

Testimony of Senator Richard J. Durbin
Senate Agriculture Committee
Thursday, July 27, 2000

Good morning. I thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today.

If you'd have happened to be in the Senate Dining Room a few months ago, you might have seen a group of people having lunch and wondered what in the world would gather Ambassador George McGovern, Senators Bob Dole and Ted Kennedy, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, Congressmen Jim McGovern and Tony Hall and myself all at one table.

And it did happen. We even have a picture.

The answer to your question is that we were working together on a bipartisan initiative that could have a positive impact on children around the world and be of great benefit to America's farmers.

As he has described to you, former senator and now ambassador McGovern has advocated an idea to emulate one of the most beneficial programs ever launched on behalf of children in this country — the school lunch program.

He has worked with Senator Dole and others to establish an international school lunch program and President Clinton has jump-started this proposal with his announcement that the United States will provide \$300 million in surplus commodities for the initiative.

Today, I am introducing legislation to provide a long-term funding source for international school feeding programs that will allow such programs to expand and reach more kids. I would like to discuss my proposal as well as a number of other important concerns, including the enormous benefits of these programs and the critical need to include other developed nations in the effort to fund them.

The Need and the Response to Date

Today there are more than 300 million children throughout the world — more kids than the entire population of the United States — who go through the day and then to bed at night hungry.

Some 130 million of these kids don't go to school right now, mainly because their parents need them to stay at home or work to pitch in any way that they can.

In January of this year, I traveled to sub-Saharan Africa, the epicenter of the AIDS crisis, with more than two-thirds of AIDS cases worldwide. There I saw first-hand the horrible impact AIDS is having on that continent. I learned of a woman in Uganda named Mary Nalongo Nassozi, who is a 63-year-old widow.

All of her children died from AIDS and she has created an "orphanage" with 16 of her grandchildren now living in her home. People like Mary need our help to keep these kids in school.

Linking education and nutrition is not a new idea. Private voluntary organizations like CARE, Catholic Relief Services, ADRA, World Vision, Save the Children and Food for the Hungry are already helping kids with education, mother/child nutrition programs and school feeding programs. These organizations and the World Food Program operate programs in more than 90 countries at this time, but typically can only target the poorest children in the poorest districts of the country.

Ambassador McGovern, Senator Dole, myself and others have called for an expanded effort, and as I noted earlier, President Clinton has responded. I applaud the President for the program he announced last Sunday in Okinawa. This \$300 million initiative is expected to help serve a solid, nutritious meal to nine million children every day they go to school.

Think about it: for only 10 cents a day for each meal, we can feed a hungry child and help that child learn. With what you or I pay for a Big Mac, fries and a soft drink, we could afford to feed two classrooms of kids in Ghana or Nepal.

The Benefits of School Feeding Programs

While we need to consider the costs of an international school feeding program, I think we should also look at the benefits.

Malnourished children find it difficult to concentrate and make poor students. But these school feeding programs not only help concentration, they have many benefits, including increased attendance rates and more years of school attendance, improved girls' enrollment rates, improved academic performance, lower malnutrition rates, greater attention spans and later ages for marriage and childbirth.

These benefits ripple in many directions: higher education levels for girls and later marriage for women help slow population growth; greater education levels overall help spur economic development; and giving needy children a meal at school could also help blunt the terrible impact AIDS is having throughout Africa, where there are more than 10 million AIDS orphans who no longer have parents to feed and care for them.

Domestic Benefits

Some will question our involvement in overseas feeding programs, so let me describe what we're doing at home and how we benefit from these efforts.

This year, we're spending more than \$20 billion in our food stamp program. More than half of this amount goes to kids. We're also spending over \$9 billion for school child nutrition programs, and more than \$4 billion for the WIC program. While this sounds like a lot, we need to do more. Many people who are eligible for these programs are not aware of it and the Department of Agriculture must do a better job getting the word out. Still, these figures put the costs of an international school feeding effort in perspective: they will be a small fraction of what we're spending here at home.

Through our international efforts, we share some of what we have learned with less fortunate countries. But we also benefit.

An international school lunch program will provide a much-needed boost to our beleaguered farm economy, where surpluses and low prices have been hurting farmers for the third year in a row. Congress has provided more than \$20 billion in emergency aid to farmers over the last three years. Buying farm products for this proposal would boost prices in the marketplace, helping US farmers and needy kids in the process. It is a common-sense proposal for helping our farmers, and the right thing to do.

Second, the education of children leads to economic development, which in turn increases demand for U.S. products in the future. Some of the largest food aid recipients in the 1950s are now our largest commercial customers.

Finally, let's consider the positive foreign policy implications of this measure. It helps fulfill the commitments we made in Rome in 1996 to work to improve world food security and helps satisfy the commitment to net food importing developing countries we made in Marrakesh in 1995 at the conclusion of the Uruguay Round. It also supports the goals of "Education for All" made in April in Dakar to achieve universal access to primary education.

It goes beyond demonstrating our commitment to summit texts and documents and has a real impact on our national security. When people are getting enough to eat, internal instability is less likely. Most of the conflicts taking place right now around the world are related at least in part to food insecurity.

We Can't and Shouldn't Do This Alone

The United States shouldn't go it alone. This needs to be an international effort. If the full costs for this program are shared fairly among developed countries, as we do now for United Nations peacekeeping efforts or humanitarian food aid relief efforts, then our resource commitments will be multiplied many times over. I encourage the Administration to continue its efforts to gain multilateral support for this initiative.

We should also seek the involvement and commitment of America's corporations and philanthropic organizations. Companies can contribute books and school supplies, computer equipment, kitchen equipment, construction supplies and management expertise.

Proposed Legislation

The food aid laws we already have in place allow USDA and USAID to start up these kinds of programs, but resources are limited.

The President's initiative is a concrete first step in the effort to assure that every kid is going to school, and that every kid going to school has a meal.

However — and this is not to detract in any way from the important action he has taken — the President's initiative relies on surplus commodities. That is a sensible approach at this time. But we may not always have an overabundance. We all hope for and are working for an end to the farm crisis, which means the quantity of surplus commodities will decline. We need to look at how we will continue to pay for this program in the future as it helps more children and as surplus commodities dwindle.

The legislation I am introducing today, the Agricultural Flexibility in Export Development and Assistance Act of 2000, addresses the longer-term funding issue.

My legislation authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to reallocate unspent Export Enhancement Program (EEP) money to school feeding and other food aid programs. When EEP was first authorized, one of its main purposes was to increase demand for U.S. agricultural commodities — to put money in the wallets of farmers by promoting overseas demand for our products. Because U.S. commodity prices have come down, it hasn't been used to any major extent since 1995. We are sitting on a pot of money, authorized but not being spent, while the EU spends over \$5 billion annually on similar programs. My legislation would free up the Secretary of Agriculture to devote those funds to school feeding and other food aid programs.

Because I recognize some would like to see a portion of the surplus EEP funds to be spent on export development programs, my bill also permits a portion of the funds to be spent on export promotion.

To maintain flexibility while ensuring our food aid goals are addressed, the measure would require that a minimum of 75 percent of reallocated EEP funding be spent for either PL480 (Title I or Title II) or Food for Progress food aid, with at least half of this amount devoted to school feeding or child nutrition programs. It would allow up to 20 percent of the reallocated funds to be spent on the Market Access Program to promote agricultural exports, and a maximum of five percent to be spent on the Foreign Market Development (Cooperator) program.

To ensure new artificial restraints don't block our intention in this legislation, the measure also raises the caps currently in place regarding the quantity of food aid permitted under Food for Progress and the amount that may be used to pay for the administrative expenses associated with the program.

Both the Coalition for Food Aid and Friends of the World Food Program support this measure. Major commodity groups such as the American Soybean Association and the National Corn Growers Association also support it.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing. I look forward to working with you in the months ahead as we continue to consider how we might respond to the nutrition needs of 300 million children, 130 million of whom are not but could and should be in school. With our help, these statistics can change.