

PRESENTATION: HOWARD BUFFETT KEYNOTE

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The ambassador thinks it's great I'm here, and there's only one reason. He's never heard me speak before. I know the next 25 minutes are quite valuable, but I do want to just take the first minute and go back about twenty-some years when I was here in Des Moines. I was in the Des Moines Club having lunch with John Crystal and Joe Rosenfield, who were two great friends of our family.

And a gentleman came up, and they introduced me to him, and we had a short conversation. And John Crystal, who was my main Iowa fundraiser for my campaign back in Omaha for the County Board, mentioned I was running for the County Board, and even though I was sitting with two Democrats, he worked into the conversation that I was a Republican. And anybody who knew John Crystal or Joe Rosenfield knew they were staunch Democrats, but they were still going to have lunch with me. So I got home, and about two days later I got a check in the mail for \$500, which, you know, when you're running for the County Board twenty-some years ago, \$500 was a pretty nice donation, signed by John Ruan. And that was my first experience with Mr. Ruan, and to me his generosity was very much appreciated. He showed confidence in someone that he knew very little about, but obviously I had two good advocates.

And I think that the World Food Prize is very much the same thing on a global scale. It shows his generosity, his willingness to invest in the future in a vision and really engage people on a global basis on a very critical issue. And the ambassador is absolutely correct that today we have more attention paid to food security and agricultural development than we've ever, at least would have ever been seen in my lifetime. And I'm getting older — everyone reminds me of that.

The other experience that I think is worth sharing — and it'll actually convey one of the kind of core points I want to make later on today — is how I kind of got started in farming. It was about 25, 30 years ago, and I had very limited experience. But I had a neighbor whose name was Otto Wins, and Otto asked me one day if I would help them prepare a field and go out and disk. And again I had pretty limited experience, but I thought this would be great.

So Otto put me on an old 5020 John Deere tractor, and I don't know what a 5020 John Deere tractor is. There's a lot of horsepower. And Otto was one of these creative guys, so he had the hood off of it, and he had no... I mean, he was always working on this thing. So there's no hood and no fenders, but, man, did it have a lot of black smoke. So back then I thought that was pretty cool.

So I'm disking away, and I'm in this area where there's different terraces and I get done with the terraces. It's starting to get dark, and I think, well, I should move up to the next one and get it done, so I move up to the next one. And I'm thinking, you know, there's not very good lights on this tractor, not much at all. So I'm thinking this field looks a little different, and I just can't figure it out. Pretty soon there's this vehicle roaring up behind me and the lights are flashing, and I'm thinking, oh, my gosh. So I stop, and Wayne Wins, Otto's son, jumps out, and he says, "Howard, quick, get this tractor out of the field! My dad might not see that you just disked up the corn he planted!"

So my prospects of being a farmer at that point weren't very good. But the key thing... You know, I think about this still, and I know it's a little bit different, but the key thing for me is — You know, years later when I think about that experience, Otto could replant that corn. Or even if he didn't replant that corn, his family didn't have any large consequences as a result. And it's completely in contrast to the experiences that I've seen and been able to learn over the last twenty years across Central America and Africa. Because, you know, in those countries, the losses of crop, as everyone knows, can have a devastating impact; I mean, it has severe consequences.

So one of the things I do when I visit places like Sudan or Zambia or Mali or other countries is I very carefully try to get a group of women separated from the men. Now, sometimes you can do this and sometimes you can't; as you know, culturally at times it's difficult. But when I can do it, then I ask the interpreter to help me word things the best way and say it in the way that he wants to say it.

But after a few general questions, I always ask if these women experience a hunger period, and they typically nod, and they get a little more serious. A few times the interpreter won't ask the next question — and it's a difficult one to ask — but I always want to understand from these women what they live through. I don't want to read it in a book and I don't want to theorize about it; I want to hear it in their own words. So I ask, "How do you choose which child to feed?" and that's a pretty difficult question to ask someone, and it's an even more difficult question for them to answer.

But I don't always get a direct answer. Sometimes I'll get an answer that will describe sorting through rotting crops, digging up tree roots, maybe boiling leaves or boiling tree bark. But oftentimes they will tell me even that alone will only be the meal for the next few days. And occasionally they're a little more direct, and they'll tell me an experience of when they lost a child through malnutrition and hunger.

The fact that farmers go hungry and that their children die of malnutrition is a pretty big paradigm shift for all of us in this room, except for some of the farmers that are here from emerging countries. I mean, that is a real paradigm shift. I go home on my farm, and I'm proud that I can feed 152 to 156, whatever the number might be one year to the other, people in the world because of that I produce.

So it's a pretty big paradigm shift to think that farmers have families that can't eat, but that is a fact in many places.

And since I'm a photographer in just a minute, not quite yet but in just a minute, I'm going to show you this DVD of photographs that I've taken around the world. And I wanted to include this today because I want to have us have a clear vision of what I'm talking about and what we're talking about at this symposium. I want to make sure that we get the right images in our mind and that we are really aware of some of the populations and some of the circumstances we're talking about. It's pretty easy when you're sitting in Des Moines, Iowa, and you have a full glass of water or a Coca-Cola or whatever it is you want, to talk about things but not really feel the depth of what they mean in the real life of people that have to live through them.

This trip, therefore, is really about the reality people face. It's about recognizing that some of our ideas, whether they're GPS technology, super hybrid seeds, whether mono-cropping systems, are not always appropriate for populations that may live on a dollar or a few dollars a day.

And I call it context. And context is pretty important. It's admitting that when 60 percent of the hunger on a continent is a result of conflict, standard answers don't provide the solutions, that the challenges of poor infrastructure, limited distribution networks, costly agricultural inputs, disease, depleted soils and multiple agro-growing zones mean that we need to be more innovative, more flexible and more willing to try different solutions.

So when you look at this, when we put this up (and it's about four minutes), when you look at this, you know, the relationship to hunger isn't always as evident to everybody. But when you see immigrants that migrate because they can't produce enough food on their small farm to feed their family, some of them end up dying trying to get to a better life.

The boy in this case might be sniffing glue, trying to deaden the pain from hunger, and I've seen that in many places — Eastern Europe and many places in Central America where children turn to alternatives because they just can't take the pain. And IDP survives because of donated food from the United States.

A child lies dying from malnutrition where if that child were in this country, she would live. Children get their only meal of the day through a school feeding program. A refugee has lost her crops and her livelihood because of conflict, a conflict that she has nothing to do with, no stake in the game. A person with HIV/AIDS receives the antivirals that he or she needs, but they don't have the nutrition to be able to maintain what their body needs to benefit from that medicine.

A group of people building a new irrigation system through a Food for Work or Food for Asset program in the middle of a draught are trying to find a way to increase their yields and productivity.

So when food is so basic and you find that it touches every aspect of life, but it may not always be that obvious. So I'm going to take you on a quick trip to remind all of us today, as I finish up with my other comments, who we're discussing and how big and how difficult and challenging some of those problems are. So if you could play that, it would be great.

— DVD —

Thank you. When I told Ambassador Quinn I'd be glad to come, I said, "You'll have to suffer through some of my photographs." But anyway there's a story behind every one of those images, and the one that I want to just pull out briefly is: When I was in Angola maybe 10 years ago we were driving to a village, and everywhere we would pass a village there were fresh graves that were only maybe three or four feet long, so we knew there was a serious problem in the area.

And when we got to that village, I mean, literally you could feel that death was in the air. You could look around and you could see the children that would not be alive in a week. And this woman came up to me, and she thrust her baby at me, and she was talking frantically. And I looked at the interpreter, and his face was just blank. And four or five women got up, and they tried to calm her down, and they finally got her to calm down. And the interpreter said that she was telling me that her son had just died, her baby that she had with her that she had tried to hand to me, she had no milk left, the baby would not survive, and that that baby's life was in my hands.

Well, you don't just go home after an experience like that and forget it. So on that trip, that is the trip where I really decided I was going to understand what it took to address hunger in a village. And I will tell you it is an amazing expense, the logistics are incredible, the therapeutic feeding, the need for general feeding so that if you distribute seeds they don't cook the seeds because they're starving...

I'm I can't describe all of it today and give you the details of it, but it was a lesson for me. And what I really learned from it was that there is just no simple answer to any of it. It's a very complicated issue. Food security is complicated. Agriculture is complicated. And when I understood what it took just to try to save one village from starvation, frankly for me personally it was quite overwhelming to think about what it would take to do that village after village after village across the continent.

Now, these villages are often net buyers of food. They farm two or three acres of land. They have limited access to markets, limited inputs, limited extension services. They don't know what PH is in terms of soil; they've never seen soil samples. They don't know what organic matter means to them. Mechanization has little value, and they rely on planting seeds, the same seeds from one year to the next, which of course has tremendous negative impact on their productivity.

But these are often the farmers we're talking about when we're looking at smallholder farmers. Therefore, what I've concluded over the last years of interviewing farmers and going to countries is that we really need to approach agricultural development in these circumstances differently.

And the first question we have to ask is: How do poor, small-scale farmers contribute to their own food security? What are the social implications of failure? What are the consequences of accelerated urbanization or environmental degradation? And probably maybe one of the biggest questions to ask is: How do you develop the concept of custodial care when land ownership is such a large and widespread impediment across so many countries on the continent?

Well, the first thing you do is you identify what you can impact and how you're going to do it. And our lessons over the past 10 years have taught us — and this is something 10 years ago I didn't believe — but it's taught us that policy and advocacy actually really count, probably more than any other single activity that we can engage in.

We've learned that you must build a system based on the advantages that these farmers offer, not a blueprint based on investments we've made here in the United States or in Western agriculture in temperate growing zones. We have to learn how to take the advantages that these farmers have and apply them. And we must embrace smallholder farmers as part of the solution and never look at them as an impediment to success in the future.

Now, if you view African agriculture as a pyramid and you break that down and you look at the top part of it, at the commercial farmers, and then break it down and look at the smallholder farmers that have access to markets, then you go down deep into the bottom part of the pyramid, which can be as much as 90 percent of the farmers in a country, you look at those divisions and you understand that those demographics mean that it takes very different solutions for those different demographics.

And I think that that is the challenge, because the big part of the bottom of the pyramid is a very difficult group to reach, and there are no simple solutions that's going to help that group.

As a farmer myself, I can simply tell you that distributing seeds, although you'll hear in a second some of the things we support on that, but just simply distributing seeds and fertilizer, if that's the plan, it's going to fail long term. The systems aren't in place to support it. So I think that is one of the parts of the disconnect in this discussion, is how to match those solutions with the right demographics.

Now, improved seeds used on depleted soils aren't going to accomplish much. And synthetic fertilizers spread on soil with no organic matter or biologic activity certainly has limitations. So we have to look at these populations and understand that hooking populations that are some of the poorest populations in the world on fossil-based fertilizers is not going to be a great solution.

Now, we have looked at breadbasket areas along with others, and these areas, we support the PASS seed program run by a great gentleman, Joe DeVries. The virus-resistant sweet potato product we have, I heard Roger Beachy is here somewhere, and we've worked with the Danforth Plant Science Center in partnership with that. And we've cofunded two projects for drought-tolerant maize with the Gates Foundation.

And I feel these all have promise and they're all very important. But the key thing is: They have promise, and

they're going to help us in the future — but they don't provide much of a solution today for a lot of poor farmers. And that's why we have to do things a little differently.

And I think that the first thing we have to do is we have to understand that what we really need in Africa is a brown revolution, a soil revolution. We have to be able to figure out how we're going to regenerate and use the soil as a way to increase production before we can really look at seeds and fertilizer as an option.

And there are many things that we can do in that regard, and I think it's going to involve training and research and the distribution of cover crops and lagoons and inter-cropping and agroforestry.

And I've been fortunate enough to be one of those farmers who has greatly benefited from the Green Revolution and the techniques it brings. And I'm a big believer in it, and I think there's a lot of places it applies. But in the end we're going to have to figure out how we apply the most appropriate thing in the most appropriate place in the most appropriate time. And some of those things don't fit, and we need to be talking about the right things.

We've had great success with cover crops, no-till, basin planting and mulching in a lot of the countries where we've worked, and these have increased yields threefold sometimes with no synthetic fertilizers. We have to have an open mind about how we're going to approach this.

Africa is not Southeast Asia with large expanses of rice fields, or India for that matter with wheat upon wheat fields. So we have to look at the diversity that is required. We have to approach it in ways that are culturally acceptable. And that I think is really important.

The crops African farmers depend on — cassava, cow peas, edible beans, brown nuts, bananas, millet, sorghum, potatoes — these were never part of the Green Revolution. So it's a mistake to use a phrase that sums it up into a neat package but doesn't really address some of the issues that these farmers face.

So I'm all for the Green Revolution, and I've lived it and I love it, but we also have to understand what applies and what doesn't apply to farmers. So it's a little bit of a different approach.

You know, I'm always amazed at the similarities between farmers, yet there's hardly one farmer that does anything the same or anything the same way each year. But in my opinion, that's the opportunity, that's the innovation — that's the opportunity to see change and to seek change.

So I think that there's a lot of hope with farmers, and they're innovators and they'll take risks, and they'll try new things. So for us who work with farmers, we've been very fortunate to have a group, a population of people that really can do this. And I believe they can do it.

You know, there's no quick fix to agriculture. People who think about agriculture in terms of a few years are going to get this wrong. It's going to take decades, and there is no simple way to approach it or to be able to overcome some of the issues that are in front of us.

It's about long-term use of resources, implementing good policies, building local capacity, and applying appropriate solutions at the appropriate times, as I said earlier.

Now, all of us in this room are on the same journey. We all want to see food security attained by millions and millions of small farmers, and that's great. But we haven't done a very good job the last 30 years, and I think we really need to challenge some of the economic and political agendas of others and be outspoken about it and try to bring change. Because if we don't do it — and many of the people in this room have the capability of affecting change — if we don't do it and the people in this room don't do it, nobody else is going to do it. So we really have to have that call to action, and we have to rise above some of the challenges

that are in front of us and have success.

Now, I want to tell you that we've spent about \$145 million on about 70 global projects, and I'll admit as I stand here that as far as I'm concerned we've not even come close to seeing the success that we should have seen.

And what does that mean to me? It means that we've learned a lot, and I want to share that with you today, because I think there's some things that are worth sharing. And in the case of agricultural projects, I've come away with about four lessons that I want to quickly tell you.

First, poor farmers are poor individuals. Simply increasing yields because they're farmers does not address the dynamics of poverty. And that to me is probably the most challenging part of our work and a critical element of when people oversimplify what the answers are.

Second, implementing projects that simply result in activities — that may help a given population in a specific time period, but often exit strategies are insufficient, projects end, everybody goes home, and the future of those people probably hasn't changed that much in the long term.

Third, if there's no markets for farmers, then all the production in the world has limited value once you achieve food security. Markets are the key to moving farmers from poverty to the economy and into the economy.

Finally, all this matters little if you have poor policies in place. You can't create long-term, productive, positive change without good, fair policies.

Now, as a result of these lessons, today the Foundation is going to announce a partnership with the World Food Programme in Latin America that I hope can work. And it thought there's no better place to make this announcement than right here in Des Moines. So I'm going to close out by just describing it quickly to you.

We got involved in what's called Purchase for Progress back the very end of, in fact, October of 2007. Incredible leadership has been provided by Josette Sheeran, the Executive Director of the World Food Programme. We call it P for P, for short.

And this is a new project for us, but it's not driven by the philosophy that we're going to give anything to anybody. So there's no gifts. No farmer is going to receive free seeds or fertilizer. No government is going to hand out vouchers. No NGO is going to develop a list of activities. The combination of government support through credit, the use of private enterprise through inputs, and the market opportunity provided by WP, these are the key ingredients of what's going to drive this project.

This is about providing knowledge and opportunity, not handouts. Co-ops will learn the obligation of a contract, how to reduce post-harvest losses, how to increase productivity, manage warehouses, implement best procurement practices, manage credit, how to develop a business plan, and, in the end, how to provide quality product.

It's all about training, knowledge and opportunity. This isn't a new concept. I've seen it in Oaxaca and Chiapas Mexico, and I've seen it very successful. But this is going to be at a new scale. It's going to test the limits. It's a model that combines training, credit, government, private enterprise, markets and philanthropy. And I look forward to sharing the results to you in a few years when we have some results.

But the success will be when our commitment expires and these 30,000 farmers are part of the economy, on their own with no need for further support. And the final success is when these farmers no longer sell to WFP, but they sell to Maseca and Bimbo or some other industrial company that will buy their product.

And it's endeavors like this that continue to give me hope, and believe me, my wife calls me the most optimist pessimist that she knows. And so I am a bit pessimistic, but I think the challenges are pretty great.

But it is what gives me hope, and it drives me to believe that someday there's going to be fewer mothers who feel they need to hand their child to a stranger to preserve life.

Thank you.
