

Déjà Vu: The development approach of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) fails again

Civil society assessment of the mid-term review of German-financed AGRA projects in Burkina Faso and Ghana

Background

At the end of 2022, after a delay of more than two years, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Credit Institute for Reconstruction (KfW) published a mid-term review of the projects they had funded in Burkina Faso and Ghana as part of phase 1 of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) programme.¹ During this first phase (2017–2022), the BMZ/KfW funded four AGRA projects totalling approximately €10 million. These funds were meant to help AGRA realise its goals of improving food security and directly increasing household incomes of at least 600,000, and indirectly a further 1.2 million

small-scale food producers in Ghana.² In Burkina Faso, AGRA announced it would improve food security and the household incomes of at least 800,000 small-scale food producers.³ Originally, the findings of the mid-term review were meant to inform the decision by the German government on whether to fund AGRA's second project phase. However, in 2020 long before publishing the mid-term review, the BMZ promised a further €15 million for the 2022–2015 period. These funds were primarily intended for AGRA projects in Burkina Faso and Nigeria – even though at that time, no official assessment of phase 1 had been done.

Summary

The mid-term review of BMZ-financed AGRA projects once again demonstrates that AGRA's approach to development does not pass muster. Additionally, it reveals a range of highly problematic consequences for both project countries, in particular for farmers participating in the projects. It shows that in Burkina Faso and Ghana, the AGRA project model is unsustainable without continuously funding external industrial inputs such as synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, and industrially produced seed. This contradicts AGRA's claim that the Green Revolution's development approach⁴ will transform small-scale food production into a successful, self-sustaining «business model».⁵ Perhaps of greater concern is the review team's confirmation that child labour is being used in these projects and that farmers in Burkina Faso report environmental damage due to project-related pesticide use. Because AGRA continues to pursue the strategy of using external inputs, it knowingly risks further environmental damage in its project countries. The situation is compounded in Ghana by the illegal use of harmful pesticides, some of which are banned in the EU because they inevitably damage the environment and human health.

The mid-term review demonstrates a dependency on external industrial inputs and, above all, on synthetic fertilisers, while the freedom of choice of farmers to independently select seed has been restricted.

The mid-term review is unable to demonstrate how BMZ-financed AGRA projects have positively influenced the income, food security, education, and health of the project participants. Further, the review of KfW projects provides no evidence of any sustainable improvement in the situation of small-scale food producers addressed by the AGRA programme in any project country. On the contrary, once again all the evidence suggests that the projects have had a negative impact on the target groups.

There seems to be no sound, verifiable basis for BMZ's decision to continue or increase AGRA funding despite significant and well-grounded critique by civil society. The outcome of the review merely confirms earlier concerns that the decision to release a second round of funding was taken far too quickly.

Analysis of the mid-term review

Child labour in AGRA projects

While the mid-term review provides repeated assurance that none of the projects had any significant negative social consequences,⁶ in other sections, it confirms the intentional and systematic use of child labour.⁷ Child labour has fatal social repercussions. It constitutes an abuse of human rights that cannot be ignored. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that every person has the right to education (Article 26);⁸ moreover, Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that every child has the right to be «protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.»⁹ The BMZ vehemently supports the campaign to end child labour, and to enforce related UN conventions, even initiating a campaign on the topic in 2019.¹⁰ Against this backdrop, the BMZ must respond clearly and unambiguously to the results of the review vis-à-vis AGRA and the KfW, and concrete measures must be taken to remedy the situation. Simply suggesting¹¹ that AGRA hopes to end child labour

by increasing agricultural incomes is unacceptable, and should not be tolerated. On the contrary, this approach should have prompted the BMZ to reject the refinancing of AGRA in the first place.

Disregard of negative environmental impact

The review's central findings repeatedly state that the AGRA projects had no identifiable impact on the environment. At the same time, the section on agroecological aspects cites farmers in Burkina Faso, who describe increasingly visible environmental damage. The report even suggests that the «wrong pesticides» were used, which may have caused this problem.¹² According to the review, AGRA project partners are fully aware of the negative ecological impacts of pesticides, but they are not always able to prevent their use,¹³ stating that external industrial inputs such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides can harm the environment. It is puzzling why these findings were omitted in the final summary. Neither the BMZ nor the KfW is called to action on the matter, meaning that AGRA ignores environmental damage that occurs as a result of its activities.



AGRA's approach prevents the development of a diverse range of food in the markets and on the fields. Here, it is all about maize.

Photo: Jan Urhahn, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

The use of banned pesticides in AGRA projects

Pesticides used for projects financed by the BMZ and KfW should comply with internal standards irrespective of whether their use conforms to the national legislation of project countries. Nonetheless, the AGRA projects in Ghana involved the use of the pesticides Propanil and Permethrin, which are both banned in the EU. This violates the BMZ's own «Reference Framework for Development Partnerships in the Agriculture and Food Sector»,¹⁴ as well as the social and environmental standards of the World Bank – guidelines that regulate KfW's involvement in projects financed by the German government. There is no mention of the illegal use of pesticides, demonstrating gaps in both the review process and the mechanisms established by the KfW to minimise such risks. It is unclear whether and how these breaches of protocols were sanctioned by the BMZ and KfW. Equally vague is the extent to which a recurrence of such events can be ruled out.

Framing the green revolution: AGRA's lobbying activities

One of AGRA's key activities is to lobby decision-makers in its project countries to influence national legislation or frameworks in the agricultural and food sectors.¹⁵ This is positively highlighted in a mid-term review of the implementation of AGRA's 2017–2021 strategy.¹⁶ AGRA polit-

ically influences legislation related to seed and other areas of the agricultural sector in its partner countries by sending colleagues to advise African governments, or in some instances, directly financing ministries and advisory boards. Through financial or other means, AGRA creates an institutional framework that promotes and attempts to enshrine its one-sided approach to the Green Revolution in local legislative processes. Thus, in pointing to the institutional frameworks within these countries, AGRA merely legitimises itself. Both in Burkina Faso and Ghana, AGRA helped draw up new laws that facilitate the authorisation and merchandising of synthetically produced fertiliser and industrial seed. In Ghana, AGRA did so despite knowing that small-scale food producers were opposed to such laws.¹⁷

Human rights: No evaluation of binding requirements

Civil society organisations have time and again insisted that AGRA projects funded by the BMZ and KfW respect fundamental human rights, such as the right to food and a healthy environment. These calls necessitate that the review processes analyse adherence to the BMZ's implementation guidelines¹⁸ and concept¹⁹ on human rights, which the KfW also views as binding.²⁰ In the evaluation, only one question refers to human rights. The evaluators then answer this question by simply saying that local

Small-scale food producers have hardly any freedom of choice in AGRA projects, which instead encourage dependency.

Photo: Jan Urhahn, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung



consultations have been conducted. However, other than the mention of local consultations, at no point in the entire review is there any explanation of how human rights in general, and which human rights laws specifically, were systematically examined and strengthened. It follows that there was little more than lip service paid to human rights by the BMZ and KfW-financed AGRA projects.

AGRA makes farmers more vulnerable

When its projects come to an end, AGRA's system of access to and distribution of external industrial inputs via village-based advisors (VBAs) is prone to collapse. The mid-term review acknowledges this weakness, calling into question the economic and social sustainability of projects. AGRA's deployment of VBAs stimulates systematic dependencies, beginning with the fact that VBAs rely on external industrial inputs. AGRA projects thereby facilitate farmers' reliance not only on the inputs recommended by its projects, but also on the companies that produce and distribute them. As soon as AGRA and its funders can no longer guarantee supplies, it is highly likely that farmers will no longer be able to access the very inputs on which they previously relied. This demonstrates AGRA's tenuous approach, while its system also exposes farmers to supply chain bottlenecks and price fluctuations, with potentially devastating effects on agricultural production and household income. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine, prices for industrial inputs have increased drastically, further signifying the economic unsustainability of this approach.

Farmers' freedom to choose their seed is restricted

Farmers who participate in AGRA projects in Burkina Faso and Ghana are offered training in the use of agro-industrial inputs.²¹ Farmers are advised to use seeds and synthetic fertilisers that are adapted to the market demand.²² Additionally, in some instances, VBAs promise farmers free access to these inputs. The training, and highly subsidised or free distribution, is aimed almost exclusively at promoting the use of industrial inputs. Organic fertiliser and locally-produced seed scarcely feature at all. This means that farmers have no freedom of choice and are limited to a range of external industrial inputs offered by AGRA. The mid-term review lauds project-enabled industrial seed companies for penetrating new regions.²³ However, because new markets for their products have been created, this means that profit ultimately flows only to seed companies and other suppliers of industrial inputs.

Over-indebtedness: problems related to AGRA's approach are disregarded

Previous AGRA-internal reviews have already well-documented the problem of over-indebtedness, as credit is needed to acquire external agro-industrial inputs – and this one is no exception. The mid-term review also notes that over-indebtedness is a widespread phenomenon among farmers, in particular in Ghana, where 41% and 33% of rice and cassava farmers respectively have great

difficulty repaying their debts.²⁴ Nonetheless, over-indebtedness is considered a common problem by the review, rather than a consequence of AGRA project participation. Astoundingly, the farmers surveyed have not even been asked whether they see a connection between AGRA's projects and over-indebtedness.²⁵ Therefore, the assertion that the project bears no relation to debt overload cannot be substantiated.

Claims of AGRA's success remain unsubstantiated

The mid-term review claims that the yields of farmers that participated in the programmes increased by between 50% and 100%, contributing to an improvement in overall income and nutrition.²⁶ However, the claim that AGRA's interventions led to increased yields, higher incomes, and improved food security cannot be verified. The review even concludes that the data used is «neither reliable nor useful».²⁷ Control group data at the time of the project's inception, for example, is insufficient or non-existent, meaning that it is impossible to verify the claims about increased incomes. The review neglects to mention the outcome indicators defined at the beginning of the funding process, which were supposed to be used to determine whether the objectives of the project were met. Furthermore, with only 40 interviewees per project, and an even smaller control group (20 interviewees in Ghana, none in Burkina Faso),²⁸ the review is based on a small data set, implying that the findings cannot be taken as representative of a three-year project, and can deliver very little trustworthy information, if any. With such a limited analysis, it is impossible to draw reliable conclusions about developments in yields and incomes across the entire target group, which constitutes 880,000 small-scale food producer households across all four projects.

Although the time span of the evaluation can be justified by the short duration of the projects themselves, it represents the repeat of a previous error that occurred in the evaluation of Mathematica²⁹ commissioned by AGRA in 2021, which only covered five years. In so doing, it ignored the fact that AGRA had already been operational since 2006, signifying that the poor benchmark results have been of its own making since the beginning. Drawing on longer-term data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Timothy A. Wise³⁰ demonstrates that AGRA fails to reach its presupposed goals. The FAO data for Burkina Faso from 2004–2006 and from 2016–2018 show that while rice and maize farming massively expanded during the period in which AGRA's projects received funding, yields increased only marginally. Instead, the farming of important staples such as millet, cassava, and sorghum declined. In the 2021 Mathematica review, AGRA reported disappointing results in both countries across almost all sectors. The evaluation of projects funded by the KfW, which draws on its own small data sets, astoundingly reaches more positive conclusions, although these – as mentioned above – are by no means sufficiently substantiated.

Summary: Exit AGRA, enter the transformation to agroecology

Commissioned by the BMZ and KfW, the mid-term review of the first phase of AGRA projects in Burkina Faso and Ghana (2017–2021) once again demonstrates that AGRA is incapable of reaching its projected goals. The results of the study «False Promises»³¹ published in 2020 and those of the analysis of AGRA's own evaluations from 2019/2020³² published in 2021, provide ample evidence that AGRA has not reached its projected goals in any of its 13 priority countries – including Burkina Faso and Ghana. Similarly, the most current BMZ/KfW review, published in 2022 and conducted in Burkina Faso and Ghana, is unable to demonstrate that agricultural yields and the incomes of small-scale food producer households have risen significantly if debt repayments and investments are taken into account. Furthermore, the 2022 review reveals no reduction in hunger and poverty quotas in both project countries, despite AGRA's promises. Similarly, there is no evidence that the target group, namely, 880,000 small-scale food producer households across the four KfW-funded projects, was even reached, let alone that their economic situation has improved.

Demands directed to the BMZ

— The BMZ should immediately end its financial and political cooperation with AGRA. The German government should avoid being misled by the few changes made in the new AGRA strategy paper for 2023–2027. It should phase out its political and financial support for AGRA projects based on the review. Although the BMZ has stated that it has no plans to fund future projects, the prudent course of action would be to immediately cease its current commitments to AGRA projects.

— Because of the Green Revolution's profound systematic false approach – especially with regard to poor small-scale food producers – the BMZ should rule out any form of financial and political support for Green Revolution projects. The BMZ, however, continues to adhere to outdated principles of the Green Revolution, for example, by supporting the «Feed Africa: Food Sovereignty and Resilience» initiative run by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the One Acre Fund, or the Global Alliance for Food Security (GAFS).

— Instead, the BMZ should refocus its development policy on agroecology and the right to food, underpinning all projects with clear milestones and measurable targets. The German government should present a comprehensive action plan in support of agroecology in the current legislative period, and free up significantly more funds for agroecological approaches. Additionally, the BMZ should strengthen the coalition of international donors supporting the FAO's Scaling Up Agroecology Initiative.

— We call on the BMZ to provide relevant support to the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which is not only the legitimate international forum to discuss issues on global food security, but also recognised by civil society.



AGRA's package for the Green Revolution contains pesticides, synthetic fertiliser, and most of the time hybrid seed.

Photo: Jan Urhahn, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

Endnotes

- 1 MDF (2022): Mid-Term Review of BMZ/KfW-funded AGRA programme in Ghana and Burkina Faso. Final Report – 04 Oct 2022. Available online at: <https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Final-Mid-term-Review-of-the-BMZ-KfW-Programme-in-Ghana-and-Burkina-Faso.pdf>.
- 2 Cf. AGRA (2020): PIATA 2019 Outcome Monitoring Report AGRA Ghana. p. 11. Available online at: https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AGRA-OM-Ghana-Report_FINAL.pdf.
- 3 Cf. AGRA (2020): PIATA 2019 Outcome Monitoring Report AGRA Burkina Faso. p. 10. Available online at: https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AGRA-OM-Report_FINAL.pdf.
- 4 The Green Revolution is a developmental approach that has been propagated since the 1960s, in which new cultivation methods, with the aid of global agribusiness, are combined with the use of technology, synthetic fertiliser, and high-yielding seed.
- 5 See AGRA's current self-description: «AGRA is a farmer-centered, African-led, and partnerships-driven institution that is transforming Africa's smallholder farming from a solitary struggle to survive to businesses that thrive.» Available online at: <https://agra.org/>.
- 6 MDF (2022): p. 44f.
- 7 Ibid. p. 45.
- 8 UN (1948): Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available online at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.
- 9 UN (1989): Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.
- 10 BMZ (n.d.): Gemeinsam gegen Kinderarbeit. Available online at: <https://www.bmz.de/de/themen/kinderarbeit>.
- 11 MDF (2022): p. 47.
- 12 Ibid. p. 44f. and p. 58.
- 13 Ibid. p. 47.
- 14 BMZ (2019): Referenzrahmen für Entwicklungspartnerschaften im Agrar- und Ernährungssektor. Available online at: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/35256/referenzrahmen-fuer-entwicklungspartnerschaften-im-agrarsektor.pdf>.
- 15 This began already long before the Partnership for Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in Africa (PIATA), which was co-financed by the BMZ: «Prior to the PIATA programme, AGRA supported the development of policy nodes and hubs in several countries, including in Ghana.» AGRA (2020): PIATA 2019 Outcome Monitoring Report AGRA Ghana. p. 45.
- 16 Itad (2020): Evaluation report. Mid-term evaluation of AGRA's 2017–2021 strategy implementation. Available online at: <https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AGRA-MTE-report-final-27.01.20.pdf>.
- 17 See for example: AGRA (2020): PIATA 2019 Outcome Monitoring Report AGRA Ghana. p. 33.
- 18 BMZ (2013): Leitfaden zur Berücksichtigung von menschenrechtlichen Standards und Prinzipien, einschl. Gender, bei der Erstellung von Programmorschlägen der deutschen staatlichen Technischen und Finanziellen Zusammenarbeit. Available online at: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/78972/leitfaden-menschenrechte-2013.pdf>.
- 19 BMZ (2011): Menschenrechte in der deutschen Entwicklungspolitik. Available online at: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/23480/f8b-949cbdbecf314a89125b1841bdbce/strategiepapier303-04-2011-data.pdf>.
- 20 See point 4.5 in the mid-term review: «Stakeholder participation, respect for human rights and freedom of choice for target groups, attention to non-intended impacts on communities, involvement of civil society». MDF (2022): p. 56.
- 21 Ibid. p. 29.
- 22 Ibid. p. 38 and p. 57.
- 23 Ibid. p. 59.
- 24 Ibid. p. 13.
- 25 Ibid. p. 85.
- 26 Ibid. p. 62f.
- 27 Ibid. p. 36.
- 28 Ibid. p. 24.
- 29 Mathematica (2021): Partnership for Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in Africa. Final Evaluation Report. Available online at: <https://www.mathematica.org/api/sitecore/MediaLibrary/ActualDownload?fileId=%7B864E09D9-712C-4789-B2A5-BBF7F3F3FE9B%7D&fileName=PIATA%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20Volume%20I.pdf&fileData=PIATA%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20Volume%20I.pdf%20-%20%7B864E09D9-712C-4789-B2A5-BBF7F3F3FE9B%7D&fileMime=application%2Fpdf>.
- 30 Wise, T. A. (2020): Failing Africa's Farmers. An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. Available online at: https://sites.tufts.edu/gdae/files/2020/07/20-01_Wise_FailureToYield.pdf.
- 31 BIBA/Brot für die Welt et al. (edH) (2020): False Promises. The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Available online at: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/42635>.
- 32 Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung/INKOTA et al. (edH) (2021): A sting in the AGRA tale. Available online at: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/44425>.

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