

The Honorable Tom Harkin
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

June 5, 2007

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We write to you as representatives of US development, religious, and family-farm and other citizens' organizations concerned about recurring food crises in many countries and how US resources and policies can best be mobilized to confront those situations.

Over the last few decades, food crises have become distressingly common phenomena. According to recent estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization, there are 850 million people in the developing world suffering from hunger. The causes of hunger are many: recurring droughts caused by changing climatic patterns; declining public support for agricultural production, particularly for small-scale agriculture; trade liberalization that compels developing country farmers to compete with low-cost imported goods, undermining consistent local production; and other political and technical barriers to sustainable agricultural production.

Just as the causes of hunger and recurring food crises are complex, we see the need for a complementary set of policies to stimulate the production of food around the world. As you enter into discussions on US farm and foreign aid policies, we ask you to:

Support local and regional purchases of food aid. The United States is the single largest provider of food aid in the world. And while there is no doubt that food aid has saved countless lives, it is also clear that several of the assumptions on which current programs are based no longer hold true. The US government no longer holds excess food stocks, and food aid is too small a percentage of total production or exports to directly affect domestic farmgate prices or the interests of American farmers. The current system of shipping US commodities to countries experiencing food shortages is enormously inefficient, even when food aid is monetized to fund development projects. Requirements that food be purchased and packaged by US firms, transported by US shipping companies and distributed by US development agencies raises the cost of food between 30 and 50 percent over the cost of purchasing needed food wherever it is most readily available. This system, when not properly managed, can also disrupt local markets.

We welcome several recent proposals for changes to the US food aid program, among them proposals to allow for up to 25% of emergency food aid purchases under Title II to be provided in cash for local and regional purchase of food rather than as commodities purchased in the United States and shipped to developing countries. In general, we support an increase in the authority to purchase food aid stocks at the local or regional level. This would enable food aid providers the ability to purchase food in the same or

neighboring countries and to deliver it quickly. Local or regional procurement would have the added benefits of encouraging local farmers to build up production levels and fostering regional economic integration as well. In some situations of regional droughts or other generalized shortages, it may be that food can be most efficiently purchased and shipped from the United States. Those decisions should be made based on objective criteria of availability, cost and how such purchases support longer-term development goals.

We understand that this would be a substantial change from current US policy and that there are serious concerns about revisions in a program that is designed as a last resort in very urgent situations of food crises. These policies are not untested – the World Food Program has extensive experience providing food aid this way with positive results. However, at the very least, we encourage you to support pilot programs in several countries to better understand how US food aid could be provided as financial resources rather than commodities and to build from those experiences.

Increase funding for food aid and agricultural development strategies designed to reduce hunger. In recent years, US food aid programs have also suffered from erratic funding levels that have been patched together with supplemental appropriations as emergencies arise. The United States should provide at least \$2 billion a year in funding for food aid.

We also support increased funding for agricultural development programs designed to reduce hunger. Over the past few decades, agricultural development funding has prioritized commercial agriculture and the promotion of cash crops for export. While we recognize the importance of exports for economic growth, too often these policies have undermined developing country farmers' ability to feed their families and their communities. We support increased funding for agencies such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development that concentrate on improving developing country farmers' ability to feed their nations and to promote sustainable agricultural practices.

We see these policies as mutually reinforcing. Food aid should complement more comprehensive development programs that recognize access to adequate and nutritious food as a necessary component for a life lived with dignity. Agriculture is central to rural livelihoods and domestic markets, and therefore to wider economic development.

Food is not just one more commodity to be bought and sold under market conditions. Access to food is an essential human right, recognized under the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Signatories recognize the right to food as an essential element of the human right to an adequate standard of living and freedom from hunger. The United States is a signatory to the ICESCR. While it has not ratified the treaty, we believe it should still be guided by the principles enshrined within it and seek “to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need.” We hope the coming debates on US agricultural policy will be guided by this essential principle.

Sincerely,

ActionAid USA
Agricultural Missions, Inc
American Corn Growers Association
Bread for the World
Center of Concern
Church World Service
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
Food and Water Watch
Grassroots International
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Just Foreign Policy
Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ USA
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
National Family Farm Coalition
National Catholic Rural Life Conference
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Oxfam America
Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural
The Oakland Institute
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Washington Office on Africa
Washington Office on Latin America

cc: Members of House Committee on Agriculture
Members of House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Members of Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Members of Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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