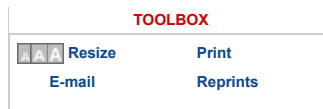


washingtonpost.com > Nation

Gates, Rockefeller Charities Join to Fight African Hunger

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Wednesday, September 13, 2006



The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's richest charity, joined with the Rockefeller Foundation yesterday to launch a new development initiative for sub-Saharan Africa that they said would revolutionize food production and reduce hunger and poverty for tens of millions of people.

Modeled on the Rockefeller-pioneered "green revolution" that transformed farming methods and staved off widespread famine in much of the developing world nearly a half-century ago, the initiative coincides with a new round of Western concern about the long-intractable problems of the poorest continent.

Home to 16 of the 18 most undernourished countries, Africa is the only part of the world where food production has decreased in recent years. At the same time, political upheaval and conflict there are seen as providing fertile ground for extremists. Widespread famine in Africa has spurred high-profile relief efforts over the years, from United Nations programs to celebrity fundraising concerts such as Live Aid in the 1980s and Live 8 last year.

Sponsors of the new "Alliance for a Green Revolution" said yesterday they are looking for a more systematic, long-term solution to African hunger.

The alliance is the first Gates venture into poverty and development after years of focusing largely on global health and education. The effort follows a doubling of the foundation's \$30 billion endowment, drawn largely from Bill Gates's Microsoft Corp. fortune, with investment guru Warren Buffett donating an additional \$31 billion earlier this year. Gates has said he will step down from direct management of

Microsoft in 2008 to work full time on foundation activities.

"We've been looking into the causes of extreme poverty and how we might make a contribution to reducing that," Gates said during a conference call with journalists yesterday. "If we can work on health and poverty issues concurrently, there is a lot that can be done to improve the quality of life. . . . Today no country of any size has been able to sustain a transition out of poverty without substantially raising productivity in the agricultural sector. It can have a transformative impact."

Melinda Gates, who serves on the board of The Washington Post Co. along with Buffett, said she and her husband studied development problems over the past three years before deciding to move beyond their health initiatives.

The Africa program will begin with a relatively small Gates contribution of \$100 million over five years, plus \$50 million from Rockefeller, to fund development of more robust disease- and drought-resistant seeds for primary African foodstuffs, enhanced distribution networks for seed and fertilizer, and university-level training for African crop scientists.

The new partners are still exploring how to make sure their initial steps do not overwhelm the continent's capacity to absorb assistance, Rockefeller President Judith Rodin said. Although future investments are likely to "scale up significantly," she said, "all of us intend to be mindful of really measuring outcomes and learning as we go and then providing the necessary resources."

Nancy Birdsall, president of the Washington-based Center for Global Development, said the mere fact that the world's biggest philanthropist is joining with the preeminent foundation working in agricultural development is "going to make a difference," adding: "It's a real shot in the arm."

Bill Gates agreed that the initial investment pales when compared with his contributions to the development of an AIDS vaccine. But he said that he expects the program to continue for decades.

"The first green revolution took a long time," said Gates program manager Roy Steiner. "It started in the 1940s with investment and made an impact in the 1960s. That takes committed partners that are going to be there for the long term and are willing to focus on what's going to help small-scale farmers" who produce most of Africa's food.

Program planners readily acknowledged that Africa's problems today far outstrip even those confronting Asia in the 1960s, including a lack of roads and irrigation, primary food crops that vary widely from region to region, degraded soil, unstable governments and tenuous security. The Rockefeller Foundation, which started shifting the bulk of its development funding from Asia and Latin America to Africa several years ago, recently shut down its program in Zimbabwe because of political strife there.

Although the Gates/Rockefeller program will be available throughout Africa, Rodin said, the partners are still studying which 10 to 20 countries to select for initial funding.

Following the pattern of its health initiatives, Gates will provide money and results-based expertise, building on existing seed development programs begun by Rockefeller and African agencies, such as a new strain of rice produced in West Africa that promises to increase yields fivefold. A concurrent goal is the expansion of seed and fertilizer distribution networks through small entrepreneurs in rural areas. Both partners hope to prime the pump for participation by both African and donor governments.

The Bush administration has increased U.S. aid to Africa significantly over the past five years, though much of it consists of food shipments and military assistance. This year's G-8 conference of the world's wealthiest nations brought agreement to cancel much of Africa's debt, but pledges to double development aid were acknowledged to be largely symbolic.

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