

Bill Gates, seeds alone will not end poverty

Vétérinaires Sans Frontières (VSF) Belgium, member of the Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP), warmly welcomes the recent expressed opinion of Bill Gates about foreign aid in the media. Foreign aid programmes do matter and certainly if they address poor farmers - the majority of people in developing countries. But VSF Belgium would like to stress that livestock is often forgotten, although it is one of the most sustainable and economically viable ways of living in arid and semi-arid lands. These areas constitute almost half of the African continent and have been affected most by the recent food crisis in the Horn of Africa.

As a Belgian NGO aiming to improve the well-being of disadvantaged African livestock farmers, VSF Belgium supports Bill Gates' reaction to the anti-foreign aid establishment that is using the report of Oxfam and Save the Children to argue that aid doesn't work. According to this report, emergency aid in the Horn of Africa came too late, at high costs in terms of lives and money. In fact, prevention is always better and cheaper than cure. We all know that having a healthy life will keep diseases away and medical bills low. But that doesn't mean that we should not interfere when people are sick or dying. We can't let people suffer if we can save their lives and the assets on which their livelihoods depend.

New seeds not always a solution in arid lands

If we want to fight poverty and hunger through foreign aid, we need to support small-scale farmers. According to FAO almost 80% of undernourished people worldwide live in rural areas, and most of them depend on agriculture, which includes livestock keeping. However, if we only focus on the crops, we forget that more than one billion poor people depend on livestock to provide essential nutrition and livelihoods.

New seeds to increase crop production will not eliminate hunger. In fact, hunger is caused not only by a lack of food availability or productivity, but also by a lack of access to food. There is enough food in the world to feed everybody, but poor farmers don't have access to it, partly due to a lack of revenue or infrastructure. Excessive consumption habits of rich consumers - the world's richest 20% consume 80% of available resources - industrialised agriculture and speculation on food are some of the main reasons for hunger in poor rural areas. As long as there is speculation on food - treating it as a commodity - prices will fluctuate widely and farmers will be subjected to the whims of international traders reacting on market information.

Arid and semi-arid lands are less suitable - and sometimes not suitable at all - for growing crops. They constitute 80% of the Horn of Africa; with an estimated population of 70 million people. Here, herding livestock often makes better technical and economic sense than growing crops. In the drylands, crop cultivation needs intensive irrigation, which is expensive and often impractical - indeed wasteful of precious water. And, be conscious, over 90% of the meat consumed in East Africa comes from pastoral herders. Encouraging all pastoralists to switch to growing crops or to move to cities is not realistic and may even have dangerous economic, social and environmental consequences.

Livestock is mobile, crops aren't

Pastoralists have always suffered from periods of cyclic drought, leaving out of discussion the climate change of recent years. As rainfall is dispersed in time and space, pastoralists move with their herds to find water and pasture. Areas of rainfall are often found 'only' a few dozen kilometres away. Thanks to strong traditional institutions and careful natural resource management, grazing areas are reserved for dry periods so that the herds can survive. Pastoralists

know how to cope with recurring droughts, if they have the mobility to do so. They master sophisticated production strategies that have allowed them not only to survive during these harsh periods but even to produce substantial economic value during better times. Pastoralists move with their herds in order to take advantage of erratic concentrations of resources within and between years, whereas obviously they would not be able to move their crop fields.

Lack of support to pastoralists

Over the years, pastoralists are faced with a gradual decline in available grazing lands and watering areas as a result of conversion to other uses. Although these areas are essential for feeding animals during periods of drought and in the dry season every year, they are now often converted to irrigated cropland or nature reserves or have been monopolised by private companies or foreign governments through 'land grabbing'. Compounded by population growth, the disputes between tribes constrain the mobility of livestock keepers and their access to water and pasture. Each month, dozens of pastoralists die as a result of armed cattle rustling, sometimes instigated by outside agendas - political or commercial.

Unfortunately, many African and international decision-makers do not recognise the economic role of pastoralists and do not address their needs adequately. Pastoralists get little support, livestock trade across borders is hindered, veterinary services are inadequate and badly coordinated and certain areas are inaccessible due to conflicts or inappropriately sited infrastructure. Numerous African countries aim for the 'modernisation' of pastoral communities by encouraging them to settle. However, there is ample scientific evidence that pastoralism is one of the most sustainable ways to exploit drylands.

Taking into account the important role and opportunity of pastoral livestock keepers for arid and semi-arid lands in Africa will improve foreign aid efficiency and the global fight against hunger and poverty. We don't always have to invent new technologies; facilitating traditional knowledge and local innovation combined with 'modern' insights can offer sustainable solutions for pastoralists to cope with future challenges. Supporting the mobility of pastoralists in an enabling policy environment will help them to cope with climate change and to get out of poverty.

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The opinion of Bill Gates - "The truth about foreign aid" - appeared in the New York Times online (26/01/2012) and in The International Herald Tribune (27/01/2012)