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Article — Digitized Version

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Uhlig, Christian (1966) : Is famine the world's fate?, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 01, Iss. 3, pp. 3-, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02922791>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/137601>

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INTERECONOMICS

MONTHLY REVIEW
OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE
AND DEVELOPMENT

EDITED BY
THE HAMBURG INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS
Hamburgisches Welt-Wirtschafts-Archiv
Director: Prof. Dr. Heinz-Dietrich Ortlieb
AND
THE GERMAN OVERSEAS INSTITUTE
Deutsches Übersee-Institut
President:
Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Andreas Predöhl

Editorial Office: Karl-Muck-Platz 1
2 Hamburg 36
Editor: Hellmut Hartmann
Published by
Verlag Weltarchiv GmbH.
Eppendorfer Landstrasse 106
2 Hamburg 20
Printed by Otto Schwitzke
2 Hamburg 70
Annual rate of subscription
DM 48.— (US-\$ 12.—)

Is Famine the World's Fate?

Once again India is writing up in flaming letters the slogan of famine on the walls of the world, the inhabitants of which are—literally—off elsewhere hunting stars. This year, because of crop failure, it might be possible that India will be short of more than 20 million tons of grain, almost a quarter of her annual requirement.

Thus the Malthusian spectre is by no means laid. On the contrary, there is every indication that its shades are becoming increasingly menacing because the soaring food requirements due to the rapid increase of populations in Latin America, Africa and Asia are not being offset by an equal rise in food production. Even to maintain the present level of nutrition food production in the developing countries would have to increase by more than 4% p.a. up to 1970, an increase which, over the past five years, scarcely a single country found possible to maintain permanently.

It must be deduced from these unsatisfactory agricultural results that many governments have greatly neglected agricultural development. It is obvious that the thesis "Development means Industrialisation" has been taken much too much to heart. However, the threatening shadow of famine should give responsible policy makers in these countries to think about whether this thesis is the correct one to adopt. In fact many development plans will have to switch priorities in favour of agriculture when funds are allocated. This does not mean that the role of agriculture should be given all the glory; but steps must be taken to ensure that this sector, which is of such importance for the fulfilment of basic needs, is given its proper consideration.

There is no doubt that in the majority of developing countries there are great potential resources for agriculture. In order to make these available the government will have to help the farmers by supplying them with more agricultural equipment and fertilisers, better seed, more favourable credit facilities and—most important of all—by passing on technical know-how. One of the most important aims, however, must be to awaken more interest on the part of the farmers in increased food production and to get them actually to accept the technical assistance which is offered. Measures from above must be fertilised by an initiative from grass-root level. There should be no doubt, a Herculean effort will be necessary for modern methods to prevail and for overcoming the traditional ways of life. But if a permanent improvement is to be achieved we must not be dismayed by the prospect of such efforts! It is a matter of experience that appeals to national solidarity meet with but limited success. It is better to offer appropriate incentives to individual interests, either by the more active promotion of a free market price structure, by improvements to the distribution system and other market reforms or by planned attempts to raise the level of demand of farmers so as to induce them to offer a greater share of their marketable produce in order to satisfy this demand.

However, to guarantee the promotion of agriculture and an increase in production in the long-term, governments will be forced to introduce basic social reforms, in addition to all the other measures necessary. Not until their dependence upon landlords and intermediaries becomes less, and not until there is a greater security of land tenure, will the mass of the rural population be convinced that it is worthwhile producing for the market.

But this type of democratic, evolutionary development highly depending on individual initiative can only succeed if it is logically promoted from both the material and functional standpoints and given status socially by means of energetic reforms. If this is not done, one must not be surprised if ultimately, in the war against hunger and to achieve better living conditions, interest is shown only in a solution à la Castro or à la Mao.

Christian Uhlig