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World food aid conference looks at initiatives and trends

by Rich Heffern



Tom Waters, center, talks to African ministers of trade, economics and agriculture during a tour of his farm near Orrick, Mo., Aug. 6. The tour was held as part of the International Food Aid & Development Conference in Kansas City, Mo. (AP photos/Charlie Riedel)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- From Aug. 2-4, people from 17 countries met to discuss the world hunger situation at the annual International Food Aid & Development Conference sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and USAID. The 650 conference participants looked at what is being done to address both immediate needs and to support long-term development of sustainable agriculture in afflicted countries.

According to U.S. government estimates, more than 1 billion people -- one-sixth of the world's population -- suffer from chronic hunger. Each year, more than 3.5 million children die from undernutrition. Hunger robs the poor of a healthy and productive life and stunts the mental and physical development of the next generation.

?Reducing chronic hunger is essential to build a foundation for investments in health, education and economic growth. It is critical to the sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations,?

said Jonathan Coppess of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, addressing the first general session Aug. 3.

A focus of the conference this year was on Feed the Future, the Obama administration's global and food security initiative.

At the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, in 2009, global leaders responded to the combined effects of underinvestment in agriculture and food security, the steep rise in global food prices, and the world economic crisis by committing to "act with the scale and urgency needed to achieve sustainable global food security." They established a framework for coordinated and comprehensive action among host governments, donors, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders. This collaborative global effort centers on country-owned processes to improve food security.

President Obama's pledge at L'Aquila to contribute at least \$3.5 billion over three years helped to leverage and align more than \$18.5 billion from other countries in support of a common approach, working with partners and stakeholders to advance action that addresses the needs of small-scale farmers and agribusinesses and harnesses the power of women to drive economic growth.

There was a panel discussion Aug. 3 on public-private partnerships, one of the important ways that agricultural development is funded in developing countries in the 21st century. In the 1960s and '70s, 80 percent of food aid was in the form of direct government handouts to afflicted countries. Now only 17 percent of aid comes in that form. Increasingly, the private sector has taken over.

Ahmadou Baba from Cameroon, CEO of Imperial Foods, described his company's construction of a plant to supply fortified noodle products to his country and others in West Africa. The plant will create 1,000 jobs and buy 10,000 pounds of cassava yearly from local farmers plus wheat flour from U.S. producers, while supplying low-cost, nutritious meals to schoolchildren.

Tom Verdoorn, vice president of Land O'Lakes International Development division, described a development alliance in Malawi in which \$3.5 is leveraged for every \$1 invested from the United States. In Zambia, Land O'Lakes has inaugurated a program to enhance farm families' access to improved-breed dairy cows that can produce substantially more milk and then help them join producer groups or cooperatives.

In another presentation on Aug. 3, Allen Jury of the U.N. World Food Program outlined megatrends in global food security, both external and internal trends that impact world food aid. Climate change events, he said, will add another 10 to 20 percent to the total number of hungry people in the world by 2050. Urbanization will also affect the hunger situation in the world, as more people move from rural areas to cities. Food emergencies in urban areas will necessitate new kinds of interventions. Internal trends include an emphasis on national government ownership and more complex and integrated interventions during food emergencies.



James Miller, undersecretary in the U.S. Department of Agriculture

(USDA), said Aug. 4 at the conference that the USDA, the U.S. Agency for International Development and nongovernmental organizations in the targeted countries will be involved in rolling out the Feed the Future plan, and that the \$3.5 billion President Obama pledged in Italy will be spent specifically on agricultural development and food security in vulnerable countries.

The steep rise in global food prices in 2007 and 2008 alerted the world to food insecurity as rioters in cities across Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe staged street protests.

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Miller also said that the bumper wheat harvest in the United States this year will stabilize prices. A severe drought in wheat-producing countries of Eastern Europe and raging wildfires in Russia have sent wheat prices soaring in the past two months on fears of a global shortage. Russia announced Aug. 5 that it was banning exports of wheat.

Miller said the shortage is good news for U.S. farmers, who stand to earn a higher price for their crop. "We'll continue to see the volatility until harvesting in the Northern Hemisphere currently underway is concluded," Miller said. He added that there is little likelihood that the shortage situation will escalate to a level similar to 2008. "The difference here is that in 2008 the shortage cut across a broad range of commodities."

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