Bread for the World
Louisiana

The Twomey Center for Peace Through Justice
Loyola University New Orleans

VOLUME 29, NUMBER 10
FEBRUARY 2011

Food Security and Nutrition: A Global Issue

In late 2007 and early 2008, there was widespread unrest over the rising cost of staple foods. Riots were reported in 37 countries. In Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, 10,000 workers rioted. Many governments called on their armies to quell violence related to food prices.

The situation seems even closer when we remember skyrocketing wheat prices in the summer of 2010 and violent outbreaks in Mozambique in reaction. When the hunger crisis of 2007-08 was unfolding, it was described as "a perfect storm" – a convergence of causes in just the right combination for the resulting disaster.

The problem with this metaphor is that it fails to separate preventable causes from factors that no one could control, at least in the short run. Climate change contributed to the crisis, and it may be ultimately subject to human intervention, but it was not a preventable cause during the months that global hunger was rising rapidly.

On the other hand, the decision by several governments to ban grain exports seemed expedient, but it didn't work as anticipated. Countries banned exports in an effort to conserve supplies for their own people. But not only were poor people in food-importing countries harmed by these bans, the people at home that governments were trying to protect were also harmed. Export bans were put in place in one country after another with the result that supplies of grain tightened in global markets, sending prices that were already unusually high soaring higher. Food was available, but poor people simply could not afford to buy it.

GLOBALIZATION HAS HELPED MANY COUNTRIES DEVELOP RAPIDLY, BUT IT HAS ALSO EXPOSED MORE NATIONS TO SYSTEMIC RISKS THAT ARISE BECAUSE OF THE GAP IN MANAGEMENT ABILITY.

Another factor that drove up food prices was the current policies that encourage farmers to divert food grains to biofuel production. Biofuel related policies accounted for as much as 70% of the rise in grain prices during the 2008 spike, according to the World Bank. The U.S. has a set of policies that encourage the production of corn-based ethanol. In 2009, ethanol subsidies

cost U.S. taxpayers $6 billion. The U.S. and Brazil account for the largest share of ethanol production, while the European Union leads the world in biodiesel production.

An urgent problem like the 2008 food price crisis, where hundreds of millions of people suddenly were no longer able to afford their usual foods, illustrates the weaknesses and gaps of governance systems. What is needed for an effective global response to such a global crisis? Currently, there is no functioning mechanism to coordinate and manage the complex web of relationships created by the interactions of the global economy with food security, but that is what is needed.

A WIDE RANGER OF ISSUES MERIT ATTENTION IN A GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY STRATEGY

Research and innovation: improving agricultural productivity and ensuring food security.

Food emergencies: preventing, monitoring, and responding to crises.

Health: improving food safety and setting health and nutrition standards.

Climate change: spurring adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Prices: preventing excessive speculation in food markets and wild price volatility.

Trade and investment: setting policies for trading food reserves and standards for foreign investment that protect poor people.

Natural resources: protecting soils and biodiversity and improving water use.

In 1974, member countries of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) established the Committee on Food Security (CFS), whose role includes monitoring food security efforts. But the committee was criticized as mainly a "talk shop." It had no means of holding governments accountable for what they say they will do to reduce hunger in their country. It did not have the mandate, the resources, or the power to enforce coordination of food security planning or to prevent countries from taking harmful unilateral action such as imposing export bans. Finally, there was no representation of nongovernmental stakeholders on the committee. Hungry people need a stronger CFS.

In April of 2008, the U.N. High Level task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis was set up to help coordinate international agencies' responses to the food-price crisis. The High Level Task Force includes the heads of the U.N. agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Trade Organization. The task force developed a "Comprehensive Framework for Action" to guide the food security funding and activity planning of its participating institutions. Additionally, efforts to strengthen the CFS got a further push from the G-20 countries, a group that recognizes the need for broader, more multilateral solutions to global problems.

As a result, the CFS now has a high level panel of experts from a variety of food security and nutrition-related fields to provide it with specialized scientific advice.

The improved CFS has a broad charter that includes coordinating global action on agriculture, food, and nutrition and holding governments to account. A wide set of stakeholders are involved, not just governments. One of the central pillars is to provide civil society groups with an international forum to communicate their concerns. Meaningful engagement with civil society will help the CFS be more accountable. The hope is to make the CFS the broadest and most inclusive global platform on food security.

Foreign Assistance Reform

The U.S. government's commitment to fighting hunger and food insecurity has refocused attention on USAID's capacity.

Effective aid matters to poor countries and to the U.S. as it creates partnerships that fuel the growth of both. Effective aid that reduces poverty helps to build a more stable world, improving the security of all.

In September 2010, President Obama released a new wide-ranging policy directive on global development to make U.S. foreign assistance programs more effective. The policy affirms that development is a central pillar of the U.S. national security policy, and it states a commitment to rebuilding U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as the lead development agency. The USAID administrator will be included in relevant National Security Council meetings and the government will formulate a global development strategy that will be reviewed and approved by the President every 4 years. The policy also creates a U.S. Global Development Council to garner high-level input from the private sector and civil society.

"IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW STABLE A COUNTRY IS, DON'T COUNT THE NUMBER OF ADVANCED WEAPONS, COUNT THE NUMBER OF MALNOURISHED CHILDREN."

HILLARY CLINTON

The President's policy directive does not address a more fundamental problem with U.S. foreign assistance. The U.S. needs a 21st century legislative framework to replace an outdated Foreign Assistance Act (FAA).

Congress passed the FAA in 1961. It has been amended on a number of occasions, but the resulting framework has come to resemble a mechanism rigged just to keep running, rather than to function as needed in the world we live in. The world has changed dramatically since 1961, when per capita incomes in Africa were higher than in China, the U.S. defined its relationship with developing countries through the prism of the Cold War, and nobody could

have guessed that carbon emissions might one day become the single biggest factor in sustainable development.

Rewriting the FAA will improve the quality of U.S. foreign assistance and strengthen the case for sufficiently funding development programs. The U.S. government is committed to helping poor countries develop. That commitment is honored by upholding high standards for how aid is used, which requires development assistance that is distinct from U.S. diplomatic and defense funding. Congress should pass legislation that makes clear the importance of poverty reduction and development in U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. foreign assistance must reach those who need it most and support their efforts to lift themselves, their families, and their communities out of poverty. The main driver of poverty reduction is the hard work of poor people themselves, who will seize every opportunity made available to them.

OFFERING OF LETTERS

The focus of Bread for the World's 2011 Offering of Letter is reforming U.S. foreign assistance. **U.S. Foreign Aid: Focus on Poverty** is the title for the offering. Information is available at www.bread.org. Included with this issue of Bread for the World Louisiana is a sample letter and the list of Louisiana's congressional delegation.

JOIN THE WALK FOR THE HUNGRY

SATURDAY, MARCH 19TH

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Published eleven times a year by

Bread for the World Louisiana
Founded in 1982

Bread for the World New Orleans

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Publisher ~ Jane F. Remson, O.Carm.
Editor ~ Mary Blaise Fernando, O.Carm.

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