

Commentary on the 2020 annual report and the false promises of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa

Miranda Hendry, MPH Sydney School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health
(corresponding author: mhen7280@uni.sydney.edu.au)

Darija Kvesic, MPH Sydney School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health

The failure of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) progressing towards any of its targets on productivity, incomes and food security has been clearly highlighted in Tim Wise's report of "False Promises" (Wise 2021). Alternative measures of food governance, and consultation with local agricultural providers has never been more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on the food system and the growing rate of poverty in Africa highlight an opportunity to reconsider food governance and funding into agricultural programmes, given that the impact the pandemic has begun to wreak havoc on the food supply and the already stressed food security on the continent (Mohamed et al. 2021). Given that sixty percent of Africans are living in rural areas and are reliant on smallholder and family farming, the threat of the pandemic to food chain supplies and nutrition is significant (FAO, 2021). Better policies and strategies are required for decreasing hunger after the pandemic in Africa, and enhancing food security is essential (Ayanlade et al. 2020).

In assessing the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa's (AGRA) annual report, Timothy A Wise and others illuminate the lack of accountability in its governance, and in the organisation's response to the arising food crisis in 13 targeted African countries (Weaver, 2020; Wise, 2021). Rightfully so, Wise and others highlight the "False Promises," including deliberately leaving out information in AGRA's annual report (Weaver, 2020; Wise, 2021). This has resulted in organisational supporters such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development to lose trust in AGRA and its unattainable goals and therefore Wise and others are advising donors to put a stop to their funding. Reflection of the voices at Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and INKOTA-Netzwerk need to be taken into account in critiquing AGRA's corporate annual report write-up.

AGRA has shown little evidence of increasing incomes of small-scale food producers. Instead, major findings from Wise and from others include promotion of input-intensive and resource-intensive supply chains leading to failure in financially and sustainably supporting small-scale producers. This may relate to relations of unequal political power as well as social discrimination that cause problems in food distribution to vulnerable communities (Bassermann, 2020).

AGRA's role as an African alliance should be to help overcome barriers and discourage monoculture and, in its place, encourage cultivation of traditional small-scale foods as well as to reform the heavy Farmers Input Subsidy Programs also known as FISPs. These will only allow for farmers working in the private sector and holding a strong commercial presence, to potentially be offered a subsidy. This means that many small-scale food producers may simply not attempt to request for a FISP and will be unable compete against stronger farming stakeholders from the private sector.

Furthermore, AGRA's annual productivity growth has not increased in any of its countries from its inception in 2006 up until the 2016-2018 period. This clearly indicates lack of progress, reflected in the experiences of most of its beneficiaries (Bassermann, 2020). AGRA continues with consultations across the targeted African countries, yet more could be done to benefit with direct and committed subsidies such as prioritizing the development of low-income small-scale food producers.

Additionally, AGRA's ongoing attempt to combat climate change is not dependable, as the alliance continues to make efforts towards reforming and promoting national and regional seed policies yet unfortunately this has only facilitated industrialized agricultural approaches to the food supply chain. This in turn causes a failure to create sustainable 'green' food production. With continuation of minor successes in policy and advocacy work by the alliance, misleading targets are clearly being used, such as small-scale producers improving commercial conditions. Initiatives such as agroecology, involving hybrid seed production, and use of synthetic fertilizers, are mentioned as priorities yet show no presence in actions towards the necessary support for small-scale food producers (Bassermann, 2020). Promotion of agroecology and a reduction of monoculture would help immensely to improve soil fertility, biodiversity and emissions of greenhouse gases. Instead, there is continuous lack of biodiversity, lack of strengthened economy and foremost lack of a sustainable food chain to vulnerable communities.

Alternatively, AGRA turns to agrobusiness such as investment and growth of the private sector seed businesses in countries including Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania. This strategy was complemented by the Green Revolution approach with, for example, a set target to increase use of synthetic fertilizers to at least 50 kilograms per hectare in all African countries (Bassermann, 2020). Although such declarations are made, the ambitious goals for 13 countries (previously 11), are unrealistic in the political environment of African governments.

To justify receiving continued funding and support from governmental and non-governmental organisations in the future, AGRA will be expected to re-evaluate their goal setting and accomplish more, for example, reforming regulations on synthetic fertilizers and hybrid seed production and stimulating the growth of a sufficient amount of locally adapted seed varieties. A better model of food governance and agricultural programmes which focuses on supporting and consulting with small local farmers, must also be supported (Vesper 2020).

Last year's release of AGRA's annual report is yet another example of ambitious and inaccurate representation of the farmers reached by AGRA interventions. As the world continues to face multi-faceted challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, a global food crisis is inevitable in our most marginalized societies, as forecasted by the World Food Programme (World Food Programme, 2020). Undernourishment has continued to increase in AGRA countries during its time of operation, apart from in Ethiopia. Rising levels of hunger with only small increases in production yield prove that AGRA has no meaningful impact (Bassermann, 2020). More sustainable and evidence-based efforts are required, with a robust reporting system with the aim to fulfill goals set by AGRA. Otherwise, there is no other sustainable solution than to seek efforts from other dedicated African programs.

Conflicts of Interest:

None – Miranda Hendry

None - Darija Kvesic

References

- Ali Mohamed, E., Alhaj Abdallah, S., Ahmadi, A. and Lucero-Prisno, D., 2021. Food Security and COVID-19 in Africa: Implications and Recommendations. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 104(5):1613-1615.
- Ayanlade, A. and Radeny, M., 2020. COVID-19 and food security in Sub-Saharan Africa: implications of lockdown during agricultural planting seasons. *Science of Food*, 4(1).
- Bassermann, J. U. (2020). False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Biodiversity and Biosafety Association of Kenya (BIBA), Brot für die Welt, FIAN Germany, German NGO Forum on Environment and Development, INKOTA-netzwerk e.V., Institut de Recherche et de Promotion des Alternatives en Développement (IRPAD), PELUM Zambia, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa, Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity (TABIO), Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement (TOAM). <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/42635>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2021. Tackling COVID-19's effect on food supply chains in Africa. <https://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/1272643/>
- The Conversation. 2021. Africa's green revolution initiative has faltered: why other ways must be found. <https://theconversation.com/africas-green-revolution-initiative-has-faltered-why-other-ways-must-be-found-167624>
- Weaver, R. (2020). AGRA Annual Report 2020: Nurturing Change Across African Agriculture. <https://agra.org/resource-library/annual-reports/>
- Wise, T. A. (2021). New AGRA reports offer little evidence to justify continued donor support. *Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy*, 8. https://www.iatp.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/New%20AGRA%20Reports%20Offer%20Little%20Evidence%20to%20Justify%20Continued%20Donor%20Support_1.pdf
- Wise, T., 2021. Failing Africa's farmers: New report shows Africa's Green Revolution is "failing on its own terms." <https://www.iatp.org/blog/202007/failing-africas-farmers-new-report-shows-africas-green-revolution-failing-its-own-terms>
- World Food Programme (2020). "COVID-19 will double number of people facing food crises unless swift action is taken." <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>
- Vesper A. 2021. "AGRA fails to deliver on promise to double yields." <https://www.scidev.net/global/news/agra-fails-to-deliver-on-promise-to-double-yields/>