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## The World's Disparate Food Supplies

For decades the United States attempted to cope with an agricultural system that produced far more food than could be consumed or sold. But in the course of only 2 years, food stockpiles disappeared and prices soared. Relative complacency has been replaced by anxiety about the world's ability to feed its growing population. This concern has been fed by sympathy for those suffering acute hardships, as in the Sahel and in Bangladesh. It has also been fed by increases in prices at the supermarkets. Many now conclude that the world has reached the limit of its ability to feed even its present numbers adequately. Obviously, if the present birth rates are maintained eventual large-scale tragedy is inevitable. The question is *when* and *where*. A recently issued fact-filled report\* does not attempt to answer these questions directly, but it provides a wealth of information about the problems.

One of the puzzling features of the present situation is that it has arisen despite a steady increase in global food production. Thus in the period 1954 to 1973, world production grew by 69 percent and, despite substantial population growth, per capita production climbed by 17 percent. In the developed countries per capita production jumped by 33 percent. The picture was not so favorable in the developing countries, where production increased by 75 percent but per capita output climbed only 8 percent. Among these countries great disparities exist, and some regions have fared better than others. For example, during much of the period 1954 to 1973 per capita production of Africa trended downward while that of Latin America was moving up. Some countries, such as the oil exporters, are rich and can easily afford to import food, and others, although poor, are surplus producers. The problems lie with those who tend to be chronically short of food, and are poor.

Further variations are encountered when the prospects for expansion of production are examined. For the world as a whole 45 percent of the land is suitable for crops but only 26 percent is used. In the Asian and Far East region 84 percent of the suitable land is in crops, while in Latin America only 23 percent is being so used. Thus, there is little room for expansion of the farming area in Bangladesh and India but a large potential in this hemisphere. The possibility of expanded production of food exists virtually everywhere through use of improved seeds and fertilizers. This is especially true of the developing countries, where yields today are only about half those of the developed countries.

Thus it appears that despite a growing population the world is nowhere close to universal famine. However, there are great differences in both current production per capita and future potentials. Unless the rich countries provide a combination of food, fertilizer, and technical assistance, some of the poorer countries face repeated famines arising, for example, from unfavorable weather.

One of the proposals of the recent Rome Conference that should be implemented is the creation of a food reserve to help meet fluctuations in supplies. Existence of such a stockpile would facilitate making life-saving shipments. It would also indirectly benefit almost all the world's peoples. Because of inelasticity in demand for food, small changes in the balance of supply and demand produce very large fluctuations in price, which could be smoothed out if a suitable food reserve existed. The annual cost for maintaining an effective global reserve has been estimated at only about \$550 million to \$800 million.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON

\* *The World Food Situation and Prospects to 1985* (Foreign Agricultural Economic Report No. 98, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., December 1974).