



Ensuring Equitable Vaccine Distribution and Preparing for the Next Public Health Crisis

Topic Overview

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) was founded just 22 years ago and aimed to tackle the intersectionality of public healthcare, poverty, and education. As the second-largest charity organization in the world, it has an endowment of close to \$50 Billion, allowing for far-reaching solutions that impact a large percentage of the world. Their goal is simple—to drastically improve the lives of billions, with a significant emphasis on vaccination efficiency and efficacy. Their public health goals include:

- We believe tackling diseases individually won't solve many global health challenges. Working across disease areas allows us to identify public goods that can accelerate global health impact and reduce the threat of epidemics.
- We believe technical innovation has a critical role to play in the design, development and deployment of these public goods.
- We invest in deep technical expertise and novel platforms in vaccine development and manufacturing to accelerate innovation for better, faster and cheaper vaccines.
- We also invest in building high-quality modeling and forecasting capabilities informed by trustworthy primary data. We make this information public to allow all experts to better prioritize our collective global health resources.¹

BMGF has been a long-standing active participant and supporter in both the World Health Organization and GAVI, the Global Vaccine Alliance. They provide close to 50 percent of the WHO's non-governmental organization overall funding and pledged to provide 20 percent of GAVI's funding until 2025. Working with global institutions is paramount for the implementation of new vaccine distribution tactics and policies, despite lacking the ability to technologically advance like the BMGF can.

¹<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-vaccine-alliance/surveillance>



The results of this historic BMGF Board meeting will chart a future for international disease control policy for decades to come. What can we learn from COVID-19 and its vaccination rollout? What needs to be improved? Is there a way to predict the next pandemic?

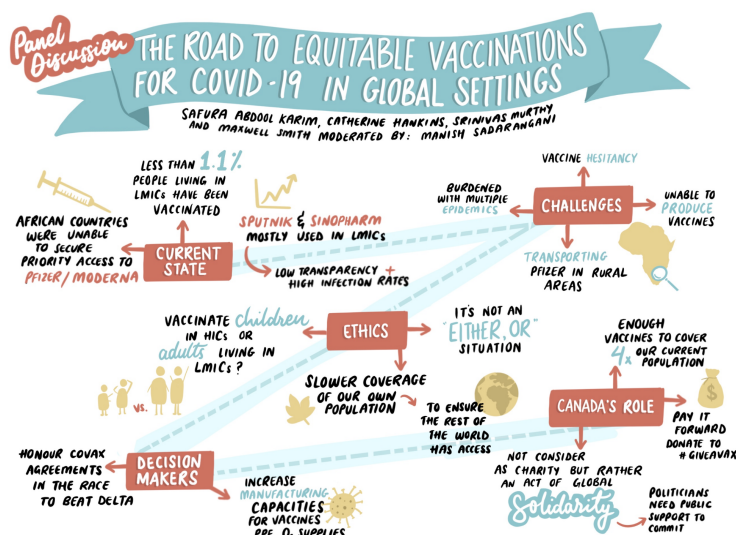
Historical Background

In 1994, Bill Gates was sitting at his kitchen table reading a newspaper article about the rotavirus in Africa. Rotavirus, which is a genus of double-stranded RNA viruses, is found in 99 percent of all children around the world by the age of one. Although only an estimated one in 50 children in the U.S. experience severe symptoms, it has a high mortality rate in Africa and other parts of the world. In the article, Bill learned that over 600,000 children around the world were dying around the world every year, and was outraged over the lack of awareness and attention to this issue. He promptly broke ground on their original foundation and then organized GAVI, which has grown into the largest vaccination cooperative in the world. In 2009, Bill Gates expressed the hope that the new rotavirus vaccine could reach half the children who needed it within six years.

Current Situation

It was a natural progression for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to take a leading role in vaccine development and distribution when COVID-19 hit the global community by storm. According to their own data, they have donated more than \$1.9 billion in efforts to slow the transmission throughout sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, provided loan assistance to prosper private development, and financed various grassroots organizations who work directly with those affected.

However, the swift infectivity and severity of COVID-19 wreaked havoc on an ill-prepared international community. The first confirmed case of coronavirus in China was on January 7, 2020. On January 12, every other country received the genetic sequence for the disease, assisting in developing testing and tracing. On January 13, the first confirmed case outside of China was found in Thailand. On January 22, the WHO convened to determine if a public health emergency needed to be issued. They did not issue the directive. It was not until January 30 that they issued a statement of international concern. On February 18, the WHO announced that a vaccine could be available in 18 months.



The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response concluded in May 2021 that “Institutions failed to protect people” and “science-denying leaders eroded public trust in health interventions.” The panel said early responses to the outbreak in December 2019 “lacked

urgency,” as countries failed to heed the alarm.² A reliance on the wealthiest countries to produce vaccinations proved to be problematic in the transmission to the poorest countries and left hundreds of millions with no protection. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was quoted saying, “The situation we find ourselves in today could have been prevented; it is due to a myriad of failures, gaps, and delays in preparedness and response.”

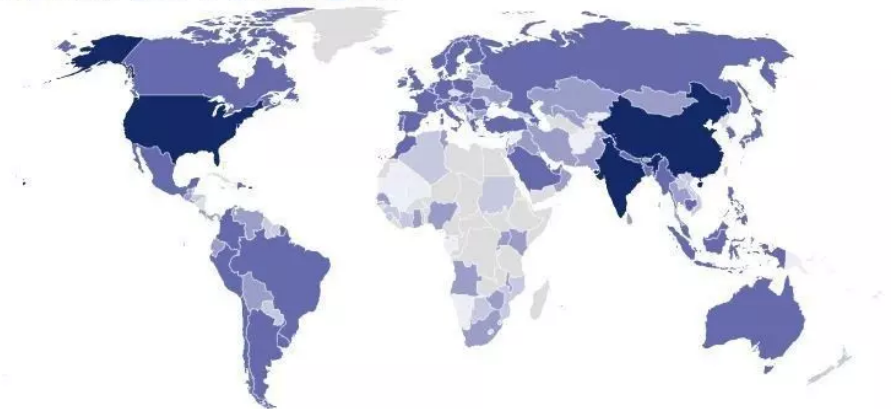
The WHO issued a report titled “COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic” and called to overhaul the existing global alarm system, which clearly failed. Although this is extremely important, it only addresses a portion of the issue. There was no existing vaccination program or strategic transmission process in place for a pandemic of this magnitude, which led to supply shortages and economic pitfalls that touched every person around the world.

Which countries have given the most vaccine doses?

COVID-19 vaccine distribution has varied around the world. With the limited supply, wealthier countries have been able to secure large vaccine contracts, while low-income countries have gone without.

Vaccine doses administered

< 10K 10K–100K 100K–1M 1M–100M ≥ 100M



Data as of April 13, 2021. Some countries' most recent numbers were from the previous week. Details not available from all countries. Some vaccines require two doses.

Map: The Conversation/CC-BY-ND • Source: Our World in Data • Get the data

Discussion Questions

- The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many weaknesses in overburdened public health systems throughout the world. What lessons can we learn from COVID-19 to strengthen and reinforce these vital public health systems?
- What economic assistance can the Foundation provide during pandemics? How should those funds be allocated?
- How can BMGF assist in curing diseases that already exist, while also planning to cure diseases of the future?
- How can mRNA be manipulated to continue advancing vaccine technology?
- Misinformation and vaccine hesitancy are on the rise across all countries and communities. This trend threatens to revert progress made on a host of dangerous diseases. How can the Foundation best educate and encourage the populace to trust in the benefits of immunization?

- How is a pandemic started? What steps can be taken to lower the potential risk of human-to-animal transmissions?
- Is it possible for vaccine distribution to be equitable? Will wealthy nations always bear the production and transportation costs? Immunization is often correlated with educational success, gender equality and breaking the cycle of poverty. How can we best provide immunization to those who would benefit the most from it?
- How do we accelerate vaccines? How do we ensure all countries get their fair share?

Key Terms

- COVID-19
- RNA
- Rotavirus
- Malaria
- Lyme Disease
- GAVI
- World Health Organization
- Global Vaccine Action Plan (GVAP) - (2011 - 2020)
 - GVAP Report Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability Report (2020)
- Immunization Agenda 2030 - A Global Strategy to Leave No-One Behind
- Global Health Strategy
- Antimicrobial Resistance
- National Immunization Programmes
- Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
- Polio Endgame Strategy (2019 - 2023)
- Neonatal Tetanus Elimination
- Global Measles and Rubella Strategic Plan
- Ending Cholera - A Global Roadmap to 2023
- Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis (2016–2021)
- Global Vector Control Response (2017–2030)
- Global Roadmap to Defeat Meningitis
- Global Influenza Strategy (2019–2030)
- Zero by 30: The Global Strategic Plan

Sources

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/articles/covid19-vaccine-geographic-distribution>

“Geographically distributed manufacturing capacity is needed for improved global health security”

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-health/vaccine-development-and-surveillance>

Foundation Goal Home Page

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press-releases/2021/06/the-bill-and-melinda-gates-foundation-pledges-50-million-to-increase-access-to-safe-and-affordable-covid-19-vaccines-in-lower-income-countries>

50 Million dollar pledge to get vaccines to low-income countries

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press-releases/2021/06/the-bill-and-melinda-gates-foundation-pledges-50-million-to-increase-access-to-safe-and-affordable-covid-19-vaccines-in-lower-income-countries>

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Announces \$750 Million Gift to Speed Delivery of Life-Saving Vaccines

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/news/preventingfuturepandemics/>

Harvard Study Preventing Future Pandemics

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>

Tracking COVID through the world

<https://www.nap.edu/read/25917/chapter/1>

Framework for equitable covid vaccine distribution requested by the NIH (Free PDF Link)

<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>

COVAX - WHO

<https://ftp.historyofvaccines.org/multilanguage/content/articles/rotavirus>

Rotavirus Vaccine History

<https://www.gavi.org/operating-model/gavis-partnership-model/bill-melinda-gates-foundation>

GAVI

<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/vaccines>

OECD Race to Vaccinate

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/an-expert-offers-one-solution-to-the-covid-19-vaccine-patent-problem/>

WHO Fact Sheets:

- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/children-reducing-mortality>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cholera>
- [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-papillomavirus-\(hpv\)-and-cervical-cancer](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-papillomavirus-(hpv)-and-cervical-cancer)
- [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-\(seasonal\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-(seasonal))
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malaria>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/measles>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/poliomyelitis>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/rubella>
- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/yellow-fever>

Other Resources:

- https://www.who.int/health-topics/vaccines-and-immunization#tab=tab_1
- <https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/infographics/immunization/unsung-heroes-of-polio-eradication.html>
- https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/immunization/strategy/ia2030/ia2030-draft-4-wha_b8850379-1fce-4847-bfd1-5d2c9d9e32f8.pdf?sfvrsn=5389656e_66&download=true

Reinventing Agriculture

Topic Overview

There is a need to feed people sustainably while keeping pace with a growing population, which is forecasted to reach 8.5 billion by 2030, 9.7 billion by 2050, and 11.2 billion by 2100.

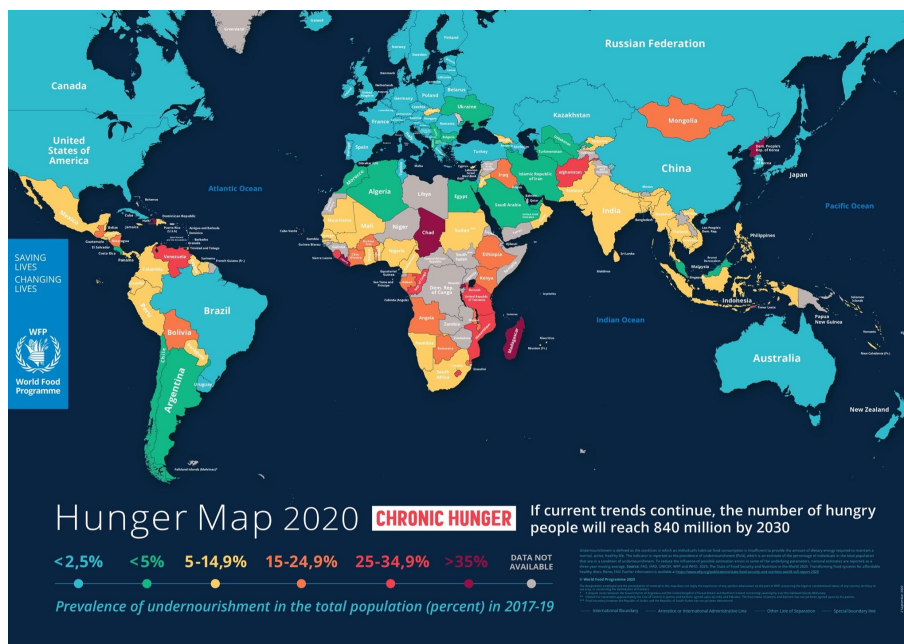
No matter how we approach the problem, providing access to and developing better agricultural technologies and practices is foundational. Even today, we struggle with feeding our populations sustainably, and when it comes to identifying areas we need to focus on, there are a few key obstacles that affect our ability to feed the world.

Historical Background

Adapting to and fighting against climate change

The ways that humans impact the environment have far-reaching effects and often unknown consequences. A new study by the WWF stated that over a third of our global agricultural output is entirely dependent on the health of rivers.³ Joao Campari, WWF Global Food Leader, called

rivers the “arteries of the planet” that provide nourishment to populations all over the globe. A large portion of global food production is directly reliant on rivers, which are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Rivers play a crucial role in crop and fish production; 40 percent of global fish consumption is reliant on rivers and over 25 percent of the



³<https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/global-food-security-at-risk-from-growing-threats-to-rivers-with-high-support-one-third-of-world-s-food-production>

world's food supply comes from cropland irrigation of river water.

Unfortunately, rivers have suffered the harsh environmental effects of overfishing, pollution and climate change. Agriculture is the largest source of pollution to freshwater ecosystems by releasing contaminating waste from livestock, food crops, and animal feed.

Of the over 6,000 plant species that we cultivate for food, only nine species account for over two thirds of the total crop production, increasing dependency on fewer options and increasing our risk from natural disasters and climate change. Managing and producing agriculture that is sustainable requires us to plan to effectively move away from this model.

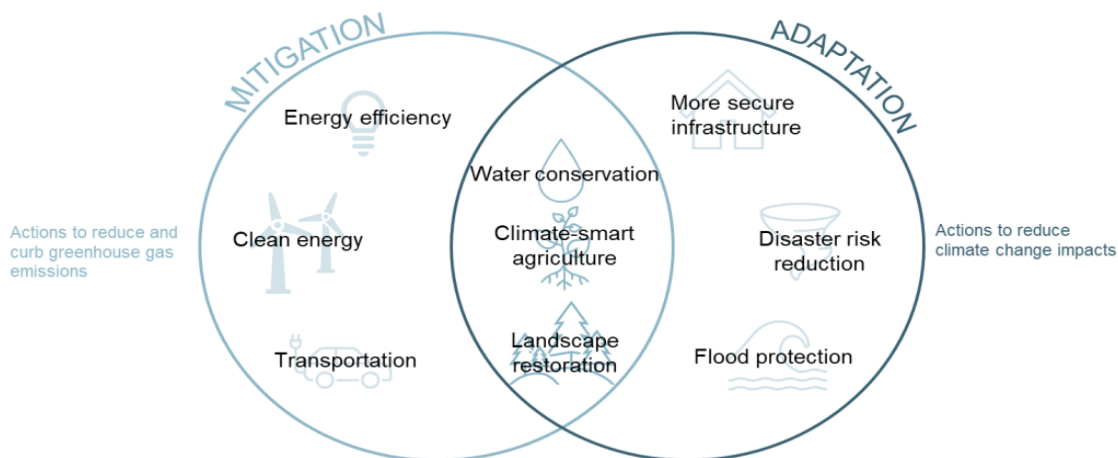
Systems of systemic poverty leave families trapped without economic or social mobility

According to the WHO, close to half of child deaths are related to undernutrition and food insecurity, which correlates highly to poverty and systemic barriers. A closer look at the world hunger map demonstrates that poorer areas in South East Asia, South America and Africa are disproportionately affected by chronic hunger. Just as one example, there are 413 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa living on less than \$1.90 per day. That same figure in Central Asia and Europe is just 7.1 million.⁴

The very real danger of food instability

Food security has been a growing challenge for the global community. The Agricultural Commodity Price Index increased over 17 percent in 2021 alone.⁵ Apart from the recent developments with regards to the pandemic, many factors, such as economic disparities and disrupted supply chains, contribute to a growing threat of food instability and insecurity.

The Gates Foundation believes that food stability starts with our Agricultural systems and call for urgent action to increase investment in climate adaptation, particularly climate-smart agriculture.⁶



⁴ <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/global-poverty-hunger-facts>

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>

⁶ https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/bill_and_melinda_gates_foundation_investing_in_climate_change_adaptation_and_agricultural_innovation_is_essential_for_our_future.pdf

Current Situation

Gates Ag One

Bill & Melinda Gates Agricultural Innovations (Gates Ag One) is focused on improving agricultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. They have made many advancements to improve farming for “smallholder” farmers because of their efforts and collaborations with research partners.

In the target geographies, smallholder farmers make an essential contribution under very challenging conditions. Their ability to work is constantly under threat from climate change, poor access to agricultural technology, ill-adaptation to environmental conditions, predatory business practices and continuously changing trends in demand.⁷ Gates Ag One, a specialized branch of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, has outlined key areas they plan to focus on to help improve the livelihood of these smallholder farmers.

Accelerating high-impact innovations for climate resilience and agricultural productivity

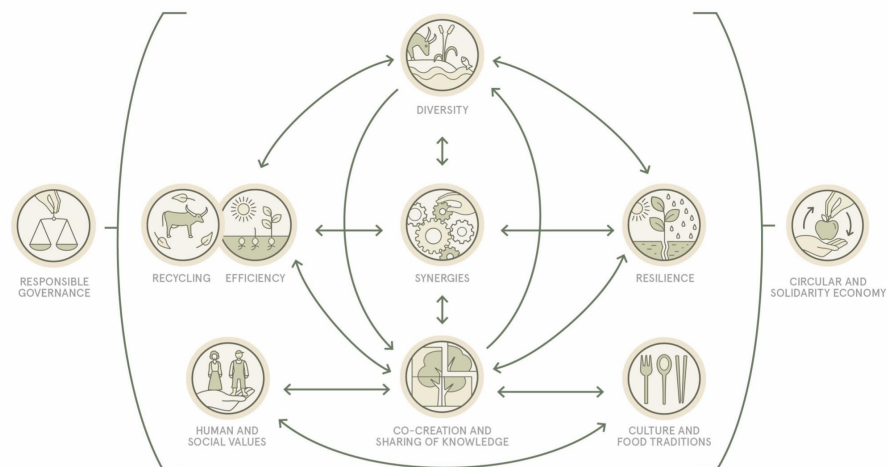
As accelerators, we are driven by the stark challenges that smallholder farmers face in cultivating crops under increasingly uncertain and difficult conditions. A key focus is to improve access to public and private research and technology. Bringing new technologies to smallholder farmers is a core tenant.

Creating impactful, inclusive partnerships for product development, value creation, and sharing

As part of our main strategy, it is important to form relationships with groups who align with our mission, and facilitate the production of tools that can help revolutionize agriculture.

Building an environment that promotes equitable access and benefits for smallholder farmers

We must focus on making sure we can bring strong technology to farmers who need them in a sustainable way, so that we can make a lasting impact on their livelihood. To do this, we must improve accessibility to this technology and make it easy to integrate within pre-existing systems.



⁷ <https://www.gatesagone.org/what-we-do/>

Cultivating best practices for technology development and advancement

To ensure our mission is achieved and sustained over the long term, and given the stakes, it is crucial that our approach to product development and execution is world class. The technology that we aim to deliver changes lives, and improves the quality of life for those who need it most.

Some of the core projects undertake and overseen by the foundation are:

1. RIPE: Realizing Increased Photosynthetic Efficiency
 - a. “RIPE is an international research project that aims to engineer plants to photosynthesize more efficiently, and ultimately, increase the yields of staple food crops to improve global food security by 2050. The project begins its work with a model crop before applying successful traits into five food crops: cassava, cowpea, maize, rice, and soybean.”⁸
 - b. The RIPE project was formed in 2012 and was initially bankrolled by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The \$25 million investment was followed up with another \$45 million investment from the Gates Foundation, Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research, and U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.
2. ENSA: Engineering Nitrogen Symbiosis for Africa
 - a. Crop plant productivity is highly dependent on the availability of multiple nutrients. Nitrogen in specific is usually given as either inorganic fertilizers or as organic fertilizers (manure). Small-holder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa usually have very poor access to either of these options, leading to very small crop yields.
 - b. The ENSA project aims to use naturally occurring biological nitrogen fixation to deliver needed nitrogen to plants in the farms of smallholder farmers in Africa.
3. CASS: Cassava Source Sink Project
 - a. The roots of cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) represent a large portion of carbohydrates for many people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Cassava is grown by smallholder farmers, who have very limited access to the tools of modern agriculture, like heavy farming machinery, pest control or fertilizer. Rather than focusing on delivering better farming tools, CASS focuses on developing inherently more productive plants.⁹
4. CGIAR
 - a. “CGIAR is the world’s largest global agricultural innovation network. We provide evidence to policy makers, innovation to partners, and new tools to harness the economic, environmental and nutritional power of agriculture.”¹⁰

⁸ <https://ripe.illinois.edu>

⁹ <https://cass-research.org/about/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cgiar.org/how-we-work/>

Key Terms

- **CGIAR (Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research):** A global research partnership for a food secure future dedicated to reducing poverty, enhancing food and nutrition security, and improving natural resources.
- **26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26):** The COP26 summit brought parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.
- **The Paris Agreement:** The Paris Agreement's central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.
- **UN Framework Convention on Climate Change:** an international environmental treaty to combat "dangerous human interference with the climate system"
- **Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate (Aim For Climate):** a new initiative seeking to increase and accelerate investment in climate-smart agriculture and food systems innovation, and accelerate coordinated action on the most pressing research priorities over the coming five years (2021–2025)
- **Smallholder farms:** Farms that are less than 5 acres in size; account for 80% of the world's food production
- **African Union's Green Recovery Action Plan:** outlines the principles for "protecting rights to the land of Africans and ensures that land is put to good use for sustainable development"¹¹
- **UN Economic Commission for Africa**
- **Disaster Risk Reduction**
- **Climate-Smart Agriculture**
- **Landscape Restoration**
- **Water Conservation**
- **Supporters of Agricultural Research (SoAR) Foundation**

Discussion Questions

- Picking the right agricultural practices for a region often involves finding the right balance between efficiency and robustness. Optimizing a field for one crop can be highly efficient, but if that crop is hit with a blight or a pest that can wildly impact the food security of the region. How can we best promote agricultural practices that are both efficient and robust?

¹¹ <https://au.int/en/documents/20210715/african-union-green-recovery-action-plan-2021-2027>

- Technology can greatly improve productivity of smallholder farms but often come with a huge upfront cost that many farmers can't afford. How can we make the right technology available to all smallholder farmers?
- Climate change has increased the frequency and severity of natural disasters. How can we best protect our agricultural pipeline from disaster-related shocks?

Sources and Additional Resources

Gates Foundation donates \$306 Million to Agricultural Development designed to boost the yields and incomes of millions of small farmers in Africa and other parts of the developing world so they can lift themselves and their families out of hunger and poverty.

[https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press-releases/2008/01/\\$306-million-commitment-to-agricultural-development](https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press-releases/2008/01/$306-million-commitment-to-agricultural-development)

Gates Foundation Agricultural Development Mission Statement

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work/programs/global-growth-and-opportunity/agricultural-development>

Investing in climate change adaptation and agricultural innovation whitepaper

https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/bill_and_melinda_gates_foundation_investing_in_climate_change_adaptation_and_agricultural_innovation_is_essential_for_our_future.pdf

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Global Warming of 1.5 °C: An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf

Advocating for the rights of local NGOs and Activists to operate without undue negative political repercussions

Topic Overview

Activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work tirelessly every day to improve the economic and social conditions of the underserved. Because of their accomplishments, NGOs have grown as important political actors on a global scale. However, NGOs and activists face many limitations as they seek to complete their work, most significant are those placed by political actors seeking to limit foreign interference. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will be tasked with navigating these obstacles as they seek to complete their mission and spread their influence around the world.

Historical Background

A brief description of Non-Governmental Organizations and their functions

More than 20,000 NGOs operate today and touch almost every facet of civil society. Their work spans fields, from Amnesty International's work in human rights to Doctors Without Borders' efforts to expand access to healthcare globally.

NGOs first emerged in the mid-17th century when Henri Dunant witnessed the Battle of Solferino in present-day Italy. The bloodshed of this battle inspired him to start the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863. The ICRC would go on to be a key motivating actor in the formation and creation of the Geneva Conventions in 1864. Since then, NGOs have played an important role in many political developments and are also a strong partner to many United Nations entities.

NGOs were involved in the U.N.'s founding and are defined according to Article 71 of the U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Charter as "any international organization which is not established by intergovernmental agreement." In practice, this definition excludes profit-making organizations such as large, multinational corporations. It also excludes organizations that operate within single states, criminal, and terrorist organizations. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation falls under the NGO definition and has been classified as the second-largest charity in the world.

In practice, NGOs tend to fall into two categories: operational NGOs, which design and implement development-related projects, and advocacy NGOs, which defend and promote certain causes. Often, NGOs perform both operational and advocacy functions. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation falls mostly into the advocacy category, as it gives away grants and large sums of money to groups doing the operational work on the ground. By giving away its money, the Foundation is engaging in advocacy, choosing which causes to promote through charitable donations.

When we consider the types of NGOs, it is also important to understand the source of NGO funding. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is comparatively lucky, as it receives funding from its titular founders, two of the wealthiest people in the world. This allows the Foundation to operate with a large budget and a tremendous amount of resources. These resources give the Foundation increased capacity to take action on issues it chooses to pursue. However, many NGOs are funded through other means, like grants, loans, membership dues, and private donations. NGOs in some countries also receive funding through government aid. For example, charitable organizations in the United States can apply for 501(c)(3) non-profit status, meaning donations to them are tax-exempt.

The growing influence of NGOs in politics is often cited as an indicator of growing participation of civil society in international politics. This means that actors who work outside the government can be involved with and take influential positions regarding prominent political issues. In this way, NGOs challenge traditional assumptions in international relations theory, which holds that countries play a primary role in geopolitical developments. In short, NGOs showcase the ability of non-state organizations to guide political progress.

Activists and their role in the political community

Activists are fluid, free from the organizational structures that make NGOs what they are. Broadly speaking, an activist is a person who campaigns to bring about change. In this way, activism means taking action to bring about this change. Activism has been a driving force behind many international and local policy changes, from the Civil Rights Movement bringing the end of legal segregation in the United States, to the U.N.'s International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

Activists do different types of work to spread their message and attempt to realize change. This includes:

- **Demonstrations and protests**, in which people come together to march, sit in, or otherwise engage in assembly. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Articles 19 and 20, people around the world have a right to protest. While this right is enshrined in international law and the law of many countries, physical demonstrations are often complicated by the presence of law enforcement and counter-protestors.

- **Boycotts and strikes** are actions designed to economically impact a target and pressure them to concede to activists' demands. Boycotts are when a group of people refuse to purchase a certain product or group of products in order to economically harm the producer. Strikes are when a group of workers refuse to work in order to hinder an organization's ability to make their products.
- **Letter-writing and petitions** are used to show a large amount of public support and pressure public officials to take action. In the digital age, often these petitions will be circulated online and be written on online platforms.
- **Social media campaigns** use the power of digital technology to spread the word about particular social issues. Often, social media campaigns will be used to draw attention to other means of activism, such as protests, direct actions, and petitions, in order to drum up support.

NGOs, activists, and their interactions with political organizations

In order to operate, NGOs need to cooperate with national and international governments, especially because their work touches many areas of political concern. This can occur in a variety of ways: (a) partnerships with the U.N. and other intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), (b) lobbying groups to take actions on specific issues, (c) on-the-ground operations, and (d) acting as watchdogs for the actions of governments.

Similarly, to bring about their desired agenda, activists may (a) work within governments to change specific policies, (b) campaign to make political and bureaucratic change, or (c) protest against certain officials or policies. For example, in 1947, even before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified, W.E.B. DuBois collaborated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to send a 92-page petition to the United Nations demanding the U.N. force the United States to take accountability for its discriminatory practices against Black and African-American people. Twenty years later, the U.N. would go on to draft the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Current Situation

Protecting the rights of NGOs and activists to operate without undue state interference

Because many NGOs work on issues of political importance, relationships with state and interstate political organizations have a strong impact on NGOs' ability to function and achieve their goals. However, NGOs face many challenges from these same actors. Sometimes, these challenges are more logistical or bureaucratic than anything else. Organizational registration processes are long, it is difficult to secure funding, or there are many rules governing what an NGO can and cannot do, among other impediments. NGOs also often work in war-torn,

underdeveloped, or impoverished regions without solid access to infrastructure, making it more difficult for them to deliver their services.

Sometimes, these obstacles are more severe. NGOs often work within the field of human rights and they seek to address human rights violations. However, the countries in which these human rights violations are taking place do not want independent watchdog organizations reporting on their activities. This can mean that state-level governments take actions to prevent NGO activities, occasionally banning them altogether.

Historically, states have placed undue burden on the operations of local NGOs through one of the following types of actions: laws governing application or registration of NGOs, laws restricting access to funding, or regulations that impose logistical burdens. The rise of laws targeting action by NGOs threatens to derail positive action on a wide range of initiatives ranging from health, poverty, social freedoms, and climate change across the globe. For instance, in 2015, Cambodia passed a law to “prevent terrorism and money-laundering.” Critics saw it as a bald-faced attempt to clamp down on NGOs that have been critical of the government.¹² The PRC Government in China has instituted a raft of regulations that critics say has made it much harder for NGOs to operate in the country.¹³ Laos has instituted similar laws in the name of reforms with much the same end goal. This trend has only accelerated in recent years across every region in dozens of countries.¹⁴

Protecting the rights of local activists to operate without undue state interference

Similarly to NGOs, activists’ demands often have to do with changing policies or political systems. This means that, by their nature, they are forced to engage in the political process. In fact, the work of activists is often considered to be an essential aspect of the policy-making process, as it is increasing public awareness that brings issues to the forefront of political conversation and forces politicians to finally act.

Sometimes, politicians are willing to come to a collaborative solution with local activists, hear their demands, and engage in a genuine attempt to remedy their concerns. However, activists often seek to bring about political change that is not desired by those in power. The most extreme example of this is when activists advocate for the end of the current government or regime. Often, these regimes are corrupt, anti-democratic, or violent, and are willing to take dramatic measures to stay in power.

One of the simplest limitations countries may place on activists’ ability to engage in direct action is by limiting what they can do through logistical laws, rather than speech-based laws, which restrict based on time, place, and manner, rather than substantive content. These laws can include

¹² <https://www.voanews.com/a/new-cambodian-law-poses-threat-to-rights-groups/2876693.html>

¹³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-cracks-down-on-foreign-nonprofits-1425694223>

¹⁴ https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1594490/laos-ngo-restrictions-threaten-development-say-non-profit-groups?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=1594490

imposing curfews to prevent protestors from gathering at the end of the workday, writing labor codes that favor business owners, rather than striking workers, or making it difficult for citizens to access and appeal to public officials. Beyond bureaucratic limitations that have the by-product of limiting activists' capacity, certain countries have chosen to revoke freedom of assembly altogether.

In addition to outlawing assembly, governments seeking to limit activism will follow up legal violence with more direct forms of assault. This can take shape in many forms; police will sometimes interrupt protests and physically brutalize demonstrators using pepper spray, tear gas, or night sticks. For example, during the 2020 Women's Strike in Poland, police kettled protestors into a confined space before using pepper spray. Police violence against is not always so direct; often, national intelligence organizations will conduct espionage raids against activists it deems to be threats.

Example: Belarus

A recent example of the activities of NGOs and activists being severely limited is the situation in Belarus. In 2020, the longtime president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, claimed that he won 80% of the votes in his re-election bid. These results were deemed to be a scam by onlookers both inside and outside the country. They also spurred a surge of protests in Belarus, which culminated in 200,000 people coalescing in the city center of Minsk, Belarus' capital. Protestors were met by police brutality and many were detained.

Since these protests, Lukashenko's government has inhibited the ability of NGOs, journalists, and activists to operate within Belarus. Belarus' oldest newspaper was banned from publishing, several journalists have been detained by police, and *Newsweek* reported that 562 political prisoners are being kept, most of whom are activists and human rights advocates. Furthermore, Belarus has closed civil society organizations, including shutting down NGOs that provide HIV treatment or support for the elderly.

What is happening in Belarus is an example of how activists and NGOs are both inextricable parts of transnational civil society and how both suffer when governments seek to quash citizen-led efforts to shape political change.

Discussion Questions

- What should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation do to strengthen the capacity of NGOs and activists worldwide in the face of these challenges?
- What should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation do to protect its local partners when they are placed in dangerous situations? To what extent should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation seek to intervene?

- How should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as an NGO overcome the many challenges placed on NGOs operating in the international sphere?

Key Terms

- **CIVICUS**: According to their website, CIVICUS “is a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world.”
- **Transnational Civil Society**: a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity that stretches across national borders.
- **Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs)**: an entity created by treaty, involving two or more nations, to work in good faith, on issues of common interest. This most prominent example is the United Nations.
- **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)**: an organization that functions independently of the government.
- **Operational NGOs**: NGOs that focus on performing a certain function or delivering a certain set of services.
- **Advocacy NGOs**: NGOs that advocate for a specific cause or promote knowledge of a specific issue.
- **Activists**: individuals or groups of individuals who seek to cause change.

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