



WORLD FOOD PRIZE FOUNDATION NORMAN E. BORLAUG INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE

2025 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue

Session Title: Meals that Matter: Humanitarianism and Innovation on the Front
Burner

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Speakers

- José Andrés | Humanitarian, Culinary Innovator, Educator and New York Times Bestselling Author
- Thomas J. Vilsack | Chief Executive Officer, World Food Prize Foundation

Transcript

José Andrés:

Man, you work hard. You start so early here in Iowa. I mean, to feed people in the world, need to sleep, you know.

Thomas J. Vilsack:

José, it's certainly great to have you and it's a tremendous opportunity for us to talk to a guy who's on the front lines. Yesterday, we had a son and father combination on this stage and they were talking about their experiences traveling overseas and the young man basically said that before he traveled overseas, before he saw hunger, he thought of hunger as an issue. But after seeing hunger, he recognized it as global faces. You've been all over the world, you've been in disaster areas, you've been in war torn areas. Help us frame this discussion this morning by talking about the faces of hunger that you've seen.

José Andrés:

Well, again, thank you for having me here. The faces of hunger, we will have to agree on this very simple principle that hunger anywhere is a moral failure everywhere. It's not reason why anybody should be hungry in America, the richest country in the history of humanity. It's not reason why anybody should be hungry in Haiti or Ukraine. But we need to first understand what's the difference between people are hungry in America or people are hungry in Haiti or people that may be hungry in Ukraine.



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In America, it's just a failure of bad policies because if we are a country that we produce far away more than we consume, there is no reason of why anywhere in America should go through moments of hunger. Even in Haiti, will have nothing to do with policies in this case. It's just a country that right now has a government that is not technically functioning. There is true hunger because it's true poverty. And the faces are a woman who has very much to take care of everything, needs to be needs to take care of herself, needs to be the mother, needs to be the one that works twelve hours a day trying to sell something like nobody buys, tries to to work in a farm that has no equipment, and no fertilizers and no money to buy them even if they were available.

And that phase of hunger is very it's something makes you almost cry because you know it's people that they cannot work harder, but they are barely making enough money to buy food just to feed themselves. And you realize that hunger is a very simple equation of all the energy you put out every day and then the energy you are able to bring in. When you put more energy out than energy you bring in, you are poor and you're hungry. And you began every morning in negative, in red, and you can never make it into black. That's the hunger.

Hunger in Ukraine is very different because Ukraine is one of the countries that exports has plenty of food to feed themselves. There is because it's a war that has the entire economic and social system upside down and where NGOs like World Central Kitchen is there, only covering the black holes in the system where there is no supermarkets because they are too close from the front lines, where there nobody is selling seats because they are too close to the front lines. It's not that they don't have, it's like the systems to bring food to the table, will keep the farms running, is not in place. So organizations like World Central Kitchen, we come to cover those black holes so people can feed themselves. So everywhere is different.

And what we need to understand the basics of why is because if not, all the actions we take sometimes are the wrong ones. For me, very very easy to understand why we need to be taking care of feeding everybody around the world. Even before development, we need to make sure that hunger use stops because without full belly, nobody can do anything else. So the first step must always be, let's make sure we feed everybody. Then we can be taking care of the next problems.



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Can we do both at the same time? Yes. But sometimes we go in places and we talk about development without first taking care of the first problem, is can we stop hunger right now?

Thomas J. Vilsack:

Let me take off on that point that you just made. Also on this stage, yesterday we had a conversation about food now being a weapon of war and concerns that folks have about that. I think you believe very strongly that food is pathway to peace and stability. Talk to us about that. Talk to us about the power of food from your standpoint in terms of what it actually means and the consequences of when people are fed or not fed.

José Andrés:

Well, we see right now what's going on in different parts of Africa, in Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, where there are conflicts happening that many of us we are even unaware. But what those conflicts are creating, obviously, it's the perfect conditions to have millions and millions of people hungry because they are displaced, because the normal functioning of their communities stops, farming stops. Countries that they are too poor to be importing any goods, real famine happens. In Ukraine, I've seen we saw during the first year of the war after the Russian invasion with the big navy blockade that Russia had on Ukraine. The grain that Ukraine produces, if the numbers are right, Ukraine feeds with all the grain.

They produce between four hundred to five hundred million people in the planet. So it's a very big important country to feed the world. The rich soils are they produce endless amounts of grain and and all the things. But by that blockade itself, we were putting certain countries around the world, Africa and others, in the path to probably starvation because where these other grains will come from. So in a way, yes, Russia was invading Ukraine, and hopefully they will stop soon, but in indirect way was creating a hunger issue, which to me really we need to applaud the country of Ukraine because they were not only defending themselves, but they fought very hard to make sure that the grain was leaving their ports.

They began doing it by train, but it's more direct than just a navy blockade. I've been in the front lines of Ukraine. I spent there almost three hundred days of my life. And



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farmers were being hit as they were land they were working on their farms. Yesterday, I was with these, soybean farmers and corn farmers, Grant and Rick. And I saw these amazing big machines and wow.

And they were doing the corn harvest, and I think it's fascinating. But I used remember those same images of those same machinery, American machinery in the fields of Ukraine destroying the middle of the fields because they were targeting and still they do to this day. They were targeting the farmers themselves. Anybody can tell me this is right. I don't agree with war.

Nobody should agree with war. But obviously, Ukraine is defending themselves. And I will say if you're gonna have war, you just let soldiers fight it between them. Even I'd rather prefer not to, but somebody tells me it morally is right that they're here in Farmers.

One of the things as well as Central Kitchen, I have a little fund on the site called the Longer Tables Fund that my daughters help me run and like an amazing group of people. And we do investments. So one of the things we did, we gave 65 generators near the front lines to milk farmers because they don't have energy, electricity has been very much is complicated to get electricity near the front lines. When I'm talking the front lines, it's not right in the front. It's now with the drones, you may be 200 kilometers away from the front lines, but you are in the front lines because a drone can hit anyone anywhere.

So we began bringing generators to help them maintain the milk production in their farms, again, their farms are being targeted every single day. So this is very much a very simple way to see how war obviously directly is going for the food producers. And this has to stop because if no one day we're gonna have true famine. You know what happens right now that we take food for granted. You come to Iowa and you see the amazing fields of Iowa with amazing American ingenuity and technology.

You see those machines that cost a million dollar and can do the work of 400 farmers. It is fascinating to see. And this is great because it's very important. It's national security. But we take food for granted because we think food is always gonna be there.



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In one year, I've been at the same time in places with war, in places with hurricanes, in places with typhoons, in places with drought, in places that had plagues, all at once. This happening in the same year or two years, back to back, one day can put on earth, will read in the newspapers. Today, we have plenty of food to feed the world, only we don't know how to deliver the food. Right? One day, not too far away from today, imagine if the newspaper says, today planet Earth has not enough food to feed itself.

This could be happening. It's not science fiction. We need to make sure that the wars are stopped, and we need to make sure that, as happens in this amazing conference, that every possible solution to keep producing food and feeding the world is at the same level of the most important issue as the national security.

Thomas J. Vilsack:

Backstage, we had a brief conversation. Don't be shy. We had a brief conversation about the connection and the tie between hunger, lack of food and migration. Expound on that a little bit. I think that might be of interest to folks.

José Andrés:

Well, I mean, you know, I feel I feel a bit I mean, do you like Star Wars? And the Jedi's and all that? I mean, I'm not gonna call myself a Jedi, but but I've been in Washington long time. I mean, I've been there for years and and this has been like, you know, my Obi Wan Kenobi. I mean, and now he's interviewing me and he's like, he knows all these answers better than me.

But one of the things I learned from people like Secretary Vilsack is that the way we handle food and food policy is so wrong. And I know he got tired of me sometimes giving that speech, and I think but he always smiled at me because he was guiding me in there. I always said that food policy alone cannot just happen through the Department of Agriculture because food is much more powerful than that itself. Food needs to be handled for every from every corner of government. Food is a national security issue.

Should be a person expert on food next to the president of the United States, in the same way he has experts about every other single issue, needs to be food people in



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the Department of Defense, so we feed our soldiers and veterans right, and we use land owned by the Pentagon to make it food productive, where you go to the American bases. And listen, I don't have anything against McDonald's and Burger King. I love it. But they should be getting food that is more than that too. Food is science. Food is health.

The Department of Health should be very important also in things about food, education, feeding our children right. So food needs to be in every corner. And immigration is one that is very obvious. You want the rich countries to stop immigration coming through their borders. What better way to make that happen than making sure that the countries surrounding your rich country are doing well?

Investing in the poor countries is the way to stop mass immigration. We can build all the walls we want. If people are hungry, try to stop an army of mothers with children in their arms trying to feed their children. You're not going to stop my mom. She's not with us anymore, but she'll do whatever it takes to feed my brothers and I.

So the best national security investment that America and any other country could do, invest in the right way in Haiti, invest in the right way in Central America. I was in Venezuela. I was in Colombia. The main people living in Venezuela were mothers with children that couldn't feed their children because Venezuela, a country that was a net exporter of food, became an importer of food. And food was so expensive that people began going hungry.

They began living into Colombia and every other country. I've seen in my life people I fed in Haiti and people I fed in Tijuana because there were Haitians leaving Haiti because they were hungry. So if we invest in ending hunger only for self interest, even if you don't have a heart, even if you claim, you are a Christian like I am, but then don't do anything about it, let's bring religion into the equation. If you say let's feed the hungry, let's give water to the thirsty. But then you don't really do it with smart policies is what the heck. Let's be smart about how we do it.

Feeding the poor is not just an act of pity. Feeding the poor is in the best interest of the countries that are doing it. People don't want our pity. People want only our respect and their dignity. And making sure those countries around us are fed will be an amazing way to stop immigration.



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We are about to see the most massive immigration in the history, already it's happening. More and more people live in their poor countries because they are hungry. Let's start being smart. Let's start creating an economy of goodness, economy that we invest in nobody hungry. Therefore, we look at the future with hope.

Thomas J. Vilsack:

So let's talk a little bit about what the incredible work that you do at the World Central Kitchen. Pick any area of the world that you currently are working in. Talk to me a little bit about the importance of partnerships or the impact of the absence of partnerships in terms of your ability to feed people either in crisis or in war, or in a disaster situation.

José Andrés:

World Central Kitchen, to the ones of you may know, is a simple organization that began actually in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti. But in my brain, it began way before. I remember Katrina, New Orleans. I watched from the comfort of my house. I didn't move a finger.

And we saw the people from the low nine different parts of New Orleans, the poorer areas of New Orleans, and every we saw the tragedy. And I'm not gonna talk about all New Orleans and all Louisiana. I'm gonna talk only about the Superdome. How is possible that we left ten twenty thousand people hungry for a week? You know what an arena is?

An arena is not where you go to see the NFL team or your hockey team or or a stadium, or where you go to see baseball, or where you go to see Taylor Swift. An arena is a gigantic restaurant that entertains with the sports and music. Go to a baseball game, who is watching the game? Everybody is eating hotdog. So an arena will be the perfect place to feed everybody in one minute.

Central Kitchen is not a hunger fighting organization, even a part of me working those fronts. World Central Kitchen is an organization in emergencies to make sure everybody has food and water to start. With that in mind is what we are doing right



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now in Gaza. We reached already 150,000,000 meals. Yesterday, we did north of 600 hot meals in one day.

We have four major kitchens, we've been there since day one. We have close to 90 partner kitchens, smaller ones. We deliver water. We are bringing in we've been bringing in 20 to 40 trucks a day. Okay but who is who is feeding the people? José Andres, sitting here and talking to you? No. Is Palestinians feeding Palestinians? What Wolstantia Kitchen realizes is that the best partner you have to take care of a situation, hunger related or emergency, are the locals feeding locals.

That's why World Central Kitchen sometimes seems to be successful where others are not. In Alaska right now, after that devastating post typhoon that hit those communities that almost we didn't read anything in the newspapers or in the news. We were there from the first hour feeding people because people of Alaska were taking care of the people of Alaska. So what Wilson Drug Kitchen does is use we thrive on their energy. That's why I believe in development or in emergencies.

Every organization has to be much more forward thinking in letting the locals take charge, in letting the locals be the ones doing it. In Gaza, we have thousands of people working with us and they are the ones solving the problems because they know Gaza best. I don't know Gaza. I know now, I've been there already a few times, but I'm not the one coming from Washington DC to tell them what we have to do. Yes, we bring ideas that are good enough for them to endorse, but very often it's one moment that they are the ones deciding what we do, when we do it, and how we do it.

Locals feeding locals. The local community being the ones that take charge cannot be this white boy coming from the sea telling them, and you are going to do it this way. Therefore, this should be the big change in the way we do things. Empower the locals to really do it, not in a speech, in reality. If you go through the World Central Kitchen, X or Facebook or Instagram, you will only see faces of locals taking care of locals.

That's the only way.

Thomas J. Vilsack:



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So there's been a lot of conversation and discussion about a school lunch, school meal coalition as a mechanism for beginning the process of helping to feed people. Talk to me a little bit about the rippling impact of a school feeding program. Beyond the obvious, who actually benefits from a school meal program?

José Andrés:

This is one we talked before that food should be in every part of government, and the different parts of government work in one with each other. But this can apply very easily in America, and applies easily in America, as should be applied in Haiti. I've seen Haiti firsthand and believe me, I had a whole bunch of failures. But this is another thing on NGOs and development. Seems that the NGOs we never fail, we are always perfect.

And me, I love to share my failures because if the private sector fails, it's okay that we fail in the nonprofit sector. But seems sometimes like if you share with your donors that you fail, that they're going to stop investing in you, stop donating money. No. It's okay to share the failures because that means you're not covering anything and that actually you're learning and that actually you are empowering your teams to take risks because when you make decisions, it's risky. But if we want to end hunger in the next twenty, thirty years, we're not gonna do it without taking some risk.

We must take risks. But on the school lunch, I think the biggest disconnect is it's a great place to take care of every children in America and around the world. Schools in a way, they are the ground zero of making sure every child is fed. Because when people tell us there is no hunger, well, because hunger is invisible. People have pride.

So it's difficult to recognize where there is hunger. In America, very difficult. In Haiti, it's much more easier. But hunger sometimes is in front of you and you don't see it, but it's there. So schools is very important because it's ground zero.

But then we need to be connecting these schools with the entire infrastructure around them, especially in poor areas and especially in rural areas, if you want to say. Because usually are the places where hunger can really be. So we need to make sure that, yes, every school has a kitchen. You know very often in schools and being in an emergency and being the shelter where the families go. So you don't want that to happen, but I've seen this plenty of times in my life already, unfortunately.



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And it's good that the school has a kitchen that then you can be feeding the people in the emergency. But to have a kitchen is good because people are going to be making meals from scratch. You're gonna be hiring local people. Local people that have maybe no other ways to get the job in a poor rural area. Another sign you have those men and women that have a job to produce the meals to feed our children instead of the food coming from somewhere else far away.

At the same time, it's all the infrastructure that goes into building those kitchens and those. And at the same time, almost mandatory that you try to buy from the local farmers and communities that produce food as much as you can so the food doesn't come from 10,000 kilometers away. And all of sudden, you start creating an ecosystem where you are really lifting up the entire community only because you are feeding your children. So there is everybody. It's the Department of Infrastructure is right there.

Department of Education is right there. The USDA is right there. You keep going, all of a sudden, you can be doing the Department of Health should be there because you're investing in healthy children. All of a sudden, the whole of our government use putting their power into feeding children in the schools in America, in Ukraine, in Haiti. You can be empowering entire communities only in the process of feeding our children.

I believe in that. We've seen some moments that this works. We need to be doing smarter investments in policy and private sector and NGOs, government together, coming up with those much more bigger ways not only to fix one problem, but investing in a solution that involves everyone everywhere. I believe we can do it, only we have to have the willingness to make it happen that way.

Thomas J. Vilsack:

We are fortunate during this week of inviting young people from all over the country and all over the world to be part of this experience. Sometimes I think there's a tendency for when you're young to see someone like yourself who's been highly successful in a number of different areas, restaurant ownership and the nonprofit world, to assume that it's relatively easy to become somebody like you or that it's



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impossible to become somebody like you. So what advice would you have for these young people?

José Andrés:

Well, I spoke yesterday to a very amazing group of young people. You know, very often I have people that tell me, José, you know, if we were able to feed the people in Bahamas because you are José and everybody knows who you are, and I'm like, what are you talking about? Yeah, because you go somewhere and I need six helicopters flying to the North Bahamas and they let you do it, when nobody else can take off on a helicopter. I'm like, do you know that the two security guys of the president almost wanted to put me in jail? Because I went to him and told him, hey, I need permission to take off now.

People are hungry. They didn't know who José Andres was. They had no clue. So I always tell everybody, you know, what I used to do thirty years ago is the same things I'm doing now. I knock on the door, and when the door doesn't open, I jump through the window.

So never take a no as an answer. Just knock on the door politely, and if not, jump. Because big problems require the urgency of now, and we have big problems in front of us. That if we are resolute and we put effort and hands on, we can solve them. But it's not gonna be happening requesting a meeting and another meeting and another meeting and the meeting never happens and then the people are hungry.

So that's why I tell everybody. Everybody can be, you know, everybody can be an agent of change. Only you need to believe in yourself. And don't be afraid of failure. Because success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.

They say Winston Churchill said that. I have enthusiasm, and failure is not going to stop me because we have no time to waste, because failure is not an option.

Thomas J. Vilsack:



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Well, folks, don't know about you, but that was a very fast half an hour. And I'm sure we could have spent a great deal longer with José, but please join me in thanking a great guy and a great humanitarian.