



Written by [Nima Sanandaji](#) on January 8, 2010

UN Commercial to Feed Hungry Schoolchildren

During much of 2009 European TV audiences were shown a commercial in which Sean Penn makes a plea for a "human rescue plan." The left-leaning actor rolls out a long roll of dollar bills showing the costs of the U.S. and EU stimulus plans, as well as the cost of the war in Iraq. He then compares the long rolls with a single dollar bill — representing the \$3 billion dollars he claims could feed every hungry schoolchild for a year.



I have seen this commercial perhaps a hundred times on Swedish television. And each time I thought to myself: "Shouldn't he also roll out the bill of total foreign aid, of some \$120 billion dollars annually? And can you explain why this doesn't feed every hungry schoolchild 40 times over?" But then I realized that the most interesting question was why the commercial was shown in the first place.

The ad is paid for by the UN World Food Programme. And on their homepage one can find that it is not only translated to Swedish, but also to Italian, Spanish, Norwegian, Finnish, French, Danish, and German.

Let's for one moment set aside the fact that researchers such as Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen have demonstrated that hunger very rarely occurs in "democracies," or that research based on more than half a century's experience has shown us that foreign aid does not foster prosperity but rather dependence. Let's assume that foreign aid is indeed the solution to poverty and hunger.

Why still would the UN World Food Programme show this ad across Europe, week after week and month after month? After all, the message of the ad isn't that the TV audience should contribute to foreign aid, but rather simply that the UN is doing a great job. And that money spent on the UN is much better, much more humanitarian and utilitarian, than money spent on the United States or the EU.

But if the UN is so utilitarian, why fund this ad? It can cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, sometimes millions, just to show one advertisement once on television. How much does it cost to run the same ad again and again across the world? It certainly can't be cheap.

Let's assume that the UN believes its own message, that \$3 billion a year can feed all hungry schoolchildren. Shouldn't they be streamlining the vast UN bureaucracy to be able to gather this funding on their own — or simply spend the money that is allocated to the UN World Food Programme on actually feeding the hungry?

I can't say whether or not UN officials actually believe in the message they are themselves propagating.



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But I do know that government and intergovernmental agencies are not driven by utilitarianism, but rather self-interest. And the self-interest of the UN is to be popular with the European public. And so, money supposedly going to feed the hungry is used for an expensive ad claiming that we ought to feed the hungry.

Photo: Sean Penn in the commercial

Nima Sanandaji is the president of the Swedish think tank [Captus](#).



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