

**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**ONLINE EVENT**

**“Humanitarian Operations During COVID-19: A  
Conversation with David Beasley of the World Food  
Programme”**

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SPEAKERS

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*Transcript By [superiortranscriptions.com](http://superiortranscriptions.com)*

Jacob Kurtzer: Good afternoon. My name is Jacob Kurtzer. I'm the interim director of the Humanitarian Agenda. On behalf of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, I welcome everyone joining us online today. Today's event is part of a speaker series that looks at the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian action, drawing on insights from across the humanitarian spectrum about the challenges that our speakers organizations are facing. We're very grateful today to be joined by David Beasley, executive director of the World Food Programme. I'll begin today with a short introduction and then turn it over to Executive Director Beasley. Following his remarks, we'll have reflections and questions from my colleague, the director of CSIS's Food Security Program, Caitlin Welsh. And then we'll have some Q&A. As a reminder to our viewers online, you can submit live questions. And this event will be posted in its entirety on our website shortly after its conclusion. Across conflict zones today COVID-19, in addition to its humanitarian impacts, has also generated severe economic downturns that threaten to undermine the food security of millions of people. Prior to COVID-19, over 135 million civilians around the world's faced acute food insecurity as a result of conflict, climate change, and economic crises, and as a result WFP estimates that number nearly doubling. Despite these challenges, the World Food Programme has remained engaged, ensuring the needs of food-insecure populations are addressed by state and humanitarian actors. So turning to you, Executive Director Beasley, how have WFP's operations evolved in response to COVID-19? And do you see this as a transformational moment in the way you work? Or is this a temporary adaptation to the unique challenges inherent in a response to a global pandemic? Over to you.

David Beasley Jacob, thank you very much. Great to be with you. And quite frankly, as I was thinking about that question, it really doesn't dynamically shift the way we operate because we are an emergency operation. We're fluid. We're flexible. We do what we need to do, where we need to do it, no matter what it takes. And whether it was Ebola, or war zone, or a drought, or a cyclone, or a hurricane, whatever it might be we adjust to get it done. Now, this pandemic does have some extraordinary impacts. It does require some adjusting, as you can imagine, because of logistics, supply chain disruptions, as well as safety net programs that are going to be needed in many, many, many countries. But also in the distribution, not to get into the details of that, of food or cash in certain areas, because you want to make sure the beneficiaries are safe when you're handing out the food. So we've changed, modified a lot of distribution operations, as you can possibly imagine. But we are facing something extraordinary. You know, when – about six, seven months ago I'd been giving several speeches throughout particularly Europe that 2020 was going to be the worst humanitarian crisis year since World War II. And a lot of the leaders are like, how do you see that? I said, well, let me just walk through it with you. Let me go through Yemen. Let me talk about Syria and the impact there. The Lebanese, you know, economic collapse there. And I was talking about the Sahel and its absolute deteriorating day, by day, by day with ISIS, and al-Qaida, and Boko Haram. And then Sudan – the amount of money it's going to take to stabilize and move Sudan in the right direction. And then the problem with DRC, Somalia, Ethiopia.

And so our numbers – and this is what’s so sad, Jacob, Caitlin – is that four years ago the number of severe hungry people was about 80 million worldwide. Now, not hungry people. That number was 780, give or take, million four years ago, now 821 (million). But the severe hunger rate, those that we would say acute food insecure. What does that mean? To me, those that are marching towards starvation. They don’t know where the next meal is. That number has spiked from 80 to 135 million people in just the last four years. And the primary driver of that is manmade conflict, whether it’s Yemen, or Syria, et cetera, et cetera. Compound that with weather extremes, climate shocks, and then now with destabilization factors like the extremist groups and poverty-stricken areas. So that number’s been going up for the first time in a long, long time. Now, because of COVID, we believe that number could double. Not the hunger rate, because that number’s going to go up by itself, so to speak, because of COVID and its economic impact. But I’m talking about the most vulnerable people. And so our projection is that number will 135 to 265 (million). And I hope that I am dead wrong. And I hope that we can do everything we need to do to prevent that from happening, because this is a serious situation. If we don’t get on top of it, you will have true famines in many, many countries – death, starvation. And you will have destabilization, political unrest, and the – as we’ve seen in the past, if we don’t get in front of these types of issues it costs a thousand-fold more on the back end. We saw that in Syria, for example. And a real small snippet. We could feed a Syrian in Syria for, like, 50 cents. Normally it’s 31 cents, but a war zone, you know, it costs more. That same Syrian in Brussels or Berlin, the humanitarian package is 50 to 100 euros per day. And we know from our studies – we feed about 100 million people. And if I fed your neighborhood for two years, do you think I will know a lot about your neighborhood and what’s going on, how people think. We survey people. People don’t want to leave their home area. But if they don’t have food, and if they don’t have some degree of peace and security, they’ll do what every single mother and father will do to help their children go wherever it takes. And like in Syria or in the Sahel, they’ll move two, three, four times inside, to the aunts, to the cousins, to friends, before they’ll finally leave. So anyway, we got before us. We got a lot of work to do. I’m glad to be with you and I’m looking forward to answering the questions. Thank you.

Jacob Kurtzer

Thanks. There’s a lot of unpack there. So I’m going now turn it over to my colleague, Caitlin Welsh, the director of CSIS’s Food Security Program to start off our Q&A. Caitlin, over to you.

Caitlin Welsh

Great. Thank you, Jake. And, Executive Director Beasley, thank you again for being with us today. It's really an honor to speak with you. And thank you also for your tireless advocacy, particularly through the pandemic. So thanks for the picture that you started to paint through your intro remarks. And I just want to build on that a bit. In your speeches and your writings, and in WFP's reports, you've done an excellent job of talking about the different ways that COVID-19 can worsen hunger. So it's through increased unemployment, reduction in remittances, oil exports dropping, and on, and on, and on. So that's done a great job, helping those of us who are not able to travel. But you've been able to travel yourself – Sudan, Ethiopia, Ghana. Can you tell us a little bit about what you've seen related to hunger?

David Beasley

Well, you know, when – it's hard to understand the discussion on this topic four months ago versus today. People are really getting more enlightened and aware of the realities. You know, three or four months ago everyone was talking just about the health impact directly from COVID. And we began doing analysis of what was going to be happening, the repercussions out in the field. And Tony Blair called me one day. This was right before I spoke to the security council. And Tony says – he said, David, what do you see out there? And I said, Tony, I said, unfortunately everyone's looking at this strictly from a health impact. I said, let me tell you what we're seeing, the long-range consequences if we continue in the same course of action of economic shutdowns, lockdowns, supply chain disruptions. And so I spent about 20 minutes going with Tony through four or five countries, just anecdotally, and Tony was like, oh my gosh. He said, you've got to talk about this. I said, I mean, I am. And so when you go out in the field – and it's quite remarkable because I'll be in – like, in Zimbabwe, or Ethiopia. And the person will say: Mr. Beasley, I'm not worried about COVID. I'm worried about feeding my child tonight. I don't have enough food till tomorrow. And if we lose our jobs and we don't have a safety net, what are we going to do? It's not like they can get in a car and drive from, you know, McLean to Bethesda, you know? I mean, there's just nothing they can do. So I went out into the field – because I've had COVID I felt like I had the immunity. And I've got all of our people out in the field. And we take risk. We do that every day to save lives. But we don't take unnecessary risk or reckless risk. And so I wanted to go out in the field and see first-hand, and pat our people on the back, and talk to the leaders about the realities, because in Africa or South America, Central America, where you're seeing the pandemic really being to take serious consequence. And so I was down in Ethiopia, I was in Ghana, I was in Sudan and several other places just in the last week, being careful but at the same time getting a true picture of the consequences. And let me just say, like, not many people think it through of a per-country basis. Ethiopia, a country that's, you know, trying to move in the right direction. You've got a great leader in Abiy and doing a lot of good things. But you've got the desert locusts. You've got a lot of poverty. You got a lot of droughts and flooding. And you got a country that depends on remittances big time. Well, that's drying up, you know, big time. Then 50 percent of their export revenues is tourism. Well, guess what? There's no revenue there right now. And so when you begin to economic analyze – and then you look at how many people live on top of each other in these urban areas, and whether it's Sudan or the Sahel, washing hands, they don't have – you can't even wash your hands in a lot of these places. They don't have hospitals to deal with capacity, they can't take the equipment. I mean, the list goes on, and on, and on. And if you start telling farmer, oh, you can't go out in the field and plant, or harvest, or this distribution point is shut down because of the fear of COVID. And I'm like, wait a minute, if you shut down that border or shut down that distribution point or that port, I can't get food. I can tell you, if I don't get food to these, let's say, 100,000 people who depend on us 100 percent, well, they can't go a month without food. I mean, it's just not complicated. And so it's not just money, but it's also supply chain. And we can break that down. But what we're seeing out there is not good. And it's very much at the early stages for Africa and in Central and South America.

Caitlin Welsh                    Yeah, absolutely. Well, you touched on one of the most difficult decisions that governments everywhere, but particularly governments in developing countries are having to make, between lockdowns to depress the spread of the disease, but they also depress economic activity, which can lead to hunger. So have you seen any best practices in terms of balancing those two options?

David Beasley                    You know, and every country has to do it their own unique way, depending upon resources and access to programs, and systems, et cetera. And so it's a balancing act. It really is. And so that's one of the reasons I've been jumping up and down so hard in the last two months is: Be careful. Don't overreact and shut down supply chains because you'll end up – I don't remember who said this – but you'll end up with – more people will die from the cure than the disease itself. You know, and you got to be very, very careful. So if you shut down a border – so we've been on export bans. I mean, there's about eight countries that have done some exports bans. And we've been very vocal about don't do export bans. You saw what happened in the economic crisis in 2008 with that. And this is much, much more consequential. You know, when you go back to World War II, you didn't have a supply chain problem other than in exact war zones. The rest of the world's supply chain was operating. The whole world supply chain is disrupted right now, an extraordinary dynamic. And so when you break it down country by country, when we see a country make a decision we think's going to have a negative impact, we immediately – I think that's one of the biggest things we bring to the table, is working with – we're probably working with about 120 countries right now, giving them guidance and advice on the supply chain. Because it's not just the food or medical supplies that we bring in, but – because we might be feeding only 10 or 20 percent of the population. But you still got the 80-90 percent of the population that's depending upon the supply chain. Remember a few weeks ago when everybody was panicking in the United States, right or wrong, you could get toilet paper. Well, you know, if you had that happening in the United States, one of the most sophisticated supply chain systems in the world, what do you think's happening in Burkina Faso, or Chad, or DRC? And so there's a lot of – we've got some good things that are going on out there, working with leaders. And we've got some things where, you know, it used to be like week to week we might have a problem, but it's like hour to hour – (laughs) – right now. We're on the phone – don't do that, here's what's going to happen, there'll be a regional reaction and these number of people you might – you might help these people not get COVID, but you're going to have about half a million people that are going to die from starvation over here. So let's balance this out. Be safe. Be careful in how you move the supplies along. Like, for example, we could have a trucks backlog, and, you know, hygiene operations, and spraying of trucks coming in across the border. But we've been in places where the trucks are backed up for 40 miles.

Caitlin Welsh                    Oh my god.

David Beasley                    And I've got humanitarian food in the trucks in – not going to get there for several days now. And so we're working through these – those are small issues, but they're not small consequences on certain populations. Anyway.

Caitlin Welsh

Yeah, absolutely. And as you said, they're global issues. And it's a perfect segue to something else I want to talk to you about, which is you told the U.N. Security Council that we need to come together as one united global community to defeat the disease. And recently the secretary-general himself has talked about the same thing. He's talked about – he said that without large-scale coordinated action COVID-19 could disrupt the functioning of food systems. So I'm glad to see attention being brought to the global nature of this crisis, but the question that I have for you is what does global coordinated action look like right now? And you mentioned the '07-'08 crisis. And you saw very effective, I think, action being taken. The G-8 at the time, they spent over \$22 billion toward global food security. G-20 launched a number of different programs. So what would – what does global coordinated action look like in this crisis?

David Beasley

Oh, boy, it's a lot more complex, a lot more robust need here because of the disruption of the supply chain globally. And so with the airline industry, just to give you a couple anecdotes – with the airline industry for cargo and passenger, you know, pretty much all but shut down, how do you move food or how do you move medical supplies? How do you get the COVID testing kits, the equipment, the PPE, the ventilators and all the things you need – the doctors, the nurses, the health care professionals, the NGOs – how do you get them from point A to point B if the airline industry's shut down? So we're now picking up that tab. We're stepping up, because we were already the supply chain logistics backbone for the United Nations on major operations – whether it was UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO. Not many people realize that we do more than just food. We actually are the supply chain mechanism. So now with the airline industry shut down, you can't – you know, the cargo. You can't move the cargo. So we've got to get those supplies out there. So we're leasing, chartering – I mean, let's take, for example, Ethiopian Airlines. Well, you know, all the airplanes are sitting on the tarmac, depreciating in value. So we went to – like, to Ethiopian Airlines and said: Look, your planes are sitting. We'll charter X number of planes from you, but we want a reduced rate that's going to allow you to be profitable but save us money so we can supply more food, and needs, and medical supplies to people. So we've already distributed – and not just Ethiopian Airlines, but they were ones that stepped up and said: Yeah, we understand. We want to help. And it helps us, we help you. And that was the kind of win-wins we're looking for right now. So we're providing about – medical supply from supplies and personnel in about 121 countries right now. We've had about 375 flights already. We'll be carrying the equivalent of about 132 fully loaded 747 planes over the next couple of weeks for UNICEF and WHO. And as I said, we are already moving a lot of cargo. And at the same time, we have set up eight hubs around the world in Liege and western Africa, eastern Africa, et cetera, to move cargo in the most cost-efficient, effective way. And we're setting up field hospitals for our NGO partners and U.N. personnel. We actually do that. Not many people realize, like in Ebola, we're actually the containment mechanism for Ebola. You know, we don't do the medical stuff. We come in, set up things, provide containment, and do the things you need to do. But that's WFP. And so we're the global operator right now. And quite frankly, we need \$965 million through the end of the year to provide that – common services globally. And we run out of money in about four weeks. And we've raised about 180 (million dollars). And it's going to be pretty bad pretty soon if we don't get some money in the next two weeks.

Caitlin Welsh

Well, you've given some examples of effective global coordinated action. I'm just going to put you on the spot here. We have the U.N. General Assembly happening in September, the G-7 summit happening this fall, and then the G-20 summit in November. If leaders could make commitments to addressing acute hunger, what do you think the most effective commitments would be?

David Beasley

Well probably safety net programs right now. Two things, and this is what I'll – my conversation with the leaders in the United States. And let me say this about the United States: You know, I took this role three years ago, reluctantly, actually. But I took this role to help fight for more funding because I believe in what the program does. And so when I met with the Republican and Democrat leaders in the Senate especially, first and foremost, it was like they laid aside their political differences, you know, and said: We are together on food security and international aid of this nature. That was so major. And so our funding in the United State went up, actually, from 1.9 billion (dollars) three years ago, not down – which most people thought it was going to go down. And so it went up to \$3.4 billion last year. And so just in the last three weeks, and I've had meetings on the Hill with Democrat and Republican leaders – key decision makers. And every one of them were committed to really stepping forward. So that's encouraging. But, you know, these – you got incredible stimulus packages. The money's going to be tight, and it is tight. So you got to really make the case why it's in the national security interest of the American taxpayer. Now, having said that, I also have had conversations in Germany, the U.K., the EU, and other donor nations explaining, number one, don't take money from our core funding for COVID, because that – we're keeping these people alive. I said, now, you've got to make some tough decisions. You're not going to be able fund everything and you're going to have to make some hard decisions. But we got to give priority to safety net programs, programs that will minimize death, starvation, destabilization, and mass migration by necessity. That's the priority. If we can do that, then I believe we can ward off famine as well as mass migration, and destabilization, and protests and riots, if we – because we've got the mechanism to deliver out there in the field if we have the money, the supply chain, and minimize the disruption because of political decisions in terms of movement of resources.

Caitlin Welsh

OK, thanks. So that's plenty of potential areas for greater coordination. So thanks. I just wanted to seed the conversation a little bit before those major global events happen. Last question –

David Beasley

Well, if they don't – Caitlin, if they don't step up you're going to pay for it a hundred-fold, or a thousand-fold more. That's what I'm trying to tell them. Look, you need to understand if you don't it's like having leaking water pipes in your ceiling. I mean, leaking. Well, you know, it's not that bad at first, but after about two months you've got replace the table, the carpet, the curtains, the – everything. And so it's a lot cheaper to go up there and fix root cause, as opposed to fighting over where to put the buckets. So I'm trying to give them – I don't speak the U.N. language to them, because when I hear the U.N. language I don't even know what people are saying half the time. I try to speak that commonsense language. People are going to die. You're going to have – (laughs) – you know, destabilization, you're going to have war and conflict. So anyway.

Caitlin Welsh

Yeah. Yeah. Well, again, thank you for doing that. I'm going to turn it over to my colleague who speaks the U.N. language a little bit better than I do. (Laughter.) So again, thank you. And over to you, Jake.

Jacob Kurtzer

Thanks. And thanks again for those answers. I wanted to ask, maybe focusing back on some of the specific countries that you mentioned, you talked about Sudan a couple of times. Last year my predecessor Kimberly Flowers launched the CSIS Taskforce on Humanitarian Access, looking at how access is denied for humanitarian actors. And, you know, you had some real landmark visits at the end of last year, the beginning of this year, to Southern Sudan which was, you know, the first visits by U.N. personnel to that part of the country in at least, I think it was, about 10 years. And there was this moment of opening, I think, that generated a lot of excitement. And I'm wondering, you know, first of all, how do you see that space that was opened pre-COVID – do you see it continuing to be open? And then I want to ask a broader-scope question about that visit because in some of the stuff that was put out by WFP, you talked about using the good offices of a humanitarian organization to, you know, sort of promote political reconciliation among some of the warring parties. So how do you see that role for a humanitarian organization who's got, you know, very specific responsibility for responding to food insecurity. How do you see that working in some of these conflict areas that you've mentioned before?

David Beasley

Yeah, Jacob, you're right. I went down there. I met with Abdel-Aziz, you know, the rebel leader; and sat down with Hamdok, Hemeti, Burhan, as well as others; and had a very frank conversation; and applied as much pressure as I could from a goodwill perspective, that this is a new day and the message to the world that Sudan wants is a new government, it's a new future. And we're going to be open to take care of all the people. And I said, well, let's prove it. And so I said: I'm going to provide the planes. We're going to go down there. Either you going to deny me going down there and we're going to go meet with – we brought Hamdok the prime minister down and Abdel-Aziz together. It was a remarkable time. And so it was the first trip down there in over 10 years. And since then, COVID slowed down a little bit of progress, but we're back, in my opinion, in the right direction, because we're trying to clear out a lot of landmines on a lot of the roads. And so we're working through those issues right now. And I was back in Sudan several times since the trip you're talking about. But I was there last week, week before last, meeting again with Hemeti. And I have people saying, oh, you shouldn't meet with Hemeti. I'm like, look, I'm going to meet with whoever I need to meet with to get access to people who controls this and controls that. So I meet with, you know, the people necessary. And quite frankly, Hamdok and Hemeti have been – with what we're doing have been tremendous to work with. I bring the points to them. I don't talk in generalities. I say we need this, this, and this. And the response has been extremely positive and we've been able to move a lot of supplies already in places we couldn't before, and at the same time have a secure working environment. And we are continuing that dialogue to move things forward. I'll leave the politics to the politicians, but as I said to particularly the United States and European donors, is that Sudan is at a magical crossroads right now. And if the donors don't step up now, you will have a collapse. It will be much worse than anything you've ever seen. And it will be a hundred- to a thousand-fold more expensive. You've got leadership that wants to move it forward. We need to put in safety net programs. We are prepared. We designed the systems to put in safety net programs. But there's a lot of work that needs to be done. And we can't continue to tinker, you know? Oh, you know, oh, we'll get to it next month. And the next thing you know, the extremists have exploited – they don't see progress being made and they take advantage of it. So in my opinion we've got to act, and we've got to act now, because I really do believe there's great hope right now in Sudan if the donor community steps up, alleviate debt, do a safety net program, and being to do economic development I think the road to recovery will be remarkable. But if we don't, the debt, the sanctions, and the deterioration, the floods, the droughts, et cetera, we're going to lose that opportunity. And then the entire horn is vulnerable, particularly when you look at the neighbors in the area. So I'm hopeful.

Caitlin Welsh

Yeah. Thank you. Executive Director Beasley, actually I'd like to jump in with a follow-up question to Jake's question. And that's noting that since you've started with WFP you've talked about the importance of coordinating emergency assistance with long-term development assistance. Not only talked about it, but you've always recognized the importance of doing that. So in the context of COVID, how do we best do that coordination?

David Beasley

You know, when I got to the World Food Programme at the United Nations I – you know, I have a kind of different perspective. I’m like, how do I put the World Food Programme out of business, you know? How do we have – what’s our exit strategy in every country? Because many of the countries I would go to – and certain operations would say: Well, we’ve been here thirty years. I’m like, well, is that good? You know? Because we want to create sustainability and self-sufficiency. And so that’s why I began tying in this development with the humanitarian nexus together, that humanitarian support should be a building block toward development. And so – and I’m not talking about a cyclone where you got a short-term impact – even though we do try to do it there with better housing and how we rebuild things. But that’s a different discussion. And so one of the things I try to do with every humanitarian dollar, how do I create a development opportunity to improve the assets of a community? For example, like, we’ve planted billions of trees with beneficiaries. Just last year alone we did, like, 15,000 kilometers of roads that our beneficiaries built with us. We built thousands of holding ponds, and reservoirs, et cetera, so people can be self-sufficient and not depend on us. COVID is a whole different dynamic in a lot of different ways. And how do we integrate those – the humanitarian development side with COVID is – it’s a different ballgame in what we do and how we do it. It’s an all-hands-on-deck right now in terms of just safety net programs, supply chain, economic disruption, et cetera. So we’re working through a lot of these issues as we speak.

Jacob Kurtzer

Thank you, Dr. Beasley. I know we have – open this up to questions from our live viewing audience. So we have two questions here from Erin Gee (sp) and Albert Hong at Radio Free Asia, asking specifically about operations in North Korea. You know, from the U.S. perspective, there’s a lot of complex crises out there where the dynamics of a conflict or the intersection between a conflict and a climate issue make work very challenging. But North Korea seems to be among the hardest places for humanitarian organizations to work. And so the questions are about, in your perspective, how severe is the food security situation there? And what is WFP doing to respond to issues around malnutrition and food shortages in North Korea, given the constrained work environment there?

David Beasley

Well, what you have first is a very, obviously, restricted access. We have been working to the degree that we would, and monitoring assessments, and assessments in the last 18 months to determine the reality, because last year there was a grave concern about the harvesting seasons because of drought and some degree of flash flooding. It was going to appear in 2018 and '19 that there was going to be really a shortage of food. And for one reason or the other, China stepped in and came in. We were negotiating at the time. We serve now about 800,000 people there. And it's about access, independence, and funding, you know? You know, it's a tricky thing. And we won't come in unless we've got, number one, the money. Number two, the operational independence to make certain that we do it the way that we believe it ought to be done. So funding has always been an issue there, of course. And at the same time, having the right access. We've negotiated a lot of issues over time with North Korea. And when China stepped in and started supplying substantial commodities, that was a game changer. There's a lot of discussion that's going on now, there's a lot of tension going on now. And of course, our belief is we don't want to penalize innocent families of politics, and people no matter where it is. But let me just kind of leave it at that at this stage right now. And I was just – not just – I was in North Korea not long ago. And we're in continued, constant – I say constant – we're in discussions now with a variety of interested potential donors, as well as North Korean leadership. But it's an interesting scenario right now. (Laughs.)

Jacob Kurtzer

Thanks for that. You mentioned a couple times the logistics function that WFP has. And we've followed the establishment of some of the logistical supply chain hubs in Asia. And I think I saw a picture of you in the airport in Ethiopia. You talked about those Ethiopian Airlines flights. Do you see those hubs now as being a cornerstone of future operations? I mean, obviously the end game is to work yourself out of a job, but that might a few years down the road. So what's the plan for that logistical infrastructure? And how has your need to set up those structures run up against something else that you mentioned, which is, you know, governments rightfully thinking about being a little bit more restrictive in the movement of goods and services because they're trying to protect their population from this threat?

David Beasley

Yeah. That's a – that's like pushing a balloon. You know, it's just – it's something all the time – I mean, literally all the time. But let me go back to the premise of the first part of the question. And that is, you know, we would like to not be doing this, you know, as quickly as we can get out of it, and let the private sector do it, because I believe the long-term success of ending hunger and poverty is going to be in the private sector anyway. And so we step in when that private sector can't do things. And so I'm hoping while we set up these hubs that we'll be able to wind them down and not need those hubs, because we're not, like, building infrastructure there. We're using existing airports, existing hangars, existing warehousing, and things of that nature. And so already where we see – if a commercial airline starts opening up a path in an area that we're now supplying supplies or personnel – in an area that we can't now – that we'll turn that over to the commercial airline industry. Say: We don't need to operate that plane there anymore. And let's now move that over here, you know, that kind of thing. So we really take it from a very practical, commonsense perspective. And again, we're not looking to build an empire. We're actually looking to build resilience and sustainability so we're not needed. So as quickly as we can downsize we will. But I don't see that being any time in the next six months, anyway. I hope by next year, but I think we're not going to see the devastation that I'm worried about until probably September/October in terms of Africa, the real big impacts that we're talking about. But hopefully the airline industry will be moving by then. But you know, this thing's evolving and changing by the day. I mean, look at the second wave, third wave, whatever wave you want to call it. You know, it's impacting the movement of personnel and supplies big time.

Jacob Kurtzer

We have another question from our audience about how your – WFP addressed malnutrition within the provision of assistance, especially given that there are linkages between chronic health and the impacts of morbidity and mortality related to COVID-19.

David Beasley

You know, two things here. One is if you don't give people food they will die from starvation. Number two, if you don't give people enough of the right food then they're much more vulnerable to diseases like COVID because their immune system's down. You know, one of the great things about many of the Western cultures is – or, developed nations – the children have good food, they have good nutrition system, and they're healthy. And so they can fight against these diseases. So you take, like the United States where the average is, what, 38.8 years of age, or something like that. Africa, the average is 18.9, give or take. So you're hoping that because it's a younger population they'll be more resistant to COVID. But because of the food systems and the lack of healthy diets, then they're going to be more vulnerable than the young people would be in the United States, or Germany, or Europe, et cetera. So we're working with UNICEF and other partners to maximize the nutrition. And let me give you an example. Schools. We know that schools have been shut down around the world. About 1.7 billion children out of school now. It's about 1.2 or 3 billion, give or take. Out of that 370 million children depend on school meals. And many of those children that's the only meal they get per day. And so where we are – I think in 42 countries we're working now with the government to do rations and take-home kind of school meals for the children who otherwise would not be getting that food, so that they can have balanced diets, to the degree we have money and access, to help them stay healthy, to protect them against – whether it's COVID, or measles, and you're hearing already about cholera breakouts, measles breakouts, many other diseases that become problematic as the supply chain breaks down. So it's not just COVID that we're concerned about. There's a lot of other diseases out there that children become more susceptible to when they don't have a healthy, nutritious diet, you know.

Jacob Kurtzer

Thanks for that. We're starting to run a little bit short on time, so I wanted to ask you a big picture system question. And, you know, today is Juneteenth. And recent events in the United States have led to a lot of soul searching, particularly in the aid sector, about issues of racial bias and social justice. And these questions are looking inward at how organizations are managed and structured, but also looking outwards at how the international humanitarian system engages with the populations and the countries in which they work. And I wanted to just get your perspective. If you can speak to how you view these challenges, both within your own agency but also how you see those kinds of questions manifest in the work that you've done, and particularly in your recent travels how you think about that relationship between WFP, your local partners, the populations that you're working with.

David Beasley

You know – (laughs) – I was the guy that took – that made the movement to take down the Confederate flag. So I'm very familiar with racial issues. And I paid a political price for it, but it was worth the price to do that. And I grew up firsthand during the Civil Rights movement in the South. And not to get into that whole story, but I talked to about 40 or 50 congressmen and -women last week about my childhood and growing up in one of the first racially force-integrated schools in the South, when it was a whole different world. I mean, it was a lot of problems back then. And, you know, the world's made a lot of progress in the last couple hundred years on poverty reduction, and a lot of disparities. But we've got a lot more work to do. I see it firsthand. That's where we are. We are in the most troubled spots, poorest places in the world. And when you neglect people or don't provide the support they need – and I'm not talking about just handouts because most people don't want handouts. They want a helping hand up. They do. I see it. I'm out there every day with the poorest of the poor and I see what happens when people are disenfranchised. And extremists, and exploitation, and riots, and protests. And if young people don't feel like they have a future at all, they go – they go do what they do. And this is unacceptable, because we have enough wealth in the world to address poverty around the world. And so – and I tell young people this, Jacob, because 200 years ago 95 percent of the people on Earth were in poverty. Eighty-five – 84-point-something percent were extreme poverty. So we built systems in the last 200 years that is sharing more wealth than we ever have in history. But try telling that to the 821 million people out of the 7.7 billion people that go to bed hungry every night. So I don't think we tear down the systems we're built. We have to continue to improve the systems we've built. How do we reach that population there? What do we do over here? And it's not a one-size-fits-all. And this is the question I began asking when I joined the U.N. You've been in this country for 30 years. You haven't made any headway. Do you need to step back and say: What do we need to do differently? And that's what we have to do. When I joined the World Food Programme I was shocked at gender parity. You would think the United Nations would be the most gender parity operation on Earth. Since I've been here at the World Food Programme – and we're the largest U.N. operation by far. And so we've moved our gender parity numbers up from 34 to 39 percent. We've hired over 1,950 women. And we're moving the numbers up. And guess what? We're better for it. But it's not just gender parity. It's also diversification, internal, external. Our programs out in the field, we need – we make sure, because we have – we have teams that are always evaluating our programs out in the field to make sure we're not leaving somebody behind, a particular group – whether it's racial, ethnic, or whatever the case may be. I have a pretty simple view in life. I believe my purpose in life is to love my neighbor, is to help other people. And I consider my neighbor has not color, no sex, no race – we're all the same. I mean, my belief is we're all created in the image of God. Everybody should be treated equally. Everybody should be treated fairly. So if I see a starving child, I don't care what their religion, their history. I want to help that starving child. And that – I think we've got so my wealth in the world today. And this is – I've been really – I don't want to say tough, but with the top CEOs. I met with about 50 top CEOs a few weeks ago. And I said: You've got to keep doing what you do good, but you've got to help us solve these problems in some of these developing nations. And I need for you to talk to your shareholders and being willing to have a little bit less return on your investment with a longer perspective to bring stability and

sustainability. Which means you got to work with smallholder farmers more than you would have anticipated. The mega farming, you got to think this thing through, so we can bring stability and peace no matter what the ethnicity, the religion, the color, whatever it might be.

So to me, I mean, I see the World Food Programme as exemplary in this area. And I know we can do better. And if somebody can point out where we can do better, we're all ears and looking forward to it. But it breaks my heart when I see racism or any type of discrimination like that. And I've sort of lived my life – I got it from my mamma. My mamma was a schoolteacher. She was always the one driving during the Civil Rights movement. And so she sort of drove that into me and my family, is you stand up, you speak out, you do it reasonably, and be prepared to take hits, just like I did when I – (laughs) – tried to take the flag down.

Caitlin Welsh

Yeah.

David Beasley

I can't remember who it was. It might have been – it was one of – it might have been Bob Novak or David Broder who says: The last living casualty of the Civil War – (laughs) – you know, was me. But anyway.

Caitlin Welsh

Yeah. Thanks for that, Executive Director Beasley. I just have one final question from me. And that's – you published a piece in Foreign Affairs this week. And you said that despite the potential for a steep rise in hunger because of COVID-19, you're still optimistic. Can you flesh that out for us?

David Beasley

Well, I believe in people. You know, as – I know the American people, you know? I've been really hard on the press in the United States. I said, the last three years, you know, you've been – it's either ever news item is Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump or Brexit, Brexit, Brexit, Brexit. And I said, I don't care if you love or hate anybody or any issue, but you're not balancing out the needs of the people around the world, with the wars, the conflicts, the starvation, and poverty. And I know the American taxpayer just is really the same as European taxpayers. If they know there are problems out there, the taxpayers actually step up because they want to help. They'll dig deeper into their pocket because they get it. And so that's why I'm still hopeful, because I just know the American heart, you know? I believe in that American spirit. And I see it in Europeans as well, if they know about it. And that's the key, knowing about it. And there's a lot of propaganda out there right now on social media that's not true. You know, you get a lot of the people using it for bad stuff. But the young people – I'm hoping they will rise to the occasion and continue the spirit of love your neighbor no matter what, no matter where. And right now is going to be a critical tipping point in world history, these next many months.

Jacob Kurtzer

Well, Executive Director Beasley thank you very much for spending some time with us today. We're going to have to wrap up for time, but you've given us a lot to think about it. And we're both grateful for your time today but also for the world of WFP and your colleagues all over the world. So just thank you again for joining us, keep up the good work, and we look forward to welcoming you in Washington on a future visit.

David Beasley

Well, Jacob, Caitlin, thank you very much. As I tell my team, I'm not your leader, I'm your cheerleader. And so there are amazing people out there putting their lives on the line. So thank you for giving us this voice to be heard so people can, you know, understand what we do, and at the same time help us be better. Because I'm not perfect. I'll say dumb things from time to time. We're looking to improve; I'm looking to improve. So please don't hesitate to let us know.

Jacob Kurtzer

Well, thank you. And for you in the audience, there you go. There's your opportunity to share your feedback with the executive director and his team directly. We'll wrap it up here. Wishing everyone a great day. Thank you for joining us.

**(END)**