

# She's still moving the ball

From hunger to world-changing executives, Bertini keeps playing

By **TODD R. McADAM**  
**Managing Editor**

[tmcadam@cortlandstandard.net](mailto:tmcadam@cortlandstandard.net)

Catherine Bertini stared into space briefly as she pondered the question: How many people did her decisions affect?

Except she wasn't staring. She was reading it off the poster on the far wall of her office: 727 million people.

That's twice as many people as the United States has residents, and then some; nearly 10% of the world's population.

And it's how many people Bertini's decisions helped feed while she was executive director of the United Nations World Food Program from 1992 to 2002.

Today, she doesn't think much about the information on a poster marking a reunion of her SUNY-Albany class. "I hope it's hugely more than that. I hope to promote policies," Bertini said from deep inside an office atop the carriage house of her Homer home.

If the policies she created more than 25 years ago remain, then she can claim a share of credit for the 15 billion rations fed to 86.7 million people each year around the world.

Big numbers. But change in the game

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of world policy isn't typically a matter of big numbers, Bertini said. The changes are incremental — inches instead of yards, first downs instead of touchdowns. And if her 10 years at the World Food Program put a world-class spotlight on a career, Bertini isn't done playing yet, even if she has retired.

She's still moving the ball.

## Guide to U.N. leaders

Bertini's latest effort is a 60-page guide to new U.N. executives on how to lead change — 19 agencies, three major departments and as many treaty organizations, nine research institutes and more.

Bertini, who became a professor emeritus in 2018 at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, keeps busy as a fellow with the Rockefeller Foundation, where she published "Leading Change in United Nations Organizations" in June.

The paper follows a conference she called in February in Italy of 17 U.N. executives to trade notes and learn how U.N.

leaders prepared to take control of their organizations, just as Bertini did with the World Food Program, than as undersecretary general for management.

"The discussion confirmed my experience," she wrote. "The participants could not identify any incoming U.N. agency CEO, not even the secretary general, who had any preparation beyond briefings, recommendations and what he created for himself."

"You just wing it," Bertini said in her office. Certainly that was her experience when she joined the World Food Program. "I thought there should be some guidance about that."

## Developing agriculture

That's executive-level influence, and could eventually affect hundreds of millions, even billions, of lives. Bertini shrugged. It's influence, not action or policy.

For action and policy, she looks to her time at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where she was a senior fellow in agriculture development from 2007 to 2009. At the time, the Gateses were concerned about health and health policy around

the world, but realized this link, Bertini said:

"How can they be healthy if they don't have enough food to eat?"

The question led to a partnership with Dan Glickman, the U.S. secretary of agriculture from 1995 to 2001. He was the Democrat in a bipartisan effort to improve world food security; Bertini the Republican. Together they crafted position papers and policies and shopped them to both the Obama and McCain presidential campaigns.

The plan called for action in several areas: creating agriculture-led economic growth; improving nutrition, especially among women and children; and building resilience into individual, community, national and international food systems. And particularly, they called for supporting small farmers.

They heard nothing for months, until Bertini played host to an inaugural party in downtown Cortland in January 2009. She heard President Obama at his inauguration: "We want small farmers to succeed."

She all but did a happy dance in the restaurant, she said. "Everybody looked at me like I was nuts."

Today, three years after their plan was solidified in the Global



Food Security Act of 2016, a photo hangs on her wall: Obama, with one arm around Bertini's shoulders, another around U2 frontman Bono, and with Dan Glickman. It shares space with photos of Bertini with presidents Ford, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush (the younger) and Pope John Paul II — among others.

### Promoting women

Food and nutrition policy is just one of Bertini's areas of expertise. Helping women advance in the world is another. Bertini donated the \$250,000 that came with winning the 2003 World Food Prize to a trust fund for girls' education at the Friends of the World Food Program, the World Food Prize organization noted.

Sometimes, the two issues merge.

Note the farm fields around the world, Bertini said. Women work most of them; milking the cows; feeding the livestock. In fact, the World Food Program notes, women account for nearly 45% of farm workers in the world — except in heavily mechanized farm economies.

Yet women account for only 10 to 20 percent of farm owners, reports National Geographic. And as Bertini heard speakers at the 2006 World Food Prize ceremonies, nobody mentioned it.

"There was no talk of gender at all," she said. She chatted with the Bill and Melinda Gates

Foundations' agriculture development policy chief. "Don't forget the ladies," she said, paraphrasing Abigail Adams.

He hired her. It began a dialogue at Gates Foundation. Bill Gates, Bertini recalled, didn't want to address the issue, even as data came in that showed closing the gender gap in the world's food producing system could help feed 130 million of 870 million undernourished people, National Geographic reported in 2014.

"He was afraid it would blur the effectiveness," of other foundation programs, Bertini said. Melinda Gates disagreed. The discussions continued, apparently long after Bertini left the foundation in 2009.

In fact, Melinda Gates spends several pages on the discussion, including mentions of Bertini, in her book published earlier this year: "The Moment of Lift."

A couple of years ago, Bertini was listening to National Public Radio and an interview with Bill Gates while on her way to work.

"Look out at the fields and see whose working the fields," she recalled Gates saying. "It's almost all women."

The Gates Foundation website lists a number of initiatives on improving women's role in the world economy, particularly in agriculture.

"Our initial investments are in projects that drive women's

inclusion in digital financial services, enhance women's participation in agricultural markets, and support a new wave of self-help groups that can provide critical platforms to empower the next generation of women and girls," the site reads. "Additionally, together with our partners, we have developed an empowerment model that can help governments, organizations, and individuals design programs that tackle gender equality and address some of the biggest hurdles facing women and girls."

The target: helping 3 billion people.

"I knew that he got it," Bertini said. "Ten years later. Guess what: It worked."

### Changing the U.N.

Today, Bertini continues working with research foundations. The work doesn't have the immediate effect of her decisions with the World Food Program or the United Nations. But in a subtler sense, they're moves on a larger playing field. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, asked her to reform United Nations systems and the paper published in June was the result.

"None of them have undergone major structural changes" in decades, Bertini said, in some cases since before the U.N. was founded in 1945. "This is an effort to try to help do that."

A plaque sits in the window of her office: "A politician thinks of the next election. A statesman, of the next generation."

So, all those agencies, like the World Food Program, help hundreds of millions of people. Do her latest steps mean change for 7 billion humans?

No, Bertini said. "You can't put a number on it."

She's just moving the ball.