

## AGRA Gets Make-Up, Not Make-Over<sup>1</sup>

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Despite its dismal record, the Gates Foundation-sponsored Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) announced a new five-year strategy in September after rebranding itself by dropping 'Green Revolution' from its name.

### Rebranding, not reform

Instead of learning from experience and changing its approach accordingly, [AGRA's new strategy](#) promises more of the same. Ignoring evidence, criticisms and [civil society pleas and demands](#), the Gates Foundation has committed another \$200 million to its new five-year plan, bringing its total contribution to around \$900 million.



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More than two-thirds of AGRA's funding has come from Gates, with [African governments providing](#) much more – as much as a billion dollars yearly – in subsidies for Green Revolution seeds and fertilizers.

Stung by criticism of its poor results, AGRA delayed announcing its new strategy by a year, while its chief executive shepherded the [controversial UN Food Systems Summit](#) of 2021. Following this, AGRA has been using more UN Sustainable Development Goals rhetoric.

Hence, AGRA's new slogan – 'Sustainably Growing Africa's Food Systems'. Likewise, the new plan claims to "lay the foundation for a sustainable food systems-led inclusive agricultural transformation". But beyond such lip service, there is little evidence of any meaningful commitment to sustainable agriculture in the [\\$550 million plan](#) for 2023–27.

Despite heavy government subsidies, AGRA promotion of commercial seeds and fertilizers for just a few cereal crops failed to significantly increase productivity, incomes or even food security. But instead of addressing past shortcomings, the new plan still relies heavily on more of the same despite its failure to "catalyze" a productivity revolution among African farmers.

The supposedly new strategy dashes any hopes that AGRA or the Gates Foundation would acknowledge the harmful social and environmental effects of Green Revolutions in India, Africa and elsewhere. AGRA offered no explanation for why it dropped 'Green Revolution' from its name.

The name change suggests the 16-year-old AGRA wants to dissociate itself from past failures, but without acknowledging its own flawed approach. Recently, much higher fertilizer prices – following sanctions against Russia and Belarus after the Ukraine invasion – have worsened the lot of farmers relying on AGRA recommended inputs.

It is time to change course, with policies promoting ecological farming by reducing reliance on synthetic fertilizers as appropriate. But despite its new slogan, AGRA's new strategy intends otherwise.

Last month, the [Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa](#) rejected the strategy and name change as "cosmetic", "an admission of failure" of the Green Revolution project, and "a cynical distraction" from the urgent need to change course.

### **Productivity gains and losses**

Despite spending well over a billion dollars, [AGRA's productivity gains have been modest](#), and only for a few more heavily subsidized crops such as maize and rice. And from 2015 to 2020, cereal yields have not risen at all.

Meanwhile, traditional food crop production has declined under AGRA, with millet falling [over a fifth](#). Yields actually also fell for cassava, groundnuts and root crops such as sweet potato. Across a basket of staple crops, yields rose only 18% in 12 years.

Farmer incomes have not risen, especially after increased production costs are taken into account. As for halving hunger, which Gates and AGRA originally promised, the number of 'severely undernourished' people in AGRA's 13 focus countries increased by 31%!

A [donor-commissioned evaluation](#) confirmed many [adverse farmer outcomes](#). It found the minority of farmers who benefited were mainly better-off men, not smallholder women the programme was ostensibly meant for.

That did not deter the Gates Foundation from committing more to AGRA despite its dismal track record, failed strategy, and poor monitoring to track progress. Judging by the new five-year plan, we can expect even less accountability.

The [new plan](#) does not even set measurable goals for yields, incomes or food security. As the saying goes, what you don't measure you don't value. Apparently, AGRA does not value agricultural productivity, even though it is still at the core of the organization's strategy.

Last month, the Rockefeller Foundation, AGRA's other founding donor and a leader of the first Green Revolution from the 1950s, [announced](#) a reduction in its grant to AGRA and a decisive step back from the Green Revolution approach.

Its grant to AGRA supports school feeding initiatives and “alternatives to fossil-fuel derived fertilisers and pesticides through the promotion of regenerative agricultural practices such as cultivation of nitrogen-fixing beans”.

### **Business in charge**

AGRA's new strategy is built on a series of “business lines”, e.g., the “sustainable farming business line” will coordinate with the “Seed Systems business line” to sell inputs. Private Village Based Advisors are meant to provide training and planting advice in this privatized, commercial reincarnation of the government or quasi-government extension services of an earlier era.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization successfully promoted peer-learning of agro-ecological practices via [Farmer Field Schools](#) after successfully field-testing them. This came about after [research](#) showed ‘brown hoppers’ thrived in Asian rice farms after Green Revolution pesticides eliminated the insect's natural predators.

China lost a fifth of its 2007-08 paddy harvest to the pest, triggering a price spike in the thinly traded world rice market. Seeking help from the International Rice Research Institute, located in the Philippines, a [Chinese delegation found](#) its Entomology Department had lost most of its former capacity due to under-funding.

Earlier international agricultural research collaboration associated with the first Green Revolution – especially in wheat, maize and rice – seems to have collapsed, surrendering to corporate and philanthropic interests. This bitter experience encouraged China to step up its agronomic research efforts with a greater agro-ecological emphasis.

### **Empty promises?**

The new strategy promises “AGRA will promote increased crop diversification at the farm level”. But its advisers cum salespeople have a vested interest in selling their wares, rather than good local seeds which do not require repeat purchases every planting season.

AGRA is not strengthening resilience by promoting agroecology or reducing farmer reliance on costly inputs such as fossil fuel fertilizers and other, often toxic, agrochemicals. Despite many [proven African agroecological initiatives](#), support for them remains modest.

The new strategy stresses irrigation, key to most other Green Revolutions, but conspicuously absent from Africa's Green Revolution. But the plan is deafeningly silent on how fiscally strapped governments are to provide such crucial infrastructure, especially in the face of growing water, fiscal and debt stress, worsened by global warming.

It is often said stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. Perhaps this is due to the technophile conceit that some favoured innovation is superior to everything else, including scientific knowledge, processes and agro-ecological solutions.

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Further readings:

- AFSA, [African Civil Society And Faith Leaders Say Rebranding The Green Revolution Is No Solution: We Need Agroecology For Food And Climate Action](#), Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, 2022.
- AGRA, [AGRA's Five-Year Strategy](#), Sustainably Growing Africa's Food Systems, 2022.
- PIATA, [PIATA Evaluation Report](#) (AGRA Evaluation Report), Partnership for Inclusive Agriculture Transformation in Africa, 2022.
- A. R. Mkindi et al, [False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa \(AGRA\)](#), INKOTA-netzwerk and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2020.
- T.A. Wise, [Failing Africa's Farmers: An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa](#), Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University, 2020.

Selection of articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to this topic:

- Opinions : [Another False Start in Africa Sold with Green Revolution Myths](#) by Timothy A. Wise and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- Opinions : [Food Systems Summit's Scientistic Threat](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2021.
- Opinions: [Green Counter-Revolution in Africa?](#) by Jomo K. Sundaram, 2020.
- [The World Economic Forum's "New Vision for Agriculture" is moving ahead on the ground...](#) 2017.
- [The European Union investigates on the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#), 2016.
- [Africa: can the continent end hunger and become food self-sufficient by 2025?](#) 2016.

and many others articles under our "[Africa](#)" category.