

Remarks at the Symposium on Global Agriculture and Food Security May 18, 2012

Please have a seat. Thank you. Well, good morning, everybody. Thank you, Catherine Bertini and Dan Glickman and everyone at the Chicago Council. We were originally going to convene, along with the G–8, in Chicago. But since we’re not doing this in my hometown, I wanted to bring a little bit of Chicago to Washington. *[Laughter]* It is wonderful to see all of you. It is great to see quite a few young people here as well. And I want to acknowledge a good friend. We were just talking backstage; he was my inspiration for singing at the Apollo. *[Laughter]* Bono is here, and it is good to see him.

Now, this weekend at the G–8, we’ll be represented by many of the world’s largest economies. We face urgent challenges: creating jobs, addressing the situation in the euro zone, sustaining the global economic recovery. But even as we deal with these issues, I felt it was also important, also critical to focus on the urgent challenge that confronts some 1 billion men, women, and children around the world: the injustice of chronic hunger, the need for long-term food security.

So tomorrow at the G–8, we’re going to devote a special session to this challenge. We’re launching a major new partnership to reduce hunger and lift tens of millions of people from poverty. And we’ll be joined by leaders from across Africa, including the first three nations to undertake this effort and who join us here today. I want to acknowledge them: Prime Minister Meles of Ethiopia, President Mills of Ghana, and President Kikwete of Tanzania. Welcome.

I also want to acknowledge President Yayi of Benin, chair of the African Union, which has shown great leadership in this cause. And two of our leaders in this effort: USAID Administrator—every time I meet him, I realize that I was an underachiever in my thirties—*[laughter]*—Dr. Raj Shah is here; and the CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Daniel Yohannes.

Now, this partnership is possible because so many leaders in Africa and around the world have made food security a priority. And that’s why, shortly after I took office, I called for the international community to do its part. And at the G–8 meeting 3 years ago in L’Aquila, in Italy, that’s exactly what we did, mobilizing more than \$22 billion for a global food security initiative.

After decades in which agriculture and nutrition didn’t always get the attention they deserved, we put the fight against global hunger where it should be, which is at the forefront of global development. And this reflected the new approach to development that I called for when I visited Ghana, hosted by President Mills, and that I unveiled at the last summit on the Millennium Development Goals.

It’s rooted in our conviction that true development involves not only delivering aid, but also promoting economic growth: broad-based, inclusive growth that actually helps nations develop and lift people out of poverty. The whole purpose of development is to create the conditions where assistance is no longer needed, where people have the dignity and the pride of being self-sufficient.

You see our new approach in our promotion of trade and investment, of building on the outstanding work of the African Growth and Opportunity Act. You see it in the global partnership to promote open government, which empowers citizens and helps to fuel development, creates the framework, the foundation for economic growth.

You see it in the international effort we’re leading against corruption, including greater transparency so taxpayers receive every dollar they’re due from the extraction of natural resources. You see it in our Global Health Initiative, which instead of just delivering medicine is also helping to build a stronger health system, delivering better care and saving lives.

And you see our new approach in our food security initiative, Feed the Future. Instead of simply handing out food, we’ve partnered with

countries in pursuit of ambitious goals: better nutrition to prevent the stunting and the death of millions of children, and raising the incomes of millions of people, most of them farmers. And the good news is we're on track to meet our goals.

As President, I consider this a moral imperative. As the wealthiest nation on Earth, I believe the United States has a moral obligation to lead the fight against hunger and malnutrition and to partner with others.

So we take pride in the fact that, because of smart investments in nutrition and agriculture and safety nets, millions of people in Kenya and Ethiopia did not need emergency aid in the recent drought.

But when tens of thousands of children die from the agony of starvation, as in Somalia, that sends us a message we've still got a lot of work to do. It's unacceptable. It's an outrage. It's an affront to who we are.

So food security is a moral imperative, but it's also an economic imperative. History teaches us that one of the most effective ways to pull people and entire nations out of poverty is to invest in their agriculture. And as we've seen from Latin America to Africa to Asia, a growing middle class also means growing markets, including more customers for American exports that support American jobs. So we have a self-interest in this.

It's a moral imperative, it's an economic imperative, and it is a security imperative. For we've seen how spikes in food prices can plunge millions into poverty, which in turn can spark riots that cost lives and can lead to instability. And this danger will only grow if a surging global population isn't matched by surging food production. So reducing malnutrition and hunger around the world advances international peace and security, and that includes the national security of the United States.

Perhaps nowhere do we see this link more vividly than in Africa. On the one hand, we see Africa as an emerging market. African economies are some of the fastest growing in the world. We see a surge in foreign investment. We see a growing middle class, hundreds of millions of people connected by mobile

phones, more young Africans online than ever before. There's hope and some optimism. And all of this has yielded impressive progress: for the first time ever, a decline in extreme poverty in Africa; an increase in crop yields; a dramatic drop in child deaths. That's the good news, and in part, it's due to some of the work of the people in this room.

On the other hand, we see an Africa that still faces huge hurdles: stark inequalities, most Africans still living on less than \$2 a day, climate change that increases the risk of drought and famine. All of which perpetuates stubborn barriers in agriculture, in the agricultural sector, from the bottlenecks in infrastructure that prevent food from getting to market to the lack of credit, especially for small farmers, most of whom are women.

I've spoken before about relatives I have in Kenya who live in villages where hunger is sometimes a reality, despite the fact that African farmers can be some of the hardest working people on Earth. Most of the world's unused arable land is in Africa. Fifty years ago, Africa was an exporter of food. There is no reason why Africa should not be feeding itself and exporting food again. There is no reason for that.

So that's why we're here. In Africa and around the world, progress isn't coming fast enough. And economic growth can't just be for the lucky few at the top, it's got to be broad based, for everybody, and a good place to start is in the agricultural sector. So even as the world responds with food aid in a crisis—as we've done in the Horn of Africa—communities can't go back just to the way things were, vulnerable as before, waiting for the next crisis to happen. Development has to be sustainable, and as an international community, we have to do better.

So here at the G-8, we're going to build on the progress we've made so far. Today I can announce a new global effort we're calling a New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. And to get the job done, we're bringing together all the key players around a shared commitment. Let me describe it.

Governments, like those in Africa, that are committed to agricultural development and food security, they agree to take the lead, building on their own plans by making tough reforms and attracting investment. Donor countries, including G-8 members and international organizations, agree to more closely align our assistance with these country plans. And the private sector—from large multinationals to small African cooperatives, your NGOs, and civil society groups—agree to make concrete and continuing commitments as well, so that there is an alignment between all these sectors.

And I know some have asked, in a time of austerity, whether this New Alliance is just a way for governments to shift the burden onto somebody else. I want to be clear: The answer is no. As President, I can assure you that the United States will continue to meet our responsibilities, so that even in these tough fiscal times, we will continue to make historic investments in development. And by the way, we're going to be working to end hunger right here in the United States as well. That's—that will continue to be a priority.

We'll continue to be the leader in times of crisis, as we've done as the single largest donor of aid in the Horn of Africa and as we focus on the drought in the Sahel. That's why I've proposed to continue increasing funds for food security. So I want to be clear: The United States will remain a global leader in development in partnership with you. And we will continue to make available food—or emergency aid. That will not change. But what we do want to partner with you on is a strategy so that emergency aid becomes less and less relevant as a consequence of greater and greater sustainability within these own countries.

That's how development is supposed to work. That's what I mean by a new approach that challenges more nations, more organizations, more companies, more NGOs, challenges individuals—some of the young people who are here—to step up and play a role. Because government cannot and should not do this alone. This has to be all hands on deck.

And that's the essence of this New Alliance. So G-8 nations will pledge to honor the commitments we made in L'Aquila. We must do what we say, no empty promises. And at the same time, we'll deliver the assistance to launch this new effort. Moreover, we're committing to replenish the very successful Global Agricultural and Food Security Program. That's an important part of this overall effort.

Next, we're going to mobilize more private capital. Today I can announce that 45 companies—from major international corporations to African companies and cooperatives—have pledged to invest more than \$3 billion to kick off this effort. And we're also going to fast-track new agricultural projects so they reach those in need even quicker.

Third, we're going to speed up the development and delivery of innovation—better seeds, better storage—that unleash huge leaps in food production. And we're going to tap that mobile phone revolution in Africa so that more data on agriculture—whether it's satellite imagery or weather forecasts or market prices—are put in the hands of farmers so they know where to plant and when to plant and when to sell.

Fourth, we're joining with the World Bank and other partners to better understand and manage the risks that come with changing food prices and a changing climate, because a change in prices or a single bad season should not plunge a family, a community, or a region into crisis.

And finally, we're going to keep focusing on nutrition, especially for young children, because we know the effects of poor nutrition can last a lifetime: It's harder to learn, it's harder to earn a living. When there is good nutrition, especially in those thousand days during pregnancy up to the child's second birthday, it means healthier lives for that child and that mother. And it's the smart thing to do because better nutrition means lower health care costs and it means less need for assistance later on.

That's what we're going to do. We're going to sustain the commitments we made 3 years ago, and we're going to speed things up. And we're starting with these three countries—

Tanzania, Ghana, and Ethiopia—precisely because of their record in improving agriculture and food security.

But this is just the beginning. In the coming months, we'll expand to six countries. We'll welcome other countries that are committed to making tough reforms. We'll welcome more companies that are willing to invest. We're going to hold ourselves accountable; we'll measure results. And we'll stay focused on clear goals: boosting farmers' incomes and, over the next decade, helping 50 million men, women, and children lift themselves out of poverty.

And I know there are going to be skeptics; there always are. We see heartbreaking images—fields turned to dust, babies with distended bellies—and we say it's hopeless and some places are condemned to perpetual poverty and hunger. But the people in this room disagree. I think most of the American people disagree. Anyone who claims great change is impossible, I say look at the extraordinary successes in development.

Look at the Green Revolution, which pulled hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Look at microfinance, which has empowered so many rural poor, something my mother was involved with. Look at the huge expansion of education, especially for girls. Look at the progress we've made with vaccines—from smallpox to measles to pneumonia to diarrhea—which have saved the lives of hundreds of millions. And of course, look at the global fight against HIV/AIDS, which has brought us to the point where we can imagine what was

once unthinkable, and that is the real possibility of an AIDS-free generation.

Moreover, we are already making progress in this area right now. In Rwanda, farmers are selling more coffee and lifting their families out of poverty. In Haiti, some farmers have more than doubled their yields. In Bangladesh, in the poorest region, they've had their first-ever surplus of rice. There are millions of farmers and families whose lives are being transformed right now because of some of the strategies that we're talking about. And that includes a farmer in Ethiopia who got a new loan, increased production, hired more workers. And he said: "This salary changed my life. My kids can now go to school."

And we start getting the wheel turning in the direction of progress. We can do this. We're already doing it. We just need to bring it all together. We can unleash the change that reduces hunger and malnutrition. We can spark the kind of economic growth that lifts people and nations out of poverty. This is the new commitment that we're making. And I pledge to you today that this will remain a priority as long as I am United States President. Thank very much. God bless you. Thank you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:08 a.m. at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. In his remarks, he referred to Catherine A. Bertini and Daniel R. Glickman, cochairs, Symposium on Global Agriculture and Food Security; and musician and activist Paul D. "Bono" Hewson.

Remarks Following a Meeting With President François Hollande of France May 18, 2012

President Obama. Well, it is my great pleasure to welcome President Hollande to the United States, to the Oval Office, and this evening to Camp David.

We all watched the remarkable election, and I offered him hardy congratulations and assured him that the friendship and alliance between the United States and France is not only of extraordinary importance to me,

but is deeply valued by the American people.

I was interested, when I was reading the President's biography, that he actually spent some time in the United States in his youth, studying American fast food. And although he decided to go into politics, we'll be interested in his opinions of cheeseburgers in Chicago. [Laughter]