

Presidential trip can draw attention to lessons on reducing hunger

BY JIM HERSHEY

Thursday, Jul. 09 2009

President Barack Obama is making Ghana the site of his first presidential visit to sub-Saharan Africa on Friday and Saturday. The White House announced that the trip will highlight the critical role that sound governance and civil society play in promoting lasting development. Ghana deserves to come to the front of the class to receive the positive global recognition that President Obama's visit can bring to its progress, including its results in reducing hunger.

Ghana has cut poverty in half to 29 percent and reduced undernourishment from 64 percent in 1979 to 18 percent in 2006 in the country that is home to 24 million people, about four times the population of Missouri. This is the foundation to overall economic progress. Yet there is much work to be done, including by charitable organizations such as the World Soy Foundation, whose headquarters are based at the American Soybean Association in St. Louis.

While farming is the primary occupation in many rural communities in Ghana, rain-fed farming limits productivity and makes most people vulnerable to chronic food insecurity and abject poverty. The World Food Program reports that in some regions, nine out of 10 people are considered poor and nearly half of children under 5 years of age are malnourished.

Protein often is missing in the diets of these children. Soy is rich in protein and a natural part of the solution. Therefore, U.S. soybean growers are working through the World Soy Foundation in Ghana and other developing countries. This past spring, I returned to Ghana where the World Soy Foundation and Adventist Development and Relief Agency signed a memorandum of understanding that will provide soy-based nutrition to schoolchildren and build on a successful 2007 school feeding program.

A North Tongu, Ghana, school district director described the importance of the original school program well when he said, "You are really going to make it possible for more children to come to school to receive not only a full stomach but to have education that will help them escape rural poverty in years to

come."

His forecast was on target. School enrollment increased by 33 percent and average school attendance by 20 percent in the two rural schools where the World Soy Foundation assisted the community by providing training and high-protein soy to combine with locally available products. The project will provide soy milk to 450 students each day they attend elementary school.

School feeding efforts such as these offer lessons for all of us. First, children must have healthy diets to learn and grow up to contribute to a sound economy. Second, strong in-country leaders, particularly women, are vital to long-term development. Third, U.S. businesses, like WhiteWave, Cargill and Monsanto, all of which support our work, are invaluable partners.

With those three ingredients, we have a recipe for lasting development so what President Obama will witness in Ghana can be replicated around the world.

Jim Hershey's international career spans more than 25 years and multiple continents. As World Soy Foundation executive director, he is based in St. Louis and oversees the foundation's work in a dozen countries. The website is www.worldsoyfoundation.org.
