



GAO report backs greater USDA role in managing U.S. food aid programs

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Washington, March 11 – U.S. food aid programs perform miracles in combating hunger around the world. But more can and must be done because “the number of undernourished people in the world has increased by over 150 million over the past two years.”

That’s according to Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), Chair of the House Appropriations Committee’s Agriculture Subcommittee. In a hearing on International Food Aid and Security Thursday, DeLauro insisted that “the continued existence of such famine in our day and age is a moral outrage. . . for the first time ever, over a billion souls on our planet go hungry or are ill-fed. Every six seconds, a child in this world dies because of hunger and related causes.” She added that as a result, “global hunger is a national security issue.”

A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released at the hearing detailed ways to improve the U.S. response to the increase in global hunger. Thomas Melito, Director of GAO’s International Affairs & Trade Team, explained the problems begin with “bureaucratic inertia” – and include dividing U.S. food-aid efforts among 10 different government agencies, with inadequate and incompatible data available from these agencies.

The GAO report notes that the administration is due to release “a government-wide global food security strategy” soon “but its efforts are vulnerable to data weaknesses and risks associated with the strategy’s host country-led approach.” Due to inadequate data collection and management, the report simply estimates that the U.S. government “directed at least \$5 billion in fiscal year 2008 to global food security, with food aid accounting for about half of that funding. However, the actual total is likely greater.”

In response, DeLauro noted that she strongly supports creating a “single, comprehensive food safety agency” and that the same approach may be needed for tackling world hunger. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) agreed, saying “I would like to have a single agency.”

Speaking for the GAO, Melito explained that one weak point in current efforts is the lack of agricultural expertise. He said that given its ties to the Extension Service and the Land Grant Universities, the overall U.S. effort could be improved by giving USDA “a much greater role.” He also said that the current programs don’t include enough “monitoring and evaluation.” He pointed to the example set by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation which allocates 20% of resources in its food aid programs to monitoring and evaluation.

DeLauro said she’s pleased to see that the State Department, which currently has the lead role in managing U.S. food aid efforts, has requested \$14 million for monitoring and evaluation. She criticized the administration’s proposed FY 2011 USDA budget for freezing funding levels for the PL 480 Title II program and the McGovern-Dole program, saying that “now is not the time to forsake our commitment to funding food aid.” She said that in order to find support on the House floor for more food aid funding, she intends to stress that improving U.S. food aid programs is a vital issue of national security. Melito commented that even with making improvements by creating a coordinated government-wide program supported by comprehensive data collection, monitoring, and evaluation, “success is going to be slow, grinding, long-term.”

To read Thomas Melito’s 15-page “Global Food Security” testimony, go to: http://appropriations.house.gov/Witness_testimony/AG/Thomas_Melito.3.11.10.pdf.

To read the GAO’s complete 100-page “Global Food Security” report, go to: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10352.pdf>

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