

Gates Foundation's Agriculture Policy Includes Focus on Women

Supports more agriculture training for women

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Washington — A major American foundation has expanded its efforts in international agricultural development to include a strong focus on women and is encouraging other donors to do the same.

Women, who are 80 percent of Africa's farmers and more than 60 percent of the farmers in Asia, are "the managers of the developing world's food supply," doing everything from planting seeds and caring for livestock to harvesting crops and arranging for storage, in addition to preparing meals, says Catherine Bertini, a senior fellow at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a former head of the U.N. World Food Programme.

Yet, women farmers received less than 10 percent of the credit awarded to men in the developing world and only 5 percent of the agricultural services. Women are "underrepresented" in farmer training programs, Bertini said at the World Food Prize forum in Des Moines, Iowa, in October.

Most agricultural research, usually done by men, is less effective when women's distinct perspectives and priorities are not taken into account, said Bertini, who also serves on the U.S. Agency for International Development's board of advisers on international food and agriculture.

The Gates Foundation integrates women's views into the planning of all of its agricultural projects, requiring all applications for grants to include a description of how a grant would specifically help women, Bertini said.

For instance, it requires grant recipients working on seed development to consider how new seeds might affect women, such as if crops grown from the seeds would require longer cooking times.

For a livestock management project, the foundation requires grant recipients to hire significant numbers of local women and to support women's professional development in agriculture.

The Gates Foundation, which began spending on agricultural development in 2006, said in early 2008 it was nearly doubling, to \$306 million, its commitment to increase farm productivity and small-scale farmer incomes in Africa and Asia.

Bertini said she is encouraging other aid donors to include women in planning their agricultural development programs.

"If we don't deliberately design programs for women ... then we don't reach farmers," she said.

One way that an agricultural program can benefit women is to incorporate basic education into farmer training. When women can read labels on fertilizer bags and when they can count when selling their crops at market, they are able to get better results from their farming, Bertini said.

Another way is to encourage the development of farm tools designed for women, such as hoes with shafts and blades that women can handle more easily.

With support from the Gates Foundation and USAID, the Kenya-based African Women in Agriculture and Development group is offering two-year fellowships to fast-track the careers of women in sub-Saharan Africa in agricultural research and development.

Participating countries include Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Sixty women have received fellowships for 2008–2010.

The Gates Foundation also is partnering with organizations involved in gender integration to learn from their experiences and understand how development projects affect women.

The World Food Prize forum annually brings together representatives of government, academia, nonprofit groups and the private sector from around the world that focus on food and agricultural development. The 2008 meeting included representatives from more than 60 countries.