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The UN World Food Program

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Paper prepared for presentation at the "World Food Security: Can Private Sector R&D Feed the Poor?" conference conducted by the Crawford Fund for International Agricultural Research, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, October 27-28, 2009

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The UN World Food Program

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The United Nations World Food Program feeds on average about 90 million people per year, two-thirds of them children. It has offices in 80 countries. Despite the scale of this effort and the large quantities of food involved, forward planning is very challenging because of the small financial reserves on hand at any time. Natural disasters and conflict generate unpredictable demand for food. The WFP is evolving successful strategies to address not only immediate needs but underlying causes of food crises; partnerships have a significant and essential role in this success.

Introduction

It is not only an honour to be here but a great opportunity to talk about issues of mutual interest. I actually came here to do something very simple but which maybe we don't do often enough: to thank the people and government of Australia for their leadership on food security. So when I met with the Foreign Minister I told him how wonderful Australia is, and of the meetings you have had this week; he agreed that these do provide special opportunities. A number of my heroes are here, some known to me only by name and others whom I have met — Bob McMullen, Jim Ingram and others that follow in the great traditions of Sir John Crawford, Norman Borlaug and others who really understood the power of advances in farming and food science and technology to save lives and to bring a more secure, humane and peaceful world. Australia has had a key role in founding CGIAR and through ACIAR, institutions that provide innovation and leadership in ending hunger in areas of the world, and particularly Africa, where progress has been slower than we have wished.

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The challenge

I was unable to attend the presentation two weeks ago in Iowa of the World Food Prize to Dr Gebisa Ejeta of Ethiopia, whose sorghum hybrids resistant to drought and the devastating striga weed have dramatically increased the production and availability of one of the world's five principal grains. I had been given a great honour of delivering a memorial speech about Norman Borlaug's legacy when a suicide bomber attacked WFP's headquarters in Pakistan, killing a number of our staff who had been maintaining the humanitarian lifeline for up to ten million people in that country, including three million displaced by the conflict there. This event was really symbolic of the convergence of our worlds: hunger, food insecurity and violence on the world's front pages, while you are working to beat the clock on food supply for an expanding global population in a more severe and erratic climate.

I really want to commend the work of the Crawford Fund's World Food Crises Task Force, and in particular Jim Ingram. The report[2] of the

[1] The text here was prepared by the editor from an audio recording of the presentation.

[2] Persley, G.J. and Blight, D.G. (eds) 2008. *A Food Secure World: How Australia can Help.* Report of the Crawford Fund World Food Crisis Task Force, ATSE, Melbourne, 60 pp.

task force noted the intersection of research investments, trade and aid in helping ensure that we can feed a hungry world. The report reminded me of the vulnerability that we experienced a couple of years ago during the food crises that exposed areas in the global food supply chain that we have to really shore up. We saw that whole nations could not procure supplies on global markets (and the World Food Program could not get tenders filled), while others resorted to shutting borders and banning export of even humanitarian food.

These events illustrated the urgency of addressing anew the issue of adequate food supply and adequate access by the world's hungry. The first Millennium Development Goal, which includes the goal of cutting the number and the proportion of hungry in the world in half, is the most threatened. In just the past two years over two hundred million people have been added to the ranks of the urgently hungry. At the recent G8 and G20 meetings, world leaders put food security front and centre of the global agenda. We must not take food security for granted. In the developing world, including 80% of the countries in Africa, prices for essential commodities are higher today than they were a year ago. What that means is that people in many places can afford only two-thirds as much food today as they could just two years ago.

This is urgent business. The World Food Program is very honoured to have been created by the world as a member of the United Nations family to help nations when all else fails and to help them build secure food supply systems that will reduce their vulnerability to emergencies and disasters.

The World Food Program and Australia's contribution

Ours is not grandmother's food aid. Eighty percent of the food that WFP purchases now is purchased from farmers in the developing world; this huge shift allows us to build synergies between even emergency action and alleviation of the root causes of hunger. For example, we tripled our local purchases in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the midst of a conflict so that farmers who could not get their food out were supported and did not require food aid. Farmers would much rather sell their food if they can connect to a market, even in the midst of conflict.

An announcement was made today that Australia will generously provide predictable multiyear funding for the WFP[21]. I met recently in London with a number of experts on global supply chains from Unilever, Cadburys and military food services who commented that WFP is the most complex supply chain in the world. We have to reach places like Darfur and there feed four million people a day in the middle of hostile deserts that have no roads. The people I spoke with thought of lead times of three years. I said, 'what if you didn't know how much money you would have in twelve weeks'? They replied 'That is impossible'. The world's most complex global supply chain does need pre-planning, pre-positioning, pre-contracting and pre-buying.

Unfortunately less than 4% of WFP's money is multiyear predictable so that we can plan ahead. When I described this great difficulty to the Prime Minister Mr Rudd he said, 'Lets change that'. So thank you Bob McMullen and all those who helped with the leadership and the report that the Crawford Fund put forward; the result has been wonderful. It allows us to get ahead of the hunger curve and, even in places like Afghanistan, to buy wheat from local farmers so that when we are filling the cup for the schoolchildren we also support the farmers who so desperately need an outlet for their food.

It also means that the WFP can ask a number of questions: not only whether people are hungry but why they are hungry: what is the basic problem? I want to thank Dr Pingali and the Gates Foundation and others who have worked with us to get better at our vulnerability analyses. In the old days these were just crop assessments. Fortunately when the food crises hit we had actually considered other factors such as differential inflation between food prices and wage prices. That is what hit the developing world two years ago. Food prices galloped ahead, doubling and tripling, while for eight or twelve months wages stayed flat and therefore the bottom billion people could afford a third less on a budget that was already devoted entirely to food. So partnerships are really valuable.

Examples of projects with multiple benefits

We would like help from experts like you and others throughout the world to develop connected, longer-term solutions to problems of hunger and poor nutrition. The following are some examples that could be built on.

[21] http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2009/fa-s091026.html

Developing local foods

The World Food Program conducts school feeding programs — school lunch programs — for 20 million children. This is not permanent charity. It helps countries build up a food security net that can be handed over to others, as we have now done in over 30 countries. Typically it is filling one cup with porridge each day for each child; that is the only food the children know.

After the recent food crises the President of Liberia told me they import up to 80% of their food. The president wanted to fill this cup with local produce, although the children had lost their taste for it. The local cassava and maize offer an opportunity to produce farina and thereby to re-introduce the population to their own food products. I have pledged to assist, but we need help in the task. WFP is not an expert on how you increase production. How do you scale it up? It would be a big pull factor if we could buy that food locally. That is where we need FAO, that is where we need the Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation as partners, and the work of CGIAR and all of you. What kinds of technology? Where does it make sense for Liberia to rebuild? And, guess what, there are virtually no nutrients in that farina. Do we fortify it? Do we plant better seeds? We need partnerships to address these questions. If we can fill this cup locally we will change the taste of a generation and strengthen local markets. I can foresee the day we would step out; there would be no need for aid. There is good business in helping to feed the schoolchildren of Liberia.

In Afghanistan we are at a point where we can dream of buying more wheat locally. We do it to a small degree now with the help of Australia, Canada and others, and we have biscuit factories where women are producing fortified biscuits for schoolchildren. Again this doesn't need permanent aid.

The multiplier effect

A second example I will give is from Senegal. We now buy locally whenever possible. Senegal is a food-deficit nation, but they do have a lot of salt. For a micronutrient initiative with Canada and others, salt is purchased from seven thousand village producers, mostly women, who never had a secure outlet — the first win. Now these women, for the first time, are iodising the salt because Senegal has an iodine deficiency epidemic. Because they have a guaranteed contract, the producers could get the equipment to add the iodine and now iodised salt is being sold in those villages — a second win. The third win is that the women are helping their own country by rebuilding areas that have been devastated. A fourth win is that the children are getting the food and the iodised salt they need. So a single initial investment has transformed whole communities. We need help in really understanding how to do this in other situations. The World Food Program does not know how to iodise salt. We don't wish to do that, but we do need the partners to do so.

Convenient, non-perishable food

In regions of increasing floods and droughts, the populations of many nations like the Philippines sometimes have no access even to adequate clean water for long periods. Neither the WFP nor the people have food products that can ensure that young children's minds and bodies stay strong through such challenges.

The World Food Program, with the help of Australia, a food technologist and others, has developed in India a sweet, highly fortified paste made with chickpeas and dried milk. If a mother rips off the corner of the package of the day's ration, the paste can sustain a child with all the necessary micronutrients without adding water — and it needs no refrigeration.

Every leader in the developing world to whom I describe this example — Prime Minister Meles, President Arroyo, others — recognise that they need such a product. Prime Minister Meles said that in a drought in Ethiopia there is nowhere for a parent to turn even if they have money. We are developing such products now in Pakistan. In the Philippines we may be able to use a coconut base. We will do our best, but how to connect the crops with accessible, non-perishable food for the bottom billion people?

We currently have a global call for every high-energy biscuit that we can find for use in the Philippines. These are biscuits produced by WFP; fortunately Thailand, Ecuador and others now produce their own. In Egypt we make a date bar that is packed with nutrients; when troubles hit Gaza last year, people had no cooking fuel, no electricity and no water. Hospital staff couldn't eat, patients couldn't eat. We produced twenty million of those date bars after gearing up overnight — talking to the government and asking DSM (an international life science and performance materials company from the Netherlands) to tell us how to fortify them to suit the people in Gaza.

Other appeals for help

The arrangements described above are very ad hoc. I envisage progress that within five years will provide people in the developing world with tools to give them affordable access to emergency foods based on their local produce. We need to know where all the production capabilities lie — not just those of the WFP. Prime Minister Meles of Ethiopia has asked that much broader assistance than the WFP can provide should be made available. So that is another appeal that I would really like to make.

We are working very closely with the Gates Foundation, the Howard Buffett Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation to examine the ways we contract with farmers. WFP — whose budget was $1.4 billion last year — invests in developing-world farmers by buying food. We are doing this in a way that allows them to plan for and invest in better seeds, better technologies and better access to markets. The great thing about WFP is that we are a real market — a market with patience and a market that can draw on the resources the world has. In our purchasing project, involving 20 nations, we are seeking ways to work even better with small farmers like the salt producers in Senegal and others to support their efforts. We really need the backing of your understanding.

We work very closely with AGRA (the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa) to make sure our public–private projects are in the same area that AGRA is working in. In our vulnerability analyses, and also in reducing risk for farmers, WFP is working with Rockefeller to map the areas that are the most vulnerable. We wish to be sure our humanitarian aid is looking at things like disaster risk insurance —we did a pilot project on this in Ethiopia that proved to have market viability; it reduces risk for the farmers who otherwise bear all the risks.

Conclusion

In many of the areas I have described our interests and work intersect. I do want to thank Australia again. In response to a question from Prime Minister Rudd, I emphasised the importance of predictability to help us get ahead of the hunger curve. His response three months later was very welcome. I know that such a rapid response has required a lot of political support, and support from AusAID and others.

By my estimates, leaders such as Sir John Crawford and Norman Borlaug have saved more physical lives then any human being in history. Theirs is a great legacy and a great goal to keep in mind, and also a great inspiration.

We are proud and honoured to connect with all of you in your work — solving hunger and its problems at its roots. So thank you.