

Every Life Has Equal Value

**An Interview with Tjada McKenna,
Senior Program Officer, Agricultural Development, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**

EDITORS' NOTE *Tjada McKenna is a senior program officer in the Agricultural Development initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In this role, she is responsible for developing strategies and executing grants designed to alleviate hunger and rural poverty. Through its Agricultural Development initiative, the foundation is working to help small farmers in the developing world lift themselves out of hunger and poverty by providing them with the tools and opportunities to boost their productivity, increase their incomes, and build better lives for themselves and their families. Working with a wide range of partners, the foundation is seeking to strengthen the complete agricultural value chain – from planting the highest quality seeds to bringing crops to market – while keeping an eye focused on economic and environmental sustainability.*



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ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Based in Seattle, Washington, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) focuses on improving people's health in developing countries and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people – particularly those with the fewest resources – have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. The foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-Chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.*

What is the mission and focus for the foundation?

Our guiding value is that every life has equal value, no matter where it is lived. So we look at where the greatest inequities are in the world and the instruments and levers to help those people. That led us to our initial work in education and global health. Meanwhile, we noticed that more than one billion people live on less than \$1 per day; 70 to 75 percent of them live in rural areas and work on small farms and they rely on agriculture for food and income. So we launched our Global Development Program, a third pillar of what we do, and agricultural development is a very large piece of that.

Within agricultural development, we're looking to help 150 million of the world's poorest families in sub-Saharan African and South Asia to lift themselves out of extreme poverty through agriculture. One of the ways we do that is by providing access and links to markets. TechnoServe is a natural partner for some of our work, because they are one of the strongest organizations looking for methods to use markets to lift people out of poverty.

Are partnerships critical to your work?

We're funders; we're not doers. So our impact comes through our grantees, who are critical partners. We have a vision and strategies to help affect change, and those strategies are pursued through organizations like TechnoServe and other partners – largely NGOs, but also private sector partners and governments in some instances. We try to work with grassroots organizations. Our belief that every life has equal value compels us to do things that will reach as many people as possible with the funds we have. So scale is very important to us.

What metrics are available to evaluate the foundation's impact?

Given who our co-chairs are and whose money we're spending, we strongly believe in results and evidence-based work. So there is a lot of analysis that goes into figuring out what areas to work in, which is why we go deep versus broad, and we give grants to organizations that have proven to show results from their work.

We also believe in risk-taking, so we understand that not everything we fund is going to work out. I'm not sure who said it – it was maybe Warren Buffett or Bill Gates: "If you're not failing, that means you're not taking risks. So what is the point of us doing it?" It's important that we identify organizations we trust and work hand-in-hand with them. We don't just give the money and walk away; we're actively involved with our grantees. We're trying to make sure that we're properly spreading funds across different grantees and organizations.

Why is TechnoServe such a well-suited grantee for your organization?

The Global Development Program

of the foundation, where the Agricultural Development initiative sits, is its newest program. We started in 2006, and from the beginning, we knew that market access was going to be a critical part of what we were doing. When we looked around for organizations that were strong at this private market-based development work, TechnoServe was one. So early on, we asked them to give us ideas and to share their experiences with us.

The first grant we did with them was a coffee grant. East African coffee farmers have a strategic advantage: the quality of their beans. So we saw that we could potentially help a larger number of these farmers reach the specialty coffee market, and we decided to fund that compelling initiative.

TechnoServe has become a core thought-partner for us. We try to consult widely and broadly as we research different projects or approaches. We value TechnoServe's opinion. They are a direct grantee on two of our grants, but they are also sub-grantees as we work with other organizations as well. They provide market expertise when another organization may be better suited to lead the project, and we lean on TechnoServe for advice in those instances. It's a relationship that has grown over time. We definitely value their opinion and experience, and we hope to spread some of their capabilities across to local NGOs and other organizations.

Do the projects you get involved in generally have a year term for the grant, and is it somewhat of an ongoing relationship?

Yes, most of our grants are three to five years and the TechnoServe grants are about four to five years. We're officially within year two of the coffee grant, but it's a little longer, and TechnoServe is already reaching and working with over 64,000 farmers.

The Gates Foundation has a broad reach, but you can only fund so many grants. Is it challenging to have to say no?

While we can't fund every grant we would like to, we are committed to engaging a wide range of stakeholders in our work, and we are actively listening, and bringing attention to certain issues. Our funding is a tiny part of what is necessary to drive change, and just because we are not directly spending doesn't mean there aren't other organizations or governments helping to drive something forward. ●