

Aaron Eddens

Seeding Empire: American Philanthrocapital and the Roots of the Green Revolution in Africa

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Aaron Eddens's *Seeding Empire: American Philanthrocapital and the Roots of the Green Revolution in Africa* critically examines the role of American philanthropic capitalism in perpetuating the Green Revolution within the African context, with particular attention to institutions such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This contemporary phase of the Green Revolution utilises advanced biotechnologies to reshape agricultural practices across Africa. Eddens challenges the conventional portrayal of the Green Revolution as a mere technological transfer, arguing instead that it constitutes a continuation of imperial legacies – specifically illustrating how the United States has influenced the trajectory of global agriculture through the intersection of philanthropy and agribusiness. By tracing the historical development of the Green Revolution, the work elucidates its entanglements with U.S. Cold War strategies, corporate expansion and interactions with Global South nations, thereby demonstrating how these historical dynamics persistently shape agricultural policymaking in Africa today. Eddens's scholarship enriches environmental history discourse and offers novel insights into the power relations underpinning global agricultural development (pp. 16–17).

Eddens, a scholar of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, draws upon a multidisciplinary foundation encompassing environmental justice, American history and political economy. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical analysis, political inquiry and agricultural studies, he reevaluates the Green Revolution's impact. His research is informed by extensive investigations into the history of American agricultural institutions, international agricultural development, and the influence of philanthropic capitalism on global agriculture (p. 12). This scholarly background enables Eddens to critically interrogate prevailing narratives of the Green Revolution, contesting orthodox interpretations. He contends that the Green Revolution's implementation in Africa represents not merely a transfer of technology but a convergence of American philanthropic capitalism, multinational corporate interests and international political agendas.

Methodologically, Eddens foregrounds the concept of 'empire' as a central analytical lens, critiquing the prevalent 'technological saviour' narrative associated with the Green Revolution. He posits that the Green Revolution's objectives extended beyond poverty alleviation in the Global South, instead rearticulating entrenched power structures and colonial histories within contemporary development discourse (p. 17). Through this perspective, Eddens reveals how the United States, through synergistic collaborations between

philanthropic entities and agribusiness, has shaped the current global agricultural landscape – often to the detriment of indigenous knowledge systems and the autonomy of local farmers. This analysis elucidates the intricate power dynamics inherent in global agricultural policymaking, highlighting the dominance of multinational corporations and developed nations within the global agricultural regime.

In the introductory chapter and first chapter of *Seeding Empire*, Eddens revisits the legacy of Norman Borlaug, widely recognised as the ‘father of the Green Revolution’, who played a pivotal role in developing high-yield wheat varieties and promoting agricultural modernisation in Asia and Latin America. Applying a critical lens, Eddens deconstructs the simplified narrative of Borlaug as a technological saviour, exposing the colonialist underpinnings and global inequities embedded within this history. While acknowledging Borlaug’s contributions to saving millions of lives, Eddens underscores the concomitant American hegemony over global agriculture and the marginalisation of smallholder farmers’ indigenous knowledge (pp. 16–18).

Chapters two through four concentrate on the philanthropic interventions of Bill Gates and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in African agriculture, with a particular focus on the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) initiative. Eddens offers a comprehensive analysis of how the Gates Foundation employs philanthropic capitalism to advance agricultural modernisation in Africa, notably through the introduction of genetically modified crops and the promotion of commercial agricultural paradigms. The WEMA project seeks to develop drought-tolerant genetically modified maize varieties to assist smallholder farmers in adapting to climate change challenges. Eddens critically examines the project’s origins and implementation, revealing the complexities and tensions involved in deploying Western technologies within African agricultural contexts. He emphasises that WEMA represents not merely a technological transfer but a perpetuation of capitalist and imperialist dynamics within the global agricultural system (pp. 42–55).

In chapter five and the concluding section, Eddens expands the discussion to consider the broader implications of the Green Revolution amid the climate crisis. He analyses how climate change intensifies agricultural vulnerabilities for smallholder farmers, vulnerabilities closely linked to the technologies and policies introduced by the Green Revolution. Eddens argues that although the Green Revolution sought to enhance food security, its legacy is complicated by technological dependency, ecological degradation and social inequities, which are further exacerbated by climate change. His conclusion critiques the limitations of conventional agricultural development models and advocates for more inclusive and sustainable approaches, emphasising the necessity of reevaluating power relations within the global agricultural system to effectively address the challenges posed by climate change (pp. 127–130).

REVIEWS

While *Seeding Empire* provides a critical and valuable perspective on the Green Revolution and its consequences, it exhibits certain limitations, particularly regarding the representation of local African experiences and the agency of African farmers. Eddens's analysis predominantly centres on American philanthropic capitalism and the influence of Western institutions such as the Gates Foundation in shaping African agricultural development. This focus tends to privilege Western viewpoints and actions, offering comparatively limited attention to the diverse experiences, responses and agency of African smallholder farmers. Although the book acknowledges African farmers' roles and their interactions with external technological interventions, Eddens's framework does not fully capture the heterogeneity of African societies and agricultural systems, nor does it sufficiently explore local efforts toward autonomy and participatory engagement within the global agricultural framework. Consequently, the narrative risks oversimplification by insufficiently addressing African adaptations, innovations and resistance within the context of the Green Revolution (p. 55).

Despite these shortcomings, *Seeding Empire* constitutes a significant contribution to environmental history and the study of global agricultural development. Through its critical reexamination of the Green Revolution, the book illuminates the enduring colonial legacies embedded in contemporary agricultural development, particularly in relation to climate change and global food security. The adoption of an 'empire' analytical framework not only exposes the profound impact of American philanthropic capitalism but also invites scholars to reconsider prevailing power structures in agricultural development. Future research in environmental history may build upon Eddens's framework by incorporating more nuanced representations of African agricultural experiences, emphasising local farmers' agency and innovations in the Global South, and avoiding reductive critiques of Western interventions. Such efforts would foster a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of the global agricultural system (pp. 127–130).

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