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Welcome to the show. I'm Caty Weaver.

The United States is the leading supplier of food aid around the world, at a cost of about 1.5 billion dollars yearly. But critics say the system is slow and inefficient. The United States Congress is considering legislation that may change how America provides food aid in the future.

Today, we have two reports that explore the issue of food aid. Does it work better when the aid is in the form of money? Or should such aid always be provided as food?

Humanitarian agencies in the Sahel area of Africa are struggling to deal with a cycle of food crises. The United States government provides about 1.5 billion dollars in traditional food aid. But it is now considering directing as much as 45 percent of that aid into newer food aid programs like "cash for work." These programs pay villagers to work on community improvement projects.

Jim Tedder reports.

It is market day in Sadio, a village in the Diourbel area of Senegal. It is also payday for about 800 people involved in the “Yokkute” program.

The aid organization Catholic Relief Service runs the program. It pays villagers to improve local agricultural and waste and water systems.

Yokkute means resilience in the local Wolof language. The program’s goal is to help Sadio’s population succeed again after years of poor harvests.

Program coordinator Pape Said says money is better than food for this at-risk community.

“The people can buy the food they’d like to have. But people in need have more needs than food alone, like healthcare. So with cash they can buy food but they can also address their other needs.”

But there can be problems with money as well. Some workers like Gass Kane want their payment in food or food vouchers. She wants to block family members from using her earnings to buy unnecessary things.

“We prefer the food because it’s useful for the whole family.”

Catholic Relief Service does not force program participants to buy food with their money. However, the group pays workers on market day to help urge them to choose food purchases.

Local shop owner Waly Faye says he can see the difference in sales.

“This program supports the merchants. Before, it was only between the aid program and the beneficiary. So with the Yokkute program, they have brought in the small shop owners. So, instead of two players, now it’s three.”

Local farmers also profit. They can sell their produce and grain without competition from imported food. Catholic Relief Service’s Pape Said says the program’s workers also are improving crop production.

“In these half-moons, we are correcting the soil, which is mostly sand. So to increase water retention, we add manure and compost. Good fertilization could double, triple or quadruple the harvests.”

Aid groups are watching to see if the United States Agency for International Development will support more programs like Yokkute in the future.

I’m Jim Tedder.

Food for Peace is a United States aid program. It provides food grown in the United States to countries in need. But President Obama’s budget proposal for 2014 makes some changes to the almost 60-year-old program. It would replace some food shipments with money to purchase food within foreign countries.

Some aid agencies welcome the proposed changes. But as Christopher Cruise tells us, farmers and millers in the central part of the United States say the plan would hurt their businesses and cause job losses.

Bill Wykes of Plano, Illinois, is the chairman of the Illinois Soybean Association. He has farmed for almost 40 years. He works the land that his family has owned even longer.

A small amount of what his farm produces has always gone to people in need. The United States government pays him for the goods he provides.

“We’re glad to see it go and be used and help millions of people over the years to prevent malnutrition, starvation and things like that.”

Since the 1950s, food aid from American farms has travelled the world to help feed more than three billion people in 150 countries. The government aid program is called Food for Peace.

It has been a source of pride for farmers like Mr. Wykes. Many are strongly opposed to the Obama administration's plan to send money in some cases instead of farm goods.

“Well, it’s a ridiculous, ridiculous idea. Why not give them the best quality instead of trying to provide them with cash to go to a market that does not have the quality or the commodity that is really needed.”

But the United States secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, says changes to the program are necessary. He says the food aid process is too slow in many cases.

“The way we currently do business can basically add 11 to 14 weeks of delay in terms of getting food to where it’s needed most in an emergency circumstance.”

But Dow Didion of Didion Milling in Cambria, Wisconsin, says the changes could result in lost jobs. He says the change could mean dismissals for as many as 212 of his company’s employees.

“We have a large number of people in this portion of the business from processing to packaging to quality insurance to logistics, so it would impact us in the jobs area.”

The United States government pays Didion Milling to process and package hundreds of thousands of bags of food aid each month. Dow Didion says that sends a stronger message to foreign countries than money.

“I don’t feel that cash will have the same impact that a bag that says ‘gift of the United States’ will have. We’re concerned about feeding the starving people a quality product and have concerns that if the program turns into a cash program, as to what will the money be used for.”

Agricultural and shipping organizations are protesting the proposed changes to Food for Peace to American legislators.

I’m Christopher Cruise.

And that’s As It Is for today. I’m Caty Weaver. What do you think of As It Is? What subjects would you like to hear about on the show? Let us know. Visit our website at learningenglish.voanews.com and click on the Contact Us link.