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Background Paper

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How the U.S. Farm Bill Can Help End Hunger

The U.S. Farm Bill not only sets most U.S. agriculture policies, but also authorizes both federal nutrition assistance programs and humanitarian relief for hunger emergencies overseas.

This wide scope makes the Farm Bill vital not only to farmers, but to other residents of rural areas, people anywhere in the United States who do not have enough money for food, and countries where many people struggle with hunger and malnutrition.

The Farm Bill can help put the United States on track to end food insecurity and hunger in our country and save millions of lives overseas. To do so, it must be designed with strong and resilient food systems and good nutrition as its top priorities.

Of course, producing sufficient nutritious food for all is essential to ending hunger. The Farm Bill provides critical protections for U.S. agriculture, particularly for the land we need to grow crops both now and in the future. Taking care of the land includes, for example, supporting high-quality soil, seeds, and water; introducing effective new farming techniques; and developing strategies to help the agriculture sector adapt to changing conditions.

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Simply growing enough healthy food is not enough to end hunger in the United States, however. People must also be able to afford to buy these foods. The Farm Bill supports this part of the solution through its funding for federal nutrition

programs, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Bread for the World supports Farm Bill policies—and federal budget allocations—that ensure that all Americans get enough to eat and that help give malnourished people around the world opportunities to build a better life for themselves and their children. Some of the most significant ways that the upcoming 2018 Farm Bill can fulfill its potential to reduce U.S.



The Farm Bill is particularly important for children, who need nutritious foods to grow, learn, and become healthy adults.

Joseph Moller/Bread for the World

and global hunger include strengthening the U.S. nutrition safety net, promoting better nutrition both in the United States and in developing countries, and ensuring that timely help reaches people caught in hunger crises around the world.

The Farm Bill and Protecting Americans from Hunger and Poor Nutrition

SNAP is designed to help cushion the U.S. population from the impact of economic hard times. And, as intended, during the past decade's Great Recession and the halting, uneven economic recovery that followed, record numbers of people turned to SNAP benefits to help put food on the table. In the spring of 2013, nearly *one in six* Americans met SNAP eligibility criteria and were receiving benefits.

As the economy made a more sustained and widespread recovery, however, the proportion of people who were either unemployed, or working at jobs that did not pay enough for them to afford to buy enough food, began to decline, as did participation in SNAP. As a “counter-cyclical” program, SNAP expands during economic downturns, when more people are



The Farm Bill includes provisions to help protect the land we need to grow food for our country.

struggling to put food on the table. As the economy improves, fewer people need SNAP benefits, and fewer participate.

SNAP helps both the tens of millions of Americans who participate and the national economy. It enables families to buy food at grocery stores and other retailers, and it generates sales for those businesses. There is also evidence that nutrition assistance has value over the longer term. In the 1960s, when SNAP's predecessor, the Food Stamp Program, was new and being phased in, researchers compared communities that were already receiving food stamps with comparable ones that were not. Decades later, adults who had received food stamps as children were significantly more likely to be in good health. They also had higher education levels, higher employment and earnings, and lower poverty rates.¹

SNAP is an investment in the country's present and future well-being. As valuable as SNAP is, however, it could be even more effective with higher benefit levels. The average benefit is \$124.97 per month per person, or less than \$1.40 per meal. Even with careful budgeting, shopping, and cooking, this is often not enough.

Studies consistently show that monthly SNAP benefits cannot sustain a family for the entire month. Another sign that benefits often cannot be stretched to cover the entire month is that participants consume between 10 percent and 25 percent fewer calories in the last days of the month than in the first days.²

Dwindling resources at the end of the month affect families' health and well-being. A study of nine years of data in California showed a 27 percent increase in hospitalizations³ for low blood sugar (closely tied to diet, particularly in people with diabetes) in the fourth week of the month over the first week—

for low-income patients only. Patients who were not poor did not have a spike in hospital admissions.

In addition to provisions in the Farm Bill on SNAP and several smaller nutrition programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which includes support for food banks, there are other ways that the 2018 Farm Bill could promote better nutrition. Some of these are supporting farmers who produce foods such as fruits and vegetables that are high in essential nutrients; scaling up incentive programs that encourage people to buy healthy foods; and improving access to healthy foods in low-income communities. Programs that could help expand access to healthy foods include, for example, the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives Program, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative,

and community partnerships such as the Hunger-Free Communities model. Such public-private partnerships are essential to ending U.S. hunger for good.

Even beyond the many benefits to individuals, families, and communities of better health and nutrition, there would also be a significant financial savings from better nutrition. This is because the cost of hunger and poor nutrition is borne not only by individuals, but by the U.S. healthcare system.

As Bread for the World Institute points out in its 2016 Hunger Report, *The Nourishing Effect*, poor nutrition, whatever form it takes, not only causes medical problems for individuals but also adds to national healthcare costs. Research by Children's Health Watch, using conservative assumptions and figures, found that hunger and food insecurity alone cost the U.S. healthcare system at least \$160 billion a year in unnecessary costs.

This \$160 billion does not include the additional healthcare costs caused by overweight and obesity, which were not part of the Children's Health Watch research but are common problems among all U.S. income groups. The obesity epidemic is caused in large part by poor diets and has led to soaring rates of diabetes and other chronic illnesses that, even setting aside for a moment the human costs, can be very expensive to treat.

The Farm Bill and Responding to Hunger and Malnutrition Overseas

The Farm Bill is the main vehicle for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contributions to reducing global hunger and malnutrition. USDA administers the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program, which is included in the Farm Bill. McGovern-Dole

provides food, mostly U.S. farm commodities, for school meal programs in developing countries. Since it began in 2002, the program has reached 40 million children with food at school, including 2.9 million in 2015 (most recent data). McGovern-Dole currently operates in 24 countries.

Children who eat at school through McGovern-Dole have better attendance and higher overall food security. Schools that offer meals also have higher student enrollment rates. In recent years, the program has increasingly focused on the nutritional quality of the meals it provides and on nutrition education.

McGovern-Dole is especially important for girls, because if meals are provided, they are less likely to leave school to work or marry. In addition to the value of better nutrition and more education for the girls themselves, educating girls moves entire nations forward. A large part of the significant decline in child malnutrition in recent decades, for example, is directly attributable to increased female educational attainment.⁴

Continued robust funding for McGovern-Dole is thus important, as is increasing attention to improving nutrition in school meals. The McGovern-Dole program could become even more valuable by exploring strategies for improving the nutrition of adolescent girls. Adolescents are often low on iron in particular, which is harmful not only to their current well-being and energy levels, but to their likelihood of safe childbirths and the health of their newborns later. In fact, iron deficiency anemia is the cause of one in five deaths in childbirth. The McGovern-Dole program could use school meals programs as a distribution network for supplements of essential nutrients to adolescents.

The U.S. Farm Bill also sets policies for Food for Peace, the principal U.S. program providing assistance in hunger emergencies and recovery efforts around the world. At this writing, Food for Peace is responding to an unprecedented constellation of needs that includes more than 60 million people forced out of their homes as well as famine or near-famine situations that threaten the lives of at least 20 million people in four countries.

U.S. food assistance programs should continue to update and modernize to allow them to operate more efficiently and help more people in need, while enabling communities confronting high levels of malnutrition to get the

right kind of food assistance at the right time. Eliminating the need for development organizations to sell commodities to pay for other needed items, known as “monetization,” is one example of how food assistance programs could be made more efficient. Local or regional purchases of food, cash assistance, and U.S.-grown in-kind food commodities all have a role to play in responding to the needs of people in crisis and post-crisis situations.

Food for Peace should also increase its focus on improving the nutritional quality of food assistance, particularly for very young children. Supplies of staple food commodities—the proverbial bag of rice—are important in meeting the need for calories. But they cannot meet all of people’s nutritional needs, particularly those of pregnant women and children under 2. The “1,000 Days” between pregnancy and age 2 is the most critical nutrition window in a person’s life. Babies and toddlers are particularly vulnerable to lack of proper nutrients. They are more likely to die if they become malnourished than older children or adults, and those who survive often suffer from stunting—irreversible lifelong damage to their health and development.

A greater focus on the nutritional needs of pregnant women



Refugees are disproportionately women and young children, so humanitarian assistance is most effective when it meets their special nutritional needs.

and young children is particularly important for Food for Peace because the majority of refugees are women and children. Thus, refugees and displaced people have disproportionate numbers of pregnant women, babies, and toddlers.

Food for Peace also focuses on supporting communities facing hunger and poverty by helping them develop resilience to repeated shocks such as drought. This includes identifying viable alternative farming or livelihoods strategies—another way the 2018 Farm Bill can contribute to ending hunger and malnutrition.

In 2016, Congress passed the Global Food Security Act with broad bipartisan support. The legislation requires the administration to develop and implement a Global Food Security Strategy that emphasizes nutrition and food system resilience. The administration released its initial Strategy in September 2016. It brings together 11 government agencies to work toward ending hunger and malnutrition—an encouraging sign of U.S. engagement in the goal to eliminate hunger by 2030.

The Farm Bill should update the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy. Augmenting U.S. emphases and funding on research on specialty crops and conservation agriculture will benefit U.S. agriculture as well as agriculture in developing countries. The Farm Bill should include incentives for U.S. land-grant universities to partner with researchers in developing countries.

Moving Forward

The 2018 Farm Bill could end hunger and promote better nutrition in the United States and around the world by:

- Protecting SNAP and strengthening benefits to reflect the cost of a healthy diet
- Scaling up incentive programs that encourage people to buy healthy foods
- Supporting farmers who produce foods such as fruits and vegetables that are high in essential nutrients
- Improving access to healthy foods in low-income communities through efforts such as Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, and community partnership efforts such as the Hunger-Free Communities model
- Continuing robust funding for the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program and Food for Peace
- Continuing to increase the effectiveness of existing international food assistance programs, enabling U.S. assistance to reach millions more people at no additional cost
- Increasing Food for Peace's focus on improving the nutritional quality of food assistance, particularly for very young children

Endnotes

¹ Hilary Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, "Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net," *American Economic Review*, 106(4): 2016, 903–934.

² White House Council of Economic Advisors, Long-Term Benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Bill, December 8, 2015, pp. 31–32. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>

[gov/blog/2015/12/08/new-cea-report-finds-snap-benefits-are-crucial-families-sometimes-inadequate](https://www.breadfortheworld.org/blog/2015/12/08/new-cea-report-finds-snap-benefits-are-crucial-families-sometimes-inadequate)

³ Hilary Seligman et al., "Exhaustion of Food Benefits at Month's End and Admissions for Hypoglycemia," *Health Affairs* (Milwood), 2014 January; 33(1): 116–123.

⁴ Lisa C. Smith, Lawrence James Haddad, IFPRI. Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: A Cross-Country Analysis, p. xi. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=cFvJ39bkNikC&oi=fnd&pg=PR4&dq=Haddad+IFPRI+female+educational+attainment+and+child+malnutrition&ots=U0JgOUye_G&sig=hvq3gtP18JT_iZ386N2x41TVg#v=onepage&q&f=false



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