



PRESS RELEASE

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Bill Gates, seeds alone will not end poverty

Reaction to Bill Gates' opinion about foreign aid

Vétérinaires Sans Frontières (VSF) Belgium, member of the Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP), welcomes Bill Gates' recent expressed opinion 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.

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. 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. 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, due to a lack of revenue, infrastructure, excessive consumption habits of rich consumers, industrialised agriculture and speculation on food.

Large areas of arid and semi-arid lands are not suitable 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. 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. As rainfall is dispersed in time and space, they move with their herds to find water and pasture. 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. Over the years, pastoralists are faced with a gradual decline in available grazing lands and watering areas; these lands are often converted to irrigated cropland or nature reserves or have been monopolised by private companies or foreign governments through 'land grabbing'.

Lack of support to pastoralists

Unfortunately, many African and international decision-makers do not recognise the economic role of pastoralists and do not address their needs adequately. They aim for the 'modernisation' of pastoral communities by encouraging them to settle. Taking into account the 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 can offer sustainable solutions for pastoralists to cope with future challenges.

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 (27/02/2012)

More information?

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About Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium

Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium is a Belgian NGO that fights hunger and poverty in remote African areas by improving livestock keeping; this amongst others by improving veterinary services, training livestock keepers, creating feed stocks and improving the access to livestock markets, water and pastures. Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium has projects in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, South Sudan and Kenya. When the animals are healthy, men are too.