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Sept. 29, 2008

MSU receives Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant to study African agricultural markets

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Michigan State University today announced a \$4 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to lead a project designed to improve research and analysis of agricultural markets in sub-Saharan Africa.

Under the three-year project, MSU will analyze the region's small-farm markets and infrastructure and develop strategies to increase agricultural productivity and create more efficient, sustainable markets for small farmers in Africa.

MSU scientists will partner with African institutions, including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, or COMESA. The resulting research and guidance will help governments, funding agencies and private stakeholders develop policies and programs and provide the resources to improve living standards of the rural poor.

"Experience in Africa has confirmed many times over that effectively linking smallholder farmers to markets is a crucial element of poverty reduction," said Thomas Jayne, project co-director and MSU professor of international development.

Specifically, project researchers will investigate the structure, performance and future potential of staple food and horticultural markets, focusing on maize, cassava, sorghum, cotton and vegetables. They'll also assess the impact of investments such as rural road construction on market development and on poor households' access to those markets.

MSU has a rich history in Africa, with more than a half-century of research and development efforts across the continent. According to the Rockefeller Foundation, MSU has "one of the largest aggregations of individuals focusing on African agricultural development."

Joining Jayne in leading the project are fellow faculty members David Tschirley, Steven Haggblade and Duncan Boughton.

The research will encompass eastern, western and southern Africa with a specific focus on five core countries: Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique and Zambia.

"There is a clear need for data to inform further investments for long-term agricultural market development," said Rajiv Shah, director of the Agricultural Development initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "This project is one tool that will help prioritize future investments to support millions of smallholder farmers to increase their incomes and lift themselves and their families out of poverty."

In addition to COMESA, MSU's partners include Egerton University in Kenya, University of Malawi, University of Pretoria and CILSS, an international organization for drought control in Africa's Sahel region.

Project officials said the project will be successful if the research findings are collaboratively developed and disseminated to the public and private sectors for consideration in policy and private investment decision-making. Currently only 5 percent of the recorded food imported by countries in sub-Saharan Africa comes from other African countries. The other 95 percent comes from farmers on other continents.

"If this project succeeds," Jayne said, "we'll see many more smallholder farmers in Africa linked up to agricultural markets. We'll also see more stability in the food system and more urban consumers in Africa getting the food that they need. It can happen, but the right kind of public and private investments need to be put in place to make it happen."

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Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health 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—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, 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.