

Bill Gates shifts focus to fighting hunger



By Javier Blas in London

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Bill Gates, the **Microsoft** founder turned philanthropist, has put the focus of his multi-billion-dollar foundation firmly on agriculture, saying on Thursday that making poor farmers more productive will have a “massive impact” on hunger.

“Helping the poorest smallholder farmers grow more crops and get them to market is the world’s single most powerful lever for reducing hunger,” Mr Gates said as he announced \$120m in grants for agriculture research and development.

The move by the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** into **food** security after an emphasis on health issues such as malaria signals how agriculture has become a global preoccupation as the number of chronically hungry people tops 1bn.

While the foundation has already provided \$1.4bn (€939m, £861m) to food security projects, the new grants and Mr Gates’s speech point to a bigger prominence for agriculture.

“The world’s attention is back on your cause,” Mr Gates told an audience of agronomist, policymakers and hunger activists at the World Food Prize symposium in Des Moines, Iowa, during his first significant address on agriculture. “The food crisis has forced hunger higher on the world’s agenda. From NGOs to the G8 to African heads of state, there is a rush of new commitment.”

The **G8s** this summer approved the L’Aquila Food Security Initiative, committing \$20bn to agricultural development in the next three years, in a shift from food aid to long-term investments in farming.

Roy Steiner, who oversees the foundation’s agricultural projects, told the Financial Times the current political climate was a “defining moment for global food security”.

In a consultation paper on the Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative released last month, the US state department gave warning that “the 2008 food price crisis illustrates the kinds of disruptions we could experience more often in the future”. The crisis saw the price of commodities such as wheat and rice rise to record highs, with food riots in countries from Haiti to Senegal.

Mr Gates said efforts to help small farmers were endangered by an ideological wedge between those supporters of a “technological approach that increases productivity”, such as the use of genetic modified organisms, and an environmental approach that promotes sustainability. “It’s a false choice,” he said. “The fact is we need both productivity and sustainability.”

He suggested, nonetheless, that technology would be key, saying he drew inspiration from the boom in productivity of the 1960s, the Green Revolution, and criticised those who “tried to restrict the spread of biotechnology. . . without regard to how much hunger and poverty might be reduced by it”.

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Special report



World food

The number of hungry may top 1bn this year and international efforts are underway to ease the crisis

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