

November 5, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chair
Committee on Agriculture
United States Senate
Washington, DC

Dear Senator Harkin:

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 conclude discussions on the 2007 Farm Bill, we ask you to:

Support a pilot program for 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 the proposal in the Senate Farm Bill to provide \$25 million a year for four years for a pilot program for local and regional purchase of food aid. Local or regional procurement would enable food aid to be delivered more quickly and at lower cost and 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. These policies are not untested – the World Food Program has extensive experience providing food aid this way with positive results. We encourage you to support the pilot program included in the Senate version of the Farm Bill to better understand how such a program could deliver food aid more effectively and efficiently.

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. We urge you to work to ensure adequate funding of food aid is authorized in the Farm Bill. The United States should provide at least \$2 billion a year in funding for food aid.

In addition, we support increased funding for other 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 Agriculture Movement
American Corn Growers Association
Center of Concern
Church World Service
Caney Fork Headwaters Association, Pleasant Hill, TN

Cumberland Countians for Peace & Justice, Pleasant Hill, TN
Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund
Food and Water Watch
Grassroots International
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Just Foreign Policy
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
National Catholic Rural Life Conference
National Family Farm Federation
Network for Environmental & Economic Responsibility United Church of Christ
Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington Office
Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural
Washington Office on Africa
Washington Office on Latin America

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