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Letter from Rania Atalla

Global Food Crisis: One Solution in the Hands of Women

Over the last several months, reports of a global food crisis have made frequent and alarming appearances in the nightly news. What may have once been an issue associated with extraordinary shortages in distant lands becomes worryingly ordinary as families all over the world are forced to make difficult choices in grocery store aisles. In the last year, the prices of staples like rice and wheat have more than doubled in many parts of the world.

According to The World Food Program, this spike in food prices has forced 100 million people into extreme poverty. For the billions of people who live on less than \$2 a day, the stakes of their daily struggle for survival have been raised impossibly high.

Humanitarian aid organizations are responding as quickly as they can, but what happens to the women at the end of

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Rania's Letter

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long lines after all the handouts have been distributed? What happens when these women are unable to secure enough food to feed their families that day – or that week? The trend becomes more horrifying as we consider the millions of women and girls around the world who eat last, allowing men and boys first-dibs on even sparse offerings. These are the women and girls who procured and prepared the food and nonetheless go to bed hungry. The crisis demands a sustainable solution that reaches beyond immediate aid and into the realm of true relief.

In every single country where Women for Women International works, this crisis is a life and death reality for the women we serve and even for our staff, who reside in the same communities and struggle alongside their sisters. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has said that at least 18 million of Afghanistan's estimated 26.8 million people, mostly women and children, cannot meet their daily food and nutritional requirements. Recently, an



Commercial Integrated Farming Initiative in Rwanda

Afghan man was reported selling his own daughter in order to secure food for the rest of his family.

The future for these families, and for their already struggling societies, cannot improve until the world comes together to develop workable solutions. This requires speaking, and listening, to those directly affected by the crisis. In Nigeria, women in our program report that rising food costs render feeding their families three meals a day impossible. One program participant said, "The price of food is high, making money valueless. My children are now crying for more food but I cannot give [it to] them because my money cannot fetch enough food."

Women for Women International is listening. We are working with women to develop sustainable solutions, with a vision of rendering this problem obsolete. In this, we hope to serve as a model. Even now, we are helping the women we work with to assess what is currently available to them and to leverage limited resources into a dependable source of income for themselves and their families.

Through our experience and research it became clear that agribusiness holds great potential for many of our women – it provides a model to simultaneously address both income generation and food security, two critical issues for socially excluded women and their families. To help us develop and implement agribusiness opportunities, we are honored to welcome one of the newest members of our team, Agribusiness Specialist Dr. Grace F. Fisiy. Grace comes to Women for Women International

with 20 years of agricultural and rural development experience. During her first few months with us, Grace traveled to Rwanda to launch our first ever Commercial Integrated Farming Initiative (CIFI), a program designed to provide specialized, sustainable agribusiness opportunities to program participants.

CIFI will provide 3,000 women over the course of three years with training in how to use sustainable farming practices to grow crops that can both be sold for profit in the local market and feed their families. One of Grace's biggest accomplishments in Rwanda was securing a partnership with the largest juice company in the country. The owner of the company has agreed to buy all of the pineapples that the 3,000 women can grow, and he is interested in expanding this partnership. This example of direct market linkages is one of the many tangible rewards the women in our program receive. So far we have been able to secure funding to pilot CIFI in both Rwanda and Sudan. The next country in which we hope to launch a comparable program will be Afghanistan, a country that desperately needs food relief and income generation opportunities.

When Grace was asked about the direct impact of CIFI on the current, global food crisis, she responded by drawing clear connections between the two: "We are tackling the food crisis on multiple fronts. CIFI's primary focus is commercial farming – production for the market – and this also directly impacts household food production and food security. Women are learning sustainable farming methods to

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Rania speaks with Rwanda Country Director Berra Kabarungi and women in the program.

cultivate higher-income crops, like pineapples and strawberries, which they can sell on the local market. These crops bring in more money and increase their purchasing power, so they can afford to buy other food staples they can't grow. And, by training more farmers and helping them increase their yields, we're making more food available in the household and on local markets – reducing the gap between local supply and demand.” In this way the CIFI program design encompasses a multifaceted attack on the global food crisis, providing participants with a critical model for sustainable income generation and food production that benefits not only individual women but also their families and communities.

This Spring, we held the ground-breaking ceremony for CIFI in Rwanda. Along with other dedicated colleagues, I had the privilege of attending. Before us we beheld the future site of the project. Rolling green hills—our hills—extended as far as the eye could see. Together we imagined the pineapples that will grow there and the women who will rebuild their lives and communities through sustainable agriculture. These women will not only cultivate sustainable livelihoods but also a critical component of the Rwandan economy. What we were witnessing was not simply the unveiling of a new program, but the dreams of our participants coming to fruition as well. Thanks to the visionary work of Women for Women staff and a strong partnership with the Rwandan government, 100 acres of land is dedicated to these women, and to the continually evolving work of Women for Women International.

The importance of the occasion was reflected in the presence of the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of the District, who were integral in the procurement of the site, and in the singing and dancing of the Rwandese women. It was clear that all attending understood the hope and celebration CIFI inspires. It is our hope that initiatives like CIFI will not only benefit the community as a whole, but will also inspire other communities and countries to engage women as vital participants in sustainable solutions to the world's problems.

Rania Atalla
Executive Director – US