

Op-Ed Contributor - Homegrown Aid

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Published: April 8, 2009

PRESIDENT OBAMA has embarked on a promising new course to fight hunger and promote economic growth and political stability in countries like Cambodia, Honduras and Malawi. These countries, and many more, have large populations of impoverished farm families. Tough climates, environmental degradation and a lack of modern farm technology often limit food production to one-third or less of its potential. President Obama recently called upon Congress to double financial support for agricultural growth in developing countries to more than \$1 billion in 2010. His program aims to help smallholder farmers get things like better seeds, fertilizer, small-scale irrigation and access to markets so they can overcome hunger and break out of extreme poverty. This new program could have amazing results — if it is properly carried out.

A crucial factor in determining the program's success will be how Washington delivers aid to the farmers. The traditional approach, and the wrong one in this case, would be for Washington to try to decide what's best for each country, and then spend considerable time and money on report-writing, site visits and professional advice. When aid programs are operated this way, they can end up spending half or more of their funds on United States-based travel, personnel and administration, and take years to get off the ground. The benefits for poor countries are then much too little and too late.

Rather than have Washington decide the kind of aid each country will receive, the recipient countries should be invited to prepare plans and budgets that would be reviewed by independent experts. These plans would describe the inputs needed by the farmers, the expected increase in production, how the strategy would be put into place and how much money would be required. Such plans, if described with care, could then be closely monitored by the United States and other donors to gauge results and avoid corruption.

Two international programs during the last decade, championed jointly by the United States, other governments and the Gates Foundation, have demonstrated the benefits of such a scientific, results-based aid approach: the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. These programs have saved millions of lives and protected hundreds of millions more from disease and infection. Here's how they work: Low-income countries submit national action plans to the two programs, which then scrutinize the plans on their scientific, financial and management merits. If the plans are properly put into effect, recipients get more financing.

It's time to adopt these strategies to fight hunger. The good news is that many poor and hungry countries already have elaborate and sophisticated plans for their smallholder farmers, but until now they've lacked the financial means and donor support to put those plans into action.

This is not to say that these countries must do all the planning on their own.

They can also draw upon the expertise of international farm experts from respected global agencies like the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development in Rome, and food research centers in the United States and abroad. They can also seek guidance from America's land-grant universities, as the Obama plan envisions, and leading agricultural companies.

For maximum effect, the United States should also pool its efforts with other donor countries and the United Nations. America's \$1 billion per year could be at least doubled by the contributions of others, including Spain and the European Commission. The overall program — pooled financing, country proposals with independent scientific review, and technical assistance for recipient countries — could be based at the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development.

The Obama administration recognizes that many volatile regions — the Horn of Africa, parts of the Middle East like Yemen and areas of South and Central Asia — are unstable in large part because they are hungry and poor. The next step is to empower recipient governments to map their own path to development. Mr. Obama's new initiative could be a major pillar of a strategy that is based on generosity, good science and rigorous management.

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