

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness
**The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore
the relationships between food and social justice**

This past Lent, Saints Peter and Paul parishioners fasted, prayed and, in the end, gave alms in the amount of \$7,078.00 through the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Rice Bowl faith-in-action program. While 25% of these donations will remain in the Diocese of Joliet for local poverty and hunger alleviation efforts, 75% will support CRS' programs around the world. Private donations like these are important to CRS' continued efforts to support the lives and dignities of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters around the world, but these are not the only funds CRS puts to work. CRS is also one of the leading implementers of U.S. international food aid programs. When the U.S. Government decides to spend tax dollars on these programs, it relies on private voluntary organizations (PVOs) like CRS to translate those dollars from numbers on paper to food on plates, formula in baby bottles, or technical assistance for farmers—to name just a few hunger-fighting interventions. Given their familiarity and longstanding involvement with these programs, and with the people these programs aim to serve, we should take seriously the fact that CRS has repeatedly called on Congress to reform and provide more funding for our international food aid programs.

CRS is not alone. They join a chorus of concerned parties that includes many PVOs, intergovernmental organizations, key trading partners, academics, both the Obama and George W. Bush Administrations, and certain members of Congress. While the U.S. has played a leading role in efforts to alleviate global hunger and malnutrition for over six decades, it remains the only major country, other than Japan, to rely primarily on in-kind, domestically sourced and shipped commodities, rather than cash-based assistance that can be used to purchase food for distribution from the most appropriate market, or given in the form of vouchers or cash transfers. Along with this reliance on domestically sourced and shipped in-kind food aid, comes a set of legislative requirements that hamstring implementing partners like CRS, and waste valuable taxpayer dollars that could be supporting the lives and livelihoods of those most in need.

CRS' objectives for food aid reform are shared with many. They have been presented to Congress on several occasions, and were outlined in an exceptionally clear manner by CRS President and CEO, Dr. Carolyn Woo, in her written testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on April 15, 2015, as follows:

1) **Eliminate or at least minimize the need to monetize food aid resources.** Monetization is the practice of purchasing U.S. commodities, shipping them abroad, selling them in the markets of the recipient country, and using the money generated by the sale to fund food security projects. The alternative would be to fund these projects directly. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has referred to monetization as “an inherently inefficient use of resources” and has found that on average, the funds generated through monetization net only about 70% of the cost to buy and transport the commodities. “Our own experience closely resembles these results,” Woo testified. In addition to being inefficient, monetization has been found to have adverse impacts on the markets of recipient countries, reinforcing negative dependency and thus undermining the dignity of the very people we are trying to help. In light of this CRS only uses monetization when legislative requirements allow them no other options.

2) Minimize the impacts of cargo preference laws on food aid programs. By law, at least 50% of the volume of food aid commodities must be shipped on U.S.-flag commercial vessels, which tend to be more expensive than foreign-flag vessels. In 2011, the Maritime Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation (MARAD) found that U.S. flagged vessels are 2.7 times more expensive than foreign vessels, which, Woo testified, “matches well” with CRS’ experience. Since food aid shipping costs must be paid out of food aid appropriations, cargo preference laws have the effect of reducing the amount of food aid we can provide. Furthermore, the 50% minimum is applied per category of vessel, and per country or geographic area of destination, which results in further reductions in the amount of food aid we can provide and, as Woo testified from experience, allows U.S. carriers to challenge or force rebidding of contracts that had initially been awarded to less expensive carriers.

The stated purpose of these cargo preference laws is to encourage the maintenance of a privately-owned, U.S.-flag merchant marine that can provide sealift capacity and skilled seafarers in times of war or national emergency, and help protect U.S. ocean commerce. However, the GAO has found that cargo preference for food aid does not significantly advance these objectives, but that it does adversely affect food aid programs. CRS has been careful to express, in Woo’s words, “respect and admiration” for the seafarers who have played a role in the fight against global food insecurity, but as Woo testified, “we believe that achieving the objective of maintaining a U.S.-flagged merchant fleet, and U.S. mariners to crew those vessels, should not come at the expense of more efficient food aid programs.”

3) Maximize discretion for implementers. There are many ways to make sure hungry people get the food they need to survive and thrive, and there are many factors to consider in choosing which way is best. These factors include (but are not limited to) cost, timeliness, potential market impacts (whether positive or negative), nutrition, cooking/preparation requirements, culture, and in situations of conflict and upheaval, security and mobility. Depending on the circumstances, the most appropriate form of food assistance may be U.S.-sourced commodities, locally- or regionally-procured commodities, cash, or vouchers. Woo testified that based on their experience using each, “CRS believes that all these modalities of assistance can be valuable tools in the fight against hunger, but which is the right tool depends greatly on specific circumstances we cannot necessarily know in advance.” However, our food aid programs tend to lock implementers into using one form or another, with a strong preference toward U.S.-sourced commodities. This is troublesome, not only because it may run afoul of international trade agreements, but perhaps more so because evidence shows that the other options (local/regional procurement, cash, and vouchers), when prudently employed, can be more timely, cost effective, culturally appropriate, and adaptable to emergency or conflict situations. Furthermore, they can bolster local markets and livelihoods, and are thus more conducive to the long-term development objectives of the U.S., and the social justice imperatives of conscientious Catholics. Therefore, CRS seeks maximum discretion to decide, in a good faith effort to promote the dignity of those they serve, which type of food assistance is the most appropriate to each particular situation.

The reason these apparently common-sense, research-backed, and widely-supported reforms have not already been undertaken appears to be a small, but vocal alliance of commodity groups and food processors, maritime interests, and a minority of non-governmental organizations that benefit from monetization. These parties continue to advocate for retaining the status-quo.

However, with about 795 million hungry people in the world, and minimal U.S. government spending on international food aid programs (these programs have always accounted for only a tiny portion of total U.S. government outlays, but the amount is steadily declining—from 0.99% in the 1960s, to 0.06% in the years 2010-2013), we cannot afford inefficiency. Furthermore, as Woo explained to senators, our faith will not allow it: “As a Catholic organization, we are guided by Catholic Social Teaching that calls us all to be good stewards of our resources.”

We can help CRS and other concerned parties advocate for more efficient, effective, and robustly funded international food aid programs. Any time is a good time to contact your representatives to let them know you want to see them supporting the reforms outlined above, as well as increased funding for international food aid programs, but the times when Congress is working on a farm bill or appropriations legislation are particularly opportune. One easy way to advocate is to visit www.confrontglobalpoverty.org and sign up to receive action alerts via email from CRS. Every time they need strength in numbers, CRS will prompt you, brief you, and provide you with a sample message you can edit and send to your representatives directly from CRS’ website. You can also sign up to receive similar alerts from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at www.votervoice.net/USCCB/home.

Whether or not you choose to join your voice to advocacy efforts, we cannot fault our government for wasting food aid resources without examining our own lives. The problem of food waste has been gaining more attention, and most of us are at least a little bit guilty. “Let us remember well, however,” said Pope Francis in 2013 “that whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor, from the hungry!” He went on to issue the following call to conversion: **“I ask everyone to reflect on the problem of the loss and waste of food, to identify ways and approaches which, by seriously dealing with this problem, convey solidarity and sharing with the underprivileged.” May we answer Pope Francis’ call, and may we prayerfully consider ways to be better stewards of all God’s gifts.**