



Rt Hon Justine Greening MP  
Secretary of State for International Development  
Department for International Development  
1 Palace Street  
London SW1E 5HE

By post and email to [dfidcorrespondence@dfid.gov.uk](mailto:dfidcorrespondence@dfid.gov.uk), [enquiry@dfid.gov.uk](mailto:enquiry@dfid.gov.uk),  
[greeningj@parliament.uk](mailto:greeningj@parliament.uk),

30 November 2012

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing from the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) in South Africa to ask for urgent clarification of the basis for current UK policy. We are working with Food & Water Europe and the Gaia Foundation on this initiative.

ACB has recently completed a preliminary study on the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA); a copy of our report is enclosed for your attention/the document can be found at [www.acbio.org.za/index.php/publications/seedfood-sovereignty/396-alliance-for-a-green-revolution-in-africa-agra-laying-the-groundwork-for-the-commercialisation-of-african-agriculture](http://www.acbio.org.za/index.php/publications/seedfood-sovereignty/396-alliance-for-a-green-revolution-in-africa-agra-laying-the-groundwork-for-the-commercialisation-of-african-agriculture)). We are very concerned by some of what we discovered, including:

### 1) Technofixes for socio-political problems

AGRA is operating under the assumption that only industrial agriculture using so-called Green Revolution and other technologies can deliver of global food security. This is a flawed premise, so whatever flows from it will necessarily miss the mark.

By pursuing a narrow technological fix for weak food supplies in Africa, AGRA will fail to address the real drivers of hunger (eg, social inequalities, and lack of access to land, water and genetic materials) that have historical, political roots.

We note in particular that AGRA emphasises the importance of expanding radically the use of synthetic fertilizers into African agriculture, and is building import chains to facilitate this.

### From our work on the ground with farmers we know:

Existing agricultural technologies are more than adequate to produce sufficient food for the world's population, a point expressed by FAO and others in the past. The main problem lies in the extremely unequal distribution of access to farming resources and the reliance on markets (with secondary support from aid) to distribute food. It is apparent that this system is not effectively distributing food to where it is needed, but only to where profit can be made off it (or to prevent immediate starvation in the case of aid).

Furthermore, reliance on multinational corporations to provide inputs creates unsustainable dependency on these organisations, dangerously decreases diversity of input supply and

pursues a pathway of increasing concentration of resources and power in corporate hands at the expense of food producers.

Many inexpensive, proven soil fertility techniques receive limited support and funding for their expansion, including the use of nitrogen-fixing trees and plants, intercropping and rotation, on-farm production and use of manure and compost, and vermiculture to name a few. This must change.

## **2) Privatisation and commercialisation of food production**

AGRA is working with multinational seed and agro-chemical corporations with concentrated power in global value chains and a vested interest in pursuing an agenda that can generate profits for themselves. To achieve this AGRA is intent on building regional and global export markets based on the belief that national export income will have a greater benefit for smallholder farmer households than increasing local food production and distribution.

AGRA has chosen to focus on so-called “breadbasket areas” of high profit potential it has identified to the neglect of vast areas of land where millions of agricultural producers continue producing food under trying circumstances. In these limited areas AGRA emphasises expansion of commercial industrial monocrops, such as maize, cassava and soya beans, where most research efforts have been focused in the past half a century in Africa, to the neglect of other, more locally pertinent crops.

A core goal of AGRA is to build private sector (profit-making) enterprises, including private patents on products developed from publicly-available genetic resources, for the production and distribution of agricultural inputs, especially seed and fertilizer, and associated technical support at the expense of public sector (not-for-profit) mechanisms.

### **From our work on the ground with farmers we know:**

Genuine local food security is far more dependent on a wide diversity of locally-produced crops and locally-adapted varieties of maize, cassava and other crops than on homogenised “improved” varieties of a few crops primarily of interest to exporters and food processors. These marginalised crops are very important locally even if they do not meet the criteria for national or regional commercial success.

Even though “breadbasket areas” may have better conditions for production, many millions of people are producing outside these areas and play an important role in local and national food security. Farmers have built up a diversity of production practices and resources available for agriculture over thousands of years, but these are increasingly becoming marginalised and disappearing as industrial, for-profit production expands its reach. Farmers have the most detailed knowledge about what practices and resources are most appropriate for the specific contexts in which they find themselves producing.

## **3) Neglecting farmers’ knowledge and needs**

AGRA is introducing finance in the form of debt and equity instruments based on the belief that financing is a requirement for the commercialisation of African agriculture.

AGRA is creating its own “civil society” and farmer institutions and organisations to work with – for example the Farmer Organization Support Centre in Africa (FOSCA) and many organisations created through AGRA’s work with the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) and CNFA – rather than working with existing organisations in Africa. This neglects local farmer knowledge and seeks to channel farmer participation into selection of inputs brought in from outside.

### **From our work on the ground with farmers we know:**

Issues of historical dispossession of land and access to water and genetic resources need to be placed at the centre of a shift towards more sustainable forms of agriculture in Africa. No agricultural projects will meet the long-term needs of food sovereignty without addressing these fundamental issues.

The use of debt and equity instruments creates dependency for many farmers, especially those with fewer resources to fall back on in times of adversity, and in conditions where output markets are unable to absorb surpluses. This will drive farmers into potentially unsupportable debt, which has caused tremendous suffering and hardship in other parts of the world, notably in India.

On the other hand, public sector, not-for-profit systems of production and distribution of inputs strengthen local democracy and provide greater security to resource-poor smallholder farmers than do private sector, for-profit systems.

Furthermore, Africa has its own civil society and farmer organisations that can and should form the basis for interactions with donors and institutions providing agricultural support.

In short, despite its rhetoric, AGRA is moving against the demands of food sovereignty. We do not accept that driving small family farmers into debt to facilitate setting up an ecologically-damaging agrochemical treadmill and dependence on multinational corporations is in the best interests of African farmers or citizens. This model is already causing problems in other places, and Africa is best served by learning from those mistakes and doing something better.

In light of these considerable shortcomings, we are deeply concerned by DfID's material support for AGRA. We note the UK Government accepted the findings of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) in 2008, which emphasised the importance of context-specific agroecological production methods as a key component of sustainable agricultural production into the future and noted that technofixes have only limited contributions at best to make to lasting solutions to food sovereignty.

**On the basis of these considerations we ask DFID:**

1) Why does DfID not support the formation of systems for food distribution that first and foremost meet the needs of people to eat sufficient food rather than prioritising the need for profit from the sale of food?

This could include, for example, DfID investment in:

- Identification of and support for the growth of short value chains that increase the amount of food distributed within close proximity of its production, including support for public action in this regard.
- Transforming agrarian structures for greater equity in the distribution of and access to land, water and genetic resources.
- Diversifying farmer support beyond areas with regional or global commercial potential to where farmers currently live and produce.
- Working directly with farmers to identify and support R&D into locally important crops beyond the handful of commercially successful crops pressed by international donors and bring to light their knowledge about production and diversity in local contexts as the basis for interventions for sustainable agriculture.
- Researching and sharing the wide range of existing practice of low external input methods of soil fertility and the diversification of input production and distribution, making this an explicit condition of DfID support for AGRA work.

2) Why does DfID support a project that merely propagates practices that work against food sovereignty?

Instead we believe DfID should, for example:

- Recognise that the use of debt and equity instruments for financing is not in the best interests of most African farmers, and instead favour grants or direct financial support to strengthen farmers' collective activity.
- Support the rebuilding of public sector extension and input supply systems rather than create private agro-dealer networks.
- Insist that donors do not create their own civil society and farmer organisations to work with, but invest their resources in strengthening the democratic self-organisation of farmers and civil society in Africa and follow the agendas of these organisations.
- End the kind of assumptions put forward by the BIS Agri-tech policy consultation (just closed) that exporting technologies like GM and cloning will help food sovereignty when they are instead a clear means to promote and extend UK industrial advantages, quite possibly at the expense of receiving food systems.

3) Food security within Africa should be the first priority for agricultural interventions in Africa. Local food production and distribution should be the starting point for agricultural interventions, with regional and global markets a secondary consideration if and when other systems are functioning satisfactorily.

How does DfID explain the discrepancies between our assessment of the needs for genuine local food sovereignty and the market-driven priorities AGRA is actually following with UK Government support?

4) Given the UK Government's stated intention to base policy on evidence, please share with us the evidence base demonstrating that:

- The AGRA approach will lead to long-term improvements in local food access and nutrition more effectively than focusing on improving soil fertility and strengthening existing seed systems, including using integrated farming systems?
- The AGRA approach based on generating cash rather than feeding people will not dispossess smallholder farmers, decrease agricultural biodiversity and concentrate power away from farmers, particularly in light of lessons learned from the Green Revolution and IMF structural adjustment?

We look forward to your answers to these questions.

Yours sincerely,



Mariam Mayet  
Director  
African Centre for Biosafety



Eve Mitchell  
EU Food Policy Advisor  
Food & Water Europe



Liz Hosken  
The Gaia Foundation

cc

Rt Hon Vince Cable MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade, BIS, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET (and [mpst.cable@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:mpst.cable@bis.gsi.gov.uk))

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Defra, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR (and [defra.helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:defra.helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk), [Correspondence.section@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Correspondence.section@defra.gsi.gov.uk), [patersono@parliament.uk](mailto:patersono@parliament.uk))