Why Food Security Matters

Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic, Energy and Environmental Policy

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Briefing from David Beasley, Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Merkley, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic, Energy and Environmental Policy, thank you for convening this hearing on "Why Food Security Matters."

This is a truly important topic and I commend the bipartisan efforts of this committee and its able staff to explore the issue of how feeding hungry people contributes to the economic and national security interests of the United States.

Today, I will provide a briefing relevant to this topic, on the World Food Program's efforts to bring peace and stability to troubled regions through not just short-term life-saving assistance, but also through a focus on long-term economic-development aid.

This brief is being provided on a voluntary basis and should not be understood to be a waiver, express or implied, of the privileges and immunities of the United Nations and its officials under the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.

I am about to hit my one-year anniversary as the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program, the world's leading humanitarian agency fighting hunger. Since I took office in April 2017, I've visited 36 countries. My travel falls into two basic categories: first, visits to donor countries to meet with leaders who help get us the funds we need to battle hunger and handle emergencies; and second, trips to where the real rubber meets the road – our operations that help feed 80 million people in 80 countries worldwide.

What I see happening out in the field is what I want to talk to you about this afternoon.

I've been to the four countries closest to famine: Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria and Somalia – all filled with hungry people because of man-made conflict. I've seen the wounds on the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. I've talked to those fleeing fighting in Central African Republic, and people desperate to return to their small farms in Democratic Republic of the Congo. I've visited hard-to-reach, war-torn areas of Syria and talked to Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The link between conflict and hunger is tragically strong. More conflict leads to more hunger. And it works the other way, too – persistent hunger creates the kind of instability that leads to more conflict.

Our fellow brothers and sisters pay the largest price for this repeating cycle. But nations, regions and continents do too.

Hunger and conflict destabilize and destroy. The inability to feed your family can force good people to face impossible choices – horrible choices. With no other options to put food on the table, you may take on considerable risk and move somewhere else. Or even more horrible choices, such as trading sex for food. Arranging an early marriage for your daughter – even though she's still a child. Or joining a violent radical group. These are just a few of the extreme actions people may be forced to take when they have no other way to get food.

Hunger and conflict combine forces to create fertile ground for extremist groups to do even more damage.

We must do more to break this cycle. We must work together on a pro-active, strategic plan that creates stability and security. A plan that gives people hope that they can live and work and play in the place they truly call home.

Last month, I spoke at the Munich Security Conference, the most prominent gathering of national defense and security experts in the world. Discussions I had at this conference reinforced my view that it's time to stop thinking that national security, or global stability, can be achieved without effective humanitarian assistance. Fundamentally, as long as there is severe hunger, the world cannot reach genuine stability and security.

While security actors and humanitarians have different roles, their work is complementary. As German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said in Munich, "security and development, joined together, create lasting stability."

If we don't work together, the consequences are catastrophic. We'll have more hunger, we'll have more conflict, we'll see stronger extremist groups and forced migration will increase to numbers I believe we've never seen. And because of all this, I believe the United States and other leading powers will need to deploy their military forces at a greater rate and a much greater cost than they would have ever had to, if we'd just worked together more to achieve food security.

State of Food Security

In 2016, the last year for which figures are available, the number of chronically hungry people in the world went up for the first time in a decade – to 815 million, from 777 million the year before.

And 108 million people – up from 80 million the year before -- are acutely hungry. These are people who need emergency assistance because they have no other way to get the food they need to stay alive.

Conflict is to blame for nearly all this rise in hunger. Ten out of the 13 largest hunger crises in the world are conflict-driven and today fighting and violence drives over 80 percent of all humanitarian needs.

In fact, some of the people I meet are more desperate for peace than they are for food. Just about every conflict-laden area I visit, the people we are feeding ask for help in creating peace.

These conflict areas are home, unfortunately, to 60 percent of the food insecure people around the world. And the consequences of conflict and hunger are most severe on children. Hunger, malnutrition and poor health often lead to stunting – a phrase used to describe severely impaired growth in these young bodies. Three out of every four stunted children in the world lives in a conflict area.

Instability

This vast link between food insecurity and conflict contributes to other serious issues within these nations.

As your colleague and my friend Senator Pat Roberts says: "Show me a nation that cannot feed itself, and I'll show you a nation in chaos."

Broadly, as our affiliate WFP-USA reports in "*Winning the Peace: Hunger and Instability,"* research shows that food insecurity produces instability, and instability produces food insecurity.

It's not surprising that just about every country near the bottom of the World Bank's Political Stability Index has a high degree of food insecurity and near-constant conflict within its borders.

Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic… the list goes on. They are all plagued by violence and home to millions of hungry people.

The world spent $27 billion on humanitarian assistance in 2016 – but almost *half* of it went to just four conflict-laden countries: Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Sudan. Forty-four other countries got the rest. In some cases, what they received covered as little as five percent of the total need.

Even small improvements in stability would make a difference for the humanitarian budget. For example, if the Somalia could improve just enough to be as stable as Kenya, WFP alone would save a total of $80.3 million a year in food assistance costs.

There *are* countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ghana and Botswana where humanitarian assistance is zero. And, not surprisingly, those countries have no conflict and much lower food insecurity.

If we are truly going to get to stability, we need peaceful resolution of conflicts. But at a very minimum, warring parties must commit to observe International Humanitarian Law, protect civilians and allow free-passage of humanitarian goods and services to reach those in need.

The Threat From Extremism

The conditions that lead to instability are like fertilizer for violent extremism. Extremist groups are always looking for new foot soldiers and hunger makes their recruiting efforts far too easy.

As the United Nations Development Programme said in a report last year, "where there is injustice, deprivation and desperation, violent extremist ideologies present themselves as a challenge to the status quo and a form of escape."

Sometimes, it's even simpler than that. These extremist groups sometimes present themselves as the only way to survive. One woman in Syria told our researchers, "The men had to join extremist groups to be able to feed us. It was the only option."

Perhaps the most prominent example of how a hunger crisis played into the hands of extremists came in 2011 in Somalia, where drought, a food price spike and civil war converged in a famine that killed a quarter of a million people.

It has been documented by researchers that during this time, al-Shabaab was keeping humanitarians from getting to hungry people *and* it was even offering money to enlist in its movement. One UN official called the famine "a boon" for al-Shabaab's recruitment efforts.

The African people are paying the price of this extremism. Secretary of State Tillerson noted last week that terrorist attacks in Africa have risen; there were less than 300 in 2009, but in the last three years there were more than 1,500 of them each year.

It would be wrong to suggest that all – or even most – hungry people are violent or immediately given to violent extremism. But we have seen how hunger, marginalization, and frustration are capable of driving people— especially youth— into insurgencies and extremist organizations.

The failure to meet the needs of these people serves to foster further frustration, increasing the pool of candidates who feel forced by need and desperation to join these movements, leading to increased food insecurity from violence and economic disruptions, completing the circle.

People should not have to choose between feeding their family or resorting to violent extremism—we have the tools through food assistance to eliminate that awful choice. Food assistance through WFP and other U.S. partners can save lives and create the space and time necessary to arrive at political solutions that avoid or end these conflicts.

It is also *very* important to note that the World Food Program is fully committed to humanitarian law and its principles. We do not take sides in conflicts; we feed the hungry and vulnerable wherever they are.

But we are "on" the side of security and stability… of conditions that make it possible for people to feel safe … safe enough to know they can live with their families in peace and with enough food.

Migration Pressure

Food insecurity and instability also clearly lead to more migration. Our own research shows that for each 1 percent increase in hunger, there is a 2 percent increase in migration.

The refugees and asylum seekers are moving because they feel they have no choice. None of them really want to move. Nearly every single Syrian we talked to in our report, "At the Root of Exodus" said they wanted to go back to Syria if and when it was secure and stable at home. And the research shows that people displaced by violence in Syria, for example, will not move out of the country until they have moved at least three times inside the country.

They want to stay home. Badly. Here's what one said: "Lots of people would rather die in Syria than be a refugee somewhere else."

It doesn't surprise me: people want to stay with their families, with familiar surroundings, in the place they call home. Sometimes they will stay at great risk to their own personal safety.

But sometimes there's a tipping point.

When humanitarian assistance was cut in mid-2015 in Syria, asylum applications to Europe spiked from 10,000 a month to 60,000 a month. The risk of moving became lower than the risk of staying.

We're seeing this kind of risk calculation now being made in Africa. The danger of crossing the Mediterranean is great, but so is the danger from conflict, hunger and extreme poverty – the established triggers of migration.

Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees shows that in 2016, 730,000 people from Africa came to Europe as refugees or asylum seekers. That's more than double the 360,000 who came in 2010.

Some of the largest increases came from countries in the Sahel or sub-Saharan Africa – Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria and Gambia. Asylum seekers and refugees also came from other countries in dire straits – the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, for example.

Much of the burden for migration does not actually fall on wealthier nations – 86 percent of refugees worldwide are hosted by developing countries.

When the refugees do move to places like Europe, though, it dramatically increases the cost of providing humanitarian assistance. For example, it costs about 50 cents per day to provide food to someone who is internally displaced within Syria – still one of the most expensive places for humanitarian assistance.

But if that same person becomes a refugee in Germany, the German people spend 50 *Euros* per day on social support programs. It's not quite an apples-to-apples comparison because the German assistance includes more than just food, but the gap is so large that it is still a valid illustration of how much cheaper it would be if we can easily and effectively reach people where they want to be – their own homeland.

Africa and the Sahel

Most of the countries in Africa, including those in the Sahel region, have abundant natural resources, plenty of arable land and young populations available to work.

As Secretary Tillerson noted last week, by the year 2030, Africa will represent about one-quarter of the world's workforce. And the World Bank estimates that six of the ten fastest growing economies in the world this year will be African.

But also present in Africa is government neglect and corruption, high amounts of food insecurity, near-constant conflict in some countries, climate-related challenges such as droughts, and in some cases, active violent ideological extremist groups.

In the five countries at the core of the Sahel -- Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauritania, acute malnutrition has risen 30 percent in the past five years.

Because of these conditions, a toxic wind blows from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. And we've got to have a better, more targeted and effective strategy to deal with it. If we don't, the migration that could come would make the Syrian refugee crisis look like a picnic**.**

The Humanitarian-Economic Development Nexus

In some of these areas, food has become a weapon of war. Access to food is blocked, in part to subjugate other combatants. And in some cases, as I mentioned, it's become a recruitment tool for groups.

But I believe food can be a weapon of peace**.** And it shouldn't be *just* food.

What is needed is a properly funded, coordinated strategic plan – one that involves work from other UN agencies, NGOs and national governments alike. It should be implemented over the long-term and grounded in international humanitarian law and principles.

This work could ensure true stability in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

True stability would mean having the conditions that help a family, a community, a region take care of itself. Of course, that starts with food. It has to, because nothing else can happen when everyone's hungry. But it also means schools and water and roads and governance and a dozen other things.

Simply feeding people and handling emergencies just isn't enough for long-term success. I do not mean to discount those tasks. Food assistance is definitely the starting point for any long-term program, and without food assistance now, we would have several countries in famine right now.

But the true task ahead requires more than saving lives, it requires changing them.

A WFP program in Niger is already showing how this works. Since 2014, we have been working with several partner organizations to help more than 250,000 in about 35 communes, or towns, with a multi-sector approach that builds resilience and stability.

Among other family assistance aspects, the programs include:

- Land regeneration and water harvesting
- Working with women's groups to plant tree nurseries and community gardens
- School meals through community gardens

Internal and external research show very positive results from this effort. Agriculture productivity in these communes has doubled and in some cases tripled. Because of increased land vegetation – up to as much as 80 percent in some areas – there is less invasion of animals onto agricultural lands. Those animal invasions onto someone else's farmland contribute to inter-communal violence, so that reduction is an important part of social cohesion. And finally, young men are migrating less, instead staying home to work in the fields and provide stability for their community's future.

Thanks to this success, we are now developing a "transition strategy" for some households, helping them move to host-government and/or partner safety net programs because they will no longer need WFP's help.

We are encouraging donor governments to work more directly with us in these kind of programs, instead of doing them in isolation, so we can achieve these results on a larger scale.

For example, in 2016, we had 10 million people in 52 countries in Food Assistance for Assets programs. They were building roads, planting trees, and working on irrigation, water ponds and other agriculture-related projects. The projects not only gave them hope but enabled them to build up their own communities.

Another key component of this pro-development strategy starts younger – with school children.

In 2016, we directly fed 16 million children with school meals in 60 countries, and we gave support that enabled food for another 45 million children.

It's enormously cost-effective – on average, WFP spends $50 to feed a child in school *for an entire year.* That means, on average, we spend 25 cents per meal – just 10 percent of the average cost of a school meal in the United States.

There's something truly important about this school feeding program that's more than just the food and how cheap we can get it to the lunch table.

For some parents, the food is the *reason* they send their child to school. It's assurance that they will indeed be fed.

And I think it does *more* than that. Those children sit down, and talk, and laugh together while eating. I think that time helps these children see each other as people. That meal binds them together. And when they're older, those bonds are harder to break.

Just this week, I received a note from Hatem Ben Salem, the Minister of Education in Tunisia that discussed how help from WFP is putting school meals at the heart of education reform in his country. These reforms are designed to keep children in school, a key part of that country's efforts to improve stability.

But what impressed me most was the Minister's "warm memory" of his own experience with school meals as a child.

"Lunchtime at school offered an opportunity for children from diverse backgrounds, rich and poor, to sit around a table and share a hot meal. The image of the two hands shaking, which portrayed the support and solidarity of the American people through USAID, is still in my memory as a symbol of equality of opportunity and social cohesion in my country," he wrote.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I'd like to submit the note from Hatem Ben Salem for the hearing record.

The minister's memory reminds me of my own childhood, in a little town called Lamar, South Carolina. It was a tense, controversial time back then, in the early 1970s, when schools were being desegregated across the South.

I stayed in the public schools, because my parents strongly believed in the power of public education. And like a lot of kids, I played sports. Most of my friends did too, and a lot of times they'd stop at our house for dinner as they walked home from practice.

I remember learning that that meal, courtesy of my mother's Southern cooking, was one of two that some of my teammates would have that day. The other would be the lunch provided to them for free in school.

Every so often, I run into one of those teammates when I'm back home. We see each other as old friends, regardless of our faith traditions or what our skin color is or who we voted for in the last election.

A meal cannot solve all of society's problems, but my experience, and the experience of Minister Ben Salem, suggests that it is fundamental and does have power to bridge barriers. So, my big dream is to make sure that every child who gets assistance from WFP gets in a school meals program. And every able-bodied beneficiary is in a food-for-assets program.

Breaking Down Bureaucracy

One of the biggest challenges we have is the siloed nature of not just the U.N., but our donors as well. Those of us in the U.N. can take some blame for not doing a good enough job of breaking out of boxes. There's too much worrying about who will get the credit.

We are also trying to break down barriers between donor countries, so money that comes to WFP can encourage, not discourage, long-term strategic planning and execution. More than 90 percent of the money we get is earmarked, not just for specific countries, but specific activities within them. So, for example, in many cases we can't build roads to connect farmers to markets, even if we have the qualified teams who could do just that.

The United States has long been in a leader in delivering flexible funding – it is by far and away our most flexible donor. I commend the leadership of President Trump's Administration, including my friends Sonny Perdue, the Secretary of Agriculture, and Mark Green, USAID Administrator.

We Are Your Offense *and* Defense

My hope for the near future is that those who work hard on security issues can draw more attention to the role fighting hunger can play in reducing security threats. This is happening on the international front, for example, as the Netherlands and Switzerland are pursuing Security Council attention on hunger.

Global military spending is now at $2 trillion a year, but I believe that food and other essential humanitarian assistance can also be a very cost-effective way of creating stability. Or as Secretary of Defense Mattis has said, effective humanitarian assistance means he needs to buy fewer bullets.

The humanitarian and security sectors are of course different, with different roles. But we are united in the desire for peace and stability. And I believe that our work at WFP – along with bags of food stamped, "from the American People" -- makes the work of others easier – and less dangerous.

Our work towards Zero Hunger is a way to be on *offense,* because it paves the way for those in the security sector to set different priorities, maybe even moving out of some countries or regions.

And if we can truly achieve Zero Hunger, we will be the best *defense* for the nations of the world. We'll create stability that reduces the risk of conflict.

We'll be doing it for people like Nyalam, and her three-month-old girl named Rejoice, whom I met when I was in South Sudan last year. She said, "I would like God to touch the hearts of the people who are fighting so they can live in peace and allow us to live in peace. Because we really don't know what they are fighting for."

I want Nyalam and her little girl to be able to live, go to school, work their fields and pursue their dreams. If we can help them do that, we'll truly be saving lives and changing lives. And it will help everyone, around the world.