

Nov 04, 2016 by *Naomi Leight-Give'on*

Food Diplomacy and “School Meals for Peace” ^[1]

I recently came across an article found in PDiN (Public Diplomacy in the News) with the headline “Public Diplomacy Done Right with School Meals” by writer William Lambers, author of *Ending World Hunger: School Lunches for Kids Around the World*. The article argues that the U.S. should look back to a successful era of U.S. public diplomacy campaigns in Europe through the Marshall Plan. The “school meals for peace” program provided meals to German and Italian school children. Posters and postcards were created to let families know that the meals were provided by the United States and built the trust of the Italian and German publics toward the United States. Lambers advocates sending full meal rations to the children in Afghanistan instead of just military aid and reconstruction. Based on the article, I gather that he wants to see this type of program as a staple of U.S. public diplomacy based on the successes of the plan in the late 1940s and early 50s.

At first glance, yes, I am for U.S. Food Aid in this context – however, U.S. public diplomacy of the 21st century should not base programs on successes of 20th century programs. There are two primary concerns I see with this project—the first is the contextual difference between the United States in Europe in the post-WWII era and the United States now, globally. Europe had been destroyed by two world wars in a very short period of time, Europeans were at a loss as to how to prevent another war, rebuild their continent and recover from extreme devastation. The U.S. was the only country with the capacity to stabilize the region – and did so with great success.

In the 21st century, the United States, because of many factors, is *perceived* as the cause of instability. The U.S. is no longer the only country that has the capability to provide international food aid and is seen by much of the developed world, in terms of meals and health, as an unhealthy country that cannot provide the right nutrition for its own children. Moving from international to domestic on this issue, I do not believe that the American public would support a large scale food diplomacy project for the same reason – we cannot feed our own children – and because of economic concerns and the current budget crisis.

While I am an advocate for aid diplomacy as public diplomacy, I would not recommend this type of program as a priority for U.S. public diplomacy in a global context. It would not achieve the desired impact as it did more than half a century ago. However, I strongly encourage smaller scale food diplomacy program through *policy as public diplomacy*. First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign in the U.S. to curb childhood obesity in the U.S. is an excellent program to demonstrate the American food “values” and our nation’s desire to become healthier. It is also a program that can build U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations as our southern neighbors are having an obesity crisis as well. Sharing experiences and creating new common values, such as exercise and healthy eating, is a key component to any successful public diplomacy campaign.

Let us not derive public diplomacy policy from our past successes. While we must learn from our past, the global context is no longer comparable. If the U.S. wants to improve our public diplomacy efforts and reach more of the global publics through our values, we must start with our nation first.
