



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Shavuot: From Charity and Dependency to Dignity and Sustainability Supplementary Resource

Introduction

The biblical description of Shavuot and the Book of Ruth, which is read on Shavuot, include references to ancient systems of food aid intended to redistribute resources and alleviate hunger. These systems, as well as contemporary food aid systems, can sometimes reinforce the dependency of people facing poverty on donations from the wealthy. Shavuot offers us the opportunity to analyze how we can develop long-term, sustainable solutions to hunger that promote self-sufficiency.

What is food aid?

U.S. food aid is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and USAID under six different programs.¹ The programs' goals are varied, including to combat hunger and malnutrition; promote economic development and democracy abroad; expand international trade; and to develop and expand export markets for U.S. agricultural commodities.² U.S. food aid programs achieve the latter goal through legislative and regulatory mandates that support various stakeholders such as agribusiness and the maritime industry. For instance, U.S. legislation mandates that 75 percent of U.S. food aid be procured, processed and packed domestically and shipped overseas in U.S. vessels. Another regulation requires that 25 percent of Title II bagged food (the largest food aid program) be allocated to Great Lakes ports each month.³

Food aid is used for both emergency and non-emergency purposes. In the case of emergency food shortages, the U.S. government conducts a needs assessment in consultation with UN agencies and international NGOs, usually in response to a request from the government of the affected country. U.S. emergency food aid is then distributed to the community in need, often in collaboration with the UN World Food Program. U.S. food aid is also provided in non-emergency situations to promote development efforts and strengthen democracy in the Global South. In these cases, U.S. food commodities are donated or sold to governments or NGOs who subsequently sell these commodities in local markets in order to generate cash to fund their development projects, a process called "monetization." A government or NGO may use cash generated through monetization to support basic health care services or build agricultural infrastructure.

Problems with the U.S. Food Aid System

There are multiple issues that hinder the ability of U.S. food aid to address hunger in emergency and non-emergency situations. These issues impact both the efficiency and effectiveness of food aid. From an efficiency standpoint, regulations that dictate that food aid must be purchased, processed and transported through American companies dramatically increase the cost of food aid and the timeliness of delivery. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that transportation costs for Title II food aid constitute approximately 65 percent of expenditures.⁴ Additionally, they found that the delivery of in-kind food aid from vendor to village takes, on average, four to six months.⁵ The GAO report also points to inadequate coordination between U.S. agencies and stakeholders that causes problems such as food spoilage, disparate estimates of food needs, difficulties in identifying the most vulnerable groups and ineffective monitoring of the delivery of food aid. GAO and CARE also note that monetization is an extremely inefficient tool to promote development.⁶

¹ For a description of all U.S. food aid programs, visit <http://www.fas.usda.gov/info/factsheets/foodaid.asp>.

² Mousseau, Frederic. "Food Aid or Food Sovereignty?" Oakland Institute, October 2005, p 5.

³ United States Government Accountability Office. "Foreign Assistance: Various Challenges Impede the Efficiency and Effectiveness of U.S. Food Aid." GAO 07-560, April 2007, p. 13.

⁴ GAO p. 16.

⁵ GAO pp. 15-16.

⁶ CARE. "White Paper on Food Aid Policy." June 2006.

“Monetization requires food to be procured, shipped, and eventually sold—incurring costs at each step in the process.”⁷ For NGOs, monetization requires intensive management to market and sell food abroad, adding high administrative costs and diverting resources from their core mission. If the end goal of U.S. food aid is to promote development, monetization is a far less efficient means than cash donations.

Most importantly, food aid that ends up in local markets, either through monetization or mismanagement of emergency aid, can undermine local markets and impact long-term food security. U.S. food aid increases the supply of agricultural goods in a local market, pushing prices down and putting local farmers out of business. This blow to local agricultural production increases food insecurity and hunger in the long run, fostering further dependency on food aid.

Moving Forward

These critiques of the U.S. food aid system have begun to gain traction. Food aid has been the focus of policy debates in the U.S. and abroad, spurred by problems of mismanagement, CARE’s decision to turn down U.S. food aid for monetization, the global food crisis in 2008 which raised awareness of the scope of chronic hunger worldwide and the earthquake in Haiti.

As a result, many donors have stopped sending in-kind food aid. Instead, they are providing cash donations so that food aid can be purchased closer to where it is needed in order to stimulate local agricultural economies, not undermine them. Donors are working to better understand the potential risks and benefits of local and regional procurement, and evidence is mounting that it is far less costly and has the potential to provide economic opportunities for small-scale farmers in countries where purchases are made. U.S. Congress responded by authorizing the Local and Regional Procurement Pilot Project in the 2008 Farm Bill to allow a small percentage food aid to be made through cash donations. However, in the scope of U.S. food aid programs, this allocation is a tiny drop in the bucket.

Greater reforms are needed to ensure that U.S. food aid effectively meets emergency needs and does not undermine long-term food security for those vulnerable to hunger. While it may be necessary to rely on in-kind food donations in some emergency situations, the U.S. should expand the scope of regional and local procurement when possible. In addition, in-kind donations must be effectively monitored so that food aid does not end up in local markets. In non-emergency situations it is clear that monetization is not an appropriate tool to address food insecurity and promote sustainable development.

In our world today, over 1 billion people face hunger, many of whom are subsistence farmers. Long-term food security depends on their ability to strengthen local agricultural production and achieve a fair market price for their goods. Current U.S. food aid policies undermine these goals by compromising the needs of those facing hunger in order to promote U.S. economic interests. As a result, food aid as it is currently structured fosters dependency, not self-sufficiency.

To get involved with AJWS’s campaign to reform U.S. food aid policy, please visit <http://ajws.org/reversehunger/>.

For more information on this and other educational resources from AJWS, please contact us at education@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/fts.

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⁷ GAO p. 38.