In what has become a ubiquitous debate over the budget, the U.S. Farm Bill plays an instrumental role. Within the bill are two topics crucial to the future of American relations with the developing world: subsidies to farmers and food aid. Nearly 5 billion USD in subsidies are paid to American farmers annually providing an unfair advantage to domestic producers inconsistent with World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations. The second is the push, promoted by President Obama among others, to remove a requirement that all U.S. food be grown domestically and sent to recipient countries. Reversing the trends of farming subsidies and U.S.-sourced food aid could have a massive beneficial impact on the developing world, making U.S. development and aid efforts much more productive.

One of the most explicit examples of the ability of the U.S. Farm Bill to affect a developing country can be found in Haiti. During the 1970s and 1980s, under the dictatorship of Jean Claude Duvalier, Haiti produced enough rice to meet its domestic demand. As rice became an affordable source of food, Haiti's rice production dropped; while the market price of rice for the average Haitian remained low, few people seemed concerned about the origins or the actual cost of the rice they consumed. In 2008, a combination of massive flooding from hurricanes and a spike in commodity prices worldwide left Haiti particularly vulnerable to food production decreases. As food prices around the world skyrocketed, demonstrations in Haiti quickly became violent in some regions, resulting in the removal of Jacques-Esdras Alexis as prime minister. Haitian consumers were no longer benefitting from the low price of American-subsidized rice. National production was only a fraction of what it once was, woefully insufficient to sustain the needs of the country.

A country that had been self-sufficient in rice production just thirty years prior had become one of the most food-insecure countries in the world. The situation was bad enough that it even caused a noted politician to apologize; President Clinton, an early advocate of structural adjustment who has become one of Haiti's supporters post-earthquake, stated in 2010:

“Since 1981, the United States has followed a policy until the last year or so, we started rethinking it, that we rich countries that produce a lot of food should sell it to poor countries and relieve them of the burden of producing their own food. . . It has not worked. It's maybe been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake, it was a mistake that I was a part of. I am not pointing the finger at anybody. I did that. I have to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did. Nobody else.” (2010.)

Haiti, like many developing countries, has seen an inordinate amount of foreign aid and investment flow towards industrialization in the past, to the detriment of its agricultural sector. This trend of ignoring agriculture has begun to change. Efforts to strengthen Haitian rice production have intensified since 2008 and again since the 2010 earthquake. By some estimates Haiti has over a million acres of land previously occupied that could again be utilized productively for agricultural purposes. Given the history mentioned above, Haiti is more than capable of increasing production and feeding Haitians.

Haiti itself is not without blame in this story. Widespread corruption and lack of supportive institutions have certainly contributed to the current economic and social state. Decades of abuse of power by both government officials and the elite minority have left the Haitian majority with few avenues for improving their economic status. The inability to sustain long periods of political stability has further complicated any efforts of reform. Furthermore, disasters including the 2010 earthquake, vulnerability to hurricanes and flooding, and the introduction of cholera by United Nations peacekeepers from Nepal prove to be massive setbacks that will take strong leadership by the Haitian government to overcome.

Changes in the U.S. Farm Bill alone will not solve Haiti’s food security problems. There has to be a concerted effort by both Haiti and the international community for serious reforms in a multitude of sectors in order for Haiti to grow. Foreign aid, NGOs, and domestic policy in Haiti will have to work together with stated goals of coordination in order for change to occur. However, if the U.S. government is interested in seeing developing countries like Haiti grow, it must be willing to open its own agricultural sector to the world by eliminating subsidies and barriers to trade, as it demands of other nations.