



Lives at Stake: Protecting Global Food Security Programs

by Michele Learner

[Michele Learner is Bread for the World Institute's associate editor. A background in African and humanitarian affairs led her to Bread several years ago. She says that although she is one of those people who is actually interested in policy nuances, she also realizes that even the best ideas about ending hunger will go nowhere unless people find them easy to grasp and persuasive—and are moved to act on them.]

Throughout 2011, U.S. advocates for hungry and poor people made concerted efforts to preserve global humanitarian and development programs in the face of proposals that would significantly cut many of them. Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision leaders to end hunger at home and abroad. Members wrote letters, made phone calls, met with elected representatives, held prayer vigils, fasted, mobilized churches and community groups, and worked with local media to publicize the threatened cuts.

The larger context of our work is a dramatic year in U.S. politics, as sharp differences among—and within—groupings have led to marathon negotiation sessions and a blur of fiscal “plans” and “deals.” On one level, the debates are about the need to reduce annual budget deficits and the spiraling national debt. On the other hand, the U.S. budget is a moral document: it clearly reveals our national priorities and our view of the U.S. role in the world. Protecting assistance for the most vulnerable people is the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing to do: the United States cannot be safe and prosperous without doing its part to end the unnecessary suffering caused by hunger and deep poverty. Elected leaders must keep in mind both moral and practical rationales for poverty-focused development assistance as they make difficult but necessary decisions about the country's economic future.

Many people recognize the presence of God in their lives, but don't think to look to God for the big changes that are going on around us. This expanded perspective can make a life of faith more exciting, and it can also show us new opportunities for service. Ultimately, our belief in God requires us to do our part to overcome hunger and poverty in our own country and around the world.

As people of faith, and as active citizens, part of our response to the overwhelming need in our world must be to tackle the politics of hunger. God didn't send Moses to Pharaoh's court to take up a collection of canned goods, but rather to declare a prophetic and political message to let the slaves go free! The Bible is clear that God cares about how nations treat poor people. And we are judged, not just as individuals, but as nations.

'Only the Strong Live to Tell Their Stories'

Spring and summer of 2011 brought much starker concerns and choices to the Horn of Africa. The worst drought in 60 years hit Somalia hardest—largely because its residents live with a seemingly endless civil war rather than a government responsible for helping them. The latest estimates are that 12.4 million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti need emergency food assistance.

Zamzam Farah is one of many Somalis who made the difficult decision to leave their homes in search of food and medical care for themselves and their dangerously malnourished children. She carried her baby and 4-year-old twin boys for hundreds of kilometers, seeking to reach the Kenyan border for help. But one day, Farah—suffering from severe malnutrition herself—simply could not continue carrying all three children. With no other adults to help her and unable to pay for transportation even if a bus or truck passed by, she had very few options. Tragically, her twin boys did not make it to the Kenyan border. Many people struggling to leave Somalia have been forced into similar situations. Most of the dead are children younger than 5.

What Could Have Been Done?

The causes of the Horn of Africa hunger crisis are complex. Somali fighters, particularly a group linked to al-Qaeda, have been preventing help from reaching many people, prompting those miserable journeys to the Ethiopian and Kenyan borders. Another main factor is that the region's deep poverty left the vast majority of families with few or no resources to cope with an emergency like the drought. More than 75 percent of the world's hungry people are rural residents with subsistence farming or pastoralist livelihoods. In the Horn of Africa, the struggle to get enough to eat has been complicated in recent years by a profound neglect of agriculture; climate change and environmental degradation; insecurity; and other worsening problems.

It's clear, however, that a lackluster response to an international appeal for assistance also contributed significantly to the current desperate conditions—full-blown famine in many areas and what is classified as “humanitarian emergency” in others. Although it may seem to outsiders that famines arise suddenly and that they are all alike, the truth is that efforts to predict hunger emergencies and to pinpoint when and where help will be most needed have come a long way. On August 23, 2010, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) for the Horn of Africa reported that there were very high rates of acute malnutrition in some areas plus a forecast of below-average rains for October-December, 2010. According to FEWS NET, “Contingency planning and additional support to the 2010 consolidated [funding] appeal are needed.”

Yet on May 21, 2011—nine months later—U.N. World Food Program spokesman Peter Smerdon said: “We began having to cut ration sizes [starting in] February, to try and eke out what food we did have coming through the system. Now, in May, it has really [gotten] extremely serious. We have only about 30 percent of the food that we need to feed the 1 million people.”

As of early August 2011—weeks after people like Zamzam Farah began to tell their stories—less than half of the needed emergency funding had been pledged. So far in fiscal year (FY) 2011, the United States has donated about \$580 million for relief efforts in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

Building Resilience through Aid

The Horn of Africa tragedy makes it clear that this is not a time for the United States to reduce its efforts to help hungry people overseas. But that is, in fact, what is happening. For FY2011, food aid—the sacks of rice that Farah and her children traveled hundreds of kilometers to reach—was cut by 17 percent. For more on budget decisions, see [“Hunger in the Horn of Africa.”](#)

Longer-term programs that focus on enabling poor people to earn a living and provide for their families—and thus prevent future famines—were also cut significantly. Bread members have consistently supported poverty-focused development assistance—the programs that tackle the root causes of hunger. The Millennium Challenge Account and Feed the Future, the U.S. global hunger and food security initiative, emphasize important but long-neglected areas such as agriculture, rural development, and infrastructure. Families are less vulnerable and more resilient when they have viable strategies to grow sufficient nutritious food and to earn enough money to provide for their basic needs—and a “plan B” when something goes wrong.

It will be an uphill struggle to prevent further funding cuts to U.S. food security assistance. Bread continues to follow closely the various proposals and votes that affect poverty-focused development assistance. One indication of the political climate comes in the agriculture appropriations bill that the House passed before the debt ceiling agreement was reached; it would have cut emergency food aid by 31 percent.

Almost always, those who support cuts to food security assistance explain that the United States needs to rein in spending and reduce the budget deficit. Yet it's clear that international development assistance did not cause, and cannot fix, the budget deficit. As discussed in *Bread's* April/May 2011 background paper, “The U.S. Budget: Myths and Realities,” the amounts of money involved are not nearly enough to make a difference.

Some people argue that when it comes to deficit reduction, every little bit helps. But, for example, the cut to FY2011 food aid amounted to \$354 million—less than half a billion dollars. Compare that to the 2011 U.S. budget deficit—\$1.7 trillion. Cuts to food aid and other food-security efforts harm some of the poorest people in the world without coming anywhere near a solution to the U.S. fiscal imbalance.

World Vision advocacy director Robert Zachritz said, “Food aid is one of the few places in the federal budget which directly saves a life for as [little] as \$40 per person.” In 2010, U.S. food aid served 55 million people. The Child Survival initiative that Bread members helped establish in the 1980s provides basic immunizations for 100 million children annually. These accomplishments have saved millions of lives. But there is much more to be done since 3.5 million children still die every year from hunger-related causes.

There is bipartisan agreement that foreign aid is critical to the U.S. national interest, demonstrated by recent statements to this effect by President Obama and Sens. Marco Rubio (R-FL) and John Kerry (D-MA). One component of the national interest is maintaining a strong economy. When people get sufficient nutritious food, they are in a much better position to develop their own economies and buy more of what they need and want. Already, half of U.S. exports go to emerging markets and 38 million U.S. jobs are tied to trade. It makes sense to invest in future customers.

A number of development efforts pay off even more directly. For example, the United States contributed a total of \$84 million to the global effort to eradicate smallpox. Each year since 1977, when smallpox was declared eradicated, the United States has saved an estimated \$150 million, primarily because smallpox vaccinations are no longer necessary. This was a good investment from an economic point of view as well as a humanitarian one.

A range of leaders, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have made the connection between development assistance and true national security, emphasizing that hunger and disease are the seeds of future conflicts.

Finally, foreign assistance is not and should not be forever. A number of countries with strong economies are “alumni” of U.S. development assistance. Former food aid recipients include South Korea, Japan, Italy, Austria, Germany, Brazil, and Poland—some of whom now fund school meal programs in poorer countries and all of whom purchase goods from the United States. Ken Hackett, past president of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), recently discussed his organization’s school feeding program in Ghana. “Many of the schoolchildren [who participated] are now in the government of Ghana,” he said. “CRS worked ourselves out of a job.”

Dealing with Increasing Uncertainty

Bread emphasizes the development of long-term solutions to the root causes of hunger and poverty. Natural disasters and spikes in staple food prices are two of several worsening threats to global food security.

The U.N. Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction for 2011 points out improvements in the response to cyclones and floods. For example, the worst floods in Pakistan’s history killed more than 1,750 people in 2010—but this is a significant reduction from the 15,000 or 20,000 deaths that would have been expected 20 years ago. However, the report singles out drought as a disaster that affects an enormous number of people yet does not have a credible model that measures (and then works to reduce) its risks to human life.

Since the prices of key grains first spiked dramatically in 2007-2008, millions more families have fallen into hunger and poverty. Relief and development efforts are affected as well. Every time food prices increase by 10 percent, for example, the World Food Program needs an additional \$200 million just to keep up its existing programs.

In June 2011, agriculture ministers from the G-20 countries met to plan a response to volatile food prices. A main component would be an early warning system for increased market volatility, based on collected information on supply, demand, and stocks of various crops. The United States supports FEWS NET; as the next step, it could help develop a tool to improve drought response and help tackle the issue of food price volatility.

Hitting the Brakes on Ending Hunger?

The United States has recently been leading proactive efforts to prevent and reduce hunger and malnutrition. It was quick to respond to the 2007-2008 food price crisis that pushed an additional 100 million people into hunger. Grasping the essential point that the crisis stemmed from several inseparable factors, some beyond the control of any one nation, the United States proposed longer-term multilateral solutions, focusing particularly on agriculture and nutrition.

This approach is now being put into practice, but will need sustained leadership, programming, and funding to bring lasting progress against hunger. This is why it’s so important for the United States to maintain its leadership role—particularly through Feed the Future.

Secretary Clinton and her Irish counterpart launched the 1,000 Days Partnership in 2010. Its goal is to scale up good nutrition practices for mothers and the youngest children, those in the “window of opportunity” between pregnancy and their second birthdays. Malnutrition during this time causes damage that is preventable but irreversible. Through Feed the Future and the Global Health Initiative, the United States will implement the priorities of 1,000 Days and Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), a global

effort to support developing countries committed to improving nutrition for babies and toddlers. The efforts are based on the effective, affordable nutrition programs identified in the respected U.K. medical journal *The Lancet*. In June 2011, Bread for the World Institute and Concern Worldwide hosted a meeting to boost support for SUN's efforts to build political will, develop workable strategies to solve nutrition problems, and identify ways to overcome barriers to further progress. (For more about the meeting, including videos of presentations, visit www.bread.org/meeting).

Feed the Future supports partner countries in developing and implementing country-led agriculture, nutrition, and food security plans. Funding is targeted to countries with widespread hunger and malnutrition, an agriculture-based economy, and credible strategies to achieve food security. The goal is to help resolve the underlying causes of hunger through improved nutrition and inclusive growth in countries' agricultural sectors.

Feed the Future is the U.S. component of a broader effort to strengthen agriculture in developing countries, originated by the United States at a 2009 meeting of the G-8 industrialized nations in L'Aquila, Italy. The initial commitment was to raise \$22 billion over three years for the L'Aquila initiative. The World Bank coordinates the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), which has begun to carry out L'Aquila projects.

The GAFSP initiative reflects consensus that agriculture in developing countries must be a top priority. Most hungry people rely on small-scale farming. Farmers need better seeds, fertilizer, access to markets, and storage to reduce spoilage—just to name a few. This innovative program ensures that the voices of rural communities in developing countries are heard as project decisions are made.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon points out that agricultural development will be critical to recovery in the Horn of Africa, for example: "In addition to food aid, drought-resistant seeds, irrigation, improved infrastructure, and livestock programs are all badly needed."

Not only is U.S. leadership on hunger and poverty important, but U.S. funding has a multiplier effect. Other donors are more likely to contribute if the United States does. USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah estimates that every aid dollar brings in an additional \$4 from other donors.

It's about Human Lives

In the end, U.S. development assistance is important simply because it's about human beings. Just as Zamzam Farah and her kids are real people, not faceless "victims," a 15-year-old Somali boy named Dawude has a real contribution to make—provided he can get enough food to stay healthy. Dawude walked alone for four days from Somalia's Gedo Province to the Dadaab refugee camp. There, he explained his goal: to continue his education and become a doctor. "There are people in Somalia with many problems," he said, "so I want to treat them."

The statement often heard in the U.S. fiscal debates, "We're doing this for our children and grandchildren," is one we should all consider thoughtfully. What do we want the world to look like for our children, and how does U.S. development assistance help build that world? Do "our" children include babies who need therapeutic feeding in Ethiopia, Mozambican children who need lunch at school, and teens who need basic farming tools in Bangladesh?

So, what can you do?

We live in the most powerful nation in the world and our government has an impact on people all over the world. When the U.S. government agreed to write-off the debts of some of the world's poorest countries, Europe and Japan joined in the effort. Many African governments used debt relief as an opportunity to expand primary education, and, as a result, 29 million more African children are in school now than in the year 2000. What people don't know is that people of faith in the United States played a crucial role in campaigning for the U.S. government to provide this debt relief to developing countries.

Bread for the World joins efforts such as the campaign for debt relief in a bipartisan way. We offer resources to our members individual and to congregations across the country. To find out more, go to www.bread.org.

With God's help, may we continue to win big victories for hungry and poor people around the world.