The Case for Revitalized, Reoriented United States Investment in African Food and Nutrition Security*

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This year the United States government (USG) began a historically unprecedented disengagement from Africa. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)[i] and Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC)[ii] have effectively closed. Only a temporary court order has (as of the time of this writing) kept the (very small) United States African Development Foundation (ADF)[iii] open. Billions in USG contributions have been rescinded from multilateral agencies actively working in Africa, such as the African Development Bank, Gavi The Vaccine Alliance, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAids), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO), and UN Peacekeeping operations, among others. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR),[iv] which has saved tens of millions of African lives, barely escaped rescission and faces a sharply reduced budget. Other governments have followed the USG lead in disinvesting, compounding the damage. A strong case can certainly be made for major reforms to and portfolio reallocation within US foreign assistance. I make several such arguments below. But the present strategy reflects unwise retreat, not sage reform.

USG investments in African nutritional and food security had long enjoyed bipartisan support because they represented an exceptionally cost-effective means for the US to project 'soft power' and to promote US-based businesses around the world, and an impactful way to advance distinctively American values concerning democracy, human rights, and market-based economies. This essay's central argument is that not only was this disengagement ill-advised, but for moral, national security, and economic reasons the USG should invest far more heavily in Africa, especially in the region's food and nutrition security, albeit with some reorientation relative to past practices.

The Moral Case

The moral case for investment is straightforward: the humanitarian imperative to save lives and relieve avoidable human suffering on the basis of need, without discrimination. For decades the US has supplied most of the world's humanitarian aid, reflecting longstanding bipartisan support for the humanitarian imperative.

Africa represents less than 20% of the world's population yet is home to roughly 40% of the world's hungry people. Low agricultural productivity and limited import capacity, combined with pockets of recurring conflict and the increasingly frequent extreme

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weather events, conspire to make Africans unusually unlikely to afford a nutritious diet. That causes high rates of child stunting and diet-related diseases, especially those related to mineral and vitamin (i.e., micronutrient) deficiencies. Children who suffer undernutrition early in life –especially before their 2nd birthday, in the first 1000 days post-conception – run a high risk of irreversible loss of adult physical and neurocognitive function, as well as increased morbidity and mortality. In Africa, 70 out of every 1,000 children die before their fifth birthday, ten times the rate in the US. This is avoidable human suffering.

Most severe acute malnutrition occurs in places and times of crisis. That's where humanitarian response is most essential. The world's only officially declared famines of the 21st century have plagued Africa (Somalia in 2011, South Sudan in 2017), as have the large majority of near-famine declarations (in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan). Rapid, cost-effective humanitarian response is essential in such contexts.

USAID was the global pacesetter in famine early warning, rapid deployment of (US-made) ready-to-use therapeutic foods, and humanitarian food assistance. Congressional restrictions on international food assistance long created inefficiencies that USAID has effectively minimized over the past generation.

A comprehensive recent assessment estimates that USAID funding from 2001-21 saved 91.8 million lives, including 30.4 million children younger than five years, partly from health interventions that achieved, for example a 50-65% reduction in mortality from HIVAIDS, malaria and neglected tropical diseases, and partly from feeding programs. Those gains are now being lost, with gross waste and grave consequences. Just this month the State Department destroyed ~500 tons of emergency food rations, wasting ~$1 million of taxpayer funds. More tragically, without reversal of these funding reductions, an estimated 14.1 million people, including 4.5 million children under the age of five, are projected to die avoidable deaths by 2030.

The most cost-effective, sustainable way to promote nutritional security is to avoid food emergencies by boosting the incomes of the poor. 45% of Africa's population falls beneath the global extreme poverty line (US$3.00/day per person in 2021 purchasing power parity terms), and at least two-thirds of them live in rural areas and work in agriculture. A large research literature shows that boosting agricultural productivity – through improved inputs (fertilizers, machinery, seed), soil and water management, and physical and institutional infrastructure (roads, commodity exchanges) – has far bigger poverty reduction bang per dollar invested than any other development interventions.

The National Security Case

As a recent Wall Street Journal headline highlighted, "Africa has entered a new era of war". While less widely covered by media than the conflicts in Gaza or Ukraine, Africa is now experiencing more conflicts than at any time post-World War II. More conflict causes more poverty and more acutely malnourished people, stretching even more thinly the world's already-underfunded humanitarian aid programs.

It is equally true and concerning, however, that causality also flows the other way: more food emergencies result in more conflict. Since the 2008 global food price crisis, recurring episodes of sociopolitical unrest and violent conflict have been fueled partly by

food insecurity. Rising food insecurity highlights a government's failure to safeguard its constituents' ability to feed their family, sowing unrest and fertile ground for insurgents to recruit combatants. Rising food prices make land and water more valuable resources over which groups become more willing and likely to fight. A hungrier world with more expensive food is a more dangerous world.

As the USG withdraws from supporting Africans in their time of need – and retreats from educating Africa's future leaders – it weakens US influence in global fora like the UN, which undercuts our national security. Moreover, US withdrawal facilitates regimes hostile to US national interests gaining footholds and influence throughout Africa. African conflict is internationalizing as Russia, China, and Iran engage more, with serious potential consequences for the US military and our national security. We can reduce these pressures by investing in reducing the prevalence and severity of malnutrition and improving the livelihoods of rural Africans.

Pandemics and antimicrobial resistance represent another national security concern. The 2014 Ebola scare and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic underscore how quickly local problems overseas can spread, with calamitous consequences as we combat microbial adversaries. Agrifood systems are the source of most zoonoses emergent in humans since World War II. Plausibly COVID-19, and certainly Ebola, bird flu, swine flu, plague, and other zoonoses arise largely due to agricultural expansion into wildlands. We can and must preempt pandemics that arise from agrifood systems by identifying and stopping them at their point of origin. Africa is the locus of most agricultural land expansion today and thus the most likely incubator of the next horrific pandemic. We also face a looming antimicrobial resistance crisis due in part to the rapidly rising use of (poorly managed) antibacterial agents in livestock and aquaculture production to meet the growing demand for animal-source foods. That demand growth is greatest and regulation weakest in Africa. Averting such threats requires investing in improvements to African agrifood systems to stem conversion of forests and wetlands that are the reservoirs of pathogens modern medicine cannot yet combat effectively.

The Economic Case

The economic case for investing in African nutritional and food security is simple: the return on investment is exceptionally high, far higher than virtually anything else in the USG budget. Recent, careful World Bank analysis estimates that every dollar invested in combating malnutrition yields an average return of $23 through improved health, education, and adult productivity. Hundreds of studies of such investments consistently return similarly high estimates of the return on investment in international agricultural research, at least $10 returned per dollar spent. Those returns are even higher – more than $30 return per dollar invested! – in African food and agricultural R&D because of massive underinvestment. By contrast the average economic multiplier on USG spending is just $1.50 per dollar. Investment in African nutrition and food security returns 15-20 times the gains of the average USG expenditure.

Good nutrition translates into good health, which results in better educated, more productive workers. The earlier in life one starts being reliably well-nourished, the bigger the gains. The median age in Africa is just 19 years. It is the only major world region poised for significant population growth by 2100, to a projected 3.5 billion. As the U.S. population ages, and soon begins to shrink, Africa will become a crucial source of

working age adults, especially in high-demand sectors like health care and information technology, in which U.S. businesses and non-profits already struggle to find qualified workers. Investments in African children today help ensure a high-quality U.S. workforce of the future. If you want your children to have non-robot nursing and health care aide options when they become senior citizens, invest in Africa's children today.

Investments in Africa today also build consumer demand for US-made products tomorrow. Although Africa today accounts for less than ten percent of a roughly US$8 trillion global food market, that will change dramatically in the coming decades. Africa is the only world region where the market for food products – indeed for consumer goods, more broadly – will grow substantially. Africa will lead the world in population growth, and possibly also in income growth rate, and because Africa is the poorest continent, the share of that income growth that converts into food demand is also the world's highest. As a result, 60-75 percent of global food demand growth to 2100 will occur in Africa, at least tripling the region's global market share and making it an increasingly important market for U.S. farmers and food-related businesses. As African agricultural productivity grows, incomes rise and demand for U.S. products does as well. This trend is already evident. Inflation-adjusted annual revenue growth in Africa's food retail and food service sectors far outpaced that of any other world region over the past decade, more than five times the U.S. growth rate.

What To Do?

Feeding an extra 2+ billion Africans this century will be a massive challenge because African farmers suffer the world's lowest agricultural productivity and the vast majority of the supply needed to meet that new demand must be produced in Africa, not imported from abroad. Roughly 60% of the world's remaining arable land is in Africa and >70% of food consumption occurs in the same country that grew the underlying commodity(ies), even more in poorer, land-locked countries. So reaping the moral, national security, and economic rewards requires investing in boosting sustainable, science-based agricultural productivity growth in Africa.

The highest single priority is to sustainably boost healthy food productivity growth. That requires investing more and differently. U.S. public agricultural research, development and extension (R&D&E) investment has fallen by one-third in 20 years and remains trapped in turn-of-the-millenium designs. The same is true of CGIAR, the international network of agricultural research centers that birthed the Green Revolution that rescued humanity from the last food-related poly-crisis, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, earning a plant breeder, Norman Borlaug, the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. The returns to CGIAR research historically have been extremely high. But CGIAR funding and science have stagnated. There is a direct link from reduced and outdated R&D&E to poly-crisis.

Much of R&D&E investment expansion must occur in Africa because technological advances developed for U.S. agrifood systems do not translate well to radically different agroecosystems. Crop varieties developed for the U.S. lose ~80% of gains when used in Africa. African agricultural research and extension systems presently lack the scale and expertise to adapt, translate, and extend new agrifood systems discoveries. African farmers are not our competitors so much as they can be our customers and partners.

Seven principles should guide policy design and implementation:

1) **Emphasize basic and applied science for impactful innovation.** The highest returns come from tackling the most basic, universal challenges: photosynthetic processes, animal and plant disease resistance, soil health, improved water management, etc. Most US foreign assistance historically has been local, bilateral programming, with uneven returns. We must rebalance the USG aid portfolio to invest far more in 'global public goods', innovations that transcend boundaries, unlocking the considerable, untapped potential of Africa's and the world's food systems – and in complementary biomedical, energy, and computational science and engineering (e.g., renewable energy, shelf-stable vaccines). Such innovation also requires investment in the brightest young minds. Today China hosts more than twice as many African university students as the US, building business, cultural, and political ties. A large share of those future African leaders study agricultural and food issues in China, although the US Land Grant University system remains the world's finest, for now. Not only will those future business and political leaders' primary allegiance favor China rather than the US, but those students are currently helping China leapfrog the US in agrifood (and many other) industries.
2) **Move beyond staple crops.** The USG should maintain R&D&E on calorie-rich staple grains, roots, and tubers, which get the lion's share of agricultural R&D&E funding now. But the USG should sharply expand R&D&E on micronutrient-rich, high-value foods to address diet-related health problems and farm profitability. There is tremendous promise in so-called 'specialty crops' – fruits, nuts, and vegetables – and many neglected – or 'orphan' – crops in Africa. Also, novel foods based on synthetic biology or chemosynthetic processes reduce reliance on conventional agriculture. Genetic advances to biofortify staple crops with essential micronutrients can address nutrient-deficient diets. Meanwhile, improved animal nutrition and genetics to reduce methane emissions and antibiotic resistance, and circular systems that cost-effectively convert waste products into fertilizers and livestock feed can accommodate rising animal-source food consumption within planetary boundaries, boosting nutrition and productivity both.
3) **Reduce water, land, antibiotics, and agrochemicals use.** Nature and human health cannot endure expanded use of these inputs and feedback (e.g., from climate change or soil nutrient loss) wipes out productivity gains. Novel production processes for familiar foods – e.g., cultivated proteins, vertical farming – as well as novel foods, including many 'alternative proteins', are especially helpful here, complementing advances based on crop and livestock genetics accelerated by new genomic techniques such as those involving gene editing.
4) **Look beyond the farm.** Three-quarters of the value of global consumer food expenditures accrues to firms beyond the farmgate, such as processors, manufacturers, retailers, and restaurants, who also employ far more workers than farms do. These are the most concentrated parts of agrifood value chains. Enforce competition policy, set clear, science-based standards for food manufacturing, retail, and wholesale – for example, more nutrient fortification and less unhealthy ultra-processing – and use public food procurement policies to induce a race to the top, not the bottom, among food producers, processors, and wholesalers. Improved practices in the U.S. spill over into other markets, including Africa's.
5) **Leverage private sector financing.** The public sector cannot and should not foot the R&D&E bill. An extra $5 billion for public agricultural R&D&E is a heavy lift for

the USG and especially for African governments. But it is pocket change for corporate America. We can better leverage taxpayers' and philanthropists' current investments by using policy tools that attract significant private agrifood systems R&D&E and disaster finance.

6) **Respond promptly, generously, and cost-effectively to crises as they emerge.** Humanitarian response has become considerably more cost-effective over the past generation, boosting the payoffs to modern emergency food assistance. Yet the U.S. – and especially other rich countries –respond inadequately, especially in Africa. Three of the four nations with the largest populations at risk (≥20 million each) are African: DR Congo, Ethiopia, and Sudan. In 2023, humanitarian assistance to those three countries covered only 34-43% of assessed needs. This is a penny-wise, pound-foolish policy. The costs of addressing food emergencies only rise the longer one waits. As children's malnutrition intensifies, the cost per child increases dramatically, with irreversible cognitive and physical developmental impacts if response is too little or too late. Desperate families risk dangerous migrations to high-income countries, including the U.S., and serving displaced persons, much less refugees, is far more expensive than supporting them in their homes. Radical groups prey on the fears and needs of food-insecure people to sow sociopolitical instability.
7) **Prioritize children and pregnant and lactating women.** Good nutrition during a baby's first thousand days, from conception through the child's second birthday, lays the foundation for adult cognitive, emotional, and physical potential. They are the highest return subpopulation to target. Of course, that requires prioritizing pregnant and lactating women as well. These interventions are relatively cheap. Providing pregnant women with free prenatal vitamins, vitamin A supplementation drops for young children, breastfeeding promotion, and mandatory food fortification (e.g., iodized salt, fortifying flour and vegetable oils with folic acid, iron, and zinc) sharply reduce maternal and child malnutrition, yielding great returns.

What specific steps can the Congress take, based on those seven guiding principles?

A. **Set explicit productivity growth targets:** Legislatively target 1.5-2.5% annual growth in agrifood system total factor productivity (that is, the value of output divided by the value of all inputs), domestically and globally. Globally, we have dipped to about 1.1% annually, and essentially no growth in the U.S. and in Africa. Moreover, set targets in terms of essential nutrients (e.g., iron, calcium, vitamin A), not just in monetary value terms. We can and should grow the supply of essential nutrients by 3-4% per year. Hold federal agencies and international partners – e.g., the World Bank, Constructive Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) – accountable for meeting those targets. Empower agency leadership and their technical experts to develop and implement strategies to deliver those results, based on the best available scientific evidence, without political micro-management. Do this via both guidance in Farm Bill Title VII (Research) and various foreign affairs appropriations (e.g., Feed the Future, Global Food Security Act (GFSA), CGIAR, World Bank) as well as through directives to U.S. Government representatives in multilateral organizations.

B. **Give agencies the resources to meet those targets.** Agricultural R&D&E is one of the very highest return public investments in the federal budget, with an

average benefit/cost above 20! Yet U.S. public agricultural R&D&E has fallen by one-third over the past two decades. China has overtaken the U.S.; soon Brazil and India will too. We need to reverse course. Double federal agrifood systems R&D&E budgets through USDA research enterprises, at a cost of approximately $5 billion/year. Simultaneously, to generate innovations customized to African food systems, triple US support for CGIAR (via the World Bank), a cost of just $400 million/year, and appropriate the $1 billion needed to resuscitate the recently-dismantled Feed the Future Innovation Labs that put the best US science from Land Grant Universities to work on the targets advanced above. Direct the US Executive Directors of the World Bank and the regional development banks to prioritize those same targets in their institutions' grant and loan portfolios.

C. **Prioritize African-led agricultural R&D&E for Africa.** Africa outsources much of its agrifood systems R&D&E because it lacks adequate institutional capacity to reap the economies of scale and scope that drive much of the return on such investments. The high returns already enjoyed on U.S. and CGIAR R&D&E would rise further if complemented by African R&D&E institutions with the scale, scope, and scientists to do the adaptive research and extension needed to promote commercial distribution of improved genetic and other inputs and practices. U.S. matching funding, directly and through the multilateral development banks, can induce greater, concerted investment by African governments in multi-national regional programs organized around agroecological zones common to many countries, possibly under the direction of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa. Resolving the technology mismatch problem that plagues African agricultural R&D&E requires adequate funding for vibrant, problem-oriented science led by and serving Africans.

D. **Leverage the private sector better**. Public and philanthropic R&D&E investments can be multiplied many times over by policies that incentivize private firms appropriately. Advanced market commitments – like those used to accelerate investment in and discovery and delivery of COVID-19 and pneumococcal vaccines – can be used in the agrifood space. For example, direct VA hospitals to commit to purchasing antibiotic-free alternative proteins with attractive nutrient profiles at the prevailing price of conventional protein sources. That ensures a profitable market for a high-quality product, eliciting private investment and accelerated R&D&E. Use benevolent patent extensions to induce cash-rich firms with expiring patents to support CGIAR or Africa-based laboratories presently starved for funding. Use modern financial tools – such as catastrophic drought insurance – that have proved highly impactful and more cost-effective than many cash transfer programs.

E. **Restore then expand support for rural infrastructure** in rural and small-town America (like the Rural Energy America Program - REAP) and in Africa development projects. Roads and communications infrastructure are the backbone of healthy market economies. Renewable energy is equally essential. Help farmers harness sunlight, methane from manure lagoons, wind, and geothermal energy to boost post-harvest processing, reduce food loss and waste, and stimulate job creation and economic growth to reduce hunger. Enable small cities and towns to convert vacant factory, military, and warehouse space to controlled environment agriculture and novel feeds/foods production, which can restore high quality jobs to rural areas

while reducing the use of land, water, antibiotics, and toxic chemicals as well as crop loss to pathogens and pests. MCC was good at this before it was shuttered.

F. Expand support for global safety nets. For generations, the United States has been the world's most generous humanitarian donor. That must continue post-USAID and our diplomats must push others to offer their fair share of support, too. That support needs to heed the evidence of the past twenty years, using the most flexible, cost-effective, contextually appropriate policy instruments in emergency and non-emergency food assistance, and resist interest group pressures to try to capture humanitarian programs for commercial gain. Safety nets to protect lives and livelihoods during emergencies are an essential complement to technological advances. They save lives and livelihoods, while depriving hostile actors from using food insecurity grievances as a recruiting tool.

Producing affordable, healthy food in Africa using environmentally sustainable practices while effectively and generously addressing disasters where they arise will be the world's biggest social, environmental, technical, and humanitarian challenge in the final two-thirds of the 21st century. Directing public investment, diplomatic efforts, and private sector activity towards meeting this challenge promises enormous national security, moral, and economic gains in the coming decades.

Further Reading

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[i] USAID, launched in 1961, operated in all 55 member states of the African Union. A large share, almost surely more than half, of USAID's >$40-50 billion in annual appropriations supported activities in Africa.

[ii] MCC was founded in 2004 by President George W. Bush to support compacts with a small, competitively selected group of low- and lower-middle-income countries (LLMICs). MCC supported country-led strategies to promote sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction, following a model advanced by critics of conventional foreign aid practices, like those employed by USAID. It was the only USG agency that supported public sector infrastructure in the region, offering a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013. At the beginning of 2025, MCC had multi-year agreements in force in 12 African nations – Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Zambia – totaling just over $3.5 billion.

[iii] ADF, launched in 1980, provides grants of up to $250,000 and capacity-building assistance to African enterprises and entrepreneurs, leveraging host country government and private sector investments. It's most recent (FY2025) Congressional appropriation was just $45 million.

[iv] Like MCC, PEPFAR was founded in 2003 under President George W. Bush. It's roughly $5 billion annual budget has always concentrated overwhelmingly on sub-Saharan Africa.