

Food aid groups push 'green revolution' to fix hunger crisis

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Photo Credit: Orlin Wagner

Thoric Cederstrom, left, and Nathan Butala set up a booth for the International Relief and Development organization at the International Food Aid Conference in Kansas City, Mo., Monday, April 14, 2008. With international food prices soaring, government and private food aid groups from around the world are gathering to grapple with the growing hunger crisis in some of the world's most impoverished regions.



Amid a deepening world hunger crisis, leading food aid groups are calling for a "green revolution" that would help impoverished regions develop their own agriculture economies rather than relying on U.S.-grown food.

Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Programme, told more than 700 people gathered in Kansas City for the International Food Aid Conference on Tuesday that the time has come for governments around the world to invest in their farmers.

Half of hungry African farmers can't even afford to feed their own families, she said. In Laos, farmers are planting one-third fewer crops because they have no access to credit to buy seed and fertilizer. At the same time, they have a fundamental mistrust in commodity markets. In many countries, remote farmers cannot access markets because of poor roads, she said.

Her comments came as soaring food and fuel prices have strained food aid budgets of humanitarian aid groups across the globe. The World Food Programme, the world's largest food aid agency, has seen its costs rise 55 percent since June, she said. That means that most countries are getting 40 percent less food for the same contribution, putting more than 100 million people under "severe stress" because of high food prices.

Besides taking care of immediate needs and stabilizing shortages that have led to violent food riots in Haiti and other countries, Sheeran and other aid leaders are backing proposals to buy

more food from local farmers in developing countries, cutting transportation costs while bolstering those nation's agricultural economies.

One solution is for humanitarian agencies to contract with poor farmers so they can afford to plant bigger crops. That would guarantee the farmers a market, in effect making the humanitarian agencies the buyers.

But some of the ideas are controversial in the U.S., particularly here in the nation's breadbasket. Currently, more than half of the food the U.S. exports for humanitarian relief is purchased from U.S. growers, and the United States accounts for the majority of the food aid distributed around the globe, feeding one out of every two recipients.

Rebecca Bratter, director of trade policy for U.S. Wheat Associates, told those attending the conference Monday that the nation's grain growers do not support the so-called cash option that would buy food aid in other countries rather than the United States. She said that 6 percent of the nation's wheat crop traditionally has gone toward food aid purchases.

"Kansas is ground zero for the wheat industry," she said.

But Gaddi Vasquez, U.S. ambassador to U.N. agencies in Rome, said the hunger crisis has spurred interest in a greater global investment in agriculture. He urged Congress to back the Bush administration's proposal to use 25 percent of U.S. food aid dollars for local procurement in other countries. He said innovative programs to buy locally would help small-scale farmers.

"The ultimate objective," Vasquez said, "is to help countries battling hunger to feed their own people."

President Bush on Monday announced plans to draw down an estimated \$200 million from a humanitarian trust to address the impact of the high commodity prices on food aid.

"Food aid is the most visible demonstration of the good will of the American people," said Mark Keenum, undersecretary for the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service for the Department of Agriculture.

Last year, the United States sent 2.5 million tons of food aid valued at \$2 billion. Because of high prices the actual tonnage was down 16 percent from 2006.

"We are spending more but delivering less," Keenum said.

In some countries, such as Sudan, food aid recipients are helping build roads so that remote farmers can bring their crops to market, Sheeran said. In Senegal, the World Food Programme taught women how to iodize salt produced in their country to create an industry.

"Defeating hunger is achievable. It requires no new scientific breakthrough. We know how to do it," Sheeran said.

In Africa, a 10 percent increase in food prices leads to a 2.3 percent increase in poverty, said Cris Muyunda, regional coordinator for the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Program of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa.

But he also saw in those high commodity prices an opportunity to potentially grow the economies in the area, because 32 percent of the region's gross national product is agricultural.

Muyunda cited Malawi as one of the region's success stories. The country, facing a serious food deficit in 2004-05 growing season issued an international food appeal. By the following year it had a 400,000 metric ton surplus. Two years later it had a 1.2 million metric ton surplus.

He credited Malawi's fertilizer subsidy program as well as government intervention to promote innovative programs such as establishing a commodity exchange for the turnaround.