Four students are delivering a presentation in a senior-level course on world food issues. The four students are born and raised on Iowa farms, and are very impressed with the prowess of the agricultural producers of their home state and their country. They express the belief that the way that U. S. producers can contribute toward allaying global hunger is to produce surplus grain so that a portion of this is available to enter food aid channels in the form of donations to needy nations. Their paper, entitled “America: The Land of Plenty,” begins:

For the last forty years the U.S. has been setting the standard for agricultural production all over the world. We have gone from a self-sustaining production system to one which has made us a leading exporter of agricultural products world wide. There have been many reasons for this change including improved technology and farming methods. The U.S. now has a system, which consistently overproduces. Most of this overproduction is exported throughout the world, while some of the surplus is used to combat hunger abroad through U.S. food aid programs.

And concludes:

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1. For the text of the full paper, including a summary of U. S. food aid programs, see: http://www.agron.iastate.edu/courses/agron342/reports/s01/surplus.htm.
The future of this world is uncertain. Nobody knows how large the population will grow or how many people will continue to die from hunger. But one thing that is certain is that the U.S. will continue to overproduce. U.S. farmers have adopted technology and farming methods that have caused yields to steadily increase year by year, and these farmers have been known to be very reluctant to change. We can only hope that the U.S. continues to use this abundance to help feed the hungry throughout the world.

During the presentation team members display historical U. S. production and export curves for four major grain crops, including maize. Melissa, a member of the class, notes that for the years 1999 and 2000 the volume of U. S. maize exports decreased noticeably and asks for an explanation. Ben, speaking for the group of presenters, explains that the major export markets for U. S. grain, European nations and Japan, have had reservations about the transgenic grains produced in the U. S., and that specifically in year 2000 the presence of StarLink™ corn\(^2\) in the U. S. shipping pipeline deterred export sales. Mark, another member of the class, asks the obvious question: “So, what is happening with all that extra grain?” Ben replies that most of it is redirected as feed for U. S. livestock. Then Nick, a member of the presenting team, points out that during the course of his research he read that a portion of GMO corn without a buyer was being donated as food aid. On hearing this, Martine, a member of the class who is a wealthy Haitian studying in the U.

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\(^2\) A variety of corn modified with a bacterial protein that is toxic to Lepidopteran insects. When this case took place, StarLink™ had received federal approval as a livestock feed, but not for human consumption. This was because the transgenic protein was found to be indigestible and this indicated the need for subsequent tests to determine potential allergenicity in humans. For further information, see: http://www.anzfa.gov.au/documents/fs053.asp.
S. exclaims: “But that is unethical!” Ben looks at her directly and asks incredulously: “Wouldn’t it be worse to let them starve?”

Questions for group discussion:

1. Is there a moral obligation for rich countries to donate food to poorer countries?

2. Is it ethical to offer food that hasn’t been approved for human consumption in your own country as food aid to another country?

3. Do different standards of food safety apply when the tradeoff involved is that starving people could potentially be saved?

4. Is it moral to withhold grain when others might eat it and live?

5. Under what conditions would it be acceptable to use this grain as food aid?

6. Is it ethical for a foreign government to accept StarLink™ corn on behalf of their people?
7. Are the ethics of trade and aid different? [Note that in trade, parties purchase products from one another. In aid, parties exchange donations or support with the intention of benefiting one another.]

In the example provided, what are the comparative benefits derived by the donor and recipient of aid?