

Religious Statement on Foreign Assistance Reform

February 2, 2009

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. You shall be called repairer of the breach and restorer of streets to live in.” - Isaiah 58

Poverty, hunger, and deadly disease afflict the majority of God’s people around the world today. Five billion of the world’s six billion people live in developing countries with access to only 20% of the world’s wealth, while half the world’s population lives on less than \$2 a day. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the willingness to fight poverty and other barriers to human dignity is one of the marks of a wise nation, and since the end of the Second World War, foreign assistance from the United States has been the single largest financial contributor to human development around the world. Today, U.S. foreign aid is essential not only to meet humanitarian necessity and promote economic growth and progress, but also to build a world of stability and security for generations to come. For children in Africa saved from malaria by U.S. assistance, to women and families in Haiti who have built successful enterprises because of micro-credit programs, the generosity of the U.S. people, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy, has helped light to rise in the darkness, and gloom to be like the noonday.

Given the complex economic and foreign-policy challenges facing the U.S. today, however, our nation has a heightened responsibility to examine whether its foreign-assistance efforts are having the maximum impact they can have in promoting the dignity of every human being. At a time when the nation faces the challenge of reduced financial resources but greater need, a new system of foreign assistance that is better targeted, makes greater use of effective existing structures, and reduces inefficiencies and duplication will serve the goals of reducing poverty and enhancing human development more successfully. In order to respond to achieve this goal and guarantee that our nation’s global contributions are cost-effective in the current economic atmosphere, we believe it essential to reform the U.S. system for distributing foreign aid and prioritizing and managing global-development efforts.

As faith groups committed to advocacy on reducing global poverty, many with a long history of experience in delivering relief and development aid – including as implementers of U.S. government programs – we come together to urge congressional leaders and the new U.S. administration to undertake the process of examining, evaluating, and reforming U.S. foreign-assistance programs to ensure their maximum reach in fighting poverty and meeting human need. The following recommendations for reform represent our common commitments in this process:

Foreign Assistance Reform Should Seek to Achieve the Following:

1. Make poverty reduction a primary goal of U.S. foreign assistance

Focus on reducing poverty and enhancing human development for the poorest countries, communities, and people who need it most through balanced interventions including agriculture, health, education, and the economic empowerment of women. Ensure that these long-term development goals and funding are not subordinated to short-term security and political concerns.

2. Elevate development in status and structure alongside diplomacy and defense

Reinstitute authority for design, planning and budgeting of long-term development goals and poverty-focused development assistance to stand alongside the interests of diplomatic relations and defense with independence and integrity.

3. Provide resources, both financial and human, to responsibly implement the new status and structure by doubling funding for poverty-focused development assistance by 2012.

Administer resources in a better targeted way that makes greater use of effective existing mechanisms and reduces inefficiencies and duplication, in order to serve the goals of reducing poverty and enhancing human development more successfully.

4. Develop a U.S. global strategy both for immediate humanitarian assistance and long-term development

With coordination at the highest levels of government, promote a balanced, comprehensive approach that coordinates humanitarian aid, development assistance, trade and agriculture policy, climate change initiatives and other mechanisms to promote poverty reduction and human development. Coordinate with other international donors and multilateral agencies to reduce program duplication and the burdens on recipient nations.

Identify opportunities to work with multilateral donors and global actors to confront global challenges such as soaring food and commodity prices.

5. Affirm that U.S. humanitarian relief and development assistance is under the control, authority and direction of civilian agencies and implementing partners (including faith-based institutions) who have the skills and expertise to plan and implement the most effective and appropriate responses.

Revitalize U.S. civilian capacity and authority to manage foreign assistance while reversing the trend toward greater Department of Defense funding, authority, and involvement related to development.

6. Provide reliable, flexible assistance in partnership with recipient countries to meet their long-term development goals

Empower the participation of poor people in development through programs that help meet the country's poverty-reduction goals in ways that respect local conditions and cultures, and involve and strengthen local governments and civil society. Supporting a strong and vibrant civil society is essential to promote the welfare of the whole society.

Planning should also be flexible to incorporate on-the-ground realities to meet long-term development goals.

7. Make foreign assistance more transparent and more accountable

Promote greater accountability – both to impoverished people being served as well as the American people – by advancing, publicizing, and reporting on measurable goals for U.S. development objectives. Goals should be measured by outcomes for the people, households, and communities served. A strong emphasis should be placed on building the capacity of local communities to ensure sustainability.

American Jewish World Service
Bread for the World Micah Challenge USA
Catholic Relief Services
Center for Interfaith Action on Global Poverty
Church World Service
Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Lutheran World Relief
Mennonite Central Committee US
Micah Challenge USA
Presbyterian Church, USA, Washington Office
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops