Poverty-focused Development Assistance

More than 900 million people around the world suffer from chronic hunger. These numbers are daunting, but U.S. poverty-focused assistance saves lives and helps improve conditions for millions more by giving people the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty.

Funding for these programs comprises only 0.6% of the U.S. federal budget. Yet this small amount of money is crucial. Each year, U.S. poverty-focused assistance: can save more than 1 million lives by focusing on adequate nutrition during the 1,000-day window from pregnancy to age 2; save 3 million lives through immunization; and brings safe drinking water to poor communities, impacting 1.3 billion people over the last decade. These programs don’t provide long-term handouts, but they fight systemic poverty and provide a chance for people to thrive.

U.S. development assistance is essential to help meet the urgent needs of the poorest countries and has made a big 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.

Just as important as more spending on development is better spending. What does “better” development assistance mean? A key element is allowing developing countries to have more say in how U.S. assistance is used. Currently, priorities are largely determined in Washington, DC. When given the opportunity to express their own priorities, poor countries opt to put resources into agriculture and infrastructure.

Dictating priorities from Washington runs
counter to what we know about how to deliver effective assistance. “We know what’s best for you” doesn’t help countries move toward self-reliant, sustainable progress on hunger and poverty. Making sure recipient countries can participate in deciding where and how their assistance is used will get better results.

Understandably, U.S. policymakers and the public worry about corrupt governments absconding with resources meant to help poor people. But there is little chance of this happening the way U.S. assistance is currently administered: project-focused, and implemented through contractors, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and World Vision, or the many qualified local NGOs that have been vetted.

Recipient governments are generally not involved, except that they are expected to guarantee sustainability once the NGOs step aside. Cutting out the host country at the start may help ensure that corruption is minimized, but it also makes it difficult—if not impossible—to achieve sustainability and scale up successful development projects.

Working with and through governments, while time consuming and difficult to coordinate, is more effective in building needed capacity and ensuring that the results are greater than the sum of individual efforts. There will be exceptions, but consultation and participation of host governments should be the goal.

Better assistance also means accepting more flexible uses of resources. U.S. development assistance is structured to address specific issues and accomplish projects with set parameters, so budget accounts are set up to channel program funds into specific line items. Examples of these accounts are Food Aid, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and Child Survival and Health. The rules are rigid. Once money goes into the PEPFAR account, for example, it can only be used for expenditures that fit PEPFAR criteria for fighting HIV/AIDS. PEPFAR does good work, but a shortcoming is its lack of flexibility.

As one doctor explained, “Once we get people on medicine, we’re able to get them out of bed and back on their feet. But soon we realize they haven’t got any food, and the success of the drugs depends on good nutrition. We do what we can to get them some food, but then we realize they haven’t got any income to purchase food on their own.”
In a perfect world of development assistance, there would be programs with the mandate and resources to work with people with AIDS to help them earn income to buy food and other necessities. But this isn’t the case. Right now, PEPFAR funding dwarfs all other development accounts.

We could simply lament the lack of money for nutrition assistance and income-generation activities, or we could press for U.S. development assistance programs to become more flexible. HIV/AIDS is a serious threat in Africa and globally. But treating it strictly as a health problem misses its multiple impacts.

Development assistance is also a specific account in the budget, a catchall that may be used for a range of issues, including agriculture. The problem is that the funds in the development assistance account are completely inadequate for the task of promoting broad-based, sustainable development.

The development assistance account has been hobbled by indiscriminate earmarking by members of Congress. Earmarks are used to direct assistance to specific programs or countries. They turn the budget process into a struggle over which program or country can get the biggest and strongest earmarks.

The earmarks are invariably well-intentioned and perhaps individually justifiable. No one would argue that assistance for potable water, microfinance, childhood immunization, women’s education, or biodiversity is not worthwhile. But there is an “opportunity cost” to every earmark. Because the development assistance account is so limited, mandating more funding for
microfinance means that other worthwhile programs have to make do with less.

**An Introduction to the McGovern-Dole Program**

The McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program is a global school-feeding program that promotes education, child development, and food security for some of the world’s poorest children. Named in honor of Ambassador and Senator George McGovern and Senator Robert Dole, the McGovern-Dole Program provides donations of agricultural commodities and financial and technical assistance for school feeding and maternal and child nutrition projects in low-income countries. With funding of about $200 million in 2010, McGovern-Dole served approximately 5 million beneficiaries in 28 countries. For most schoolchildren, the one meal they get through this program is often the only meal they get all day.

The school feeding and nutrition projects within recipient countries are conducted by nonprofit charitable organizations, cooperatives, the United Nations World Food Program, and other international organizations. USDA invites proposals for projects, which are then carefully reviewed. Proposals are selected based upon several criteria, including the following: (1) the implementing organization’s experience in school feeding; (2) additional, non-McGovern-Dole program resources that will be available to implement multi-year, sustainable projects based on assessed needs; (3) targeting of low-income areas with low school attendance or enrollment rates, especially for girls; (4) coordination of supplementary feeding with nutrition programs; and (5) involvement of local institutions and communities.

In addition, country eligibility for McGovern-Dole funding is contingent upon the following criteria: (1) country-wide per capita income must be at lower, or lower-middle income standards (using World Bank statistics); (2) the country must have greater than 20% prevalence of stunting (WHO data); (3) adult literacy rates must reside below 75%; (4) the country must be a net food importer; (5) the government must have preexisting commitments to education; and (6) the country may not have, or have limited civil conflict that could impede implementation of the program.

The McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program is one of the successful food aid programs supported by the U.S. The McGovern-Dole Program must not be cut – it must be protected along with other poverty-focused assistance and food aid programs. Write/call your member of Congress and urge them to support a circle of protection around food/nutrition programs. Before you write or call take a moment to pray. Why Pray?
Prayer must be an important part of our efforts to overcome poverty and hunger because:

1. Prayer brings our hearts closer to the heart of God, especially as it concerns the poor. God's grace inspires us to strive for justice when we pray.
2. Prayer helps us remember that real people are behind every statistic.
3. Prayer empowers us to be powerful agents of social justice.

LET YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS KNOW

Dear Senator / Congressman,

While we must reduce our deficits, it should not be done at the expense of the most vulnerable people. Around the world, nearly 1 billion people suffer from chronic hunger, and one child dies every 3.6 seconds from poverty, hunger, and preventable diseases.

Funding for poverty-focused foreign assistance programs comprises just 0.6 percent of our federal budget, but these programs have a tremendous impact. Each year, this small amount of funding saves millions of lives and provides people with the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty. By enabling poor people to get out of poverty, we save lives, ensure future markets for U.S. goods and services, and create a safer world for our children.

Cuts to these anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs won't address our deficits, but they will have a devastating impact on vulnerable people. I urge you to create a circle of protection around funding for vital poverty-focused foreign assistance programs that address the root causes of poverty.

Sincerely,

Your name & address

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Washington, DC 20510

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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