SMART FOREIGN ASSISTANCE MAKES FOR ENOUGH FOOD

Enough food is produced globally to feed the planet but even so more than one billion people go to bed hungry every night. Hunger is a leading cause of death, killing more than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined.

According to the U.N. World Food Program, a child dies of hunger every 6 seconds and a quarter of children living in developing countries are underweight.

Most of the world’s hungry are not short of food because of a one-off disaster or crop failure but because of chronic, long-term poverty that means they cannot afford to purchase the food that is readily available in their local markets.

Additional stresses like food price rises, drought, flooding, war and disease can create local food shortages, which, without government or aid agency intervention, can develop into food crises. However, even at the height of a famine, often only certain groups are affected within a particular region.

While state or aid agency food handouts are seen as a short-term solution and a valuable tool to help, many aid experts say longer-term solutions are needed to address root problems.

Seventy percent of the world’s hungry live in rural areas and smallholder farmers tend to be food insecure. The Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) has stressed the need to improve smallholder productivity by promoting more effective public and private investment in agriculture and rural development.

If smallholders can be more productive and efficient in their farming operations and manage to make a profit, they can feed their families but also invest in their own farms. In addition to the constraints of climate variability, plant and animal pests and diseases, smallholders face other obstacles, such as, lack of credit, insecure land tenure, poor roads and transportation and lack of market opportunities.

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As awareness of the critical importance of agriculture and agricultural production has grown, so has the interest of the international community and the political will to target investments to agriculture.

The 2008 global crisis in food prices pushed the number of hungry people past the 1 billion mark. Worldwide, it underlined the urgent need to invest
more in agriculture for the longer term and in nutrition assistance for vulnerable people now.

In April 2009, President Obama announced a new program to address world hunger, mainly by strengthening agriculture in poor countries. The G-8 group of industrialized countries committed $20 B over 3 years to the effort (U.S. pledged $3.5 B).

The initiative seeks to balance immediate and long-term needs. In Ghana, for example, Nana Ayim Poakwah, executive director of the Ghana Food Aid Network seeks to combine longer-term agricultural development with immediate needs for nutrition assistance. Their program provides farming cooperatives with cost-effective storage facilities, transportation, and technical assistance in selling their products at higher prices in exchange for 10% of the harvest. In turn, this food supplies the country’s food bank for hungry and poor people, particularly children.

According to David Beckmann, Bread for the World President, “The needs of smallholder farmers in developing countries were obvious when I visited Mozambique.” For about 40 families who live in the settlement of Mtimbe – 100 miles from the nearest road – survival depends on their annual cassava crop yield. “If the family's cassava field flourishes, they are fine. If it fails, they go hungry. This is how critical agriculture development and our agricultural investments are to the world’s poorest people.”

In the effort to balance immediate and long-term needs future plans include finding ways to extend the shelf life of products and reduce waste. “Grains and even cassava would keep longer if they were ground,” Poakwah said. “It’s minimal processing, but right now farmers just don’t have the equipment to do it.”

Many elements of the U.S. Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative (GHFSI) reflect policies Bread for the World has long considered top priorities. They include focusing on agricultural development, particularly for small-scale producers and women; improving nutrition for women and young children; and ensuring that efforts are ‘country-led’ – meaning that the communities, constituencies, and countries actually affected by hunger are setting priorities and developing programs. The GHFSI is also a potential model for making U.S. foreign assistance more effective, the goal of Bread for the World’s 2009 Offering of Letters.

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GHFSI programs are now getting started using $1 B in funding for agriculture that was included in the FY2010 budget. President Obama has requested $1.6 B in GHFSI funding in the administration’s fiscal year 2011 budget.

For 2011, 20 countries have been identified for GHFSI funding. All have chronic rural hunger and malnutrition and the potential for rapid agriculture-led growth. Strategic investments in these countries
could contribute to improving food security at the regional level as well.

Five countries that have made significant progress in developing country investment plans and strengthening their agricultural and nutrition policies will receive funding to begin implementing their plans. They are Rwanda, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and Mali.

Rwanda’s minister of agriculture, Agnes Kalibata, was ready when she first began to hear talk of a global agriculture effort. Her government had already developed a detailed plan whose priorities included irrigation, soil conservation, local seed research, and extension services to advise farmers. In December 2009, representatives from several U.S. government agencies came to Rwanda to discuss how donor governments could support the plan.

“It’s a reversal of the old style of doing business, where the outside world would come in and say this is what we want you to do,” said David Nabarro, coordinator of the U.N. Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis. “Now the countries are saying to the outside world, ‘This is what we want to do and this is how you can help us.’”

In Rwanda, 90% of the arable land is on hillsides, where erosion causes loss of soil fertility and low crop yields. Erratic rainfalls exacerbate these problems. The combination of local knowledge, government support, and donor investment in a truly collaborative effort is the best hope for the rural economy. The experts say if GHFSI is successful, it could change the way hunger is fought and development aid dollars are spent, and usher in an agriculture revolution in Africa.

Climate change adds another challenge to the global food system – a system that is expected to feed a world population growing to 9.1 billion in the year 2050. Sustainable management of the natural resources base of agriculture, forestry and the fisheries is the only way to deal with this challenge. Many parts of the world already struggle with grave deterioration of their food production systems and the number of people suffering from chronic hunger has now exceeded 1 billion. The world’s poor and food insecure are often the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change and have the least capacity to adapt. They are often highly exposed to natural hazards, greatly dependent on climate-sensitive resources and possess limited economic and technological resources. The ability of individuals to cope with climate change impacts is affected by economic development and institutional support. It is the local people, who manage the land and have to adapt and manage agriculture, forestry and other land uses to climate change.

Climate change is one of the biggest threats we face. Everyday activities like driving a car or a motorbike, using air conditioning and/or heating and lighting houses consume energy and produce emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG), which contribute to climate change. When the emissions of GHGs are rising, the Earth’s climate is affected, the average weather changes and average temperatures increase.

In agriculture and forestry different sources and sinks release, take up and store three types of GHGs: carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Many agricultural and forestry practices emit GHGs
to the atmosphere. The main sources of agricultural GHGs include; by using fertilizers nitrous oxide is released from the soil and by burning agricultural residues carbon dioxide level rise. Methane is set free in the digestion process of livestock, as well as if rice is grown under flooded conditions. When land is converted to cropland and trees are felled, a source of carbon dioxide emissions is created.

Agriculture is an important contributor to climate change, but it also provides a sink and has the potential to lessen climate change.

It is important that smallholder farmers participate in the mitigation of GHGs emissions and receive fair remuneration for the environmental services they provide.

U.S. development assistance has made a difference to millions of people in poverty. A well that provides clean drinking water for a village may cost a few hundred dollars, but the benefits far exceed that sum in terms of improving people’s health, increasing the productivity of workers, and allowing girls to attend school rather than walking hours each day to find other sources of water.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has asked for a 50% increase in funding for international agricultural research in 2011. Secretary Clinton said the U.S. wants to target those investments at specific research breakthroughs that, if successful, will not only help save and improve lives, but raise incomes for farmers and generate growth across Africa, Asia and other parts of the world.