

**AtA Dina Esposito Testimony for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on  
Global Food Security  
March 6, 2024**

Thank you, Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and the distinguished members of the Committee, so many of you long-time champions for the world's hungry and impoverished. I also want to thank Special Envoy Fowler for his focus on strengthening indigenous food production. I've prepared an opening statement, but my full testimony has been shared with the Committee for the record.

We should be honest about the state of global food insecurity today. After more than a decade of progress fighting chronic hunger and malnutrition following the last global food crisis in 2009—progress spurred in meaningful part by Feed the Future, the United States signature global hunger effort—a series of unprecedented shocks have reversed many of our gains. These shocks include: the COVID-19 pandemic; Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine; ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, and now Gaza, among so many other hotspots; and unprecedented consecutive droughts, most notably in the Horn of Africa.

The confluence of these events means that today, 735 million people are chronically hungry—every night before they go to bed because they can't afford enough to eat. That's 120 million more people than in 2019, pre-COVID.

One hundred and forty million people in the most vulnerable countries are acutely hungry—they are victims of conflict or crises that have upended their livelihoods, and

now are severely malnourished and must depend on humanitarian assistance to survive. That number is twice as high as it was in 2019.

But even in the face of such stark numbers, all of you on this committee and every American taxpayer should know that American generosity has kept hundreds of millions of people off the knife's edge.

The United States has maintained its role as the world's leader in providing both acute and development food assistance. In fiscal year 2023, we provided over \$14.2 billion in total humanitarian assistance, of which \$3 billion was emergency food assistance to 134 million people in 58 countries. That includes sending American-grown agricultural commodities like wheat, sorghum, and rice overseas—critical in emergencies when crops have failed and markets have gone bare. It also includes market-based assistance which is a more efficient way to help those in places where markets still function, but livelihoods have been destroyed.

This lifesaving work would not have been possible without the continued generosity and foresight of Congress in appropriating emergency supplemental funds. At the height of the global food crisis in FY 2022, USAID was able to provide nearly \$20 billion in humanitarian assistance, of which \$6 billion was for emergency food assistance.

Additionally, Congress also supported our decision to draw down the full balance of the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust. The Senate's recent passage of the National Security Supplemental appropriations bill which includes \$9.15 billion in humanitarian assistance

is critical, and we urge the House to follow your lead. Without these resources, we face a 52 percent shortfall as compared to FY 2022 in appropriated humanitarian resources, at a time when needs are increasing.

I wish I could say that other donors would likely step up in our absence, but globally we are seeing humanitarian budgets contracting, especially as many European nations shift their resources to support incoming Ukrainian refugees. When it comes to the fate of those in the world's most dire conditions, it is America that leads.

But our response to greater humanitarian need cannot simply be to call for more resources. We must also take two critical steps.

First, we must make every American taxpayer dollar we spend as efficient and effective as possible. Every five years, this country has a chance to strengthen our U.S. food assistance programs through the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. Ten years ago, I helped support the bipartisan effort that gave USAID critical flexibility to make our food assistance dollars stretch further. As Congress negotiates the reauthorization this year, it is critical that we maintain and expand those flexibilities—for instance, granting authorities to make using US commodities in non-emergency programs an option rather than a requirement—without decreasing overall commodity procurement levels for the program. Doing so will allow partners to design activities that most improve livelihoods and agricultural productivity so poor communities can better withstand shocks without the chronic need for emergency food aid.

I want to be very clear: this does not mean cutting the level of US commodities we send, but simply allocating them to emergency response where they are the most appropriate. These may sound like minor, technical adjustments, but they will save lives, save money and benefit American farmers and taxpayers.

Second, beyond making our dollars stretch further in short-term emergency situations, we must continue investments resilience efforts that we know can prevent hunger, before it is dire starvation. If we can help countries and communities better anticipate shocks that drive hunger and enhance their capacity to grow more food and sustain their livelihoods no matter what comes, then we can greatly reduce the need for humanitarian assistance. This is supported by clear evidence, research from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Madagascar found that for every dollar invested in resilience, we save between \$2.50 to \$7 in humanitarian assistance.

This is what the United States has done across decades in places like Korea, Mexico, Brazil, and India—countries that once were our largest recipients of food aid but now count amongst our largest trade partners. When Feed the Future was launched in 2010, its goal was to continue that legacy: to tap into the know-how of America's farmers, crop researchers, and agribusinesses to spur agricultural transformation in the countries with highest potential for growth in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

And we've had meaningful success. In the areas where Feed the Future worked, poverty, hunger, and child stunting all declined by 20-to-25 percent in its first decade of work, outpacing results seen in non-Feed the Future peer countries. Children's diets improved. Women played a greater, more empowered role in their households and their economies. Agricultural sales doubled every year since the Initiative began. And these results held, even in places beset by disasters, or where populations grew rapidly.

But we did not rest on these results. When Congress took the extraordinary measure of providing an additional \$1 billion in supplemental funds to Feed the Future efforts in 2022—a doubling of our annual budget and the first and only increase in funding since 2008—we undertook a massive effort to harness Feed the Future to “feed the present.” As food prices hit record highs following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, we rushed to get high-quality seeds, fertilizer, and financing to the markets and into the hands of some of the world's poorest farmers. By helping keep these markets open and prices down, we helped absorb the worst effects of the food crisis by strengthening local production.

This complement to humanitarian assistance—providing USAID with supplemental resources to keep farmers planting and the services they rely on running at a time of crisis—was a critically important Congressional decision. Using the Feed the Future development platform to respond to future shocks—alongside emergency food assistance—is one of the critical reforms we're embracing to strengthen and evolve the initiative and advance global food security objectives. The National Security Supplemental passed by this chamber last month included \$50 million in funds to

prevent and respond to global food insecurity. As the House hopefully takes up this critical package of assistance for our allies, it is important that humanitarian and development assistance remain key components alongside security assistance.

We're also doubling down on our partnerships with the private sector, through which we crowded-in almost \$700 million in private dollars in 2022. By tapping into the expertise and supply chains of companies like JR Simplot Company, McCormick Spices, and Walmart, we are helping open new markets for American businesses and global farmers at the same time. And by using public funds to "de-risk" the flow of private capital to small-and medium agribusinesses in Africa, rather than providing just grants, with the support of Congress, our new Financing Agricultural Small-and-Medium Enterprises in Africa (FASA) fund will catalyze up to a five-fold match by private financiers.

We're harnessing the latest technologies to bring innovation to the field to have more impactful results and help farmers decide how much fertilizer to apply. We are partnering with NASA and others to harness geospatial imaging to automatically trigger needed insurance payments, if weather patterns shift. Through our partnership universities, like with Pennsylvania State University, where we're harnessing AI to help farmers rapidly identify and addressing crop diseases and new pests; as well as bringing water pumps and drip irrigation systems to areas buffeted by droughts. We're also using the latest in genomics and lab techniques to develop climate resilient seeds and promote soil health. Today, no less than 15 percent of our budget is dedicated to

research, much of it in U.S.-based innovation labs, an effort strengthened by Special Envoy Fowler's Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils.

We're also focusing investments on women farmers who we know do most of the work, yet have the least access to quality seeds and inputs, and suffer the most when crisis strikes their fields. Women-managed farms are 24 percent less productive than male-managed farms of the same size, and women earn 82 cents for every dollar that men earn working in agriculture. If we simply close these gaps, global GDP would rise by nearly \$1 trillion, and 45 million fewer people would go hungry. As part of our new Generating Resilience and Opportunities for Women initiative, one-third of every dollar we spend through Feed the Future will go toward women's economic empowerment, essential targeted programming to yield the results I have been talking about.

We are doubling down on Feed the Future's core mandate, to concentrate bilateral investments in several countries that we know are most in need and are best poised for regional agricultural-led economic growth. Already, we've identified a subset of Feed the Future target countries in Southern Africa that, with adequate investment, we feel could give rise to a new regional breadbasket for the continent.

We welcome of course additional investment and attention to global food security, and are eager to partner with this Committee, and others, on how to best work towards those goals. For example, we welcome the opportunity to engage on the Global Food

Security Foundation legislation introduced by Senators Coons, Graham, and Boozman. As Congress thinks through such ideas, USAID can be a valuable partner.

While we are heartened by the progress we've made and optimistic about what our reforms will yield impact, we should again be clear-eyed about the circumstances the world faces. The current El Niño weather pattern has involved weather disruptions that spike food needs around the world—just last week, Zambia declared a national emergency following a month without rainfall. As the war in Sudan spills into the country's breadbasket just as the lean season begins, the threat of catastrophic famine is very real.

And in Gaza, the entire population, some 2.2 million people, is facing crisis levels of acute hunger. Administrator Power just returned from the region, where she joined President Biden, Secretary Blinken, and other Administration officials in continuing to call for expanding humanitarian access and, with international partners, scaling up the amount of life-saving aid we're getting into Gaza. That includes operating existing border crossings at Kerem Shalom and Rafah at full capacity, streamlining customs delays and easing restrictions on needed humanitarian goods, opening up additional land routes into Gaza, especially in the north, pursuing potential maritime routes, and conducting air drops. The use of air drops, typically a last resort, is a clear indication of how dire the humanitarian situation has become. Humanitarian air drops do not replace the necessity of overland aid delivery. We also need much stronger protections for humanitarian workers who are delivering life-saving aid, and ultimately, we urgently

need an immediate and sustained ceasefire during which assistance can flow and Israeli hostages can be reunited with their families.

There's no question that the state of global food security is disheartening after so many years of progress. But, the truth is, without American leadership and continued bipartisan congressional support, it would be far worse. Through the COVID pandemic, through yet another food price crisis, through Putin's attempts to shut down a global breadbasket in Ukraine, we persevered, and hundreds of millions of people benefitted. Children starved to skin and bone were revived; parents could feed their children without selling off all they owned; farmers from Kyiv to Kinshasa could sow their fields instead of letting them lie fallow.

After a career spent battling global hunger, I believe with your continued support, we can help to usher in a new era of resilience, agricultural transformation, trade, and global food security., and note that we are stronger economically when our developing country partners are stronger as well.