

U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis

For Immediate Release:

SENATE HEARING ON GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS OFFERS SAME FAILED SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS GLOBAL HUNGER

Stacked Panel Featured Only Industrial Agriculture and Genetic Engineering Apologists

Washington D.C. (March 26, 2009) - The U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis, a group representing various sectors of the food system, including anti-hunger, family farm, community food security, environmental, international aid, labor, food justice, consumers and others, expressed deep disappointment with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on “Alleviating Global Hunger: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Leadership” held on March 24. The hearing relied primarily on testimonies from “Green Revolution” advocates for the industrial agriculture system, even though it is broken, and failed to address many of the real causes and solutions to the food crisis.

While the Committee summarized well what is at stake, particularly in Africa and South Asia—massive human suffering, political stability and economic development—the analysis and solutions offered by the stacked roster were a rehashing of pro-industrial agriculture technologies and practices that have failed again and again to address this human tragedy. Current reliance on chemical-intensive agriculture and genetic engineering has deepened the gap between the haves and the have-nots, are further deepening the global climate crisis and threatening our planet’s natural resources.

The U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis’s vision for reforming agriculture policy to help end the global food crisis includes the following that were either not mentioned during the hearing, or directly contradicted by the panelists:

- Re-regulate commodity futures markets to end excessive speculation
- Stabilize commodity prices through international and domestic food reserves
- Halt expansion of industrial agrofuels in developing countries

- Direct farm policy, research and education, and investment toward biodiverse, agroecological farming practices

Commodity Speculation and Food Prices

A significant part of last year's food price fluctuations that led to the increase of hunger for 100 to 200 million people were the result of excessive speculation in the commodities markets by the very hedge funds and investment banks that have helped create the current economic meltdown. The Senate Committee and panelists failed to acknowledge the large role of the financial sector in destabilizing prices for food. Patrick Woodall of the consumer group Food & Water Watch said, "Any solution to the food crisis must crack down on rampant commodities speculation. Wall Street poured hundreds of billions of dollars into the under-regulated commodities markets, propelling the skyrocketing prices in 2008. Reigning in excess speculation can help to reduce food prices immediately and for the future." A recent letter signed by nearly 200 Civil Society groups to President Obama requested decisive support to wring out excess speculation in agriculture futures markets that threatens the food security of millions.

International and Domestic Food Reserves Stabilize Food Prices

Last year's volatility in commodity prices, driven in large part by financial speculators and not supply/demand concerns, exposes the perilous state of even U.S. food security due to the lack of food reserves. In 2008, a World Bank report highlighted a need for reserves in the global food system to prevent "price shocks." Ben Burkett, an African-American Mississippi farmer and president of the National Family Farm Coalition said, "Just as Wall Street and financial markets were deregulated in the 1990s and 2000s, so were agriculture commodities. Both here and in Africa and other countries, governments were pressured to get rid of all their food reserves and rely on the "free market" and imports to make up for any shortfalls. If we're going to alleviate hunger, I hope the U.S. Senate takes a serious look into supporting both the right of countries to have reserves and the establishment of international reserves so we don't repeat the devastating food riots of 2008."

Industrial Agrofuels Threaten Food Sovereignty

Another problem not addressed during the hearing that seriously impacts poor countries' ability to end hunger is industrial agrofuels such as palm oil and jatropha that are skyrocketing in production while driving off the land peasant farmers producing for local consumption. "No serious discussion of the global food crisis can ignore the devastating impacts of foreign land grabs on African communities. Foreign corporations are taking away needed community resources to produce industrialized biofuels, such as palm oil and jatropha, for their own profit," said Andrea Samulon of Rainforest Action Network

Need to Fundamentally Reorient Agriculture Practices

While the panelists at the hearing emphasized the need to expand commercial agriculture practices, including genetic engineering, the recent landmark report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), backed by United Nations agencies and the World Bank and over 400 contributing scientists, directly contradicts that vision. Dr. Molly Anderson, a coordinating lead author of the report, said, "The IAASTD is the most authoritative and broad-based resource available on the full impacts of past investment in agricultural development and future options. It showed that "business as usual is not an option" and that commercial agricultural practices are endangering the planet while also failing to rectify the hunger of millions. To reverse this, the report said investments in ecological practices and science that encourages participatory knowledge creation and the integration of indigenous knowledge show more promise for meeting development and sustainability goals than relying on transgenic crops and other chemical-intensive Green Revolution tactics. Hopefully for future hearings on this vital subject, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee can include the perspective of this critical report."

Genetic Engineering Offers False Promise

The inclusion of Robert Paarlberg, a well-known ideological critic of sustainable and organic agriculture, with no counter-balancing voice, was especially disappointing. Eric Holt-Gimenez, Ph.D., Executive Director of Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, said, "In its use of specious arguments to justify industry's biotechnological assault on the agricultural systems of the developing world, Professor Paarlberg's recent book, *Starved for Science: How Biotechnology Is Being Kept Out of Africa*, epitomizes everything that is wrong with agricultural development. It is appalling that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee allowed Dr. Paarlberg to testify with no counter witnesses who have a very different vision on how we can help Africa and the rural poor feed themselves."

For more information, go to the US Food Crisis group's website for a full analysis and a call to action:

www.usfoodcrisisgroup.org

To read the group's letter to President Obama on what to do to address the global food crisis, see:

<http://www.usfoodcrisisgroup.org/files/Open%20Letter%20to%20President-elect%2012-15-08.doc>

To read the recent letter asking President Obama to clamp down on speculation in agriculture markets, see:

<http://www.nffc.net/Pressroom/Letters/2009/03.24.09%20Food%20Speculation%20Coalition%20Letter%20to%20President%20Obama.pdf>

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