



Micro(soft) managing a ‘green revolution’ for Africa: The new donor culture and international agricultural development

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ABSTRACT

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has become an influential development actor, spending billions of dollars on international health and agricultural development. While scholars commonly assert that the foundation is part of a new breed of “philanthrocapitalists” who apply business principles to their philanthropic activities, little is known about what this really means or how the Gates Foundation works on the inside. This article seeks to deepen our understanding of this new development actor by examining its organizational culture. I do this through a case study of the Gates Foundation’s Agricultural Development program. Using in-depth interviews, materials from the BMGF’s website, and a variety of other primary data sources, I explore the foundation’s quotidian practices, workplace norms, and interactions with grantees as it tries to improve the lives of smallholder farmers in Africa. I argue that the Gates Foundation’s heavy emphasis on strategic planning has produced an approach to agricultural development that abstracts away from smallholder farmers’ sociocultural worlds and relies on a generalizable set of development solutions. My analysis also reveals another significant consequence of the BMGF’s organizational culture: By immersing bright, high-achieving professionals in the competitive, intense environment that characterizes the foundation, staff have learned to “manage up” (toward Bill) rather than manage down (toward their intended beneficiaries). This insulates and distances foundation staff from the field, making it difficult for them to listen to smallholder farmers, even though many express a genuine desire to do so. As a result, farmers continue to be treated as passive objects of development rather than as complex social actors.

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1. Introduction

I am sure I will make mistakes in over-applying some elements from my previous experience and will need to adjust. For instance, the countries where Microsoft does business are far more stable and have a lot more infrastructure than most of the places where the foundation does its work, so I will need to better appreciate how difficult it will be to execute our strategies. However, I am equally confident that our maniacal focus on drawing in the best talent and measuring results will make a difference. ... The opportunity to gather smart, creative people into teams and give them resources and guidance as they tackle the challenges is very fulfilling.

– Bill Gates, Annual Letter, 2009

Since starting its Agricultural Development Program in 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has become a major actor in the field of international agricultural development. To date, the Foundation has committed \$4.9 billion to agricultural development, much of which has been targeted at what it sees as

the problems of African agriculture—the low productivity of smallholder farmers, poor soils and plant disease, and the dearth of formal markets. Although the BMGF was not the first to promote an “African green revolution” (Kofi Annan began calling for a *uniquely African green revolution* in 2000), the Foundation has become the key proponent of a Green Revolution for Africa on both a material and discursive level. Bill Gates has traveled the world touting the need for such a revolution, urging others to help lift African smallholders out of poverty.

The Gates Foundation’s foray into the field of international agricultural development has attracted considerable scholarly and practitioner attention. The Foundation’s supporters, many of whom work in international agriculture and benefit from its largesse, applaud the BMGF’s commitment to a sector that is seen as ‘backward’ and unsexy to donors but is of critical importance to food security.¹ They view Bill Gates as a generous humanitarian.

¹ This is the dominant perspective on the Gates Foundation; it is frequently expressed at international agricultural development conferences, workshops and other fora. It was also a common refrain in the author’s interviews with international agricultural experts.

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Critics take a less sanguine view. Some see the Gates Foundation as charting the same narrow science-and-technology course as did the Rockefeller Foundation, developing high cost inputs for farmers who cannot afford it (Bezner Kerr, 2012; Koopman, 2012; Patel, 2013) and searching for ‘silver bullet’ solutions to rural poverty (Brooks, Leach, Lucas, & Millstone, 2009). Others accuse it of nefariously seeking to spread capitalist agriculture across the globe and of working closely with multinational corporations in the process (Morvaridi, 2012; Thompson, 2014).

Yet despite the plethora of praise and criticism that has been heaped on the Gates Foundation, surprisingly little is known about what the foundation does in its Agriculture Development program or how the program operates. Furthermore, while development scholars commonly assert that the Gates Foundation is part of a new breed of ‘philanthrocapitalists’ who bring business principles and practices to bear on their philanthropic activities (McGoey, 2012, 2015; Thompson, 2014), we do not really know what this means in terms of the foundation’s quotidian practices, its interaction with grantees, or its internal decision-making processes. While a few scholars are beginning to shed light on these questions (Fejerskov, 2017a, 2018b; Tompkins-Stange, 2016), most of what happens *inside* the foundation remains shrouded in mystery.

In this article, I help to fill this lacuna by looking at the Gates Foundation’s organizational culture. With an asset base of \$52 billion in 2017, the Gates Foundation is currently the world’s largest global philanthropist (Gates Foundation, 2017). Indeed, between the size of its resources and its partnership-oriented approach, the BMGF is arguably *the* most influential of the “new actors in development” (see Richey and Ponte, 2014). By opening up the thick glass doors of the Gates Foundation and peering inside, we can learn a lot about what shapes its staff members’ thinking and behavior as well as how the foundation perceives the peoples and places it seeks to transform. Understanding how the BMGF operates – and how it projects its thinking and practices *outside* the foundation – can help us grasp some of the major shifts in development today.

In what follows, I examine the BMGF’s new philanthropic culture in action, to see how it operates and what it delivers. Like many other “new philanthropists,” the BMGF describes itself as both an “outcome investor” (Gates Foundation, 2014) and a “strategic philanthropist” (Gates Foundation, 2011). But what does this actually look like when applied in a specific arena, in this case, international agricultural development? What norms and routines does the Foundation bring to its work, and what does this tell us about the development practices of one of the most powerful development actors in the world? While it is still premature to make strong claims about the Gates Foundation’s success in achieving its goals of reducing global poverty and improving food security, it is not too early to analyze its cultural dispositions in practice and to ask how they shape its *modus operandi* in the field.

My data come from several sources. Since 2011, I have been studying the Gates Foundation’s Agriculture Development Program through interviews and materials that have appeared in the media, on the web, and on the BMGF’s website. My interviewees include nine former and current officials from the agriculture program and approximately twenty individuals who have worked closely with it as grantees and consultants.² I have also sustained numerous conversations with people who do international agricultural development work and who have had close contact with the Gates Foundation. Additional data sources include 187 comments posted by current and former full-time BMGF employees on the employment website, Glassdoor. These posts respond to several prompts: whether an employee recommends employment at the

Foundation (yes/no/neutral), the pros and cons of working at the BMGF, and employees’ “advice to management.” Although these comments are not specific to the Agricultural Development Program, they offer a revealing sense of employee perceptions of BMGF culture and represent a useful complement to my interviews. The fact that these posts are split almost evenly as to whether or not they recommend employment at the Gates Foundation suggests there is no systematic bias toward critics.

My analysis reveals an organizational culture that, particularly during the early years, reflects important continuities with the corporate culture for which its parent company, Microsoft, was so well known (Eichenwald, 2012; Rivlin, 1999). From the start, the Foundation sought professional staff who possessed strong analytical skills, were very smart in a “logical-mathematical” way,³ had business experience, and were highly motivated. By hiring people who represented the “best and the brightest” by these criteria and charging them with solving the perceived problems of African agriculture, the Agricultural Development program became populated by individuals who applied their business thinking and analytical skills to “fixing” rural Africa and rural Africans. The foundation’s orientation toward strategic planning, which is a key aspect of this mindset, produced a decontextualized program that abstracted away from farmers’ real agricultural and sociocultural worlds and proffered a set of universal (and *universalizing*) solutions.

My analysis also highlights two other noteworthy features of the BMGF’s organizational culture. One is that by immersing bright, high-achieving professionals in an intense workplace run by a powerful and revered leader, the Gates Foundation taught staff to “manage up” (toward Bill Gates) rather than manage down (toward African farmers). This, together with the “culture of smartness” that pervades the Foundation, leads BMGF staff to privilege expert knowledge and professional credentials over other kinds of knowledge, including smallholder farmer knowledge, community familiarity, and experiential knowledge. Both of these phenomena serve to insulate and distance Gates staff from the field, making it difficult for them to listen and learn from those whose lives they seek to improve, even though many express a genuine desire to do so. As a result, the intended beneficiaries of the Foundation’s largesse are treated as passive objects of development rather than complex, knowledgeable social actors.

The other significant feature of the Gates Foundation’s organizational culture – and one that has important consequences for the way the BMGF ‘does development’ and influences other organizations – is the foundation’s obsession with *having impact* on a large scale. This manifests in two ways. First, it leads the foundation to privilege big, international organizations that can develop and manage megaprojects. Second, it manifests itself in the BMGF’s concern with making sure that its grants can be “scaled up,” that is, expanded into new social, biophysical and geographic domains. This often encourages grantees to expand their projects beyond their organizational capacities and into locales where they possess little knowledge and few local connections. At the same time, small, local organizations and individuals that are cognizant of community needs and *could* offer strong links at the local level, tend *not* to be supported.

2. Conceptualizing Foundation culture

In claiming that an examination of the BMGF’s organizational culture can provide unique insights into this important development actor, I draw inspiration from Alvesson (2012), Smircich

² For reasons of confidentiality, I do not cite my interviewees by name.

³ ‘Logical mathematical’ intelligence is one of nine intelligences identified by psychologist Howard Gardner in the 1980s. It is the type with which Bill Gates is also richly endowed.

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