

## Food aid experts: 'world hunger can be eliminated'

Rich Heffern | Apr. 14, 2009



Child at food distribution center in Zimbabwe (CNS photo)

### KANSAS CITY, MO.

Despite the global economic crisis, soaring food prices and reports that millions more people joined the ranks of the undernourished in 2008, key experts at a major food aid conference here April 6-8 shared a tangible optimism that both the will and means are now at hand to attack and even possibly conquer world hunger.

Grounds for this cautious optimism, the experts say, can be found in an improved efficiency in collaboration and communication, advances in technology, greater expertise in understanding the roots of hunger within funding agencies and the emerging will to combat global hunger as exhibited by leading nations, including those who gathered early this month in London for the G-20 summit.

Budding optimism is certainly tempered by some harsh realities.

- The 2009 global economic crisis follows in the wake of the 2008 world food crisis, which witnessed soaring prices for staple foods and sparked riots in some 30 countries.
- In January the United Nations reported that because of higher food prices, 40 million people had joined the ranks of the undernourished in 2008, bringing the total to 1 billion, or roughly one in seven.
- Each year population increases add an estimated 79 million people, a rate that challenges any capacity to grow and raise enough food.

Facing exasperating challenges, more than 700 people met here to share ideas and recommit the global family to face down endemic hunger. This was the 11th annual International Food Aid Conference, jointly hosted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The theme this year was 'Fighting Hunger in an Era of Global Economic Crisis.'

Though food prices have eased on global markets after last year's spike, which was due to high fuel costs and a brew of other circumstances, they remain high in many countries. Price volatility, the credit crunch and shrinking coffers, both private and government, are making it harder for farmers to get loans to invest and plant, and shrinking investments make it harder for humanitarian agencies to fund emergency food deliveries.

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[Catholic Relief Services president, Ken Hackett, a purpose-driven man](#) [2]

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Despite the obstacles, government agencies and humanitarian groups alike spoke of a significant new will to tackle and solve the problem of global hunger.

"Of the 1 billion hungry people in the world, we in relief and development work reach probably 100 million, meaning nine out of 10 hungry people are not being served," said Dirk Dijkerman, acting assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, at the conference.

Yet there's also "the most articulated demand for change I've seen in 30 years of working in international development."

Grounds for optimism are found in a greatly improved efficiency in collaboration and communication due to globalization and to advances in technology – in, for example, producing high-calorie, high-protein therapeutic products such as Plumpy'nut, which are able to quickly revive the desperately malnourished.

The crowd was also significantly encouraged by recent moves and talk coming from President Barack Obama's new administration, interpreted as a solid commitment to move toward global food security.

"The new president has expressed concern about the global financial crisis and about the impact that will have on poor people," said David Kauck at the humanitarian organization CARE. "He's talking about putting the resources where they're needed."

Newly installed Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack, meanwhile, announced at the conference that an additional 51,700 tons of agricultural commodities, valued at nearly \$80 million, will be provided to children in low-income, food-deficit countries under the U.S. agriculture department's McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program for the 2009 fiscal year. This comes in addition to \$95.5 million allocated already.

"No child in the world should go to bed hungry, and this additional funding will help remedy the sad reality that across the globe every night, many do. As a result of this effort, 655,000 poor children will eat a nutritious meal during their school day," Vilsack said.

In addition, the United States will give about \$5.5 billion over the next two years, most as grain shipped abroad.

At the G-20 meeting in London, Obama pledged to increase assistance for global agriculture and rural development, asking Congress to double U.S. financial support for agricultural development in poor countries to \$1 billion by 2010.

"President Obama wants to put a new face on the one America shows to the world," Vilsack said, "one that

relies less on military might and more on cooperation and taking leadership in promoting global food security.? The United States is the world's largest food aid supplier, supplying 55 percent over the last 10 years.

During the food aid conference, Tony Hall, former congressman and ambassador to the U.N. Food Programs in Rome, and Catholic Relief Services executive director Ken Hackett introduced a "Roadmap to End Global Hunger," the result of an effort by 29 of the world's top humanitarian agencies to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to end global hunger.

The agencies met for seven months beginning at the peak of the crisis caused by food price spikes. "It was the first time all of these groups sat down together, the best and brightest in the field, spurred by moral outrage that we have not produced the political and spiritual will to end hunger in the world," Hall said.

The Roadmap calls on Congress for legislation and asks the president to establish an international hunger coordinator in the White House. Until now, there has been no single overall accountable official on global hunger, according to Hall.

Panel discussions at the three-day conference spotlighted significant issues and key problems facing government agencies and humanitarian groups that work to alleviate world hunger.

One discussion looked at the "militarization" of humanitarian aid.

As a result of the "nation building" character of military excursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, the Department of Defense expanded its role into non-traditional areas. The military calls these "stability" operations and has developed field manuals instructing and educating commanders and troops on the ground.

Emily Burrows, strategic issues advisor for Catholic Relief Services, said: "In many areas Catholic Relief Services works in the same space as the U.S. military."

After the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004, for example, Catholic Relief Services relied on the military for transporting food quickly into devastated areas. "Because the military has unique capabilities and resources, the crisis necessitated cooperation. It's possible for military and civilian actors to cooperate effectively, and the military has been receptive to learning from humanitarian agencies," she said.

Problems arise, though, because the military is not seen as "impartial" by local populations, making it more difficult for civilian operators, according to Burrows. "The military often just addresses symptoms, not the long-term causes of hunger. Blurred boundaries can undermine principles of impartiality and independence that are the basis for our acceptance in communities."

For example, she pointed to the experience of a Catholic Relief Services (CRS) team in a southern Afghanistan village. A Provincial Reconstruction Team showed up, a unit consisting of military officers, diplomats and experts working to support reconstruction in unstable areas. Soon after, insurrection leaders showed up to grill the village's leaders about why the reconstruction team was there. As a result "CRS was asked to leave," she said.

According to Djikerman, the U.S. Agency for International Development has created an office of military affairs; its purpose is "to give the military a larger sense of what development means, to reduce the amount of miscommunication, and to build in areas where we share values."

Army Brigadier Gen. Edward Cardon said, "We are not the right tool for humanitarian purposes but sometimes we are the only tool available for a while. When there is danger to civilians working in an area, we can help but we ultimately want to work ourselves out of a job."

In a keynote talk, Stephen Lewis, codirector of AIDS-Free World, described "the malevolent brew of the 21st century" — higher food prices, the effects of global climate change and disease — describing how the three intersected recently in Zambia and Zimbabwe, a perfect storm of misery and cholera epidemic.

"Keep pressuring politicians to develop and sustain a humanitarian imperative," he counseled, "to coincide with the economic imperative brought on by financial collapse."

"The grandmother who buries her children, the orphan who weeps through the night, they recede into the mists of statistical calculation. We dehumanize them, their faces blurred, their identities lost. It's a terrible thing we do to the uprooted of the earth. Together, we must bring it to an end."

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