

THE WORLD FOOD PRIZE

Administrator Gayle Smith | World Food Prize Keynote Address | June 28, 2016

- Thank you, Ambassador Quinn, for the introduction, but also for your leadership and your many years of dedicated service. Thank you for having me today. It's an honor to be here.
- I want to echo your thanks to Secretary Kerry, Nancy, Kurt, and all of our colleagues at the State Department for hosting us, and for being such wonderful partners in our collective work to enhance food security and nutrition across the globe.
- I also want to thank – obviously – team USAID for its leadership and commitment to the issues that bring us here today, and our colleagues from USDA for their partnership, dedication, and smarts.
- Ambassadors, Congressman McGovern, and all of our distinguished guests – and even those of you who aren't so distinguished, you know who you are – thank you for being here today.
- We're here to celebrate. And not just because the World Food Prize turns the big 3-0 later this year, though that's a pretty big deal. We're here to celebrate the work and extraordinary achievements of four scientists. These men and women represent the very best of their field, and they chose to put all their talent, energy, and skill in service of a better world.
- We owe them a debt of gratitude for that. Especially because I'm sure it wasn't an easy road to get here. Operating on shoestring budgets and always fighting for more funding... Keeping at it in the face of rejection and skepticism, trial after trial and error after error... Trying hard to convince others of the possibilities of what they were doing.
- A lot of people would probably have quit. But we are incredibly fortunate that they didn't. And I am so thrilled that Dr. Andrade, Dr. Mwanga, Dr. Low, and Dr. Bouis will share this year's World Food Prize.
- I can't think of anyone more deserving of this honor, but I have to confess there's just a little bit of selfishness to me saying that.
- That's because this occasion gives all of us at USAID a chance to brag. We have the proud distinction of being a partner to both of the organizations supporting these scientists – the International Potato Center and HarvestPlus. So for many years now, we have supported the work of these scientists and their colleagues to enrich staple crops like the sweet potato with the vitamins and nutrients people need to be healthier.
- And now we can say we were supporting future World Food Prize Laureates all this time. So they've made us look pretty good.
- In seriousness, though, these are partnerships that we are really proud of. And they're representative, I think, of something President Obama's Administration has done from the very beginning, which is to elevate science and research to their rightful place at the forefront of policymaking.
- We're at that point in the Administration now, almost the final quarter of the final quarter, where people start to talk a lot about legacy.
- So let me just say that as someone who has served in this Administration from day one, there is no question in my mind that a renewed commitment to science, research, and evidence-based policymaking deserves a place in that conversation.
- I can speak to how true this is in our international development work, but it goes beyond that. Look at the investments in STEM education, or the work the U.S. military has done – driven by science – to address the very real threat of climate change. Vice President Biden is leading a Cancer Moonshot to launch the next phase of research and eliminate cancer as we know it.
- Across the board, the U.S. government is supporting vital research and development efforts, and – importantly – we're acting on what the science and evidence tell us.
- And there's a pretty simple reason for taking an approach like that: it works. When we start with the evidence and then go from there, we make better decisions and achieve greater impact. When we invest in research and development, we can unlock force multipliers for our work – and identify solutions not just for today's problems but for the problems of the future.

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- And when we bring top scientists from the United States and around the world together with businesses, governments, NGOs, and civil society – and make sure they have the support and tools they need – we can go beyond incremental progress and actually achieve transformation.
- These ideas are central to Feed the Future, the food security initiative that the President called for just weeks after being sworn into his first term.
- I had the privilege of being there at the very beginning of that effort. And it emerged in part out of this frustration – a feeling I’m sure many of you shared – that things were backwards. Donor investments in agriculture had plummeted. But people were hungry, and undernourished. So we were pumping more money into relief and food aid than we were into agricultural development.
- So in general, there was a feeling that agriculture could be so much more than it was. That it could be an engine of growth for poor economies, and a dignified and sustainable livelihood for smallholder farmers.
- And the President understood this was a moment ripe for American leadership. There were plenty of people – development advocates and practitioners – who had the know-how to promote agricultural growth. We had scientists. African leaders had laid down markers for domestic agricultural investment. Progress meeting the targets had been slow, but the interest was there. Businesses, too, were showing interest in emerging markets, but the enabling environment wasn’t always in place. The Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research was in the midst of a reform process. Here in the United States, there was a strong foundation of bipartisan cooperation around development efforts.
- The moment was there. What we needed to do was marshal our resources and bring the many different players together in support of shared goals. And that’s exactly what we did.
- And the only reason I’m telling this story, which I know so many of you experienced personally, is because it’s worth looking back to see how far we’ve come.
- What you realize when you do that is that we have already seen a tremendous global shift. Investments in agriculture – by donors, businesses, and country governments – are up. Farm productivity is rising across much of the global south. And the Feed the Future model is proving itself in country after country, increasing incomes for smallholders and leading to notable drops in poverty and stunting in the places we work.
- Our investments in research and technology have fueled – and accelerated – much of this progress. Building on longstanding support for research institutions, the United States has more than doubled its investments in research since President Obama took office. Because of technologies like biofortification, we now have access to simple interventions that can have a huge impact on nutrition.
- Moreover, we have revitalized relationships with the university community here at home, and with research and educational institutions around the world. The Feed the Future Innovation Labs – which partner with more than 60 U.S. colleges and universities, as well as industry and independent research groups – are making progress developing and scaling safe technologies like drought or heat-tolerant crops to help meet the challenges of a changing climate.
- So what we have now is a proven track record that is strong enough for the next Administration to build on. And with the Global Food Security Act, Congress has an important opportunity not only to solidify the incredible progress made by Feed the Future but also to lock down our approach – including an emphasis on research and development.
- But even with all this progress, there is still a long way to go. 795 million undernourished people is unacceptable. We have to do better.
- Ambassador Quinn mentioned the lasting impact seeing hunger and suffering had on him. And like he said, that’s true for me as well. I was at an event the other day and someone asked me, “what is it that keeps me going? What motivates me?”
- And the answer is I’ve seen up close what it looks like when we fail. And I don’t ever want to see it again.

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- But the hard truth is, we will not meet the world's food needs unless we can continue making big investments in research and development, unless we support scientists and innovators like this year's Laureates. And when we can't meet those needs, people die.
- So as we move forward and continue to build on our progress, it is imperative that we continue to sharpen our research efforts. And there are three "how" questions I think we need to constantly be asking ourselves.
- The first is about scale: how do we disseminate the new technologies and crop varieties to the people and businesses that can scale them up? The great work of three of our Laureates provides an excellent model. They have helped disseminate the orange-fleshed sweet potato across 10 African countries so far.
- The second is: how can we effectively communicate both the value of our research and what we are learning from it? This is essential both for making the case for continued investment, and for scaling the most effective interventions.
- And the third is: how do we make sure the next generation of scientists and researchers are ready to further the advances we have made? Through the Innovation Labs and other means, we have a good start to this. But we have to keep it up – we need new ideas, new talent, and new energy.
- These are big questions, and we're up against big challenges. But, judging from what this community has accomplished together so far, I know we're ready to meet them.
- Congratulations to our Laureates. You have proven that science matters and that when matched with dedication, it can change people's lives. Thank you so much, for everything you do to build a more food secure world.