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The Ghost at the Feast

The specter, unseen by some and ignored by others, looming over the World Food Conference this week in Rome is the continuing rapid population growth of the world's poor countries. Some scientists and publicists have seriously advocated a "lifeboat ethic," saying that nations which do not *compel* human fertility control (by what means is never stated) are endangering the survival of our species—hence they should be starved out of the human race by denying them food aid. This obscene doctrine assumes that men and women will not voluntarily limit their own fertility when they have good reasons and the knowledge and means to do so.

The sharp decline in birthrates during the past decade in a dozen developing countries belies the assumption. But one thing is clear from this experience: environmental changes can bring down birthrates only if they affect the people who have the children—the great mass of the poor who now have little hope for a better life.

In the past, much foreign assistance has benefited elite groups; it has contributed little to the welfare of poor people in the poor countries. In future aid programs, the rich nations would be morally justified in insisting that the major part of capital and technical assistance be directed toward improving the living conditions and raising the aspirations of poor people, through bringing about higher levels of literacy and employment opportunities for women, improved health of both children and adults, better communications, greater opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, rational urbanization, agricultural modernization that benefits small farmers and landless laborers, and family planning services that give poor families freedom to choose the numbers of their children. Some or all of these conditions characterize the developing nations which have already markedly reduced their birthrates.

In the meantime, the World Food Conference has much to do. Emergency measures must be agreed upon to prevent widespread famines during the next 12 months. Preliminary plans must be laid for a World Food Bank. The Persian Gulf oil producers should be strongly encouraged to build nitrogen fertilizer plants based on the gas now being flared from their wells. The developed countries should pledge capital and technical assistance for agricultural modernization in the poor countries. Adequate nutrition should be recognized as a universal human right, applicable to poor people everywhere. And the world's scientists should be urged to devote part of their research efforts to increasing world food supplies.

One purpose of a World Food Bank should be to ensure maximum production of cereals and legumes by providing intergovernmental support prices. Another should be to dampen the wild short-term fluctuations in prices for cereals and soy beans that now occur whenever there is a slight deficit or excess of supplies. Reserve stocks provided to poor countries should not be used, as they were in the past, to depress prices received by their farmers, thereby reducing their incentives and ability to increase productivity. Support prices should be guaranteed to these farmers at a level which would ensure profitable operations for efficient producers.

The World Food Conference dramatically signifies the true interdependence of human beings everywhere, but it emphasizes even more the necessity to change the selfish and shortsighted behavior of many people in both the rich and the poor countries.—ROGER REVILLE, *Center for Population Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138*