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We join each other in the midst of a global emergency.

Malnutrition will claim the lives of nearly 10,000 children today. That daily toll will almost certainly rise in the coming months.

The price of rice, corn, and other staples are skyrocketing. Riots over food have broken out in two dozen countries.¹ From some of the worst-hit regions, we're hearing stories of terrible deprivation. People in Somalia are surviving on gruel made from the mashed-up branches of thorn trees.² People in Haiti are filling their bellies with cakes made of mud.³

In this climate of crisis, the scariest prospect is not that the food shortage continues. What's scarier is the possibility that—as the bad news piles up, day after day—we lose our sense of urgency, and allow hunger to tighten its grip on the world.

The current food shortage requires swift action. It also reveals deeply entrenched problems that require long-term solutions. So even as we strategize how to get food to hungry people as quickly as possible, we must also think of new ways to address the underlying causes of this emergency.

¹ New York Times, "Worries Mount As Farmers Push For Big Harvest," June 10, 2008

² New York Times, "Famine Looms as Wars Rend Horn of Africa," May 17, 2008

³ New York Times, "Across Globe, Empty Bellies Bring Rising Anger," April 18, 2008

Hunger and poverty are entwined. When you're chronically hungry, every aspect of life becomes more difficult. The very act of getting up in the morning... caring for children... performing a job... gathering water or firewood... when you aren't getting enough calories to sustain a basic level of energy, even the simplest task can become an impossible challenge.

In this way, hunger and poverty are connected in a vicious circle. Actually, we wish it were a circle. It's a downward spiral. And it's accelerating.

But something else is accelerating as well: our understanding... our ability to do something... and our desire to do something.

Hunger is not new to our world. What *is* new is the level of global awareness that the latest food crisis has sparked.

So even in this emergency, there is opportunity for progress.

Governments, NGOs, and philanthropies around the world are searching for solutions with renewed vigor. A Food and Agriculture Organization conference two months ago discussed several ways to respond, including increasing food aid, raising food production, and accelerating agricultural research. More recently, at the G8 Summit, the food crisis also took center stage, with world leaders pledging to look for ways to address the ever worsening situation.

These are all important ideas worth considering and pursuing.

But there is another solution that the world consistently overlooks.

I believe it is crucial to solving the hunger crisis—and, in turn, the poverty that hunger sustains.

That solution is women.

Women are the managers of the developing world's food supply. They plant the seeds, harvest the crops, manage food storage, prepare the meals, and feed their families.

But too often, they are left out of plans to strengthen the global food supply.

Most food programs don't target them. Agricultural equipment isn't made for them. Markets aren't designed for them. Scientists don't consult with them. Universities don't train them.

If we are to succeed in fighting hunger, we must put women at the core of *our* work... by supporting them in *their* work.

I'm certainly not the first person to suggest that we turn our attention to women farmers. Some governments, international organizations and NGOs, to their credit, have been saying this for a long time.

But talk is not the same as action. And as we delay, the food crisis is getting worse.

It is time that we seriously reevaluate our approach to agriculture and make the changes necessary to put women at the heart of everything we do.

I'm here today to describe how one foundation is taking on this challenge.

The Gates Foundation's agricultural work: new mission, new approach

A few of us met each other during my years at the United Nations, where, among other roles, I spent a decade as the Executive Director of the World Food Programme.

Today, I am here representing the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as a Senior Fellow for the Agricultural Development initiative.

The core belief of the Gates Foundation is simple: every life has equal value.

The mission that follows from this belief is simple to say, but much harder to achieve. It is to eliminate the world's greatest inequities, so that every person, no matter where she or he lives, has the tools they need to achieve their full potential.

On a global level, this mission led the Foundation to focus on health. More recently, we've entered a new area: global development. Agriculture is a significant focus of that work.

The Foundation is pursuing improvements along the entire length of the agricultural chain – from the seed to the sale – by focusing on four grant-making priorities: increasing farmer productivity; creating links to markets; developing new technologies; and collecting data for policy analysis.

Now, the Foundation has decided to implement a priority that is an umbrella that covers all the Foundation's work in agriculture.

After years of seeing the central role that women play in growing the world's food—how hard they work, and how little support they receive—the Gates Foundation has decided to implement a new requirement for agriculture grants: every grant must explicitly address gender.

Whether the grant proposal suggests a method to develop heartier wheat, or educate farmers about innovative irrigation techniques, or help farmers get up-to-date price information from global markets—whatever the idea, the proposal must address the gender gap and find a way to meaningfully support women in the field.

If it doesn't, it won't get funding from the Gates Foundation.

This new requirement is not about a political agenda. It is about effectiveness. The Gates Foundation is convinced that agricultural development is more effective when it directly addresses the needs of the women who manage the food supply in the developing world. When these women are neglected, or treated as an afterthought, agricultural programs don't get the best results.

The Gates Foundation is making these changes to how we work now, at the start of our work in agriculture, to make sure that as we scale up our efforts, our commitment to women scales up as well.

Why women? A closer look at global farming

It's worth remembering exactly how hard the women in the developing world work to feed their families and communities—and how little support they get.

Consider the daily life of a woman in an African village.

She rises before the sun. She spends many hours laboring in the fields. Depending on the time of year, she will weed, plant, fertilize, or harvest staple

crops. If her family has livestock, she will care for them. She will grind grain and store seeds for next year's planting.

She does all this while caring for her children. She may, like many women, work all day with a baby strapped to her back.

Then she is responsible for preparing her family's meals, which means she must gather firewood and collect water. This can take up to three hours in some parts of the developing world.

And finally, at the end of the day, she will feed her husband, she will feed her children—and then she will eat last, from whatever is left after everyone else has eaten. Some days that means she doesn't eat anything at all.

And the next day, she will get up and do it all again—with whatever energy she can muster.

This is not just the story of one woman. Across Africa every day, millions of women work from before dawn till after dark, simply to feed their families.

Eighty percent of smallholder farmers in Africa are women. Sixty percent of smallholder farmers in Asia are women. They carry the burden of feeding most of the world.

Once you realize this, you realize the inaccuracy of our nomenclature. Most of the time, when we refer to a farmer, we talk about "him." If we were accurate, we'd talk about "her."

This division of labor was powerfully illustrated for me years ago, when I made an unannounced visit to a small village in Mozambique, along with some colleagues from the WFP.

There were a bunch of men and teenage boys sitting around in the center of the village. We stopped with them for a while and had an interesting conversation about life in their community—all sorts of things.

At some point, we realized that some people were missing. We asked, “Where are the women?” They told us, “The women are down at the riverbed, tending to the vegetables.” Then we asked, “Where are the children?” The men looked at us like we were crazy. “They’re with the women, of course!”

So we asked, “When are they coming back?” “When it is time for dinner.” And who will prepare the dinner? The women. And what will they cook? Vegetables that they carry home with them. And what will they cook with? Water and firewood that they also carry home with them.

On and on—eventually, we got the picture. The women were doing a tremendous amount of work to sustain the lives of their children and these men with whom we were talking.

Finally, we asked them, “What is it exactly that *you* do?” They drew themselves up very proudly and answered, “When we need new houses, we build them.”

Certainly, building houses is important work. Everyone needs shelter.

But looking at how life was organized in this village, we were struck by how much work these women were doing every day—and how difficult that work was—and the huge disparity between what was expected of these women and what support was given to them.

We demand so much from the women who grow the developing world's food. We should give them support, to help them shoulder the burden. That would be fair. It would also be smart.

But today, only a small percentage of women benefit from the many programs the world has created to support farmers.

Women own just 2 percent of the world's land. They make up just 5 percent of those who benefit from agricultural extension services. This may be because only 15 percent of agricultural extension agents are women.

Women have little access to credit. According to an FAO study in five countries in sub-Saharan Africa, women received less than 10 percent of the credit awarded to men.

Women often have a difficult time reaching local markets. Travel can be long and dangerous, and there are few transportation or childcare options. And once they get to markets, women are often limited by low levels of literacy and numeracy. Two-thirds of the illiterate people in the world are women.

At the other end of the spectrum, few women are involved in high-level agricultural research. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 18 percent of agricultural researchers are women.⁴ So women aren't even involved in the research that can have a major impact on the results women achieve in the fields.

Gates Foundation and gender mainstreaming

There are many places along the agricultural chain where women are underserved.

⁴ <http://www.asti.cgiar.org/pdf/womenagr.pdf>

This means there are many opportunities to help women—and by helping them, improve global agriculture as a whole.

This is the idea behind the Gates Foundation’s commitment to integrating gender throughout all our programs—what’s known as “gender mainstreaming.”

We’re making several changes to the way we work.

First, we’ve written two sets of guidelines: one for new proposals, and one for the internal review of grants. Now, people applying for grants will know what we’re looking for—and people inside the Foundation will know how to evaluate whether the proposals we get sufficiently address gender differentiation

Second, we know that our grantees may need help figuring out how to integrate gender into their proposals, and then how to accurately evaluate the results. So we’re reaching out to several organizations that have expertise in this field. We’re looking to create partnerships that will strengthen their work, our work, and the work of our grantees.

Third, we’ve added a new person to our staff—a program officer who specializes in gender, and who will advise us in our efforts and manage a dedicated portfolio of grants that focus on women in agriculture.

Fourth, we’re adding gender integration to our job descriptions. This is a skill set we’re looking for as we expand the agricultural development team.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, gender integration will also be part of our internal performance reviews. We’re going to hold ourselves accountable to how well we carry through on our commitment.

Sixth, we're developing indicators to help us measure how well our work is reaching women and their families. We're also implementing new rules for how our grantees will gather data in the field.

Finally, we will disaggregate that data by sex. This may seem like a small point, but it's crucial if we are all to get a clearer picture of what works and what doesn't, so we can keep improving our programs.

Let me give you a few examples of how these changes will affect our programs.

One of our projects is designed to improve the efficiency of cotton production and increase cotton farmers' participation in markets. Now, we've included a component on literacy and numeracy training, with a focus on providing this training to women.

For another project, which focuses on livestock management, we're requiring our NGO partners to hire significant numbers of local women, to support their professional development and to build a stronger network of local farmers.

Some of our grantees are scientists developing new seeds. We know how much work women already do to grow and prepare food, so we are insisting that these scientists consider how the seeds they're developing will affect women's workloads. For example, in addition to seeking increased yields, we also want our scientists to consider whether the new seeds require longer cooking times. We want them to broaden the scope of their innovation, based on a recognition of the reality of women's lives.

And in scientific fields dominated by men, we are supporting the training of women scientists, to ensure that the next generation of scientists working in agricultural R&D is more balanced.

Through programs like these, we hope to help women increase their productivity and their ability to support their families. We want to change the marketplace, so women have more opportunities to participate in research, access crucial services, acquire better seeds and tools, and learn new skills.

We also want to learn. We're new to the field of agricultural development, and we're new to gender mainstreaming. We want to test many ideas in the coming years, to see what works and what doesn't, so we can hone our approach, increase our effectiveness, and share our best practices with other organizations working in this field.

Finally, we want to do something very fundamental.

We want to listen.

We want to open more channels of communication with women in the developing world, and start building programs around their needs, as they express them.

Too often, the world has taken the approach that, if we support agriculture on a broad level, the benefits will eventually reach women.

This isn't true. It hasn't happened. So we have to change our approach. We must listen to women, learn from them, and target them, if we want to effectively help them.

This became clear to me on a trip I took to Angola, to visit a part of the country that had recently been de-mined. All of the farmers in the area were anxious to go out and work in the fields now that they were safe. Of course, the

farmers were all women. We met near a field where they were working. I asked them, do you need anything to do your work? And they said, “Hoes.”

Well, I looked around and saw dozens of hoes, leaning up against the wall. You know – the long wooden pole that meets a rectangular metal spade at a 90-degree angle, almost like a rake. I asked, “What’s wrong with those hoes?” The women said, “Those are male hoes.”

That made me pause. “I didn’t realize there was a gender differentiation in hoes.”

Then they explained to me that a female hoe has a shorter handle that meets a pointed spade, like a shovel, at a 45-degree angle. You have to squat to use it, unlike a male hoe, which you use by standing and bending over it. The reason for the difference is these women work all day in the field with babies strapped on their backs. It’s much less painful for them to squat than to bend over.

Let’s set aside the fact that absolutely no work was going on in those fields because that was the women’s job, and no one else would do it—even though they had all those “male” hoes.

If we had asked the women what they needed, and designed the equipment for them—instead of making assumptions about what they needed, and expecting them to make do with whatever we gave them—we could have been a lot more helpful... and these women would have been a lot more productive.

The lesson that day was clear. If we don’t deliberately and explicitly reach out to women... ask them what they need... and design programs specifically for them... we don’t reach them. And if we don’t reach women, then we aren’t reaching farmers... or families.

This is not easy to get right. It takes sensitivity, patience, and a commitment to innovation. Most importantly, it requires strong support from the top.

Call to action and conclusion

This is where you come in.

You represent NGOs, governments, universities—the world’s most powerful forces for change. Your commitment to improving women’s lives would dramatically advance global efforts to reduce hunger and poverty.

I urge each of you to take a closer look at the work that your organization does, and find opportunities to significantly increase your support of women.

Let’s be honest with ourselves. For too long, women have appeared more frequently in our mission statements than in our grant or budget proposals. We’ve used them to represent our ideals, and to put a human face to the problems we’ve taken on.

Recently, a group of Masters students at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University took a deeper look at this issue. They analyzed seven of largest funders of agricultural development, comprised of international organizations and government funding agencies to see how well gender commitments were kept. The results will not surprise this audience. On the whole, they found weaknesses in implementation, lack of consequences for non-compliance and much more rhetoric than action.

The conditions within these organizations and others show that we haven’t moved enough beyond rhetoric. We haven’t made good on our commitment to women—even as we talk about how important women are, and how much they

deserve our support. They have suffered from our neglect—and our work has suffered as well.

By overlooking women, we've undercut ourselves.

It's time to translate our words into action.

The world has a long way to go before every farmer in the world has the tools and the knowledge she needs to support her family.

We all have a role to play in making that vision a reality.

If we succeed, the world will look very different in the coming years.

I don't only mean that the women who grow the world's food will be using more effective tools, planting better crops, and raising healthier children.

All of that should happen. But if we invest in women, much more can change as well.

We join each other today in the midst of a global emergency---it reveals deep problems and inefficiencies that the world can no longer ignore.

We all want a world where people no longer try to survive on the mashed-up branches of trees, or cakes of mud. A world where people are never forced to sink to such depths.

But we also want a world where all people can rise to great heights—because they have the tools they need to make the most of their talents.

Investing in women in agriculture is one of the best opportunities we have to fight hunger, advance global development, and end extreme poverty. Only when women have the support they need to do *their* job, will we have done *our* job—to create a world where no one is trapped by hunger and poverty.

If that's where we want to end up... this is where we begin---with women.
