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Feeding More for Less in Niger

By SOPHIA MURPHY

THE famine unfolding today in Niger has too many familiar characteristics. One of the poorest countries in the world is in a deadly crisis - one foreseen and ignored until the cost of intervention had jumped from \$1 per child to \$80, according to the United Nations.

Many people have died and more will die in the coming weeks and months because rich countries failed to respond in time. United Nations agencies first appealed for money and food in November, but governments have only started to respond seriously in the last few weeks.

It does not have to be this way. Swift and smart reforms to outdated American food-aid programs can move us toward preventing such crises rather than cleaning up after them.

In a study I did this year with Kathleen McAfee, a geographer at the University of California, Berkeley, we concluded that the United States' food-aid system has two main problems - ones that other major donor countries have already taken steps to solve.

First, almost all the aid is in the form of food produced in the United States. The government buys food from American commodity traders. The food is fortified, bagged and shipped by American firms. This approach usually results in costs well over market rate for food, handling and transport. The emphasis on using American commodities and firms is grossly inefficient and means that food is slow to arrive where it is needed. It also prevents the establishment of local food systems.

Most other major donors, particularly those in the European Union, give money instead of food. This frees agencies like the United Nations World Food Program to buy food from farmers near the affected country - farmers who are often very poor - and to send the food quickly where it is most needed.

To its credit, the Bush administration proposed designating an additional \$300 million for food to be bought from local or regional sources this year, but Congress rejected the proposal.

The second major problem is that the United States sells some of its food aid. It is the only country other than South Korea to sell food aid (albeit for less than commercial prices) or give it to intermediaries that then sell it. Private American aid organizations receive American food aid and sometimes sell the food at local markets to raise money for their other aid programs in the country. Governments of recipient countries also sell food aid at local markets to raise money. The result is a subsidized sale that creates unfair competition for local farmers and commercial traders.

The current system ensures that the United States' food aid falls far short of its potential. While our food aid saves lives, it could save many more. And most important, the system fails to strengthen food production and systems of food distribution in vulnerable countries. If we want our contributions to tackle the root causes of hunger, then the United States government needs to make immediate changes to the food-aid system.

It should transition to cash-based aid and phase out sales of food aid. The United States also needs to work with other donors and local governments to establish regional reserves in the most vulnerable parts of the world so that local authorities and private agencies can respond to crises quickly. The government should make multi-year guaranteed donations to the World Food Program so that the agency has the financial reserves to allow it plan its responses to emerging crises. The United States should also simplify its food aid system, which consists of six different programs administered by two agencies.

The best food aid is flexible, timely, responsive and provides a buffer for tragic food shortfalls caused by devastation from disease, war or nature, while strengthening the systems of food production and distribution in the countries and regions it is trying to help.

Food-aid donations from the United States to Niger, recently doubled with a pledge to reach \$13 million in 2005, could save many more lives if we change the way we spend the money. We should work not only to prevent every death we can in Niger today, but also to ensure that the children and grandchildren of those affected by this crisis can look back on it as an exception rather than a norm.

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