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Meeting World Food Needs

This year has been favorable for the world's food crops. India has enjoyed an especially good monsoon. Thus the long-term aspects of the war on hunger can be contemplated in a relatively crisis-free atmosphere. A valuable stimulus to thinking about the struggle is a new book* issued by Iowa State University, which includes chapters by many of this country's leading experts on world food problems. Some of the contributors make optimistic predictions of long-term success. Others are less cheerful, and they advance very good reasons. One conclusion to be drawn from reading the book is that United States policy toward the underdeveloped countries has not been well formulated.

The bases for optimism are twofold. Birth control campaigns are meeting with partial success, and there is some improvement in agricultural practices. A Rockefeller Foundation program conducted in Mexico is noteworthy. This program has developed varieties of wheat especially suitable for cultivation in Pakistan and other tropical and subtropical countries. Pakistan is also making effective use of additional products of modern technology, including nitrogenous fertilizer.

As compared with the magnitude of the problems, however, progress so far is small. The world's population continues to increase at the rate of about 70 million per year. In the underdeveloped countries the death rate is dropping and half of the population is below the age of 15. As those already born reach sexual maturity, a further enhancement of population growth could occur. In many regions the birth rate is in the range 40 to 50 per 1000. For the long-term, the rate must be brought down to about 15 per 1000.

The potential for increasing the available food supply seems great. Use of improved grains, fertilizers, and pesticides could enlarge the food supply of the underdeveloped countries by as much as a factor of 4. N. S. Scrimshaw states that "in developing countries where there is little or no insect or rodent control either in the field or during storage, more than half of the food produced is lost before it reaches the consumer." The amount of food lost in this way is many times the total U.S. production.

Achieving the possible increase in food supply is not a simple matter. Development of high-yielding varieties suitable for growth in many tropical regions has not been achieved. Fertilizers and pesticides are costly. Improvement of agricultural practices is slow in countries where the farmers are illiterate. Worse still, there are few to instruct them in such practices. The so-called intellectuals disdain any connection with farming.

The role of the United States government in the war on hunger has not been well thought out. Supplying food to the needy has been a humanitarian effort. However, a side effect of this disposing of surplus commodities has been to discourage production of food in the recipient nations by depressing prices, and to attenuate local responsibility and initiative. Our government has spent billions of dollars in supplying food from the United States, but only a small fraction of this sum has been spent on helping the recipients to help themselves.

The war on hunger will continue for a long time. With our surpluses disposed of, we should abandon the quixotic goal of growing crops to meet most of the world's food shortages. We should formulate new policies—including massive support for birth control—designed to assist in many ways those who make an effort to help themselves.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* *Alternatives for Balancing World Food Production Needs* (Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1967).