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**Op-Ed: Why Take Such a Big Bite From U.S. International Food Aid?
These House cuts would deny food help to roughly 18 million people, argues the
director of a food aid alliance.**

**by Ellen Levinson
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The House of Representatives has put America's international food aid programs on the chopping block, last week slashing these cost-effective and life-saving programs to their lowest levels in over a decade. While the House's fiscal year 2011 funding bill cuts 10.3 percent from non-defense appropriations, it disproportionately cuts food assistance by an astonishing 42 percent.

These cuts would deny aid to roughly 18 million people and would curtail efforts to reduce the burden of destabilizing food shortages on poor and vulnerable populations. The timing of these cuts could hardly be worse. This week, the World Bank announced that escalating food prices have pushed another 44 million people into extreme poverty -- the highest levels since the 2007-2008 food crisis, which triggered protests in 33 developing countries. The Bank further predicted that the number of undernourished people will hit 1 billion before the end of the year. Long-term, strong demand will likely keep prices high, and these issues will remain with us for some time to come.

Meeting the challenges facing the global food system as emerging economies and growing populations place greater demand of food supplies requires a dual approach: adequate food assistance, and investment in better and more sustainable production, processing and marketing systems. In 2009, G8-member countries committed to support countries that are struggling with chronic hunger and have invested in well-designed strategies to improve agricultural and food systems.

In those countries, three out of five poor people reside in rural areas. Malnutrition in children is common; farm work is mainly done by women who are also raising children and maintaining households; and farms are small, have low productivity and are not linked to markets. U.S. food assistance plays an important role in addressing the special needs of such smallholder farming communities.

Yet, the House legislation cuts nearly 15 million people from the Food for Peace program, which targets selected regions in 21 countries where there is persistent hunger and 30 percent or more children are undernourished. Besides providing much-needed food, these programs help to strengthen local communities, as charitable organizations and cooperatives partner with local organizations, government institutions and businesses to improve nutrition, household incomes, food supplies, and agricultural and food systems.

Reductions in Food for Peace will also severely limit the ability of the United States to provide assistance in response to conflicts, drought and other disasters. Furthermore, under the House legislation, an additional 2.5 million food aid recipients -- schoolchildren -- will be dropped from the McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program.

Cutting food aid would also impact U.S. jobs and our nation's economy. Agricultural and transportation industries and workers all play an essential role in the food aid supply chain. Moreover, rising prosperity in developing countries leads to increased demand for imports. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, developing countries now account for more than half of all U.S. agricultural exports and will continue to be the main source of projected growth in food demand and trade. Half of each additional dollar earned in an extremely poor country - such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and others targeted by the Food for Peace Program -- is spent on food.

On February 14, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton informed the House Appropriations Committee that its proposed reductions would result in a 41 percent cut in money available for humanitarian efforts, which "will be devastating to our national security, will render us unable to respond to unanticipated disasters, and will damage our leadership around the world."

Reducing the deficit is urgently important, but it must be done in a fair and balanced way and without undermining American leadership and long-term interests. With one in six people facing a nutritional crisis, we can hardly justify retreating from food assistance programs that benefit nearly 50 million people every year; leverage partnerships with thousands of communities and organizations in low-income countries; and provide jobs and economic benefits at home -- all for just three percent of U.S. international relations funds.

Ellen Levinson is the Executive Director of the Alliance for Global Food Security, which is comprised of humanitarian and development organizations working in more than 100 developing countries. For further information on U.S. food aid programs, please see www.foodaid.org.