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## Green Revolution a failure in Africa

*Ben Burkett*

The global food crisis and how to stop hunger from escalating in the midst of the current economic crisis will be the subject of a recent G8 meeting of Agricultural ministers in Treviso, Italy.

For now, the G8 and the United States continue to advocate the same disastrous policies that got us into the current mess where 1 billion people lack access to adequate food. U.S. agriculture secretary Tom Vilsack has said that biotechnology is necessary to address hunger while the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently approved without much public debate the "Global Hunger Security Act" sponsored by Senators Bob Casey and Richard Lugar, that for the first time would mandate the U.S. to fund genetic engineering projects in foreign agriculture research. Meanwhile, the Gates Foundation has billions invested in the "Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa."

As an African American farmer from Mississippi who has visited and traveled to Africa many times, I am stunned that the real solutions continue to be ignored. We face multiple crises -- financial, climate, energy, and water. Business as usual will not solve our global hunger crisis. More expensive genetically modified seeds, pesticides and chemical-intensive practices won't help the hungry and will only allow more profits and control for seed companies like Monsanto and Syngenta.

While the G8 calls for more "free trade" in agriculture and more biotechnology, groundbreaking scientific reports and actions at the United Nations are actively calling for a different vision of agriculture. This would be based on agroecological methods that respects our planet's resources and provide a decent living for family farmers. In 2008, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), backed by United Nations agencies, the World Bank and over 400 contributing scientists from 80 countries found that the most promising solutions to the world's food crisis include investing in agroecological research, extension and farming. The Congress and Obama Administration need to take a serious look at the IAASTD report before funneling scarce resources into another Green Revolution in Africa.

Past public-private partnerships in Africa have proven to be failures, such as the 14-year project between Monsanto, USAID and the Kenyan Agricultural Research Institute to engineer a virus-resistant sweet potato. The GM sweet potato failed to show any resistance to the virus while local varieties actually outperformed the GM variety in field trials. The U.S. approach to helping Africa should not be a top-down process that excludes the voices of African farmers who have the knowledge of their land and what food to grow.

The UN is helping to move the discussion towards "food sovereignty" by appointing a Special Rapporteur on the "Right to Food." and convening a Panel on the Right to Food. I was privileged to hear General Coordinator of La Via Campesina Henry Saragih of Indonesia and Professor Olivier De Schutter before the United Nations General Assembly. De Schutter said, "the right to food is not simply about more production, but about distribution and access. While high food prices are bad for consumers, so too are depressed prices for farmers who can't make a living. De Schutter pointed out that 60% of hungry people in the world are small farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk and others who make a living off the land. An additional 20% are landless agriculture workers."

A "right to food" framework therefore goes deeper than simply the misguided obsession with

yields and productivity, and more fundamentally towards questions regarding democracy and access to resources, including land, water and credit. A recent report by Union of Concerned Scientists titled "Failure to Yield: Evaluating the Performance of Genetically Engineered Crops," showed that despite 20 years of research and 13 years of commercialization, genetic engineering has failed to significantly increase U.S. crop yields while only driving up costs for farmers. In comparison, traditional breeding continues to deliver better results. The scientific research and renewed focus on the "right to food" exposes why we must move away from Green Revolution monoculture practices and instead embrace ecologically sound practices, more equitable trade rules and local food distribution systems to empower family farmers. Now the governments of the world and the Gates Foundation need to finally get the message as well.

Ben Burkett is a Mississippi farmer and President of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives. He is also the President of the National Family Farm Coalition and represents North American on the Food Sovereignty Commission of La Via Campesina. The National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) was founded in 1986 to serve as a national link for grassroots organizations working on family farm issues. [www.nffc.net](http://www.nffc.net). This column was distributed by MinutemanMedia.org.

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