



Gates Says Environmentalism Hurting Africa

Microsoft founder Bill Gates said on October 15 that environmentalists who are adamantly opposed to using genetically modified crops in Africa are hindering efforts to end hunger on that continent.

Gates was speaking at the annual World Food Prize forum, which honors those who make important contributions to improving agriculture and ending hunger. He noted that genetically modified crops, fertilizers, and chemicals could all help small African farms produce more food, but environmentalists who resist their use are standing in the way.



“This global effort to help small farmers is endangered by an ideological wedge that threatens to split the movement in two,” Gates told the forum. “Some people insist on an ideal vision of the environment. They have tried to restrict the spread of biotechnology into sub-Saharan Africa without regard to how much hunger and poverty might be reduced by it, or what the farmers themselves might want.”

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed \$1.4 billion to developing agriculture by assisting poor, small-scale farmers to grow and sell more crops, thereby alleviating hunger and poverty simultaneously. Gates announced at the forum nine new grants totaling \$120 million that will be directed toward increasing crop yields and enhancing farmers’ skills.

Projects receiving the funding include those developing legumes that fix nitrogen in the soil, sorghum and millet that have higher yields, and sweet potatoes that resist pests. Another project will aid governments in Africa to put in place policies that would benefit small farms. Gates specifically pointed out that these small-scale farmers need training and access to markets, not just a supply of improved seeds.

The Gates Foundation is also partnering with researchers who are using both conventional crop-breeding and biotechnology to produce drought-tolerant corn. And other work is being conducted on flood-tolerant rice and wheat that is resistant to a virulent form of rust disease.

“The technologies will be licensed royalty free to seed distributors so that the new seeds can be sold to African farmers without extra charge,” Gates declared. “I hope that the debate over productivity will not slow the distribution of these seeds.”

For all the technology at Gates’ disposal, he apparently never received the memo that politically correct environmental extremism must be adhered to even when — if not especially when — it causes humans to suffer. For Gates to openly, publicly, and honestly criticize environmental extremists shows he is probably genuinely concerned about the people he is trying to help, which is the opposite attitude from those who always put the environment ahead of people.

It would never even occur to radical environmentalists that people are the most valuable natural resource in need of saving. It is refreshing to hear a public figure emphasizing “how much hunger and



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poverty might be reduced” and focusing on providing “what the farmers themselves might want” rather than fanatically insisting on “an ideal vision of the environment.”

Bill Gates’ own words say it best:

On one side is a technological approach that increases productivity.

On the other side is an environmental approach that promotes sustainability.

Productivity or sustainability — they say you have to choose.

It’s a false choice, and it’s dangerous for the field. It blocks important advances. It breeds hostility among people who need to work together. And it makes it hard to launch a comprehensive program to help poor farmers.

The fact is, we need both productivity and sustainability — and there is no reason we can’t have both.

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