



GLOBAL: Improved farming rather than more food aid?



Photo: Stacey M Winston/ECHO

End of food aid?

JOHANNESBURG, 9 July 2009 (IRIN) - President Barack Obama wants the United States, the world's largest provider of food aid, to focus on agricultural development in the countries it helps support, rather than having them remain recipients.

"Quite simply, this change in mindset is that food security is part of national security," said a factsheet issued by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA); this new approach had already begun to unfold in strife-torn, food-deficit Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"This welcome and substantial shift of resources into long-term food security programming marks an important break from past policy," said Chris Barrett, an expert on food aid who teaches development economics at Cornell University. This "very important strategic shift" towards supporting agriculture "merits widespread applause".

The move comes hot on the heels of the 2008 food price crisis, which prompted the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to call for better governance of food security.

The number of hungry climbed to more than a billion in June 2009 while the economic crisis kept reducing the affordability of food, prompting FAO to urge the G8, a group of eight of the world's richest countries meeting in L'Aquila, Italy, to devote 17 percent of their official development assistance (ODA) to agriculture in needy countries.

A similar allocation of funds had led to the successful Green Revolution of the 1970s, which prevented looming famine in Asia and Latin America, FAO reminded the gathering.

Grow your own

USDA has appointed agricultural experts to 13 provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan since the beginning of 2009, and hopes to more than triple this number if President Barack Obama's request for funds is approved by the US Congress.

Political unrest, recurring natural disasters and high food prices in Afghanistan have left 31 percent of the population without enough food, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). Similar events and conditions have also affected food security in Pakistan, where more than 80 percent of the population earn less than \$2 a day.

Under a new strategy, led by Obama and US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, the USDA will help Pakistan and Afghanistan conduct research to improve the production of fruit, nuts, livestock and other agricultural products, and reduce post-harvest loss.

The department will also help develop corridors along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which will not only facilitate cross-border trade but increase the potential for Afghan and Pakistani agricultural products to be exported to other countries.

At the recent G20 Summit in the United Kingdom, Obama announced that he would ask the US Congress to double financial support for agricultural development in poor countries to \$1 billion in 2010.

"A portion of the additional resources [in Obama's proposed support package] is designed to support multilateral efforts to provide rapid assistance for farmers and the rural poor," said the USDA factsheet.

Since January 2008, the G8 has committed over \$10 billion to short-, medium- and long-term support of food aid, nutrition interventions, social protection activities and boosting agricultural output. The G8 have affirmed their commitment to support agriculture in developing countries and said \$13 billion of the pledged funds had been disbursed.

However, Gawain Kripke, spokesman for the UK-based development agency, Oxfam, said: "We already know that around nine of the \$13 billion they disbursed since January 2008 to tackle the food crisis was nothing more than recycled cash. This is unacceptable when more than 1 billion people are going hungry. This G8 must not be 'business as usual', and take urgent action."

End of food aid?

The move towards development does not necessarily portend the end of food aid. Blake Selzer, Senior Policy Advisor at the US-based NGO, CARE, one of the world's largest aid agencies, said the shift was more about taking "A comprehensive approach to food security, which does still include emergency food aid but places increased emphasis on global agricultural development, creating more of a balance of long-term needs with short-term emergency ones."

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He pointed out that funding for international agricultural development had decreased dramatically over the past few decades, and that any successful comprehensive food security initiative would also need to address safety nets, social protection and nutrition programmes.

WFP, which dispenses the largest amount of food aid, said there could not be an "either and or" approach. WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran noted in a statement: "It's a false logic for the world to say that we will either invest in tomorrow's agriculture or today's urgent food needs. There is no question that we must do both."

Food aid has dropped 35 percent since 1995, and global food aid supplies in 2008 were 18 percent lower than in 2005, a 34-year low. "We cannot afford to lose a generation to malnutrition, starvation and despair," said Sheeran. "Addressing immediate hunger needs is a critical long-term investment in healthy, stable societies."

Food aid can also help agriculture

Andrew Natsios, who led the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for five years, told IRIN that emergency food aid programmes - which make up 75 percent of the food aid budget - could be integrated into agricultural programmes.

"The question has been: 'Where we should buy the food aid? In the US or in the developing world, where the purchase by WFP and donor governments can help create demand, increase production, and strengthen markets?' We should be buying food aid from African farmers for Africans displaced by war and conflict, who are in need of temporary assistance."

In the series of measures announced to beef up agriculture in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US administration announced plans for \$27.5 million in international assistance under the Food for Progress Program, which raises the money by selling vegetable oil bought in the US markets in the beneficiary countries.

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