

House Agriculture Committee Hearing; "The Next Farm Bill: The Future of International Food Aid and Agricultural Development."; Testimony by Navyn Salem, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Edesia Nutrition, Kingstown, RI

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Body

INTRODUCTION

As the Founder and CEO of Edesia and a private citizen, I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony to the United States Agriculture Committee Hearing for the Next **Farm Bill**: The Future of International Food **Aid** and Agriculture Development. I would like to thank the members of this committee for their commitment to food security and agricultural development, both here and abroad. The robust U.S. agricultural supply chain and food **aid** programs make businesses like mine, and the impact they make, possible. Edesia n1 is a Rhode Island-based nonprofit social enterprise and manufacturer that works in partnership with the U.S. government to promote global stability and national security for America by supplying evidence-based, lifesaving nutritional support to vulnerable children worldwide. International Food **Aid** is a critical part of the U.S. economy and an important tool for our national security - it is an America First policy.

Let me begin by sharing a story with you that I believe well illustrates why I am here and why your continued commitment to food security and agriculture development is so critical to creating a world of hope and security for all Americans. A year ago I was in a health clinic in rural Liberia, passing by mothers sitting on wooden benches waiting their turn to see the doctor. The Ebola virus outbreak had just ended and a semi-sense of normalcy was returning. A young mother entered the clinic with a baby so small I thought she wasn't real.

I pulled her out of the long line of patients waiting to be checked by the healthcare **worker**. The little girl's name was Surprice. I unbundled her from her mother's back and placed her on the scale. She was seven months old and weighed only seven pounds, the same weight as my daughter was at birth.

Surprice had severe acute malnutrition. I handed her a packet of ready-to-use therapeutic food, commonly known as Plumpy'Nut, a lifesaving and revolutionary fortified peanut paste, specifically designed to treat severely malnourished children, that does not require refrigeration or the addition of water. It can reach the most remote villages because of its two-year shelf life and its simplicity allows mothers to treat their children at home, freeing up critical hospital beds and healthcare resources.

The foil packet I gave to Surprice was marked with the USAID logo and the message "Gift of the American People." Those were not empty words. They held real meaning. Inside were peanuts from Texas and Georgia, milk powder from Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, and Michigan. Vegetable oils from Kentucky and Maryland. Vitamins and minerals made in Illinois and New Jersey. What the American farmers had sewn and reaped and what the American processing facilities had processed with utmost regard for quality, was carried across state lines by hardworking American truckers to the Rhode Island factory so that my team of 70 could turn every ingredient into an alchemy of lifesaving ready-to-use therapeutic food - so that this one little girl in Liberia could have her chance at

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life. After a few bites of the fortified peanut paste, Surprice started to perk up and breathe easier right before our eyes. We no longer felt so worried because we knew this little girl was going to make it.

That is what we do at Edesia. With the help of American farmers, manufacturers, and transporters, we strengthen the fabric of our world one malnourished child at a time. There are 28 million pounds of American agricultural products that go into our lifesaving efforts each year. Through our work, we have infused well over \$100 million dollars into the U.S. economy.

EDESIA AND OUR PRODUCTS

Millions of children throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East are dying needlessly from severe acute malnutrition - a completely preventable condition caused by a lack of adequate nutrients in the diet - and this crisis is having an immediate and lasting adverse impact on the stability of entire regions. The reality of something so unimaginable in this day and age was what led me to start Edesia to tackle this problem while creating jobs for my state and throughout the supply chain.

Since our first USAID grant helped Edesia launch operations in 2010, we have manufactured enough lifesaving peanut-based ready-to-use therapeutic and supplementary foods to help reach over five million malnourished children in 50 countries in partnership with USAID/USDA along with UNICEF and the World Food Programme, whose every day heroic efforts to deliver aid and assistance in some of the hardest-to-reach, most inhospitable places on our planet mostly go unsung.

In any given year on our planet there are over 35 million children throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East quietly suffering from some form of acute malnutrition that will either rob them of life or of their true potential. They desperately need innovative solutions, including the kind of evidence-based, ready-to-use therapeutic and supplementary foods we make in our factory. Only 20% of that need is being met, not due to lack of capacity, but due to lack of funds and adequate programming.

GDP, EMERGING MARKETS, AND GLOBAL SECURITY

The World Bank estimates that malnutrition reduces the GDP of countries by as much as 10 percent. This is not why we help save lives, but the productivity increase is certainly a critical part of what we do. Higher GDP leads to stronger markets for American products. High-income countries are the biggest consumers of America's high-value agricultural and food products, but demand is increasing at a robust 16% pace in lower-middle-income and low-income countries. n2

While rising global economies expand markets for American goods; hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition are concurrently linked to violence, conflict, migratory activities, and potentially radicalization leading to political instability that ultimately affects the United States. n3 Ending malnutrition is fundamental to fighting terrorism. A healthy, well-nourished child stays in school, stays out of the clinic and out of trouble, and gives back to his or her family, community, and world in significant and positive ways.

In a February 2017 letter, 120 retired military generals, from all branches of the armed forces, wrote to Congressional leadership in support of diplomacy and international aid and development. n4 They spoke out strongly that military inventions are not enough to confront the crisis facing our nation and that the best way to keep our military's men and women out of harm's way is to support stability in vulnerable regions abroad.

EDESIA-US GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

In 2010, Congress allocated \$10 million dollars to USDA's Foreign Agriculture Services for a Micronutrient-Fortified Food Aid Pilot Program (MFFAPP) intended to work with the public and private sector to develop new nutritional products. Edesia partnered with the National Soybean Research Lab and a food factory in Haiti to develop a specialized food for school children who otherwise did not have access to hot lunch due to lack of water or cooking facilities.

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USAID commissioned Tufts University in 2011 to evaluate how to improve upon the nutritional aspects of their food aid baskets through the Food Aid Quality Review. n5 They found that putting nutrition at the heart of the food aid agenda enhanced the impact and credibility of USAID Title II programming. This included an emphasis on products that are "fit-for-purpose," such as ready-to-use foods and fortified blended foods (ex: corn-soy blend) for the treatment and prevention of malnutrition, in addition to the standard bulk commodities that are required to feed the general population during times of need. While these enhanced nutritional products may be costlier per pound, their positive impact on specific measurable nutrition outcomes that add to the resilience of communities makes them a smart investment with a high rate of return.

Edesia has since 2010 participated in the Farm Bill-authorized, International Food Relief Partnership (IFRP) program. This program provides shelf-stable products to predominately faith-based groups assisting especially vulnerable populations. In this climate of austerity, we ask the members of the House Agriculture Committee to protect these vital programs in next Farm Bill.

PRESIDENT'S BUDGET AND NATIONAL SECURITY

While not directly in the scope of this committee, I wanted to take the opportunity to address the President's proposed budget. The White House budget proposal that requests removal of funding from Title II Food Aid of the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954 (Public Law 480) is in opposition to the humanitarian nature of the American people and will result in job losses here in America. We can be both America First and responsible global citizens. Financial contributions generously provided by the American people and authorized by Congress support the critical work the humanitarian sector and government are doing, through Food for Peace, to further America's mission abroad.

The world is currently in the midst of the worst cluster of humanitarian disasters in recent memory, putting over 20 million people at risk. With a famine declared in South Sudan and Somalia, Nigeria, and Yemen headed in the same direction, on top of the ongoing conflict and crisis in Syria, continued financial support of food aid and humanitarian assistance, and strong leadership from the United States is needed now more than ever. We saw support from Congress for the FY2017 budget, and we hope to see that support continue in the budget for FY2018 and with the reauthorization of the 2018 Farm Bill. Humanitarian aid is good for recipients, as well as the citizens of the United States, as it provides both jobs and economic development here, future trading partners abroad, and improved global security.

Hunger has the power to threaten the stability of nations. After WWII, it was France, Germany, and Italy that suffered from drought and extreme hunger. Today it is Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria where terrorism grows amid hunger. If our goal is to fight terrorism, then feeding people is one of the most effective tools we have to spread peace and stability and thereby keeping US national security interests at the forefront of our agenda.

For decades, humanitarian aid and food aid have garnered bipartisan support from Congress and the White House. It was this week 70 years ago that George Marshall delivered a powerful speech. He said, "Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos. Hunger and insecurity are the worst enemies of peace."

His words rang true then and they ring ever true now. With global food insecurity at all-time high levels - the highest since World War II - this is nowhere near the time to pull away from the American tradition of compassion and striving toward a better world for all. Ending malnutrition is how the world gets stronger, safer, and more resilient.

CONCLUSION

As the CEO of a U.S. social enterprise, I solve problems through business in ways that are sustainable, scalable, and measurable. Edesia creates jobs, is laser-focused on innovation and determined to save the lives of those suffering from the deadly consequences of conflict, drought, and natural disasters. For over 70 years, humanitarian aid and food aid have garnered bipartisan support from Congress and the White House, who understood not only the moral imperative of these actions, but also the important national security benefits and the increased economic

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opportunities that are created for our farmers, manufacturers, and transporters. We, as Americans, need to continue demonstrating strong, decisive leadership in this area and show the world that Americans do not turn their back on human suffering.

A failure to act now could lead to not only an increase in hunger and malnutrition but also to greater worldwide instability and insecurity that will cost us far more in the future. With strong U.S. leadership, we can consolidate the gains made in the past decade and accelerate progress toward the elimination of extreme hunger and malnutrition, to benefit both the United States as well as the world, especially its most vulnerable people.

Members of this distinguished committee, I urge you to do everything within your legislative power to safeguard and shield the funding that, as a true and meaningful gift of the American people, is powerfully helping American farmers, manufacturers, and transporters put food on their tables while it also does the critical work of healing the wounds of our world that so desperately need mending.

In summary, we ask that this Committee preserve the positive benefits of international food **aid** through:

- * Authorizing a **Farm Bill** that includes Food for Peace and McGovern-Dole.
- * Acknowledging that science-based, high-impact commodities hold a crucial place in food **aid**, in addition to staple commodities.
- * Maintaining fit-for-purpose products, like ready-to-use foods and fortified blended flours, that effectively treat malnutrition in vulnerable populations.
- * Continuing to support research that positions the U.S. as a leader in innovative products and advanced manufacturing.

Thank you again for providing me the opportunity to testify, and thank you for holding this hearing - the support and involvement of the agricultural community has been and will continue to be crucial in keeping these important programs running. Please do not hesitate to contact me if the Committee has any questions or would like further information as you continue the 2018 **Farm Bill** process.

n1 <https://www.edesianutrition.org/>

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n3 Cullen S. Hendrix. April 2016. When Hunger Strikes: How Food Security Abroad Matters for National Security at Home. Chicago Council on Global Affairs.
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n4 http://www.usglc.org/downloads/2017/02/FY18_International_Affairs_Budget_House_Senate.pdf

n5 Webb, Patrick, Beatrice Lorge Rogers, Irwin Rosenberg, Nina Schlossman, Christine Wanke, Jack Bagriansky, Kate Sadler, Quentin Johnson, Jessica Tilahun, Amelia Reese Masterson, Anuradha Narayan. 2011. Improving the Nutritional Quality of U.S. Food **Aid**: Recommendations for Changes to Products and Programs. Boston, MA: Tufts University.

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