

May 7, 2020

Mr. John Barsa  
Acting Administrator  
United States Agency for International Development  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C., 20523

Dear Administrator Barsa,

Thank you for the important steps the United States Agency for International Development is already taking to help developing countries around the world respond to the COVID-19 health pandemic. In late April, the World Food Program estimated that **COVID-19 could double the number of people who are at risk of catastrophic food shortages**. U.S. and global leadership will be critical to avoid the worst-case scenario: an expanding global pandemic that exacerbates the destructive effects of violent conflict and climate change on the lives and livelihoods of nearly 300 million people, collides with systemic gender inequality that limits women's voice and access to resources, and spirals into a global food security and nutrition crisis.

Many of us recall the shock of the 2007-08 global food price crisis that provoked a sudden rise in food insecurity and triggered riots across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean. **That crisis, however, sparked a remarkable convergence of efforts to mitigate the effects of food and nutrition insecurity and to strengthen global food and agriculture systems**. These initiatives recognized the importance of providing humanitarian relief to vulnerable populations in the short term as well as the need to make longer-term investments to boost agricultural growth as a key pillar of inclusive economic development. President Bush made nearly \$1 billion in emergency and development assistance available in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, President Obama's \$3.5 billion commitment attracted more than \$18 billion in funding for global food security programs from other donor governments.

COVID-19 represents an unprecedented challenge to global food security and nutrition and an important opportunity for USAID to lead an effective global response. **The pandemic's disruption of food and agriculture systems is already erasing the gains that reduced poverty and improved food security over the past decade, and will inevitably lead to a rise in child malnutrition as access to nutrient-rich food diminishes**. To address this new food security and nutrition crisis, especially in fragile and conflict-affected countries, the United States should support a coordinated crisis response in the short-term, drawing especially on the USAID Food for Peace office and its deep experience with humanitarian assistance and strong ties to multilateral and bilateral partners. The United States can also build on the success of Feed the Future in strengthening private sector-led and sustainable market systems. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of food and agriculture systems in low-income countries. They are central to response and recovery efforts in the short term, and as the foundation for advancing food security and developing local capacities to "build back better" as the pandemic comes under control.

“Building back better” in the context of today’s crisis means: the creation of more resilient, gender-inclusive and equitable food systems that are better able to withstand climate and conflict shocks; expanding economic opportunities to enable small-scale producers to deliver more nutritious, safer foods at lower cost to consumers; and developing new employment and entrepreneurship opportunities on and off the farm, especially for women and young people. Speed, flexibility and coordination of effort will be critical to meet the huge level of need and adapt responses to local contexts in the short term. Over the longer-term, the pandemic presents significant opportunities for large-scale systemic change led by local public, civil society and private sector leaders. Expanded Feed the Future research and capacity-strengthening programs can offer critically important science-based evidence, analysis and ongoing guidance to these efforts.

**We believe that there are opportunities for USAID leadership in seven priority areas:**

1. Supporting food crisis response teams at the national level
2. Contributing to and leveraging multilateral efforts to address the food security impact of COVID-19
3. Stabilizing food markets and reducing price volatility
4. Preserving small- and medium-scale agribusinesses and jobs
5. Improving access to and availability of nutrient-rich foods to improve diet quality
6. Ensuring that land preparation, planting, and production for the coming agricultural season are not delayed, focusing on helping small-scale farmers, particularly women, and private-sector providers of inputs and services
7. Helping countries use this “reset” moment to rebuild more climate-resilient, healthier, inclusive, equitable and digitally connected food systems

Each of these action-agendas is discussed in more detail in an attachment to this letter.

During the pandemic, the world’s immediate focus has necessarily been on health and containing the spread of COVID-19. However, the economic shutdown poses a grave risk to food supply, production, and livelihoods. The leadership of the United States and USAID was crucial in developing a response that helped avert the worst consequences following the 2007-08 crisis and left a legacy of more productive, stronger private sector-led food and agriculture systems across low- and middle-income countries. **Today, U.S. leadership and swift action are again needed to prevent a food-related global catastrophe and use the opportunity to “build back” more inclusive, climate-resilient, and healthy food systems.**

Sincerely,

David Beckmann, President, Bread for the World

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1,000 Days

Farm Journal Foundation

Feed the Children

Food for the Hungry

InterAction

Save the Children

World Vision

Cc: The Honorable Michael Pompeo  
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**There are seven priority areas for USAID leadership on food security:<sup>1</sup>**

1. **Support food crisis response teams at the national level.** Speed, flexibility and coordination of effort will be critical to meet the huge level of need and adapt responses to local contexts. USAID, MCC, and USDFC can offer technical assistance and flexible financial resources to support county-led efforts. They should provide senior managers, contractors and grantees with expanded flexibility to draw on ongoing research and operational partnerships, adjust existing programming, and fast-track new grants, loans and contracts to meet pressing needs and reduce the impact of the pandemic on the food security and nutritional well-being of the most vulnerable.
2. **Contribute to and leverage multilateral efforts in support of country-led efforts to address the food security impact of COVID-19.** Multilateral and regional organizations are stepping forward to assist country-driven responses to COVID-19 and deserve strong support from the United States. They include efforts by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and partners to coordinate and quickly disseminate data and analysis to guide policy decisions at country level. It is vital that data be sex-disaggregated to ensure understanding of gender dynamics and the particular needs of women, men, boys and girls. Projects and entities supported by the United States --including the Famine Early Warning System (FEWSNET), U.S. university research partnerships, and the CGIAR, among others -- can offer expertise to help track emerging supply constraints and hunger hotspots, market prices, and weather conditions.

Important efforts are underway to expand and speed the flow of resources to social protection programs and provide financial relief for small firms, including agribusinesses. US support for the suspension of debt payments to international financial institutions and US government institutions will be important to allow low-income countries to quickly increase available funds for the COVID-19 response, including addressing food security needs. The US should also support fast-track facilities that have been established by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and African Development Bank, and support front-loading IDA disbursements to recipient countries where feasible.

The United States should also provide resources to the multi-donor [COVID-19 Rural Poor Stimulus Facility](#) that was recently launched by the International Fund for Agricultural Development to ensure timely access by the rural poor to inputs, information, markets and liquidity.

3. **Stabilize food markets and reduce price volatility.** The United States should advocate for the removal of existing or threatened export restrictions to allow the free movement of

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws extensively on Julie Howard and Emmy Simmons, "Covid-19 Threatens Global Food Security: What Should the United States Do? CSIS Commentary. April 22, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/covid-19-threatens-global-food-security-what-should-united-states-do>

agricultural commodities and inputs at global, regional, and national levels. The U.S. is a signatory to the [World Trade Organization's recent statement](#) on the importance of responding to the pandemic with open and predictable trade in agriculture and food products. U.S. and other leaders can draw on additional resources including the [Covid-19 food policy tracker](#) and the [Agricultural Market Information System \(AMIS\)](#) to identify areas of concern.

USAID programs can provide financial and technical resources to help countries fast-track the supply of agricultural commodities and inputs to hard-hit areas, including providing production support for farmers, expedited transit for agricultural supply trucks, and monitoring and reporting food prices to ward off profiteering. Keeping wet markets open is essential to maintaining access to staples and nutrient-dense foods. USAID can work with city and subnational authorities to support emergency planning protocols and safety measures for wet markets.

- 4. Provide immediate relief to preserve small- and medium-scale agribusinesses and jobs.** Local, informal markets and private food transporters, processors and restaurants provide most of the food in urban and rural areas of low-income countries. Mobility restrictions and the closure of businesses and markets to contain COVID-19 are having a significant negative impact on people's livelihoods, their purchasing power, and on the availability of food at local levels. It is vital that safety net programs be scaled up and emergency assistance be delivered as quickly as possible to minimize the impact on small- and medium-scale agribusinesses and the erosion of poor households' assets in the face of the crisis.

In the United States, Europe and Asia, companies, processors, schools and food banks are pivoting quickly to make and supply different kinds of foods safely. USAID can help adapt these experiences for low-income countries, with the aim of channeling assistance through existing markets and companies so that firms can stay in business and continue to employ workers. Relevant innovations include technical assistance to SMEs to help them adjust products and models, utilizing electronic vouchers and other forms of contact-free payment, repurposing institutional kitchens to provide food system workers with safe spaces in which to work, enhancing the safety and sanitary conditions of markets to allow them to continue to operate in a manner that addresses physical distancing needs and developing new food delivery options for schools and urban consumers more generally.

Access to finance for SMEs producing nutritious foods during and after the pandemic is critical, particularly for women-led SMEs. USAID, the US International Development Finance Corporation and other USG agencies can convene and collaborate with other development finance institutions, the banking sector and investor communities at global, regional and national level, to expand access to finance to SMEs through grants, loans and guarantees.

- 5. Improve access to and availability of nutrient-rich foods to improve diet quality.** Diverse and healthy diets are key to building resilience and improving immunity. Disrupted supply chains, rising food prices, and the impact of the illness itself will impact the ability of households to access nutrient-rich foods. This poses significant risks for vulnerable populations, especially pregnant and lactating women and infants and young children in the

critical first 1,000 days. In the short to medium term, USAID and partners should expand support for homestead food production to improve access to nutrient-rich foods including fruit, vegetables and eggs. USAID should also support the use of cash transfers and social protection/safety net programs to allow poor households to buy nutritious foods.

Governments and partners should be encouraged to launch messaging campaigns to promote the consumption of nutritious foods. Institutional buying programs can use their purchasing programs to maintain or expand the local production and distribution of nutritious foods for school feeding, food aid, food banks, hospitals, and the military.

- 6. Ensure that land preparation, planting, and production for the coming agricultural season are not delayed, focusing on supporting small-scale farmers, particularly women, and private-sector providers of inputs and services.** USAID and partners should support country-level food crisis response teams to facilitate the use of best-available data and analysis to forecast crop and livestock system needs and work with the private sector to identify and address constraints that will affect their ability to meet agricultural input, transport, and marketing needs.

In collaboration with other international donors and organizations, the United States can provide financial and technical assistance to help countries rapidly establish and implement protocols to permit the safe movement of agricultural inputs, provide essential agricultural services, and implement critical farm and livestock operations.

In the face of COVID-19 disruptions, farmers, producers, laborers, and suppliers may require immediate financial support to allow them to proceed with preparations for the new season. It is essential that this support take gender dynamics into account. Women play critical roles throughout the food and agricultural system, but consistently face greater constraints in accessing resources.

- 7. Help countries use this “reset” moment to rebuild more climate-resilient, healthier, inclusive, equitable and digitally connected food systems.** USAID should help countries take advantage of the pivotal nature of the pandemic to transform their food systems in four ways.

First, many of the low-income countries at the greatest risk from the pandemic also face severe threats to crop and livestock systems as a result of climate change. During the Great Depression, the United States created the Civilian Conservation Corps to put those who had lost jobs back to work while helping farmers implement science-based conservation measures to arrest the spread of the Dust Bowl across the country. USAID has ample experience with cash-for-work programs. The pandemic may provide a similar opportunity for programs that strengthen climate resilience through research, construction of irrigation systems, bunding and terracing programs, and reforestation and restoration of depleted lands.

Second, the pandemic will provide opportunities to stimulate the production, marketing, and consumption of nutritious and safe foods. Poor diets are the leading cause of early death in the world today. Labor-intensive and perishable fruit, vegetable, and animal-source protein supply chains are being especially hard hit by the pandemic. USAID research and field

programs to support farmers, consumers, and agribusiness should prioritize expanding the availability, affordability, and access of these nutritious foods to consumers. The pandemic could also be the impetus to develop innovative and cost-effective food safety measures throughout the food supply chain, especially for wet markets featuring horticulture and livestock products.

Third, accelerate the adoption of digital technology. The physical distancing requirements of the pandemic will provide a unique opportunity to broaden access to digital information tools and services for a range of production, market, health, and social service functions. Over the past decade, USAID has facilitated the development of digital tools for agricultural information and marketing, the electronic delivery of vouchers for food, inputs and income support, and mobile banking services. Most of these programs are still in the pilot stage and have not reached the most vulnerable or rural areas. The United States, with its unparalleled technology sector, expertise, and resources, is well placed to help countries work with private and public resources to fast track infrastructure and soft program investments that will significantly scale the adoption and impact of these digital tools.

Fourth, the rights and empowerment of women and youth are at risk in the COVID-19 crisis and must be a central element of the response and of strengthening long-term resilience. Pre-COVID-19 food systems were marked by systemic gender inequality and a dearth of opportunities for youth. Women are critical actors in global food and economic systems. They are scientists, innovators, farmers, agri-business owners and employees, and responsible for meeting the nutritional needs of their families. Gender-blind policies during the COVID-19 response will jeopardize women's rights now and limit their abilities to contribute to improving our food and nutrition systems in the future. In sub-Saharan Africa, one-fifth of the population is aged 15-24 and most are unemployed. They represent an ongoing potential security threat – or, alternatively, with the right support, their energy and innovation can position youth to drive food and agricultural system transformation.

USAID support to countries to revitalize and transform their food systems should ensure that policies and programs are designed to address the different needs and vulnerabilities of different populations. This means engaging communities to ensure local-led and gender-responsive solutions. Women and men, boys and girls must be able to meaningfully contribute and lead as a wide range of opportunities for employment and innovative startup businesses emerge, both on and off the farm. Strengthening local leadership, particularly of women and youth, will be critical to reach the most affected members of society and unlock their contributions to solving the great challenges we face.