

"Regaining the Focus of Food Aid; Giving Children a Chance to Live Life to its Fullest"

International Food Aid Conference (hosted by USDA & USAID)

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Thank you for the opportunity to address this diverse and distinguished audience. I do so on behalf of the World Vision International Partnership, which works in 98 countries around the world, serving highly vulnerable children. We are one of the largest food-aid programmers in the world, working in partnership with many of you who are here today, including USAID, USDA, WFP and many more.

The challenge

I also speak to you as someone who is deeply concerned about the mounting challenges to food security around the world. This conference comes at a critical time. It is a time when we have reached the mid-way point for the Millennium Development Goals, which (among other things) call for the world to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by half by the year 2015. Although we have made progress, there are still 820 million people in developing countries who experience hunger on a daily basis. Millennium Development Goal number four calls for the world to reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five. Again, although we have seen significant progress, close to 10 million children under five needlessly die each year. Malnutrition contributes to around half of these deaths. Furthermore, one in four children is underweight and one in three is stunted, realities that undermine their future and the development of their communities.

The sad reality is that while no one wants to see children suffer in this way, and while we have the resources to overcome hunger and malnutrition, children are not getting the adequate nutrition they need. Malnourished mothers are giving birth to underweight babies, who often die in their first five years or who are stunted in every aspect of their development because they do not get the nutrients they need to thrive. Although child survival has improved in the past few decades, it has not improved quickly enough, and

millions of children who do manage to survive their first five years are nevertheless impaired by the effects of malnutrition.

I recently saw this first-hand in Laos, where I visited a rural village in the Mekong Delta. The biggest challenge children in Khonwai village face is inadequate nutrition. Many of the children are stunted because they are not getting the proper food they need. And it's not just this village. 40% of children in Laos are moderately to severely underweight. And as we all know, Laos is not the only country with this problem.

I believe we all bear responsibility to help close this gap. Certainly communities and governments bear primary responsibility, and we need to ensure that they are not neglecting this. But we are all called to be partners in this fight, working together for these common goals.

This conference comes at a critical time, because it is a time of rising food prices, major food shortages, changing political landscapes and difficult questions about the role of food aid. It is critical that we use this time to work together to tackle these problems and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Global trends

To do this, we need to be cognizant of the challenges of several important current global trends:

First and foremost is the rise of commodity prices. Others have already talked about this, and the impact of drought, bio-fuels and increasing demand on the price of food. This has resulted in the sad reality that more people cannot afford basic food supplies. It also means that government food aid programmes are not purchasing as much food as before. Rising transportation prices have compounded this issue.

Second, the last seven years have seen a significant decline in the global flow of food aid, even as tremendous need remains. Until the fundamental impediments to long-term food

security are dealt with, World Vision believes that food aid needs to be maintained and indeed increased.

Third, climate change represents a major threat to long-term food security, particularly in poor communities. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report highlights the threat that climate change will negatively affect food production and exacerbate poverty.

These trends should be seen as a challenge. It is not likely that the need for food aid will go away anytime soon. Indeed, the need will likely increase. We need to work together to ensure the long-term effectiveness of food aid, especially in relation to the Millennium Development Goals.

Key debates

In the last couple of years, we have seen the increasing prominence of several controversial issues connected to food aid. These issues have often been discussed as diametrically opposed debates between food aid reformers and food aid traditionalists.

Local cash purchase has been set up against in-kind commodity aid. Emergency and development food aid have been cast as competing objectives. Monetization has been demonized and defended. The entire debate has taken on a tone of opposition and acrimony.

World Vision's position

Allow me to briefly outline World Vision's position:

Far more important for World Vision than the method of food aid is that vulnerable children get the food they need. Our focus, therefore, is on outcomes: that no child should go hungry, be malnourished, underweight or stunted. All children should get the nutrition they need to grow up healthy and able to reach their full potential. This is a basic point, but I think we all need to be reminded.

In World Vision's experience, food aid in all its forms is needed to achieve these outcomes. We need local cash purchase. We need in-kind commodities. We need monetization. We need developmental and emergency food aid. When well-programmed on the foundation of a contextual analysis, all of these forms are effective tools in the fight against poverty. Not perfectly efficient perhaps, but nevertheless important. I have seen this with my own eyes. Often it depends on the specific context which should be used. Therefore we believe that blanket pronouncements against certain forms are unproductive. It would be better for us to focus our energy on improving the quality and effectiveness of food aid to help vulnerable children.

Some critiques of food aid are certainly valid. New ideas should be considered. We all want to see food aid become more productive and effective. Let me give an example:

Cash transfers pilot in Lesotho

With the help of WFP and Overseas Development Institute (ODI), World Vision is currently conducting a pilot programme in Lesotho to do structured operational research on cash programming. World Vision's experience with cash programming has been relatively limited, but we recognised this as an important approach with potentially significant benefits for communities struggling with food insecurity. To do it well, we needed to do more research and build our own capacity.

Our pilot in Lesotho has three scenarios. In some communities we are distributing exclusively cash to the beneficiaries. In other communities we are distributing a combination of cash and food (50% cash and 50% food), and in some other communities we are distributing only food. The purpose is to evaluate the effectiveness of different kinds of programming in different contexts and to build staff capacity and learning.

The pilot started in November 2007 and will end in June of this year. Some key lessons have already started to emerge, including those related to gender dynamics and impact on children. Once complete, we hope to contribute more to the growing body of knowledge

and be better prepared to assess, design and implement the most appropriate interventions based on local context. As with all aid, cash transfers need to be well-programmed and appropriate for the specific context, and this pilot project will help us better serve vulnerable children.

Constantly evaluating and improving

World Vision is not alone in its desire to constantly improve food aid programming. We all want to maximise our impact for vulnerable children. All forms of food aid should be evaluated and improved so we can move closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Food aid is effective

But the good news is that food aid is already effective and is already making a difference in the lives of millions of vulnerable children. In emergency situations, food aid keeps millions from going hungry and suffering from malnutrition, enabling them to continue to fight poverty and build long-term food security. Food aid is also a valuable developmental resource, as it directly contributes to community development and food security.

Food aid is especially effective when it is implemented in conjunction with other needed interventions. Too often food programming is handled in its own sector silo, while its greatest strength is the value it adds in conjunction with other interventions. But our experience shows that when implemented in conjunction with nutrition, education and HIV programming, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Allow me to highlight a few examples:

Food aid and nutrition

Malnutrition remains the world's most serious problem and the single biggest contributor to child mortality. In addition, there is substantial evidence that malnutrition is linked to

immense losses in economic productivity, education and intelligence. The human and economic costs to families, communities and nations are unacceptably high.

The world has the capability to solve the problem of child hunger and malnutrition. The solution does not require any new invention, but it does require focused attention on evidence-based interventions. Immunisation, health screening and care, education, adequate nutrition, clean water and sanitation are critical for ensuring the health and growth of young children. Delivery of these services depends on the development of the community as a whole. World Vision uses a combination of child services and community capacity-building techniques to support the health and nutrition of the child.

Through PL 480, Title II, USAID funds many Maternal Child Health and Nutrition (MCHN) programmes aimed at reducing childhood malnutrition by providing food aid for children. Programmes include supplemental food; monitoring the weight, height and health of the children, immunisation, oral rehydration, clean water and training mothers about proper sanitation, nutrition, and basic health care.

Infants and young children in their first two years of life require special foods of adequate nutrient density, consistency, and texture. In resource-constrained populations, children are at high risk of suffering from micronutrient and protein deficiencies. This is why a number of World Vision's Title II programmes include wheat-soy blend or corn-soy blend that are fortified with vitamins and minerals, including vitamin A, iron, and zinc. World Vision operates such programmes in Haiti, Honduras, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Maternal Child Health and Nutrition (MCHN) programmes have been a great success. Positive results are evidenced by reduced stunting and improved weight and height among children. While children's health and nutrition are improved, the broader community also benefits from the intergenerational educational and human capacity-building components of the programme.

There is a Creole proverb that says, “An empty sack cannot stand.” This proverb captures the reality of food insecurity in Haiti and many countries around the world. Food insecure households are in many ways like ruptured, half-full sacks that need to be filled, strengthened and stood upright again. Our Title II food security programme in Haiti (called “Full Sack”), aims to do this. By building the resilience of the most vulnerable, we are empowering households to stand together and withstand future shocks. With the recent protests in Haiti over food prices, this is all the more relevant. By 2012, the “Full Sack” programme aims to reduce food insecurity in more than 100,000 households in Haiti.

This programme builds on the evidence from a five-year study that compared preventive and recuperative approaches to food-assisted MCHN programmes in rural Haiti. World Vision Haiti’s Title II programme was part of that operational research programme, which also included FANTA, IFPRI, Cornell University and others. The results, which were published in *The Lancet*, show that the preventive nutrition approach is more effective in reducing malnutrition, with the prevalence of stunting, underweight and wasting significantly lower in the preventive compared to the recuperative programme communities after three years of programme implementation. The evaluation provides evidence of how to make such programmes work even in difficult contexts. The evidence suggests that to improve effectiveness, food-assisted MCHN programmes should target all children under the age of two years, as opposed to malnourished children under five. World Vision is embracing this preventative approach in our Title II MCHN programmes, because we want to increase the impact of our programmes and help reduce malnutrition.

Food aid and education

Another example is food aid and education. Access to education in Afghanistan is extremely limited for girls, and the quality of the education is poor. We know that when a girl is educated, her income potential increases, her children are more likely to be immunised, maternal and infant mortality is reduced, the birth rate decreases and she is more likely to ensure that her daughters also receive an education.

World Vision has a two-year \$24.5 million USDA funded McGovern-Dole Food for Education programme in Western Afghanistan, begun in FY06. The programme serves the Badghis and Ghor districts with a 9,000 metric tonne food distribution programme that targets 70,000 students. In order to promote and ensure consistent school attendance, World Vision anticipates that it will distribute take-home rations to students in 192 schools, and to teachers and school support personnel in 507 schools. This project also intends to support adult literacy classes for 2,500 women aged 15-55, in order to promote adult literacy and increase the pool of potential female teachers in conservative regions with low female student attendance. Already we have seen the impact, and we know that this programme will result in major long-term benefits for the people of Afghanistan. Food aid is contributing to the education of girls, and the impact will be felt for generations.

Food aid and HIV

My final example relates to food aid and HIV:

When asked what their greatest needs are, HIV-affected households in Africa often rank food at or near the top of the list. Yet as international HIV programming expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s, most programmes did not include food and nutrition components, and evidence on how to integrate such components was urgently needed. There is a complex, bi-directional relationship between food security and HIV. Illness and death resulting from the disease have an immediate impact on food security by limiting household income and food production. At the same time, food insecurity and poverty fuel the spread of HIV when people are driven to adopt immediate survival strategies that make them more vulnerable to HIV infection. Access to adequate nutrition is critical to the health of infected individuals, including those receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART). Finally, the combined impacts of food insecurity and HIV place further

strain on already limited household resources as affected family members struggle to meet household needs.¹

Food and nutrition interventions help to break this vicious cycle by strengthening immune functions, management of symptoms and side effects of treatment, nutritional status, quality of life and productivity. Over the past five years, World Vision has worked with USAID to integrate food and nutrition in the context of HIV/AIDS, especially during the Title II funded C-SAFE (Consortium Southern Africa Food Aid Emergency) programme in 2003 through 2006. Looking ahead, World Vision will look to strengthen the evidence base on the role food and nutrition plays in HIV care, develop national guidelines for programmes and policies, and strengthen implementation of nutritional care in HIV treatment and care services.

Integrated programming

I have seen with my own eyes the impact of programmes such as these. Most recently in Laos, I saw the effectiveness of integrated World Vision programmes. Working with the Government of Laos, World Vision is using food aid in conjunction with programmes in health, education, livelihoods, water, food security and agricultural production. Together these interventions are making a real difference for children in the community.

Moving forward

As I have said, there are valid critiques of the way food aid has traditionally been done. We should address critiques and test new approaches so as to make food aid more effective.

But we also need to increase the level of food aid. With all the challenges I have outlined, there is a very real danger that food aid will shrink and millions of children will suffer the consequences. With rising prices, the amount of food being delivered is shrinking. We need to restore the previous amount of food aid delivered and indeed increase it. Too

¹ Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) Project and World Food Programme (WFP). Food Assistance Programming in the Context of HIV. Washington, DC: 2007

many children are going hungry, suffering from malnutrition and dealing with chronic food insecurity and poverty.

At the end of the day, my perspective on food aid is simple: let's keep vulnerable children at the centre of the debate. Ultimately, this is not about us: the NGOs, academics, government, farmers and shippers. It's not about our newest trend or our various interests. It's about vulnerable children who have the potential to build a better world. I hope World Vision will always reflect this reality and put the interests of children first and foremost. And I hope that this will be true for all of us.

We have disagreements, but we have a lot more in common: we believe in the critical importance of combating food insecurity and malnutrition. We believe that no child should go hungry. No child should be malnourished. The MDGs are within our reach if we work together.

So let's build a coalition to overcome food insecurity and malnutrition. This coalition should have vulnerable children as its focus. It should be willing to improve methods and try new approaches. It should be willing to make changes that are costly for us but beneficial for children. It should increase the use of food aid as part of a holistic effort to combat poverty and achieve the MDGs.

As President of World Vision, I believe this is possible, and I am committed to doing my part.

Let's work together and keep vulnerable children at the centre of our work.