

Feeding Haiti

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A young boy was able to find a meal at St. Clare's Church rectory in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, this week. (Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

By Dr. Joia Mukherjee and Donna Barry
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ONCE AGAIN the media are filled with stories and images of unrest in Haiti, this time due to soaring food prices and pervasive hunger. In the United States and around the world, grain stocks have been depleted, energy costs have skyrocketed, and prices of food staples are inflated by increased use of grain to feed livestock in middle-income countries and supply ethanol plants. Unpredictable weather is causing droughts and flooding in key grain-producing countries. Add to that the widespread deforestation of Haiti, and the result is a 50 percent increase in the price of food staples over the past year and countrywide shortages.

Yet the current crisis is only the most recent in the hemisphere's hungriest country.

Food insecurity in Haiti has deep historical roots and can be tied to interventionist policies of foreign governments - from the brutal and slave-dependent sugar production that made Haiti France's richest colony to the current US practice of grain dumping. In the 1980s and 1990s,

under pressure from international financial institutions and the United States, Haiti lifted tariffs that protected the livelihoods of its rice farmers, leaving local producers unable to compete with heavily subsidized US agribusiness. The United States gave Haiti rice as "food aid." Such assistance is highly profitable for US producers but disastrous for Haiti's small farmers, and resulted in dramatic decreases in local production of this staple. In short order, the tiny country of Haiti became the fourth largest importer of US rice.

These stressors are not isolated to Haiti. Generous subsidies of agribusiness and shipping companies disguised as food aid have enormously deleterious effects on the local production of food and livelihood of farmers who live on a small economic margin. Acute shortages superimposed on chronic food insecurity are like matches on gasoline in countries like Haiti, where the large majority of people earn less than \$2 a day and spend more than half their income on food. It is past time for the United States, other donor governments, and large aid agencies to reexamine agricultural, trade, and aid policies to prevent more crises, and to work with local farmers and markets to assure lasting food security.

First, nongovernmental organizations should stop buying surplus US grain at cheap prices, subsidized by US taxpayers, and then reselling it in developing countries for profit. Such programs undermine local production and local markets. CARE acted wisely last year when, after examining the effects on local farmers, it opted instead for cash transfers to directly aid local food production and purchasing.

Second, foreign aid for food security should be increased and separated from the US Farm Bill. The current linkage serves to tie the financial interests of the agricultural and shipping industries with aid instead of having assistance driven by an analysis of local needs. Food aid is the only form of international assistance almost entirely outside the purview of the House and Senate foreign relations committees.

Last, the world's poorest countries must be released from their enormous debt to international financial institutions, most of which was incurred to support ruthless dictators and never reached the neediest. While President Rene Preval's government in Haiti struggles to calm and feed its population, it continues to remit over \$1 million per week to service its debt. Last month, the House passed the Jubilee Act, recommending debt relief for several countries to free up critical funds to improve food security. The House unanimously approved an amendment from Representative Alcee Hastings of Florida advocating that Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson use his office to immediately cancel Haiti's debt and debt repayments. We encourage the Senate and President Bush to pass and sign similar legislation.

Since most of the world's poor and malnourished populations depend on agriculture for their income, higher grain prices would benefit small producers if they could compete in global markets. However, subsidies of the US food industry create a steep gradient against fairness. When subsidies are couched as "food aid" they are deeply cynical and infringe on the basic right to food that should be afforded to all.

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