

The United States and the First UN Millennium Development Goal

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About 963 million people around the world suffer from chronic hunger, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, which is a little over three times the population of the United States. Global hunger statistics are often difficult to conceptualize, and when faced with such a large number, one often wonders just where to begin, or if the problem can actually be solved.

Hunger is sometimes described in terms of food insecurity. Food security is defined by CRS as a situation in which all people, at all times, have both physical and economic access to sufficient food and water to meet their needs for a productive and healthy life today, and the good health to use it properly, without undermining future food security. Another way of saying this is that food security is a combination of three critical components: availability, access and utilization. Food must be available, either through local production, local stores or markets, or imported from other regions or countries. Access means being able to obtain it either by growing it yourself or being able to afford it -- physical and economic accessibility. People must also know how to utilize food properly; maximizing the nutritional value and making sure those in most need are appropriately fed. Sometimes, even within households, those who need the best diets like growing children and mothers, have the poorest diets in the family. The view of food security as a combination of availability, access and utilization can best be addressed by holistic and integrated programs that work at the individual, household, community, institutional/structural, or even at national levels.

As a way to address this daunting problem of global hunger and poverty, the United Nations created a set of nine Millennium Development Goals as a global response to a global problem. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) grew out of a gathering of world leaders in 2000 to commit countries around the world to reduce poverty with a deadline of 2015. The declaration was endorsed by 198 countries (including the United States) and then developed into a roadmap with specific goals. The goals represent reducing hunger and poverty, poor health, gender inequality, improving education, access to clean water and minimizing environmental degradation. Goal number one is to cut in half by 2015, the number of people in the world who live on less than one dollar a day, and the number of people suffering from hunger.

Today, we're roughly at the halfway mark and the MDGs are far from being achieved globally. Some countries and regions are doing much better than others, but regardless of whether the goals are met by 2015 the MDGs are not a failure. Instead, they set very clear and measurable goals for each country and publish the ongoing status for the entire world to see. In this way, governments that might be embarrassed by slow progress will be prompted by published figures to develop MDG strategies, or step up the pace of current efforts. The MDGs also alert donor countries about areas of greatest need. The MDGs through continual monitoring also uncover success stories and policies that might be adopted by other countries. In short, the MDGs keep the focus of poverty and hunger high on the list of global development goals and help frame discussions at the UN, donor conferences and within the development community as a whole.

Although the United States is a signatory to the declaration it has no office devoted to combating international hunger or furthering any of the MDGs. Instead, because US food aid programs have been such a prominent feature of the US hunger strategy since the 1950s and have been a steady, albeit diminishing resource, many organizations fighting hunger today rally around food aid as the only current response to the problem. Most of food aid programs are managed out of the Office for Food for Peace housed in the US Agency for International Development. Growing out of the void of not addressing international hunger comprehensively over the decades, the Office of Food for Peace has become the defacto US office on hunger, although with a very limited mandate and budget. By their own accounting, of the estimated 963 million chronically hungry in the world, total US food aid reaches only 50-70 million people every year. At best, this leaves over 90% of the problem still unaddressed. If the US doubled its only resource devoted solely for addressing global hunger (food aid), we would still reach at best about 15% of those suffering.

National governments play a key role in poverty and hunger reduction through the policies and programs they set in place. Therefore, national governments across the developing world need to be included in a partnership that couples international development assistance with incentives for policy reform. If the United States were to fully embrace the first MDG with a comprehensive coordinated effort, how would such a strategy be carried out? To adequately address hunger, a combination of food aid, other foreign assistance as well as leverage mechanisms all need to be put in place. Without a coordinating office in the US Government, such a strategy is unlikely to be implemented as the offices responsible for these different components are spread across the US Government. Unfortunately, under current law there is no such office mandated to conceptualize global issues related to hunger and coordinate a comprehensive response.

A US Office on Hunger would not only show the world the United States is making a real commitment to the issue of hunger, it would also direct US Government agencies with foreign responsibilities to take active steps to further the MDGs. A significant component of the global hunger puzzle lies in the role developing countries play in establishing policies and programs that fight hunger and poverty. The United States can influence these policies through diplomatic means. In looking at published agendas over the last two presidencies of head of state meetings between India and the United States, the issue of India's progress in fighting hunger within its borders was never discussed, even though India is home to 39% of the world's undernourished children. One can speculate about the different reasons this was not discussed, but if there were an Office on Hunger, at least there would be an entity within the US Government fighting to get these issues on agendas of high level bilateral meetings. Another lever of influence lies with the State Department. The US State Department carries out diplomatic strategies around the world on a wide range of issues and often monitors progress on key issues prompting on-going discussions with foreign governments. Bilateral trade negotiations are yet another way the United States engages in detailed policy discussions with foreign governments on everything from national banking laws to the Endangered Species Act. Could specific benchmarks on policies that address the underlying causes of hunger be put in place as a component to trade agreements? If specific language were to be inserted into legislation that impinges on trade, the United States Trade Representative would be mandated to cover anti-hunger policies in all bilateral trade negotiations. The first step for the Administration, of course, would be to determine what policies and programs are most effective in combating hunger in the developing world.

In July 2008, a core group of anti-hunger groups representing both implementers and advocates got together to create a comprehensive plan for new Administration to enhance the US role in realizing the first UN Millennium Development Goal. After six months of hard work, the Roadmap to End Hunger was negotiated and written by the group. In February 2009, the Roadmap was endorsed by over 30 national hunger organizations and presented to both the Administration and Congress. Sometime in the Spring of 2009, legislation based on the Roadmap will be introduced in Congress.

Meanwhile, what can the average citizen do in response to such a staggering global problem? As food aid has become synonymous with the US fight against hunger in many circles, even while food aid's positive impact remains important yet small in relation to the global need, it is important to speak out about solving the problem utilizing a variety of means. Citizens can work to get global hunger issues a more prominent role in US foreign policy in general ensuring it has a place in both foreign assistance as well as diplomacy. With the new Administration's stated commitment to achieving the first UN Millennium Goal, we are provided a unique opportunity to advance these issues. With the large, and increasing, number of people suffering from chronic hunger around the world, it is easy to get discouraged and think this is a problem that can't really be solved. But with the MDGs, the new Administration's commitment to achieve them, and a comprehensive US hunger strategy fighting world hunger might seem a little more manageable.