



Global food security: Next steps

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By Marshall Matz

In the last several months, there has been a lot of attention on a number of separate issues and events which impact global food security across a range of activities, yet they have not been drawn together. From Pope Francis' visit to the United States and the announcement of the [United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#), to the ongoing trade negotiations and even food labeling legislative developments, they all have an impact global food security.

As Pope Francis noted during his recent trip to the U.S., "The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts..." He was absolutely right, of course, and in fact there has been some important progress on this front. The number of hungry people in the world – 795 million – has dropped by 100 million over the past decade, thanks in no small part to coordinated international efforts led by the U.S. According to the USDA, Latin America and the Caribbean region saw the steepest declines in the number of food-insecure people, followed closely by Asia.

Looking forward, what would it really take to totally wipe out global hunger?

According to the State Department, to feed a growing world population, we need to increase global food production by 70% before 2050. Women make up the majority of the agricultural workforce in many areas of the world. Yet, today, for every investment we make in producing food, we fail to get the best results because many women lack the access they need to land, seeds, water, credit and markets.

That is particularly true in Africa, as pointed out recently by Dr. Agnes Kalibata. Dr. Kalibata, who was the Minister of Agriculture in Rwanda responsible for a dramatic turnaround in the country's food security, is now the president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). "Africa is the last region of the world to go through an agriculture transformation," she notes. "Africa has lagged behind for a number of reasons, including lack of access to improved seeds, fertilizers, mechanization and irrigation. The good news is that we are starting to see positive changes. A real African agriculture transition is underway. We are very single-minded about closing the yield gap for smallholder farmers and especially women farmers."

Africa is key to global food security because the continent contains a majority of the world's underdeveloped agriculture land. Further, yields are so low (only 10% of yields in the U.S.) that

they can be increased dramatically by simply providing smallholder women farmers access to modern (hybrid) seeds, inputs and educational services.

The distribution system in Africa has to be a major focus of attention. Whether through private sector agro-dealers, community groups or government, smallholder farmers in very remote villages must gain access to the tools of modern agriculture.

The newly released UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development places a high priority on agriculture and empowering women. Included in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is a commitment to double, by 2030, the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, particularly women.

At the other end of the technology divide, in the most developed countries, we must have enough political courage to follow sound science. Yes, that means accepting genetic engineering (GE) for agriculture production just as we do for health care.

Last month, the United States and China released an important joint cooperation statement to promote a strong global economy. As a part of that process, according to the White House statement, “The United States and China conducted in-depth discussions on the administration of agricultural biotechnology, and committed to further improve approval processes. Both sides reaffirmed the importance of implementing timely, transparent, predictable, and science-based approval processes for products of agricultural biotechnology, which are based on international standards.”

This position taken by the U.S. with regard to China on the importance of regulatory synchronization should now be extended to the fifty States here in America. The federal government cannot allow each State to implement its own GMO labeling system and expect interstate commerce to continue without interruption. It is simply not possible or reasonable. Congress and the Administration must come together and develop one national system that is uniform and science-based.

Agricultural biotechnology, by itself, is not the answer to global food security, but it is a part of the solution and it is important that consumers have confidence in the technology. A national system of transparency may well help establish consumer confidence. Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) is trying to bring together a bipartisan group of Senators behind legislation that would preempt States and create a uniform, national system, which does not stigmatize GMOs.

When discussing labeling, however, we need to think beyond the paper label on the food can or package. According to a new study by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs consumers are seeking more and more information about the food we consume. We therefore need to update our definition of the term “labeling” to include all forms of transparency and innovative approaches for communicating nutrition and production related information. GMO labeling has become a political issue that is undermining consumer confidence in a scientific discipline needed for global food security.

In order to achieve global food security, there must be a consistent policy across a range of issues. If the United States is going to push China on biotechnology, it should also push the States on labeling of the technology.

The European Union must establish agriculture policies based on sound science and food security.

We need to invest in African agriculture, not because of past history, but because Africa is the future. And if we don't invest in Africa, China is going to become the dominant influence on that continent. This is significant because Africa has 25% of the countries in the world and 6 of the ten fastest growing economies.

Let's also realize that, even if we could wave a magic wand and implement all of these steps, there would still be hungry people in the world. There will always be natural disasters, droughts and civil wars. Today, some 60 million people are displaced by violence, conflict and/or repression. The World Food Program (WFP) is an extraordinary organization, but is being stretched beyond its capacity. WFP doesn't have the resources to help refugees, the victims of natural disasters *and* farmers who are not producing enough to sustain their family. Boosting the production of smallholder farmers would allow WFP to focus on emergencies.

In short, global food security is in sight. If it is made a priority, the new UN goal to eliminate hunger by 2030 can be achieved.

In Memoriam

This article is dedicated to the memory of David Patterson Lambert, a former counselor at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations food agencies in Rome, who passed while attending the World Food Prize in Des Moines, Iowa. David will be long remembered for his dedication to global food and nutrition security, as well as his graciousness, gentle spirit and friendship.

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