

Opinion

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Food aid for the 21st century

By John Kerry, Tom Vilsack and Rajiv Shah

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For almost 60 years, a bag of life-saving food etched with the American flag has served as one of the purest expressions of our country's generosity and compassion around the world - from the earthquake devastated streets of Port au Prince to the refugee camps in the Horn of Africa.

Through a program called Food for Peace, America's agricultural bounty and heartland values have fed well over a billion people in more than 150 countries since 1954. This life-saving program was born in a time of great U.S. agricultural commodity surpluses, an era that didn't boast the tremendous export and new product opportunities the American farmer enjoys today. But while the world has changed significantly since President Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House, our hallmark food assistance program has not evolved with the times. In fact, the amount of food aid we deliver has decreased by nearly 70 percent over the last decade due in large part to rising costs - at a time when millions of people continue to go to bed hungry every night. Now, to preserve our role as the world's humanitarian leader, we have the opportunity to act.

As a part of his 2014 budget, President Barack Obama proposed important reforms to Food for Peace that would feed up to 4 million more hungry people every year, maintaining our leadership as the world's greatest force for good while saving an estimated \$500 million over the next decade.

This more agile, flexible and modern approach pairs the continued purchase of the best of American agriculture with greater flexibility around interventions such as local procurement and electronic payments to save more lives.

At a time of urgent human need and budget constraint, this is the right choice.

The current program limits our ability to use the appropriate tool for each humanitarian situation - tools we know will help people faster and at a lower cost. This year, 155,000 fewer children in Somalia will receive support because we do not have enough flexibility to use cash to address the ongoing emergency in areas where our food aid cannot go. In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, we will not be able to reach 34,000 vulnerable children. Each one of these children is three to four times more likely to die than a well-nourished child.

Buying food locally can speed the arrival of aid by as many as 14 weeks - precious time when every day can mean the difference between life and death. It can also cost much less - as much as 50 percent for grains. That's because the average cost of buying and delivering American food overseas has increased to

\$1,180 per metric ton today from \$390 in 2001.

Using electronic payments, for example, can help us reach families in inaccessible and insecure areas. In 2011, at the height of famine in Somalia, electronic payments enabled us to help more than 90,000 families buy food in their communities.

A flexible approach will not end the contribution of American agriculture to our mission. It will create a new and enduring agricultural partnership. The president's proposal maintains the majority of emergency food aid funds - 55 percent in 2014 - for the purchase and transport of American commodities. That means we're going to keep working with soy, wheat, pulse and rice farmers and processors across America to help feed hungry children from Bangladesh to the Sahel. And the proposal commits \$25 million of the savings from these reforms to support U.S. vessels and mariners that will be impacted by the reduced shipments, helping to maintain our military sealift capability.

The state of American agriculture is nothing like it was in the 1950s. Today, agriculture is the second most productive sector of our economy, and we just experienced the strongest four years in history for agricultural trade. Between now and 2050, agricultural production will have to grow 60 percent just to keep up with demand. Rather than talk of surpluses, we talk of tapping into the ingenuity of American farmers and the power of science and innovation to avoid shortages and end global hunger.

Far from ending a partnership between our nation's humanitarian and development mission and our world-class agricultural and food system, we are recommitting to the role American agriculture plays in food security.

We aim to carry out our development mission more effectively and efficiently - not to perpetuate dependency, but to advance human dignity. By freely and flexibly harnessing the tools we've developed and the knowledge we've gained, we can save more lives without asking for more money - an opportunity we must not pass up.

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