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Gates attacks 'outdated' UN food agencies

By Javier Blas, Commodities Editor



Bill Gates, the Microsoft founder turned philanthropist, has broken a taboo in the development community by publicly accusing UN agencies of allowing infighting and inefficiency to undermine the battle against hunger.

The comments by Mr Gates, the largest donor to food security from the private sector, echoes the thinking of many government officials and

hunger activists. But few senior donors have publicly denounced the problems of the UN system.

The UN has three agencies devoted to food security with a combined annual budget of roughly \$4.5bn: the Food and Agriculture Organisation, founded in 1945; the World Food Programme, created in 1961, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, founded in 1977. Although the three are based in Rome, they act largely as independent entities with little interaction.

Mr Gates, who has donated roughly \$2bn to food security in the past decade and plans to give another \$2bn in the next five years, told an audience of the three agencies in Rome that the current system was “outdated and inefficient”.

“Countries, food agencies, and donors aren’t working together in a focused and coordinated way to provide the help small farmers need, when they need it,” he said. In a separate interview with the Financial Times, he added: “You would not say that the UN system has come together in a strong way.”

Mr Gates highlighted the Purchase for Progress programme, which buys food from small farmers to provide emergency relief in neighbouring countries, as an example of the lack of collaboration between the different agencies of the UN.

“Right now, WFP runs nearly every aspect of the programme, with a little guidance

Donor countries' officials and hunger activists believe that the agencies' new leadership, particularly the appointment of José Graziano da Silva from Brazil as director-general at the FAO after the retirement of Jacques Diouf of Senegal, who headed the organisation for nearly 20 years, would help to improve the relationship among the three organisations.

The US, European Union and other donors such as Canada, Australia and Japan have been frustrated by the slow pace of reform at the FAO under Mr Diouf in spite of demands for rapid change. Donor countries have long complained that the FAO keeps more than half its staff at the Rome headquarters, rather than in African and Asian countries affected by chronic hunger.

Mr Gates also blamed western nations for some of the failures of the UN agencies that specialise in agriculture and food security, saying many donors have forced recipients to "change priorities to suit political realities in their home countries".

"The [UN] food agencies have taken on projects that weren't strategic because they needed any funding they could get simply to stay in business," he said.

The multibillion dollar Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has elevated food security to a top priority, second only to health issues such as malaria. Food security, long a topic merely for agriculture ministers, is now hotly debated among leaders of the Group of 20 leading economies.

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