

International Food Aid: Support for U.S. Agriculture

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Andrew Wong/Reuters

The world produces enough food to provide each person with a 2,720-calorie-a-day diet. Despite such wealth and the UN goal to cut in half the number of hungry people by 2015, their number is growing.¹ Hunger is not a result of the lack of food, but of bad food distribution and bad politics. Rich countries have tried to compensate economic disparities produced by neoliberal policies by creating an international regime of food aid based on the UN infrastructure. This is not an ethical maneuver, but a security one: a hungry world is an unsafe place to be.

WORLD FOOD PROGRAM OR WE FEED PEOPLE

The World Food Program (WFP) is the main UN agency working directly to end hunger, aspiring to connect humanitarian aid with education and development. “If you give a

man a fish, he’ll eat today; if you teach him to fish, he’ll eat all his life.”²

The WFP was funded in 1963 as a short-term project, but it soon became permanent. It currently distributes food to about 90 million people around the world, in the form of US\$80 million a year in official development aid.

The problem is that half of the WFP aid is in products and the other half is in cash. That is where the conflict starts. Aid in kind allows the donor to rid itself of its agricultural surplus, which is why it is preferred by countries like the United States and Great Britain. Actually, 90 percent of all the food aid in products comes from the U.S. The rest comes from France, Italy and Russia. A small part comes from countries forced to sell their organic crops (Algeria, India, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Thailand and Vietnam) and import genetically modified products. Food aid in kind does not always adapt to local cultures and sometimes arrives late due to transportation costs, so late that local crops are also ready by the time international aid arrives.

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In certain cases food aid turned out to be transgenic and contaminated local markets and crops. WFP has been distributing genetically modified (GM) food since 1996, without notifying the receivers. If food aid complies with the donor's standards, WFP accepts them. "We think that the hungry prefer to eat GM instead of junk; there is no way that WFP may provide food for everyone without GM," said James Morris, former executive director of WFP representing the U.S. (2002-2007).

During the negotiations of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, some African governments declared they would rather not serve as experiments by eating GM food nobody wanted. The UN officials said it was not the responsibility of the organization to check whether food aid was organic or not. According to the protocol ratified in 2003, countries may refuse imports of GM food. The U.S. has not signed it.

USAID, MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND THE UN AGENDA

In the U.S., there is no separation between GM and organic crops. Therefore, exports of agricultural products are difficult. Despite international lobbying in favor of cash food aid, the U.S. keeps distributing products with the argument that it is not always possible to find particular items such as vitamin-enriched cereals in underdeveloped countries.

According to U.S. law, 75 percent of food aid should be in products, partly sold by export credits and partly donated. U.S. legislation (PL 480) divides food aid into three categories: a) from government to government through sale, in order to open markets to U.S. commerce; b) emergency aid, distributed through NGOs and WFP; and c) subsidies from government to government for development activities.³

The U.S. food aid system is one of the most expensive in the world, with 60-percent support by citizens and 40-percent by the government.⁴ The main winners in this system are the agricultural engineering companies that use USAID and indirectly the WFP to protect their monopolies. The Iron Triangle group, representing 17 companies and agricultural associations, argued to the WFP that cash could be stolen or badly used and that therefore they prefer aid in products rejected in the U.S. or meant for animal consumption. These companies argued that GM would solve hunger in the world and they succeeded in directly influencing the UN agenda. For instance, Cargill and Archer Daniel Midland directly sponsor the WFP, without USAID mediation. Between 2002

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and 2005, Archer Daniel Midland has donated US\$3 million in GM food to the WFP.

With the USAID policy of conditioning HIV/AIDS aid on the acceptance of food aid, several African countries had to promote legislation on intellectual property that would allow the entry of genetically modified organisms.

FOOD AID PUBLICITY

Given quite a few cases of GM aid rejection in Africa, Latin America and Europe, the WFP decided to use publicity to convince the poor to receive it.

A WFP ad published in the *Financial Times* in December 2005 provoked European officials. It showed some children of color in front of a blackboard with the words, "Don't play with our food!" With this image, the WFP indirectly accuses restrictions on food donations and asks, "Will the WTC [World Trade Organization] take away their food?"⁵

Other public diplomacy instruments favoring the GM food have been NGOs like Friends of the WFP, established in 1995 in Washington and coordinated by U.S. leaders in the food aid field. Friends of the WFP organizes special events to promote the U.S. aid system, including a yearly ceremony to award leaders in the fight against hunger.

PERSONAL DIPLOMACY FOR FOOD ETHICS

Still, positions among U.S. aid officials are neither monolithic nor linear. For instance, take former USAID Director Andrew Natsios, once a staunch enemy of humanitarian NGOs, now working with them. Natsios quit his position with USAID in 2005 and made a deal with environmental organizations lobbying against transgenics. Natsios spoke of a moral necessity to reform the U.S. food aid system and recognized food aid in products sometimes gets there late and works against local economies.

In the case of Afghanistan, food aid resulted in local farmers giving up their wheat crops because there was too much of the GM wheat sent by the U.S. They then began planting poppies for opium.

GREEN DIPLOMACY AGAINST TRANSGENIC AID

According to some NGOs like Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth or environmental publications like *GM Free Scot* and *NGIN*, food aid is just a tool of U.S. foreign policy, meant to protect agricultural engineering corporations and get rid of GM products that were never sold on the local market.

These organizations lobby against GM food aid, since it makes recipients' economic, ecological and humanitarian systems collapse. Greenpeace and People's Earth Decade denounce the lack of ethics in the United States, which ensures a market for its GM wheat, corn and soybeans using the fake argument of food aid.

The Olmy News Agency⁶ also shows that the Doha Agenda favored the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy and U.S. subsidies to agriculture more, but damaged agriculture in poor countries of Africa and Southeast Asia. In this way, the agenda broadened out opportunities for rich countries but forgot its initial development goal.

HUNGER AS A COMMERCIAL PROBLEM

Food aid is a special case of economic diplomacy that favors the donors more than the recipients. Hunger is transformed into a commercial problem, not a humanitarian one.

As a matter of fact, the organization that controls food aid is not the World Food Program but the World Trade Organization (WTO) and that is where the scandal on GM food is. During the yearly WTO Summits,⁷ the United States and the European Union (EU) develop serious arguments and public relations campaigns, trying to prove that the politics of the other side are slowing down international development.⁸ The EU supports a "cash only" policy. According to the European Union, cash offers greater flexibility to each country's economy and culture, since it allows UN officials to buy the food in the local market and helps the local economy, avoiding dependency on donors. On the other hand, the United States argues that cash can be stolen and rejects changing its current product aid programs. So far, no agree-

ment has been reached since no one wishes to give up their own plans.

AGRICULTURAL AID NETWORKS: A GAME OF RESISTANCE

The case of GM food aid clearly shows that the market of generosity or philanthropical capitalism has become profitable. Solutions to food aid and hunger in general go beyond the WTO negotiations. In the case of food aid transformed into economic sanctions and trade diplomacy to get rid of GM crops, the problem is not only governmental, but also one involving the UN system. The questioning of hegemony or multilateralism actually implies a criticism of UN dysfunctions, as well as the lack of a coercive mechanism that would complement its functions.

In this way, food aid is a subtle foreign policy tool that widens the distance between rich and poor. The lack of food distribution networks in the world further creates hunger and underdevelopment. This use of economic diplomacy proves to be a fatal weapon for hegemonic power that eliminates many perspectives of solutions to the problem of hunger. Once again, the argument about the ethics of intervention, whether humanitarian or not, is on the table. **MM**

NOTES

¹ F. Mousseau, "Food Sovereignty: Ending World Hunger in Our Time," *Humanist*, March/April 2006, vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 24-26.

² J. Powell, "Statement by Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme," World Trade Organization Food Aid Seminar, Geneva, Switzerland, May 17, 2005.

³ J. Clapp, "The Political Economy of Food Aid in an Era of Agricultural Biotechnology," *Global Governance* no. 11, 2006, Canada: Oakland Institute, pp. 467-485.

⁴ Mousseau, op. cit.

⁵ "Food Aid Fight," Heinrich Böll Foundation, at <http://hongkongblog.globalalternative.org/?cat=14>, December 17, 2005; consulted on January 24, 2006.

⁶ Olmy News at www.olmynews.com, December 2005.

⁷ The International Convention on Food Aid was renegotiated in the World Trade Organization (1997-1999) to broaden the list of products that can be offered as food aid and stipulate that developed countries open their markets to imports from the underdeveloped ones, through a just mechanism of subsidies and taxes.

⁸ "Food Aid Fight," op. cit.

FURTHER READING

Tigau, C.N., "La diplomacia en la era digital. Modelos dinámicos de negociación y prospectiva," doctoral thesis presented at Mexico's UNAM in 2007.