The Obama Administration announced yesterday that it wants to change US food aid rules to allow for more "local procurement" of food aid in the countries that need it. Predictably, the special interests are aghast. But the administration is right: current food aid rules are among the most egregious special interest legislation in the world right now, preventing this country from stopping starvation, often helping it, wasting taxpayer money, increasing greenhouse gas emissions, and causing soil degradation in Africa. I have been working on this issue for the last couple of years with the American Jewish World Service, one of the world's best charities: ending the current rules is a win-win-win-win all around, which is why it will probably be a fight to accomplish it. The most important source on this issue is Roger Thurow and Scott Kilman's outstanding book *Enough: Why the World's Poorest Starve In An Age of Plenty*. Run, don't walk, and go and read it. But in the meantime, here is what you need to know.

In order to see how egregious current rules are, suppose that there is a famine in Ethiopia (I know, hard to do). the quickest and most effective thing to do would be to find some farmer or group of farmers in other parts of the country, or in neighboring countries, buy their food and get it to the stricken area. After all, one key cause of famine is the lack of money, not lack of crops. But under current law, USAID is basically forbidden from doing that. Instead, it must buy grain *in the United States and ship it several thousand miles to the famine area.* You can imagine the amount of time that that takes; sometimes, several weeks. it's a logistic nightmare. In the meantime, thousands die, usually the weakest such as children and the elderly.

But it's worse than that.

If the food needs to be shipped, then that means that the shipping must be paid for. And it sure is: according to a study done by AJWS and Oxfam, nearly 55% of the cost of American international food aid goes not to food, but to shipping costs. That's what your tax dollars are going to.

But it's worse than that.

Just because a ship is *flagged* American, doesn't mean that the sailors on it *are* American. Hundreds of ships have been flagged under Liberian registry for years, and during much of that time, there was no "Liberia" to speak of. So your tax dollars are not necessarily going to American jobs, and probably are not.

But it's worse than that.

Recall, of course, that the food that will be shipped to the famine area is subsidized, so in fact, we are spending food aid money not on people who are starving, but on relatively wealthy American farmers.

But it's worse than that!

Once the food finally makes its way to the country in question, not all of it gets to the famine area. Free food from the United States is simply too attractive to smugglers, who siphon it off and then sell it in markets. I personally have several instances of markets selling food in bags stating quite clearly: "GIFT OF THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: NOT FOR RESALE." You can it in markets throughout Africa. And what that does is put local farmers out of business because they cannot compete with this illegally dumped food from the United States. in other words, by this sort of dumping, in many instances, *we are actually making the problem worse over the long term* because we are undermining other countries' ability to feed themselves. Ikal Angelei, whom I blogged about several months ago, told me that in her village in Kenya, they used to have enough supplies to last for several months in the event of a famine. Now, in no small part because of the dumping, the village only has a few days' worth. This is **not-not-not** to say that there should not be food aid, but rather that it needs to be done effectively and efficiently.

But it's **even worse than that!**

The inability of local farmers to farm the land means that the topsoil begins to erode. Native farming techniques were hardly environmentally perfect, and caused damage, but the failure to farm at all often mean environmental degradation. So when we hear that "Africa Is Dying," as I did back in 2010, we should know that we are part of the problem.

That's pretty awful isn't it? And the really shocking thing is just how little it gets us. James Caponiti, the executive director/lobbyist of the American Maritime Congress, claimed in the NYT article that moving to local procurement could cost the United States "hundreds of jobs." *Hundreds?* That's what he claims? Hell, we could end the sequester and write a bigger transit bill and multiply that over several times. And that's taking his argument at face value. One remembers Muhammed Ali's famous taunt to George Foreman in Kinshasa: "Is that all you got, George? Is that

it?”

My friend Timi Gerson, AJWS’ advocacy director, is quoted at the end of the article: “From a taxpayers’ and policy perspective, the food aid program is clearly in need of reform. The only thing getting in the way is politics and special interest.” Absolutely, 1 million percent true. Call your Congressmember and tell them how important it is to support the administration.

It will be very interesting to see what evangelicals and so-called fiscal conservatives do on this issue. Very interesting indeed.