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Guest column: Fight hunger as moral, practical thing to do

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Matz was chairman of the board of the Friends of the World Food Program from 1995 to 2008.

The recent debate over the farm bill might have left some with the impression that corn-based ethanol is responsible for hunger around the world. It is a great deal more complicated.

The impact of corn-based ethanol must be examined, but price increases for grain are the result of several factors, including a dramatic increase in energy costs, low grain stocks worldwide, the rapidly changing diet in China and India and the weak U.S. dollar. In short, there is a long-term structural problem that goes beyond the use of corn-based ethanol. Complicating the dilemma is whether the United States should reform its agriculture program in the absence of an international agreement where all countries reduce farm subsidies in proportion.

The problem of world hunger, however, is quite real and is not being exaggerated by the press. Our planet has the capacity to support a population of 10 billion people, yet with a world population of 6.5 billion, 850 million go hungry.

The solution to the hunger challenge in the short run is for all countries to follow the lead of the United States and increase funding to the World Food Program. In addition, the world community should help expand the McGovern-Dole international school-lunch program. Just one meal a day at school can change lives. When food is provided at school, parents will allow their girls to attend. They then marry later and have only half the number of children.

In the long run, the answer is to build a sustainable food supply throughout the world. We must bring the green revolution to Africa and help countries there develop an infrastructure for growing and distributing food.

Zambia is a dramatic case in point. The average life expectancy is just 33 years, the combined effect of hunger and AIDS. There is plenty of water in Zambia, but people still live from rain to rain because there are no irrigation systems. I've seen a road and a dam being built there with shovels, hoes and plastic buckets. There were no power tools or mechanized vehicles.

Further, we must recognize that the fight against AIDS is linked to food. The United States has been generous with drugs to combat AIDS, but the drugs will not work effectively without enough food. In Kenya, I have seen medical doctors on the front lines in the fight against AIDS establish large-scale farm operations to grow the necessary food. Patients diagnosed as positive for AIDS get two prescriptions, one for drugs and one for food. The doctors are to be commended, but farming is not the best use of their time.

In the United States, we have come to recognize that hungry children cannot learn, and illiterate adults cannot contribute to society. It was President Richard Nixon, in 1969, who helped make the point that there are practical consequences to hunger. Hunger is a moral imperative, Nixon said, but then he went on to note that, "Even in purely practical terms there are compelling considerations requiring this challenge to be met ... a child ill-fed is dulled in curiosity...a worker ill-fed is less productive, the mounting cost of medical care for diet related illnesses ... all of these place heavy economic burden on a society as a whole."

Under the extraordinary leadership of Sens. George McGovern and Bob Dole, the United States enacted a bold range of programs to address the problem of hunger in America. When it was

suggested in the 1980s that the Women, Infants and Children food program be cut for budgetary reasons, it was corporate America that objected. Corporations need educated workers, and WIC helps prepare children to learn.

The same is true on the world stage. One-sixth of the world's people live in extreme poverty. It is not possible for them to be productive and participate in a new-world economy. Eliminating hunger is not just the moral thing to do; it is also the pragmatic thing to do.
