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The Battle of Hunger

In Africa, Asia, and Latin America spectacular increases in grain production are being achieved by the use of improved seed lines, water control, more fertilizer, and disease and pest controls. Last week, in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico—where much of the new agricultural technology got started—the Rockefeller Foundation gathered together many of the world's experts on food production for a symposium on Strategy for the Conquest of Hunger. Participants from Mexico, India, El Salvador, Thailand, Pakistan, Colombia, Peru, Uganda, and the Philippines told of yields of the new dwarf wheats several times as great as the record yields of earlier varieties; of plans to expand 10,000 acres of Pakistan farmland planted with the miracle rice IR8 in 1967 to a million acres this year; of the eagerness of farmers in many countries to plant the new seeds; and of the attainment of self-sufficiency—this year, next year, or soon—of nations that have long had to import their staple grains.

The symposium celebrated the research successes of agronomists and plant geneticists who have made possible a stepwise increase in grain production. Participants from other lands also made the symposium a tribute to the leadership of the Rockefeller Foundation in winning this battle against hunger.

A victory can be celebrated, but the campaign must continue. For now arise social and economic and management problems on which substantial progress must be made within a handful of years. How is the more abundant yield to be marketed and distributed? How can it most effectively be made to increase consumption? What will happen to processors and small-scale industries geared to the older agriculture? Will the ability to raise all the grain a country needs on half the former acres turn other sections of that country into depressed Appalachias? Unless these problems are solved there will still be rural poverty and starvation in the cities.

If these problems can be handled, there is now opportunity for economic advance and there is hope for millions who last year or the year before feared starvation. There is opportunity, but not assurance. The specter of Malthus was never absent from the symposium. In the long view the greatest benefit of the agricultural achievements is additional time in which to stabilize populations. At current growth rates, the population of Latin America will double in 24 years. Since India attained independence in 1947, its population has increased by as many people as now live in all of North America. Over Africa, Asia, and Latin America as a whole, the rate of increase is greater now than in the 1950's.

The agricultural improvements offer a little more time in which to decide how many people the earth can support at reasonable standards of comfort and decency. But only a little more time is available. One speaker estimated that within 20 to 25 years we would breed ourselves into starvation unless population growth is curbed.

The agronomists have given us a revolution in crop production. That revolution must be followed quickly by a revolution in population control. There is not time for any slower approach.—DAEL WOLFLE