

Improving US Food Aid

Changes in food program will feed more of the world's malnourished

By Lane Vandervliet

A DEBATE gone unnoticed in the press, yet one vitally important, deals with the future of the PL-480 program, the US food assistance program. The image of food assistance is feeding the hungry. But most of the program is far from doing that.

Most of the program is also far from promoting food security, which is the development aim of the program. This is especially for

What is principally in contention are the "Title 1" programs, which form over half of PL-480. Under Title 1, the US government provides food commodities to developing country governments by extending them long-term low interest loans.

The country government then sells food to those who can afford to pay (meaning malnourished people receive a small percentage of food) and uses the currency obtained for its own purposes, subject to certain conditions imposed by the US government. The conditions are supposed to promote food security.

gram, which include promoting economic development, US foreign policy objectives, and markets for US agricultural goods, have resulted in a slow and ineffectual bureaucratic process. Major and many minor decisions are made by a food aid committee comprised of the Agency for International Development, OMB, and the Departments of Agriculture, State, and Treasury.

The third and most fundamental criticism is that the PL-480 program, aside from the emergency feeding program and some other "Title 2" programs, could be doing much more to prevent malnutrition. In part this is a function of concerns already mentioned: Politics, not prevention, tends to govern much of the allocation. A cumbersome administration impedes the not very easy task of preventing malnutrition.

There are other problems. Developing country governments are mainly interested in obtaining much needed government revenue through the PL-480 program, and significantly less interested in finding ways to benefit malnourished people - typically less influential politically. Within the AID, PL-480 in general and the food security of malnourished people in particular, have suffered from what can charitably be described as "benign neglect." For example, the PL-480 program has only one nutritionist - who doesn't even work as a nutritionist but as an overall program evaluator. The average school district spends more on nutritionists than the \$1.4 billion PL-480 program. Moreover, there is no substantive link between the AID nutrition staff and the principal nutrition resource of the US government, the PL-480 program.

We are entering a new era. PL-480, which once disposed of surplus crops, now has to buy food on the open market with real money. We have to decide: Are we getting our money's worth? And as cold-war concerns are reduced, it will be more possible than ever for the nations of the world to unite to resolve major world problems, which will be a great contribution to world peace. There is no more urgent problem than world hunger, and there is no program that can or should make a bigger difference in reducing world hunger than a redirected PL-480.

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the most "food insecure" - the over 350 million malnourished people in the world, including 150 million children.

To address the major problems, two of the three congressional committees with jurisdiction - the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Agriculture Committee - have proposed the greatest changes in the program since its inception. One key change is opposed by the administration, and has not been adopted by the third committee, the House Agriculture Committee. Thus the fate of the changes remains unclear as the House and Senate begin consideration of the farm bills, including PL-480.

The emergency feeding programs, about 16 percent of the program, are not in contention.

There are at least three major criticisms of the program.

First, the developmental direction of the program has been usurped to a great extent by political concerns. In 1989, the top 10 countries receiving food assistance (in order) were Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Morocco, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Sudan, Jamaica, and Sri Lanka.

The food allocation levels of only three countries, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, did not seem to be strongly influenced by political considerations. Egypt and El Salvador, for example, receive far more aid per capita than Africa and Asia, where malnutrition is far more prevalent.

The second criticism is that the multiple objectives of the pro-