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## The Future of Food Assistance: Opportunities and Challenges

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## THE FUTURE OF FOOD ASSISTANCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

*Erin Lentz\**

### INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a radical remaking of direct food security interventions and an expanded understanding of preventing undernutrition. Previously, in the United States, transoceanic food aid was the standard, de-facto approach. Today, there are more food assistance choices—agencies can deliver cash, vouchers, or food procured locally, regionally, or transoceanically. Further, nutritionists, economists, and others have identified the first 1000 days as a critical window for life-long cognitive development and health outcomes. Relatedly, our understanding of the value of more tailored, nutritionally-specific interventions to reach nutritionally vulnerable groups has expanded.

As a result of this research on the causes and consequences of undernutrition and on different forms of food assistance, at least three programmatic changes may be on the horizon. First, an implication of the first 1000 days is arguably the need for a refocusing on how food assistance programs operate and whom they target. Second, and relatedly, renewed attention on the nutritional quality of food assistance means that future food aid baskets could rely more on micro-nutrient rich foods rather than on basic grains and pulses. Third, increased flexibility among food assistance tools means that by selecting the most appropriate tool, agencies can potentially meet a

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variety of objectives, including faster delivery, lower-cost delivery, and delivery of more nutritious foods.

Yet, several challenges remain. First, while the number of food insecure individuals remains high, food aid funding levels have stagnated. Second, new knowledge and practices mean that business as usual will not be adequate. Agencies, donors, and local partners need to clarify and prioritize their objectives, recognizing that some forms of food assistance are better suited for some contexts and populations than others. Nutritional interventions, for example, need careful programming to reflect the heterogeneity of recipient groups. Third, food assistance is, just as food aid has been, a political issue, particularly in the United States.

One follow-on question is how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can best incorporate this information into food assistance practice? In the remainder of this piece, I will first provide an overview of food aid and assistance and discuss some of the challenges facing the future of food assistance. Second, I will detail the evidence behind these three factors that can contribute to the future of food assistance. In conclusion, I will argue that opportunities resulting from these findings can generate more effective programs. However, the benefits of new forms of food assistance and improved nutritional practice will only be achieved if policymakers and practitioners clarify and prioritize among objectives and seek ways to build greater programming flexibility into the current system.

## I. CHALLENGES

In 2012, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that the number of food insecure individuals was 868 million.<sup>1</sup> The number of individuals affected by (non-complex)

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<sup>1</sup> *Global Hunger Down*, FOOD AND AGRIC. ORG. OF THE U.N. (Oct. 1, 2013), <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/198105/icode/>. Numerous definitions of food security exist. Here, I use the definition agreed upon during the

disasters has nearly doubled in the past thirty years (see Figure 1); however, disasters are a relatively small driver of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Food security is most often an issue of lack of access (*i.e.*, the demand-side of food security, commonly manifested in an inability to afford food), as Amartya Sen noted in 1981.<sup>3</sup> In fact, most food security is chronic or periodic (*i.e.*, seasonal or predictably occurring). Poverty is the main driver of lack of access; indeed, the relationship between poverty and food security tends to be bidirectional, with one resulting in the other, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while an increase in emergencies means that more individuals will require some form of food assistance, the majority of food insecure individuals and households face long-term structural (*e.g.*, lack of employment with adequate purchasing power) or idiosyncratic (*e.g.*, ill health or disability) challenges to achieving food security.<sup>5</sup> Food assistance can rarely—if ever—resolve structural causes of food insecurity.

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1996 World Food Summit, which defines food security as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” *Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action*, FOOD AND AGRIC. ORG. OF THE U.N., ROME DECLARATION ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY (Nov. 13-17, 1996), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.htm#PoA>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Barrett, *Measuring Food Insecurity*, 327 SCIENCE 825, 827 (2010).

<sup>3</sup> AMARTYA SEN, POVERTY AND FAMINES: AN ESSAY ON ENTITLEMENT AND DEPRIVATION 47 (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Erin Lentz & Christopher Barrett, *The Economics and Nutritional Impacts of Food Assistance Policies and Programs*, 42 FOOD POLICY 151, 153-54 (2013).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 154.

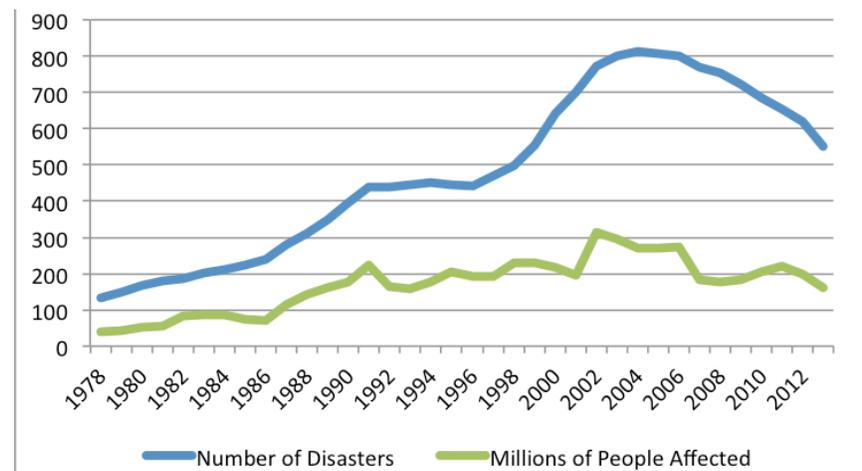


Figure 1: The Number of People Affected by Disasters (5-year lagged moving average)

The nature of transoceanic and Local and Regional Procurement Project (LRP) food aid flows is also changing. Figure 2 presents a graph of global food aid volumes over the past thirty years. The graph includes both transoceanic food aid, which is purchased in the donor country and shipped to the recipient country, and locally and regionally procured food, which uses donor funding to purchase food for delivery either locally from the destination country or regionally from a neighboring or nearby country.

Most noticeable in Figure 2 is the decline in overall volumes. There is much less food aid available for delivery than there once was. Now, more donors provide food-security funding in the form of cash assistance and vouchers. Further, there has been rapid growth in LRP, which has shifted the source of in-kind food aid delivered from predominantly transoceanic locations to local and regional ones. For example, in the face of evidence-based research and civil society advocacy that food aid fails to be an effective surplus disposal mechanism, the European Union and Canada shifted their food aid policy away from transoceanic food aid toward funding for

cash-based transfers and local and regional procurement.<sup>6</sup> In 1994-95, thirteen percent of all food aid by value was LRP. Yet, by 2010, sixty-seven percent of all food aid was LRP.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the graph splits food aid flows into three categories. Emergency food aid is deliveries of in-kind aid to people experiencing short-term periods of food insecurity, perhaps due to a natural disaster or complex emergency. Program food aid is concessional sales to governments, and it is now a small portion of the overall total of food aid. Project food aid includes aid for development projects and for monetization, which is food aid sold in the recipient country to generate funds for development projects. Monetization is rarely cost-effective, often earning returns of only fifty to seventy cents locally per dollar spent.<sup>8</sup> Over the past decade, funding for program and project food aid has declined, and most food aid now delivered is emergency-based.

Lastly, food aid flows are volatile, as indicated by the spikes in donations in 1992 and 1999. In both of those years, large U.S. donations to Russia contributed to the spike. U.S. food aid deliveries responded to a poor harvest and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992 and the collapse of the Russian banking system and currency in 1999.<sup>9</sup> Yet, these donations also reflect bumper harvests in the United States when food prices were low, making food aid relatively cheap. Further, some argue that delivering food aid to Russia was a

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<sup>6</sup> See JENNIFER CLAPP, HUNGER IN THE BALANCE: THE NEW POLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL FOOD AID 46-68 (2012).

<sup>7</sup> *International Food Aid Information System Database*, WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME, <http://www.wfp.org/fais/reports/quantities-delivered-two-dimensional-report/run/year/All/cat/All/recipient/All/donor/All/code/All/mode/All/basis/0/order/0>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Barrett & Erin Lentz, *U.S. Monetization Policy: Recommendations for Improvement* 7 (2009), [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:GVY1JiT9f4cJ:dyson.cornell.edu/faculty\\_sites/cbb2/files/papers/ChicagoCouncilPolicyDevelopmentStudyMonetizationDecember2009.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:GVY1JiT9f4cJ:dyson.cornell.edu/faculty_sites/cbb2/files/papers/ChicagoCouncilPolicyDevelopmentStudyMonetizationDecember2009.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us).

<sup>9</sup> See CHRISTOPHER BARRETT & DANIEL MAXWELL, FOOD AID AFTER FIFTY YEARS: RECASTING ITS ROLE 38-49 (2005).

low-cost political win for the United States.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, these procyclical donations, providing more food aid when prices are low, often do not coincide when needs are greater, such as during the food price crisis of 2007-08.

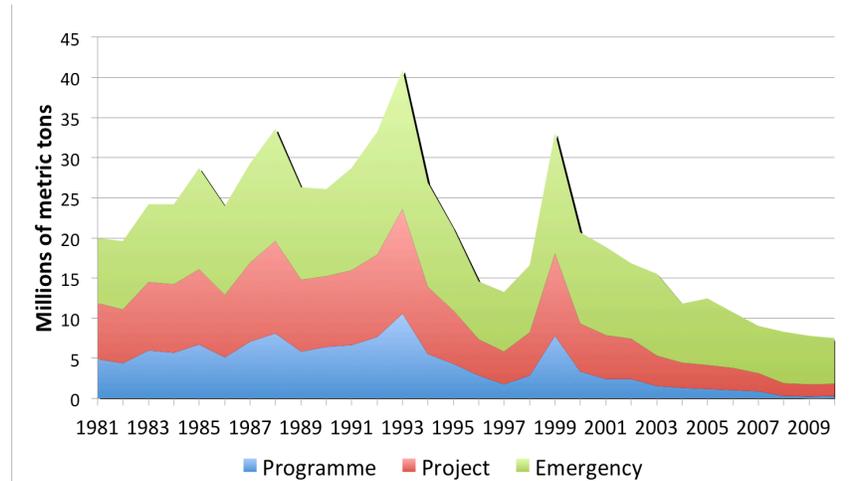


Figure 2: Global Food Aid Flows by Category (1981-2010)

The United States has been slower to fund new forms of food assistance than counterpart donors. Further, it remains the dominant actor in transoceanic food aid deliveries. In 2011, eighty-nine percent of all transoceanic food aid deliveries originated from the United States.<sup>11</sup> One reason for the slowness of the United States to change its approach is that large agro-processors, the U.S. shipping industry, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—labeled as the “iron triangle”—have little interest in losing food aid related payments and funding.<sup>12</sup> While many NGOs today embrace greater flexibility, and notably some large agro-processors as well, lobbying efforts by some members of the iron triangle to maintain the status quo should not be underestimated.<sup>13</sup> In particular, U.S. flagged

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 26-30.

<sup>11</sup> *International Food Aid Information System Database*, *supra* note 7.

<sup>12</sup> BARRETT & MAXWELL, *supra* note 9, at 87.

<sup>13</sup> NGOs, including CARE, which stated in 2006 that it would limit its monetization practices, have distanced themselves from the iron triangle. CARE

vessels receive priority bidding on some food aid cargo under the Agricultural Cargo Preference Act.<sup>14</sup> As a result, members of the U.S. maritime industry have often lobbied to maintain the status quo of high food aid volumes and less funding for cash, vouchers, and local procurement.<sup>15</sup> Balancing these domestic demands with recipient needs can hinder effective programming for recipients. Thus, food aid, perhaps especially in the United States, is political.

## II. OPPORTUNITIES

### A. New Forms of Food Assistance

Deliveries of cash, vouchers, and locally and regionally procured (LRP) food are now commonplace, while traditional, transoceanic food aid deliveries are declining. Some of the prospective benefits of moving away from food aid as *de facto* response include faster deliveries, lower costs, local foods are more acceptable to respondents, supporting local markets, and improving nutritional outcomes. These new forms of food assistance are not without potential risks: traders may default during local procurement; local foods may not meet similar quality and safety standards as transoceanic food aid; resources may be inequitably shared within households; and local foods may be less fortified or nutritious. Any form of food assistance can potentially have an adverse impact, depending on the local context. For example, large injections of cash

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USA, WHITE PAPER ON FOOD AID POLICY 4 (June 6, 2006), <http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/CARE%20monetization%20of%20arm%20bill%20white%20paper%5B3%5D.pdf>. Agro-processors are also changing. Cargill, for example, in May 2013 argued “it is time we reassess the [food aid] program . . . and allow for some flexibility in the delivery of a portion of food aid assistance so that food can get more quickly to people on the brink of starvation.” *Cargill Lends Support to Food Aid Reform*, AGRIPULSE, May 23, 2013, <http://www.agri-pulse.com/Cargill-lends-support-to-food-aid-reform-05232013.asp>.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Bageant et al., *Food Aid and Agricultural Cargo Preference*, 32 APPLIED ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES & POLICY 624 (2010).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 626-28.

could potentially adversely affect prices and/or disrupt local markets.<sup>16</sup>

Our understanding of the tradeoffs among and impacts of food assistance instruments has not always kept pace with these changes, in part due to a lack of comparable data. Recently, several new studies more clearly identify the possible benefits and drawbacks of the various forms of food assistance.

Two recent randomized trials compare cash and in-kind distributions, equalizing the magnitude of transfer, program design, and frequency of transfer across the different food assistance forms.<sup>17</sup> In Niger, researchers found that recipients of food baskets had higher dietary quality and consumption than recipients of cash.<sup>18</sup> Those receiving cash chose to spend some of their funds on improving their dwellings prior to the rainy season or purchasing agricultural inputs.<sup>19</sup> Food deliveries were fifteen percent more expensive than cash deliveries.<sup>20</sup> In Ecuador, researchers found that relative to cash transfers, food transfers result in recipients consuming significantly greater calories while food vouchers resulted in significantly greater dietary diversity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the nutritional impact varies not only by the form of transfer, but also by nutritional measure used.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Barrett et al., *Market Information and Food Insecurity Response Analysis*, 1 FOOD SECURITY 151, 155-57 (2009).

<sup>17</sup> John Hoddinott et al., *The Impact of Cash and Food Transfers: Evidence from a Randomized Intervention in Niger* 1-16, IFPRI Discussion Paper 01341, INT'L FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INST. (Apr. 2014), <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp01341.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>21</sup> See generally Melissa Hidrobo et al., *Cash, Food, or Vouchers?: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment in Northern Ecuador*, IFPRI Discussion Paper 01234, INT'L FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INST. (Mar. 2014), <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp01234.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

A nine-country evaluation undertaken by the LRP Learning Alliance compared LRP, cash, and voucher projects with matched transoceanic food aid provided at similar locations during similar timeframes in the fiscal year 2011. The focus areas of the evaluation included timeliness, costliness, impacts on price levels and volatility, impacts on smallholder farmers, and recipient satisfaction.<sup>23</sup> Because cost savings and time are usually the driving sources of advocacy for LRP, I limit discussion of the findings to these two areas.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding timeliness, cash, vouchers, and locally purchased food arrived, on average, nearly fourteen weeks earlier than matched deliveries of in-kind transoceanic food aid.<sup>25</sup> In Figure 3, countries are arranged by the number of weeks saved with the top-most country program (*i.e.*, Zambia) experiencing the most time saved. The six programs that experienced the most time saved were located in landlocked countries. One reason why timeliness matters is because the first 1000 days (discussed below)—from conception until a child turns age two—is the most critical window for nutrition during a person’s life.<sup>26</sup> A savings of fourteen weeks translates into about ten percent of the first 1000 days. The timeliness of food assistance delivered to pregnant and lactating women and children could make the difference between a healthful, productive life, and stunted growth and decreased human capital.

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<sup>23</sup> Erin Lentz et al., *On the Choice and Impacts of Innovative International Food Assistance Instruments*, 49 WORLD DEV. 1, 3 (2013).

<sup>24</sup> Erin Lentz et al., *The Timeliness and Cost Effectiveness of the Local and Regional Procurement of Food Aid*, 49 WORLD DEV. 9 *passim* (2013).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>26</sup> Cesar Victora et al., *Maternal and Child Undernutrition: Consequences for Adult Health and Human Capital*, 371 THE LANCET 340 *passim* (2008).

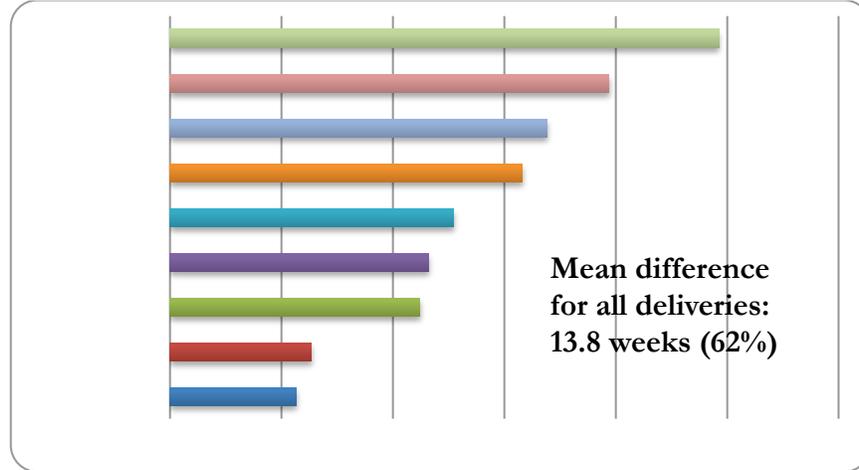


Figure 3: Number of Weeks Saved Using Local and Regional Procurement Project (LRP), Cash, or Vouchers Relative to Transoceanic Food Aid

Compared to transoceanic shipments, the same nine-country evaluation found that, compared to transoceanic shipments, local purchases, cash, and vouchers of cereals and grains were over fifty percent cheaper. The average savings associated with these new forms relative to transoceanic food aid for beans and pulses was twenty-five percent. Yet, there was often little or no cost-savings associated with locally purchasing processed products, such as vegetable oil and corn-soy blend. Further, oceanic shipping costs drive the price differentials for grains and pulses.<sup>27</sup>

One finding to emerge from the nine LRP Learning Alliance projects is that each form of food assistance does not necessarily meet any single objective (the following objectives were evaluated: timeliness, costliness, price and price volatility, impacts on smallholder suppliers, and recipient satisfaction) in all locations or all objectives in any one location.<sup>28</sup> Donors and agencies need to

<sup>27</sup> See *The Timeliness and Cost Effectiveness of the Local and Regional Procurement of Food Aid*, *supra* note 24, at 9.

<sup>28</sup> See *On the Choice and Impacts of Innovative International Food Assistance Instruments*, *supra* note 23, at 1; see also Hidrobo et al., *supra* note 21, at 1; Hoddinott

prioritize objectives, and recognize that there might be tradeoffs among them. Such a prioritization will assist in choosing the most suitable (combination of) food assistance tools. For example, certain nutritional outcomes appear easier to achieve with in-kind food, such as increased caloric consumption; while other measures, such as dietary diversity, may be more achievable through voucher distribution or cash. Similarly, not only do objectives matter, but so does the context. What may be appropriate in one situation may not work well in another.<sup>29</sup> As a result, agencies and donors need context-specific response analysis that evaluates market conditions, local preferences, security, and other concerns to identify what form(s) of food assistance is appropriate.<sup>30</sup>

#### B. Nutrition and Food Aid Quality

In a 2011 review on food aid quality and nutrition undertaken at the request of USAID, Webb et al. argue that “[p]utting nutrition at the heart of the food aid agenda will enhance the impact and credibility of Title II programming,” which is USAID’s largest source of food aid funding.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, they argue that the nutritional needs of the populations served by USAID are heterogeneous. For example, nutritionally vulnerable populations, such as people living with HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis, children who are wasted, or children and mothers in the first 1000 days need different, nutrient dense, specialized foods. The authors write, “[f]oods . . . should be designed with the physiological demands of the target group in mind.”<sup>32</sup> Further, Webb et al. argue for greater choice among the nutritional tools available, highlighting the promise of lipid-based

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et al., *supra* note 17, at 1 (explaining that food aid is more expensive but results in certain, better nutritional outcomes).

<sup>29</sup> *See id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Webb et al., *Improving the Nutritional Quality of U.S. Food Aid: Recommendations for Changes to Products and Programs*, USAID 8 (2011), <http://www.nutrition.tufts.edu/documents/ImprovingtheNutritionalQuality.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 10.

products and advocating for better formulations of fortified blended foods and premixes of micronutrients, vitamins, and minerals.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, while the LRP Learning Alliance findings show that the objective and context matter, Webb et al. find that composition of the nutritional basket matters as well, especially for nutritionally vulnerable individuals.<sup>34</sup> No one type of food can meet all programming goals, and no single programming approach is appropriate for all populations. In other words, if the goal for food assistance is to be something more than “the number of people ‘fed,’” practitioners and policymakers need to fine-tune food aid baskets to meet the needs of the targeted population.<sup>35</sup> Yet, identifying which nutritional tools to use, and when, is complex.

### C. The First 1000 Days

Mounting evidence indicates that the period from conception to age two—the first 1000 days—is the most important window for lifelong health and cognitive outcomes.<sup>36</sup> Victora et al. find that poor fetal growth or stunting before age two is associated with shorter adult height, reduced economic productivity, less schooling, and, for women, lower offspring birthweight.<sup>37</sup> Although there is more evidence of the possibility of cognitive and socio-emotional skills “catch-up” after the first 1000 days, the evidence of successful “catch-up” growth for stunted after the first 1000 days has been uneven. The authors argue that an implication of their findings is that “the prevention of maternal and child undernutrition is a long-term investment that will benefit the present generation and their children.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Ruel et al., found that in Haitian districts with high rates of undernutrition, preventing undernutrition was more effective and lower in cost than a recuperative approach

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<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>34</sup> *See id.*

<sup>35</sup> *See* Webb, *supra* note 31, at 6.

<sup>36</sup> Victora, *supra* note 26.

<sup>37</sup> *See id.* at 340.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

targeting already underweight children.<sup>39</sup> The preventative approach included food aid rations, as well as a range of health and behavior change interventions.

Reaching mothers and their children during the first 1000 days appears to have greater longer-term health outcomes than reaching other populations, including school-age children.<sup>40</sup> Yet, food assistance programs often target school-aged children with school meals and take-home rations because school-age children are more easily reachable and food assistance can incentivize school attendance.<sup>41</sup> While increasing school attendance and improving nutritional status are both important priorities, it is worth considering whether mechanisms other than food assistance would also be effective for boosting enrollment, saving food assistance for nutritional objectives.

#### CONCLUSION

More than ever before, there is an opportunity for food assistance to be fit for purpose. Yet, how best to incorporate these findings into future U.S. food assistance projects and programs is an open question and several challenges remain. First, the evidence briefly discussed above indicates that the most important window for long-term nutritional outcomes is the first 1000 days. Targeting mothers and their children during that window may be the most efficient way to limit stunting. Nonetheless, efficiency is only one consideration when determining who should receive food assistance. Equity also matters. Expecting families to direct all food transfers to certain members while others go without is unrealistic. Similarly,

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<sup>39</sup> Marie Ruel et al., *Age-Based Targeting Of Food Assistance And Behaviour Change And Communicated For Reduction Of Childhood Undernutrition In Haiti: A Cluster Randomised Trial*, 371 THE LANCET 588, 594 (2008).

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Bryce et al., *Maternal and Child Undernutrition: Effective Action at National Level*, 371 THE LANCET 510, 510 (2008).

<sup>41</sup> See *The Economics and Nutritional Impacts of Food Assistance Policies and Programs*, *supra* note 4, at 156.

targeting certain members of a community while ignoring others who are arguably experiencing the same degree of food insecurity, such as the elderly or infirm, can be disruptive within the community. Thus, balancing efficiency and equity remains an important challenge, particularly because funding for food assistance is limited.

Second, blanket prevention during the first 1000 days can be more effective and cost efficient than recuperative treatment. Many anthropomorphic indicators, such as wasting and stunting, are lagging indicators. In other words, by the time they are identified, children are already food insecure.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, a stronger focus on preventing these conditions can be more effective than intervening once emergencies have been declared. Yet, the bulk of current food aid funding goes to emergencies. Inasmuch as possible, prioritizing preventative food assistance programming in districts with high undernutrition can get assistance to those who need it, but are not yet showing the physical manifestations of undernutrition, faster. This could include redirecting food assistance resources away from other programs that can operate with alternative sources of funding.

Third, greater flexibility associated with the new forms of food assistance brings opportunities to better meet a range of food security and nutrition objectives. Prioritizing more explicitly among objectives—and recognizing that there are tradeoffs—can assist in identifying which type of transfer will be best suited to the local context. Nonetheless, greater flexibility also requires more effort to identify which type of food assistance is appropriate for the prioritized objective for a given context. Greater flexibility also requires more effort to identify which type of food assistance is appropriate for the prioritized objective (for a given context).<sup>43</sup> A corollary of greater flexibility is that donors and nongovernmental agencies also need ways to build in greater programming flexibility so

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<sup>42</sup> See *Measuring Food Insecurity*, *supra* note 2, at 827.

<sup>43</sup> See *id.* at 827; Joanna Upton & Erin Lentz, *Expanding the Food Assistance Toolbox*, in *UNITING ON FOOD ASSISTANCE: THE CASE FOR TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION* 75, 76 (Christopher Barrett et al. eds., 2012); see also Webb, *supra* note 31, at 10.

that they can change their approach as context changes (*e.g.*, as prices increase, nutritional needs change, or markets recover).

Lastly, food assistance is political and will likely remain so. Because the flexibility of U.S. food assistance is relatively new, and our understanding about the long-term effects of undernutrition in the first 1000 days is expanding, we are at a particular moment when evidence helps to shape the debate about the future of food assistance. Evidence helps to navigate political discussions and move debates from the ideological to the concrete. Looking forward to the next round of Farm Bill negotiations, we have an opportunity to build the evidence base and clearly articulate how new innovations and approaches can improve food assistance programming.