy crop to replace degenerated or lost seed and to serve as a collection point of different types of seeds. Women farmers are placing seed at the centre of the fight for food sovereignty.(22)

Contradictions abound between the model promoted by AGRA and the vision of food sovereignty for Africa. Raj Patel, a celebrated international agriculture and development expert highlights that the biggest negative impact AGRA has on women is its neglect of women's agricultural knowledge systems by focusing primarily on cash crops. This allows wealthy men to displace women as farmers and as agents.(23) He adds that African farmers' organisations have consistently rejected high-tech approaches and demanded that their own choices and strategies be adopted and their sovereignty respected. Of course, this sovereignty is dependent on full participation by all. Given African women's low representation and status in the agricultural sector, there is significant gap that needs to be filled until true 'sovereignty' can be realised.

Concluding remarks

While AGRA has been celebrated for putting agriculture back on the mainstream international development agenda, it has a number of flaws. One of these is its neglect of women's role in the agricultural sector. The lack of a gender-sensitive approach and agenda is damaging to the majority of the agricultural workforce on the continent. There are a myriad of gender-based challenges that women face in Africa. Focusing on equitable, empowering solutions for African women, by African women, is essential for all sectors of society. In this case, education, training and development need to take a women-centred approach but cannot neglect the role that men play in sidelining women's potential for leadership and equity in decision making. The distribution of genetically modified seed and a move away from traditional practices is an affront to female food sovereignty on the continent. Local solutions must be developed alongside development efforts in order to consider these approaches just and sustainable. The overwhelming critique of AGRA is its lack of African voices in influencing the trajectory of agricultural development and solutions. An alternative approach must take the barriers that women face into account.

NOTES:

- (1) Contact Katherine Austin-Evelyn through Consultancy Africa Intelligence's Gender Issues Unit (gender.issues@consultancyafrica.com).
- (2) Elenita C. Dano, 'Unmasking the new green revolution in Africa: motives, players and dynamics', Third World Network, Church Development Service (EED) and African Centre for Biosafety, 2007, <http://www.twinside.org.sg>.
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- (18) *Ibid.*
- (19) *Ibid.*
- (20) Chris Milton, 'Africa's green revolution 2.0: rejecting agribusiness, pesticides and GM greenwash', The Ecologist, 26 May 2011, <http://www.theecologist.org>.
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- (22) Heather Day and Travis English, 'In Kenya, farmers grow their own way', YES! Magazine, 4 October 2010, <http://www.yesmagazine.org>.

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Written on Thursday, 16 June 2011 05:20 by **Consultancy Africa Intelligence**

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