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**Testimony to the Foreign Affairs Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Hearing--Reforming Food Aid: Desperate Need to Do Better**

October 7, 2015

Respectfully submitted by  
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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify. Even more, thank you for your leadership in making U.S. food aid more efficient and effective. I also appreciate your leadership on the Global Food Security Act. Food aid reform and investments that strengthen agriculture and nutrition in poor countries are separate issues, and should be kept separate, but both are important to the reduction of world hunger.

I am David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad. Our network of thousands of members, congregations, and church bodies works together to encourage Congress and the President to do their part to help end hunger in our country and around the world.



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In this testimony, I want to help make the case for several reforms in U.S. food aid and then talk about the relationship of this issue to three broader concerns – the global humanitarian crisis, U.S. agriculture, and the possibility of virtually ending hunger in our time.

U.S. food aid is important to many of the world's most desperate people. It saves many lives. But there are several ways to make U.S. food aid more efficient and effective.

First, we should further increase the flexibility of food aid. Current law requires nearly all of food aid to be commodities produced in the United States, but this is not always the best way to help. For example, it's much better to give Syrian refugees in Jordan debit cards to purchase food in local grocery stores than to ship bags of food from the United States. Bags of food for refugees would add to local resentments, while allowing them to be customers in local stores makes them more welcome. In situations of emergency, the delays involved in shipping food around the world are sometimes a big problem. Even short bouts of hunger for children can have devastating lifelong consequences, so additional flexibility can allow nutritionally appropriate foods to reach pregnant women, new mothers, infants and young children. Also, food shipped in from outside can sometimes frustrate the development of food production by local farmers.



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A GAO study and a congressionally-mandated study by Management Systems International both found that local and regional procurement reduces costs by 25 percent. A Cornell University study found savings of more than 50 percent in some cases, along with a 62 percent gain in timeliness of delivery. So Congress should allow more flexibility for local and regional procurement, including the use of vouchers and cash transfers.

Second, Congress should loosen Cargo Preference restrictions. The law now requires at least 50 percent of all food aid to be shipped on U.S. flag vessels. But the American Enterprise Institute has recently shown that these restrictions wasted more than \$140 million between January 2012 and May 2015. So Congress should ensure the viability of the U.S. merchant marine on its own merits, not with a subsidy that, in effect, takes food away from hungry people.

Third, Congress should eliminate the practice of monetization. It is inefficient to fund projects in poor countries by shipping and selling U.S. food in local markets. A recent GAO study found that monetization loses 25 cents on every taxpayer dollar. According to USAID, eliminating monetization could free up \$30 million per year and feed an additional 800,000 people.

We are currently faced with a global humanitarian crisis. This makes food aid even more urgent. The surge in humanitarian need is mainly because of the war in Syria, but there are also severe



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humanitarian situations in Yemen, Iraq, Central African Republic, and South Sudan.

People in the West have become more aware of the humanitarian crisis because of all the refugees who are coming into Europe, but the people left behind in and around Syria and in violence-torn regions of Africa are typically even more desperate.

I am grateful that Congress has increased funding for food aid and other humanitarian assistance, but funding has not kept up with need. The World Food Program has had to cut back on food rations for Syrian refugees. From a U.S. national security perspective, it is not smart to cut back on food rations for Syrian refugees. Food aid reform offers the opportunity to provide more assistance with available dollars.

Let me also talk about the relationship of food aid to U.S. agriculture. I grew up in Nebraska and, in fact, spent the last few days with family in Nebraska. I understand that farmers and other people involved in U.S. agriculture are proud of their role in feeding our nation and the world, and the agricultural community has provided powerful political support for U.S. food aid.

But food aid accounts for only one-half of one percent of U.S. agricultural exports. It is not economically important to U.S. agriculture. On the other hand, the dramatic progress that the



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world as a whole is making progress against hunger and extreme poverty provide an important and dynamic market for U.S. agriculture.

Most of the farmers I know are conservative, church-going people. If they understand that food aid reform can improve the efficiency of government spending and reach more hungry people with our tax dollars, they support food aid reform. If they understand that food aid reform will also contribute to progress against hunger and, thus, growing markets for U.S. agriculture, they will certainly support food aid reform.

The question of committee jurisdictions here in Congress should not hold up the reform process. Neither of the committees concerned should hold up help for hungry people to over the question of jurisdiction.

Finally, I want to talk about the possibility of dramatically reducing – perhaps even ending – hunger in our time. The world has been making unprecedented progress against hunger, poverty, and disease over the last few decades. Despite the current surge in humanitarian need, the global trend toward ending hunger still continues.



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I'm a preacher, so I see this great liberation as an example of our loving God at work in the world and believe that God is calling on us to contribute to it.

When Pope Francis addressed Congress late last month, he said this:

How much has been done in these first years of the third millennium to raise people out of extreme poverty! I know that you share my conviction that much more still needs to be done . . .

The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts, especially in its causes.

Reforming food aid is one way to fight hunger, and fighting hunger is sacred business.