



U.S. Food Aid Contributing to Africa's Hunger?

Critics Say U.S. Food Aid Is Part of the Long-Term Problem in Africa

By DANA HUGHES

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Drought-stricken [Ethiopia is pleading for food aid](#) again to stave off starvation, but some critics are complaining that the policies of the country's most generous donor, the United States, is exacerbating the [cycle of starvation](#).

A [hungry Ethiopia](#) gets 70 percent of its aid from the U.S., but according to a new report by the aid organization Oxfam International, that help comes at a cost.

U.S. law requires that food aid money be spent on food grown in the U.S., at least half of it must be packed in the U.S. and most of it must be transported in U.S. ships. The Oxfam report, "Band Aids and Beyond," claims that is far more expensive and time consuming than buying food in the region.

"For roughly \$1 spent on aid, the U.S. taxpayer is paying \$2 to get it here," said Carolyn Gluck, an Oxfam spokeswoman.

[American aid policies](#) also undermine long-term development strategies that could break the cycle of drought and starvation in Ethiopia.

"It's like having a health service that's running on emergency ambulances to deal with the sick all the time," said Gluck. "You can't just deal with the problem. You need to treat the underlying causes, otherwise you'll be locked into this endless cycle of foreign food donors."

It was only 25 years ago that Ethiopia was in the grip of a devastating drought that killed 1 million people, and prompted an alarmed world to launch a massive relief effort.

Today the country again faces a killer drought and looks for help to avoid widespread starvation. The World Food Program in Ethiopia has launched an appeal for \$285 million, or 419 tons of cereal in the next six months to help feed the drought-stricken population.

It has also prompted the Oxfam report on the millions of dollars of food aid going to Ethiopia. Oxfam is not the only critic of the current policy. U.S. Government Accountability Office reports show that of the nearly \$2 billion a year allocated to foreign food aid, more than half of the funds are spent on transport, not the food.

U.S. Food Aid Policies Are Expensive

"It is a clumsy resource," Chris Barrett, a development economics professor at Cornell University, told ABC News. Barrett, the former editor of the American Journal of Agricultural Economics, said the current food aid system is not only expensive, but counter-productive to the idea of helping a country in an emergency.

"The median time to deliver emergency aid from the U.S. is just under five months," said Barrett. "At a time when food aid is more important than ever before& we don't follow best global practices."

Some of those best practices include buying food to distribute locally or regionally. For example, instead of shipping grain to Kenya from Iowa, USAID, the U.S. agency in charge of humanitarian food distribution, could buy it from Uganda, or use cheaper and easier ways to transport the food to its destination, allowing more money to be spent on the aid and less on logistics.

Oxfam says more money should be spent instead on long term programs like the Pastoralist Livelihood Initiative. This group works with the largely nomadic cattle herding communities in Ethiopia to find ways to better sustain their livestock through drought situations and strengthen the livestock market. The program began in 2005 and has increased the livestock survival rate more than 10 percent through the last drought in one community where they worked.

A GAO report published last month investigating international food assistance concluded that U.S. food aid shipped to 10 different Sub-Saharan African countries costs 34 percent more than food bought locally and regionally by the World Food Program.

There is a major push by international aid groups and analysts for reform in the laws, something that Barrett says members of Congress who have agricultural constituent interests are resistant to adopt.

"Not many congressmen like giving up domain," said Barrett. "Congressional committees that are dealing with agriculture and shipping don't have the same interests or backgrounds as the foreign affairs and foreign relations committees do. They're viewing it in the broader context of farming, not in terms of development."

U.S. Contributes More Food Than Any Country

Rebecca Bratter, the policy director for U.S. Wheat Associates, says that current policy is not about benefitting the U.S. agribusiness, but making sure the world's hungry are fed in the safest, most effective known method.

"We are feeding people in emergency situations. Nobody donates more food than the United States," said Bratter. "Countries should become commercial markets and not donation markets, but that can't happen in a year."

Some reform to the law has already occurred. In last year's farm bill the Bush administration pushed for more flexibility on aid assistance restrictions, citing the global food crisis as making the changes necessary. After some debate, Congress allowed \$60 million over the next four years to be spent on local and regional food purchases..

The Obama administration has also expressed interest in having more flexibility in the food aid policy. A spokeswoman for USAID told ABC News in a statement, "The administration requested \$300 million in International Disaster Assistance for an 'emergency food security fund.' This fund expands the U.S. government humanitarian tool-kit by enabling us to procure food locally or regionally, or to provide vouchers for food available in local markets, when our own food assistance is too far away, or when there is ample food in the market, but crisis affected households cannot afford to buy it."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who is leading the administration's \$3.5 billion three-year initiative for global food security, has repeatedly said helping poor nations develop their own agriculture sector is a priority for the administration. Two weeks ago agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters that he wants to see the current policy develop into more of a partnership between the U.S. agricultural sector and the agricultural needs of developing countries.

But Bratter warns that a total switch from in-kind food donations to cash for local buying could produce a backlash in food aid funding.

U.S. Food Aid Policies Can't Change Overnight

"Agricultural interests fight for these programs every year on the Hill, but if it's just cash then that removes agricultural interests from the equation," said Bratter. "It could have a negative effect in future support for the programs. "

Judith Schuler, the WFP spokeswoman for Ethiopia, concedes that change cannot happen overnight.

"We do have to work on long-term strategies, but we have a productive safety net program covering the needs of 7.5 million people, which provides programs like school feeding," Schuler told ABC News. "At the moment though, 6.2 million people are food insecure. They need immediate assistance."

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