

Working Together to End Hunger

Alan Larson



Courtesy of African Rice Center (WARDA)

Advanced food technology is shared with developing countries as here in The Gambia, where farmers assess rice varieties.

Ending hunger and malnutrition is an achievable goal, but only if governments in both developed and developing countries make the right policy decisions.

Alan Larson, formerly U.S. under secretary of state for economic and business affairs, is senior international policy adviser at the Covington and Burling law firm in Washington, D.C., and a director of the charitable organization Bread for the World.

There is no more important global goal than ending hunger. More than 800 million people around the world are hungry or malnourished. A large percentage of these are children.

Childhood malnutrition is a special tragedy. It can cause brain damage that permanently impairs an individual's capacity to achieve his or her full potential.

Food security is a need so basic that neither families nor countries can effectively tackle other challenges when they do not have enough to eat. Hunger and malnutrition must be conquered in order to make lasting progress on education, health, and environmental problems.

Americans of all political persuasions have a strong commitment to addressing hunger. For Republican and Democratic administrations alike, overcoming hunger has been a top priority. For years, the United States has been the largest supplier of food aid and the largest contributor to the U.N.'s World Food Program.

American universities and scientists share this commitment. Since Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize for work leading to the Green Revolution, American universities have produced a stream of scientists devoted to curtailing world hunger. American citizens provide generous private contributions to



The United Nations World Food Program works quickly delivering food in emergencies such as the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan.

Courtesy of UNWFP/Keith Urseel

cling to trade-distorting subsidies that disadvantage farmers in developing countries. Food-importing countries too often have used trade barriers to provide unfair and inefficient preferences for local production.

WHAT IS NEEDED

Ending hunger and malnutrition is an achievable goal, but only if governments make the right policy decisions. Ending hunger will require great political will, close cooperation, a clear plan, and a sustained effort. Here are a few of the central elements of such a plan.

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that deliver food aid abroad and to anti-hunger advocacy groups such as Bread for the World.

AN ACHIEVABLE GOAL

Of all the pressing challenges the world faces, ending hunger can be one of the most achievable. There is no global shortage of food. The capacity to continue to produce sufficient high-quality food to meet the needs of the world's population is not in doubt.

Hunger, rather, results from policy problems. Wars and civil conflicts leave vulnerable women and children without access to food. Sometimes emergency food assistance is too small, too slow, or too inefficient to meet these needs.

Science and technology have not always been available to meet the special agricultural needs of developing countries. International donors sometimes have underfunded efforts to assist developing countries raise agricultural productivity and promote rural development. Developing countries sometimes have avoided valuable new technologies, such as biotechnology, that are used safely and effectively in developed countries.

Although the trading system can and should help people meet global food needs at lowest cost and least environmental impact, misguided trade and agriculture policies, in both developed and developing countries, sometimes have impaired the ability of the trade regime to operate. Europe and the United States, for example,

1. Providing More and Faster Food Aid: When international or domestic conflicts leave people in circumstances in which they cannot afford or cannot gain access to the food they need, international donors must step forward more quickly and more generously. Working under the leadership of the World Food Program, bilateral donors such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have stepped forward. Other donors need to recognize that food aid is indispensable. All donors need to act more quickly in responding to food emergencies, using early warning systems.

2. Providing More Effective Food Assistance: Food assistance must be made more effective. In some instances, the direct delivery of food from traditional exporting countries such as the United States is less efficient than purchasing food locally or from the region in which the food shortage occurs. As the U.S. Congress rewrites the multiyear farm policy bill, groups including Bread for the World have been advocating reforms to make American food aid more efficient.

3. Helping Poor Countries Grow More Food: The United States and other donors can do more to help developing countries increase their agricultural productivity. The United States has begun to do so during the past six years. The World Bank and the regional development banks need to ramp up their own programs for agriculture. Robert Zoellick, now president of the World Bank, has taken an interest in African agricultural



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Poor policies in Zimbabwe have helped turn a rich agricultural land into a hungry one.

has begun to harness its scientific capability to address issues of hunger and nutrition. Policy makers and scientists from China and India have won the prestigious World Food Prize.

In contrast to these positive examples, abysmal leadership in Zimbabwe has transformed this rich agricultural land into a hungry one. In North Korea, the distorted goals of the regime and its heavy-handed political control over food distribution have

issues. I hope he will act to re-establish the leadership position of the World Bank in increasing agricultural productivity in developing countries.

4. Using Food Aid to Support Agricultural

Development in Developing Countries: International food aid should be a short-term response, not an enabler of long-run dependency. Working with NGOs, the United States supports countries that are trying to use food aid to jump-start their own agricultural productivity. In Burkina Faso, USAID and the U.S. Department of Agriculture work with a group called Northwest Medical Teams to support farmer groups that share cultivation equipment and build wells. Similar successful projects have been launched in Senegal, Kenya, and Eritrea.

5. Making Agriculture and Nutrition National

Priorities: While assistance is indispensable, hungry countries themselves must take the lead in making agriculture and nutrition national priorities. China and India, the world's most populous countries, have shown what can be done. In China, the government launched major reforms that have given farmers more freedom over what they grow. In India, the government has launched seed distribution schemes to assist farmers and milk distribution schemes to help consumers. Each country

created great hunger and hardship, notwithstanding years of generous food aid.

6. Extending the Power of Technology: In the United States, our citizens have been fortunate to benefit from sustained advances in food technology. Some advances, notably biotechnology, not only have increased productivity but also can produce plant varieties that are more resilient to drought, have higher nutritional content, require fewer chemicals, and are more resistant to pests. With a concerted international program, including both the public and private sectors, the power of biotechnology could be harnessed to the benefit of farmers and consumers in developing countries. It is heartening that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation are teaming up to address agriculture. With stronger international help we can expect even more important initiatives from researchers such as Sierra Leone's Monty Jones, who improved rice-growing techniques in West Africa.

7. Tapping the Power of Trade: The trading system must be a tool in ending hunger. Rich trading regions such as Europe and the United States must slash trade-distorting agricultural subsidies that impoverish farmers in developing countries. Rich countries including Japan must

slash stiff trade barriers against the agricultural exports of developing countries so that the food production capabilities of those countries can be enhanced.

At the same time, too many developing countries have been slow to realize that trade barriers against food imports raise food prices for their people and perpetuate inefficiencies in their own food supply systems. While adjustment periods may be appropriate, a reduction of developing-country barriers to food imports is a necessary part of the solution to global hunger.

8. Making the Elimination of Hunger a Top Political

Priority: In the fight against world hunger, we face a shortage. It is not a shortage of food; it is a shortage of political will. Eight hundred million people, many of them women and children, are counting on us. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

THE GREEN REVOLUTION



Norman Borlaug in 1970.

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Norman Borlaug, a native of Iowa, earned a PhD in plant pathology in 1942. His work sparked what is known today as the Green Revolution. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 and the

Congressional Gold Medal in 2006. The following is excerpted from his Nobel Lecture, delivered at the Nobel Institute in Oslo, Norway, in December 1970. The full text is available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1970/borlaug-lecture.html.

The term “The Green Revolution” has been used by the popular press to describe the spectacular increase in cereal-grain production during the past three years. Perhaps the term “green revolution,” as commonly used, is premature, too optimistic, or too broad in scope. Too often it seems to convey the impression of a general revolution in yields per hectare and in total production of all crops throughout vast areas comprising many countries. Sometimes it also implies that all farmers are uniformly benefited by the breakthrough in production.

These implications both oversimplify and distort the facts. The only crops which have been appreciably affected up to the present time are wheat, rice, and maize. Yields of other important cereals, such as sorghums, millets, and barley, have been only slightly affected; nor has there been any appreciable increase in yield or production of the pulse or legume crops, which are essential in the diets of cereal-consuming populations. Moreover, it must be emphasized that thus far the great increase in production has been in irrigated areas. ...

The green revolution has won a temporary success in man’s war against hunger and deprivation; it has given man a breathing space. If fully implemented, the revolution can provide sufficient food for sustenance during the next three decades. ...

We must recognize the fact that adequate food is only the first requisite for life. For a decent and humane life we must also provide an opportunity for good education, remunerative employment, comfortable housing, good clothing, and effective and compassionate medical care. Unless we can do this, man may degenerate sooner from environmental diseases than from hunger.

And yet, I am optimistic for the future of mankind.

FEEDING THE HUNGRY THROUGH BIOTECHNOLOGY

With the United Nations projecting a global population of about 10 billion by 2050, estimates indicate that farmers will need to grow twice as much food as they do today. The impact is particularly significant for countries with the largest population growth and the most widespread nutritional deficiencies. Many agricultural tools and resources will be needed to meet these demands. Given the limits on land available for cultivation and the ability of current techniques to grow food in arid and pest-infested areas and salty water, agriculture biotechnology now offers one of the most promising approaches.

Biotechnology's potential role in addressing vitamin A deficiency is one example. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 140 million to 250 million children, most living in developing nations, suffer serious symptoms of vitamin A deficiency, the leading cause of avoidable blindness and other afflictions. Vitamin-enhanced "golden rice" and cooking oils derived through biotechnology may help to meet this challenge. Similar approaches are targeting dietary shortages of iron, zinc, and other essential nutrients.

The first biotech food reached the market in 1994: a tomato with improved ripening. Insect-protected maize was introduced in 1996, followed by pest-resistant and herbicide-tolerant maize, cotton, and soya. While the first countries to adopt the technology were developed countries including the United States, Canada, and Argentina, biotech crops are now grown in 22 countries around the world by more than 10.3 million farmers, of which 9.3 million are small-scale farmers living in developing countries. Maize, cotton, and soya constitute the largest share of crops currently produced using biotechnology; however, other biotech-improved crops are now available, including disease-resistant papaya and squash and nutritionally improved maize, soya, and canola.

Growing biotech crops increased income to farmers by about \$27 billion between 1996 and 2005, with \$13 billion of that going to farmers in developing countries.

Yet all these advances have generated differences of opinion and even controversy. Although data show that most American consumers feel they do not know enough about food biotechnology to have an opinion, among those who do express an opinion, positive attitudes are twice as common as are concerns. In a 2006 survey by the International Food Information Council, some 75 percent of American consumers indicated that they are at least somewhat confident in the safety of their food. By contrast, consumer perceptions in Europe have historically been more negative, likely stemming from a number of food safety crises totally unrelated to food biotechnology. Nevertheless, consumer acceptance appears to be slowly growing in Europe; consumers polled in 2005 by Eurobarometer expressed an increasingly positive opinion toward medical and pharmaceutical developments in biotechnology and a moderately positive opinion about the technology as a whole.

As with many major developments in science, initial doubts and uncertainties may change to acceptance and optimism as knowledge and understanding increase. Agricultural biotechnology is meeting with growing acceptance in countries around the world, helping farmers and food producers rise to the challenge of producing enough food to meet the needs of growing populations in the 21st century and beyond.

— Rachel Cheatham, director of science and health communications, and Andrew Benson, vice president for international relations, International Food Information Council.

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