

State Department's Document On Hunger And Food Security: Some Hits, Some Misses



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As a part of the change from one administration to another and in response to the 2008 food price crisis which led to an increase in the number of hungry in the world to over 1.1 billion people, the US State Department followed up on the commitment made at the G-8 Summit in L'Aquila to raise "more than \$20 billion to support a renewed

global effort" to reduce world hunger by developing a consultation document called "Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative" <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/130164.pdf>.

The document recognizes that "chronic hunger and under-nutrition primarily results from poverty – people who are poor often simply cannot afford to buy food. Hungry families spend over half their income to buy the food they need to survive, with little to fall back on." But before looking at local food production issues, public agricultural research, reduction of post-harvest loss, role of women, and sustainability, the flow of the argument quickly shifts to trade: "Food often cannot travel from surplus to deficit regions within and across countries because of poor roads and barriers at the border and checkpoints along the way."

No one is arguing that moving food from food surplus regions to food deficit regions is not a good idea. It is, but first things first. It all begins with small holder farmers producing sufficient food to feed their families. Marketing of food surpluses comes next. On these issue, the State Department document comes up short. In some sense the document provides a 30,000 feet view of US intentions without the kind of specificity on the producer side that is likely to result in increased production in the target countries.

Instead of looking at small holder systems with minimal access to capital the document says, "We will work with partners to develop private input industries, organize private dealer networks, expand sustainable irrigation and water management, and strengthen farmer organizations." Later on we read, "Agribusinesses are a crucial connection between small-scale producers and markets to purchase inputs and sell products. They are the link between producers and consumers through which handling, storage, processing, market information, transportation, and product distribution services are delivered."

A later bulleted point reads: "Create an enabling policy environment for agribusiness growth. Frequent and unpredictable public intervention in the agricultural sector deters private investment and limits the ability of farmers and businesses to access capital. Companies function best when regulations are transparent, mechanisms exist to enforce contracts, and policies are predictable. The U.S. will contribute to strengthening enabling policy environments for growth by improving the ability of governments to collect and analyze market information, training private sector trade associations in how to engage local and national governments, [and] pressing for reductions in government controls on commodity prices."

While the document is strong on the needs of developing and protecting agribusinesses, it says little about protecting developing country farmers' traditional access to both agricultural land and pastoral lands – the latter often is seen as empty because the pastoralists only use the land on a seasonal basis. Without stable access to their traditional lands, farmers and pastoralists are often displaced by large foreign owned enterprises that have the capital necessary to produce products for export markets.

While the document has significant shortcomings in its excessive concern for protecting a role for agribusiness, and focus on trade before looking at production issues, the paper also makes some important points.

The document calls to attention the role that women play and can play in improving agricultural output in developing countries. "Many countries overlook the ability of women to drive agriculture-led growth. As a result, women often have limited access to agricultural inputs and financial services and face legal or social constraints to owning land. Economic output could be increased by 15 – 40 percent and under-nutrition reduced by 15 million children simply by providing women with assets equal to those of men."

In the paper the US State Department notes: "Gains in productivity come primarily from increases in yields, more efficient use of labor, mitigation of risk, improved links to market, and adoption of improved technologies and production practices. Gains in productivity must be made at a time of dwindling natural resources, increasing water scarcity, and a changing climate. This calls for careful attention to protecting the natural resource base, better management of water resources, and adapting agricultural production systems – crops, livestock, and fisheries – to a changing environment."

Toward the end of the paper, the authors make four points:

- Prevention through community-based programs: Evidence indicates that improving nutrition during pregnancy and the first two years of life provides the maximum benefit to health, education, productivity, and efforts to reduce poverty. We will implement programs that improve maternal nutrition, provide targeted nutrient supplementation, and encourage appropriate infant feeding.

- Diet quality and diversification: Food-based approaches to combat under-nutrition and prevent illness are cost-effective, sustainable, and income-generating. We will support approaches such as homestead food production, fortification of foods during processing, and research to improve the nutritional content of staple foods.

- Community management of acute under-nutrition: A successful approach for managing acute malnutrition will include timely detection of under-nutrition, outpatient treatment for the 80 percent of children without complications, and inpatient treatment for the remaining 20 percent with complications. We will support the integration of this successful model into national policies and health systems. We will also invest in innovative new approaches and products in partnership with the private sector to treat acute under-nutrition.

- Improve nutritional value of food aid commodities: We will work to increase the nutritional benefit of U.S. food assistance programming to ensure that we do not miss the opportunity to support the longer-term health and development of those receiving emergency assistance.

We hope that in the revision of this document, the US State Department will provide additional focus on the circumstances, skills, and needs of small holder agriculturalists and pastoralists, recognizing that the characteristics of agriculture are different from those of the manufacturing and service sectors.

Also, food reserves are not mentioned. It is extremely important to do all that can be done to increase the productivity of small-holder farmers. But the irregular rains and other disruptions to production will still occur. To us that would suggest that the creation of grain/staples reserve programs should be right up there with efforts to enhance farmer-productivity and probably precede implementation of many of the other programs. △

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