

A Quiet Revolution in the Developing World

By Regina Cornwell

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The Gates Foundation has found an experienced adviser who knows as much as anyone about the importance of focusing on women to increase agricultural production in those countries where hungry people need it most. And her gender-sensitive policy does not end with the farmers.

Insanity is often defined as doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result. In the field of aid for agriculture in the developing world, there are many competitors for this dubious distinction among governments, NGO's and donors.

When the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation stepped up two years ago and announced the launch of a new Agricultural Development program, it might have gone the same route. But instead they heeded the words of Catherine Bertini, who knows something about feeding millions of hungry people.

The 2003 World Food Prize laureate had a simple message: "Don't forget the women." To guarantee failure, she said, ignore those who are the majority of farmers in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—the areas where the foundation planned to invest. The Gates not only heeded her words, but invited her to join them as a consultant. As senior fellow in Agricultural Development, they asked her to create a gender policy that would change the way grants are awarded and ensure that women farmers are given their fair share.

Who is this woman helping the largest and most powerful foundation in the world set a major course of action? Now 58, Catherine Bertini is acclaimed for finding ways to feed poor hungry women and their families and for bringing more girls to school in developing countries. She was the first American to run the UN World Food Program (WFP), where she spent a decade. Before leaving in 2002, she totally reformed the globe's largest humanitarian organization, with a staff of 8000, feeding 80 to 90 million of the hungry each year. She had learned earlier while working in the U.S. government that the majority of poor heads of households seeking aid were women. Food for them meant feeding their families, and giving them training and educational opportunities opened a door out of abject poverty.

Her solution at the WFP was to deliver food directly to the family cooks—in Afghanistan and North Korea, in countries in Africa and Latin America, where hunger, starvation and famine were rampant. "Unless we're going to partner with the women," Bertini remarked, "most of the food is going to end up [being sold] on the street."

She took her more than 20 years of leadership experience—in war zones, dealing with natural disasters and the poorest of the poor—and applied it to creating a gender policy. "With the Gates,

we're committed to it but we're just beginning," she reminded me in our interview at the UN this fall.

Bertini announced months ago that the typical beneficiary of Agricultural Development would now be referred to as "she" rather than "he." That caused some double takes among the press. She works as a team with staff, so that all own a piece of the developing policy and feel responsible for both its achievements and shortcomings. A full time gender advisor trains staff to engage with grantees, and an exhaustive gender checklist is an added guide. Grantees are offered training. Those unwilling to cooperate with the program's goals are rejected. Even third party vendors who provide products and services are drawn into the gender requirements.

Funding also supports scientific work. At this stage in developing countries, there are few women scientists specializing in areas needed to benefit farming. Gates Agricultural Development grants go to male scientists at the top of their fields and to female graduate students with the same specializations to serve as their lab assistants. In a number of years the former assistants will be full fledged scientists in demand for their nation's or region's labs, extension services and universities, mentoring other women graduate students who will work beside them. In this way, gender equity becomes institutionalized.

In an example of how women must be consulted if resources are to be useful, a scientist produces a new wheat seed that grows well in the local soil and calls for little irrigation. But the women reject it because it is very slow cooking, so it is back to the lab to develop something women want and can easily cook. In another instance, fertilizer is sold in 50-pound bags that women cannot manage without help. If the vendors had talked to the women, they would have packaged 20-pound bags. And of course, in cultures where women cannot speak to men unless they are family members, women extension workers need to be hired to offer them services and training. The project begins with listening to what women need and want, and continues as they learn, lead, become entrepreneurs, and go beyond the poverty of subsistence farming to market their crops and glimpse a better future.

Given her experience in all three sectors, I asked Bertini what the differences are between working for the U.S. government or the UN versus a private foundation. "If you're with a government or a UN agency," she remarked, "you have a formal representational role. ... When you go to the UN there isn't a sign for the Rockefeller or Ford or Gates Foundation, so you have to make a point of being there and participating." But you can "pick and choose" what to engage in.

"A foundation like the Gates offers more flexibility than a government or UN organization," she said, adding that it leaves room for "a lot of creativity. At the U.S. government or the UN, one can be creative and I think I have been, but the options are more limited." She mentioned a Gates funded project through the Chicago Council on Global Affairs bringing together experts in agricultural development to prepare proposals for the new administration to consider—something neither the UN nor a government agency can do.

Gates projects are designed to influence policy. The foundation knows "it can't fix everything," says Bertini, even with its large resources. But it can lead, catalyze, rally support from

governments and other sectors, and create partnerships, all of which it is already doing. The foundation is focused on the first of the highly publicized UN Millennium Development Goals, to “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger” by 2015. It sees Agricultural Development as one way of reaching this and seeks to influence others to follow its example and join.

In late September, the same day I interviewed Bertini at the UN, I also attended a press conference kicking off “Purchase for Progress” where Bill Gates and Howard Buffett, representing their respective foundations, and Josette Sheeran, the head of the World Food Program, discussed their cooperation in this innovative marketing pilot project aimed at poor farmers in developing countries. Instead of buying most of its food intended for the global South from the United States and other northern countries, in a five-year pilot the WFP will purchase food from poor small farmers in the countries where it is needed. The project will also help them establish markets, coops and other services to improve their harvests, sales and incomes.

At the press conference, Bill Gates never mentioned women farmers or that the majority of farmers in “Purchase for Progress” would, no doubt, be women. Perhaps he just took women for granted because of the foundation’s new gender policy in Agricultural Development.