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Guarded Optimism about World Food Prospects

Interview with A. H. Boerma, Director-General of FAO, Rome

QUESTION: Mr Boerma, according to an earlier report by FAO, 15 p.c. of the world's population, mainly in the southern part of the globe, suffers from hunger or malnutrition. It also predicted that in 1980 this percentage would double. Are you today more optimistic on this matter?

ANSWER: I assume that the report you are referring to is the Third World Food Survey published by FAO in 1963. I should like to point out that the Survey stated that, while 10 to 15 p.c. of the world's population were undernourished, up to a half were suffering from hunger or malnutrition or both. The situation was therefore much more critical at the time than is indicated by the figure you quote. So far as the prediction concerning a doubling of the percentage by 1980 is concerned, I can only assume that this has been based on the calculations regarding the increase in food supplies

that would be needed by that date in order to meet the estimated growth of food demand. But the fact that food supplies in 1980 may have to increase by something double their order of magnitude in 1963 is a very different thing from saying that the percentage of people suffering from hunger or malnutrition in the world would have doubled over the same period.

To answer your direct question, the evidence that we have shows that, in comparison with the situation as described in the Third World Food Survey, the position is much more hopeful now than it was then. The introduction of the high-yielding varieties of cereal crops holds out tangible prospects of a significant increase in the world's basic food supplies. Thus, far from the prospect of the percentage of the hungry and malnourished having doubled by 1980, there is every likelihood that it will have fal-

len. On the other hand, I should make clear that this in no way signifies the end of the world food problem. Due to population growth, the absolute numbers — as opposed to the percentage — of those suffering from hunger and malnutrition may in fact have increased. Thus, while we are considerably more optimistic about world food prospects than we were at the time of the Third World Food Survey, it is a guarded optimism.

Assistance of FAO

QUESTION: The late John F. Kennedy once said that the fight against hunger was the most important fight of civilisation. In what way is your Organisation in a position to assist?

ANSWER: This is a question on which an entire book could be written. Indeed, the amount of documentation that FAO has published over the years in connection with its fight against hunger and malnutrition would

make up a small library. I must thus answer your question in very general terms.

The mere fact of FAO's existence is evidence of the will of the international community to bring a concentrated force to bear on the problem of hunger in the world. However, insofar as hunger is primarily the result of poverty, it is only through general economic growth that it can be eliminated. This means a concerted effort by all concerned — the governments and peoples of the countries where hunger and malnutrition are rife, bilateral aid programmes, private foundations, non-governmental organisations and all the organisations within the United Nations family.

FAO's main concern is with promoting an increase in agricultural production, although this is of course so vast an undertaking that it involves us in a number of related matters such as trade, the conditions of rural life, measures to prevent the wastage of food and so forth. To cover the broad range of activity required of us, we also have to concern ourselves with such things as economic analysis, nutrition and cooperation with industry and banks.

Broadly speaking, we work in three main ways. We collect, analyse and disseminate information on agricultural matters which may be of assistance to our member countries. Secondly —and of increasing importance

—we send out experts to the developing countries to work on field projects. At present there are about 2,300 of these experts in different parts of the world. Thirdly, we work out projects for investment by the World Bank, the regional banks and private industry.

I should also mention two overall schemes on which we have been engaged for some time. There is first our Indicative World Plan for Agricultural Development. This Plan, which has just been published and which is FAO's contribution towards a global development strategy, attempts to set forth realistic goals for agricultural production, consumption and trade in 1975 and 1985 and also suggests a range of policies which governments should follow if these objectives are to be achieved. Secondly, on the basis of the Indicative World Plan, we have worked out a new strategy consisting of five Areas of Concentration which are to serve as the focal points for our activities in the years ahead. These five are: the promotion of the new high-yielding varieties of cereal crops; a drive to increase the present world shortage of protein; a battle against waste; the mobilisation of human resources for the development of the rural areas; and assistance to countries in their efforts to earn and save foreign exchange.

From what I have said, you will see that FAO is active in

a large number of ways in civilisation's struggle against hunger and malnutrition. But, although our particular mandate and specialised knowledge places us in a sense at the centre of that struggle, it will not be won, as I said earlier, without concerted action by very many other organisations and people.

Internal Reorganisation

QUESTION: In 1968 an internal reorganisation of FAO was carried out. What have been the most important changes undertaken?

ANSWER: Over the years, FAO has grown substantially in size and, from being mainly a source of information and advice for its Member Governments, has become increasingly operational, with projects throughout the developing countries of the world. The main object of the reorganisation that we have carried out has thus been to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of FAO's field operations. It has taken three chief forms.

Firstly, in order to provide a better geographical focus for FAO's operations, an effort has been made to re-group field projects in such a way as to meet the needs of individual countries as a whole in contrast with the previous pattern of having them fit into the programmes of FAO's own Divisions, which deal with separate specialisations such as land and water,



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livestock, plants, nutrition, rural institutions, fisheries and forestry. This has involved changes both at Headquarters and in the field. At Headquarters, major responsibility in the formulation of projects has been given to our Development Department and a new Area Service Division has been created within that Department. In the field, it is proposed that a network of Country Representatives should be set up. If this is approved by the FAO Conference in November, the network would consist of 55 Senior Agricultural Advisors/FAO Country Representatives, 28 administratively responsible to the United Nations Development Programme and 27 to FAO. All 55 would work on both FAO and UNDP activities.

Secondly, the reorganisation brings about a considerable degree of decentralisation. This means that, apart from the new corps of Senior Agricultural Advisors/Country Representatives, greater authority has been given, at one level to FAO's Regional Representatives, and, at another, to individual project managers. In particular, the role of the Regional Representatives has been strengthened in their dual capacity as my main advisors in the formulation of policy towards their regions and as my chief negotiators with the governments of the countries that comprise them.

Thirdly, arrangements have been made to enable the technical staff of the Organisation to concentrate on their technical work by transferring the non-technical and administrative duties which they have previously carried out to other units.

Apart from these three main aspects of the reorganisation, there have been a number of structural changes at Headquarters, but these are of less interest to the outside world. I should mention, however, that alongside all this, we have had a thoroughgoing management survey carried out at Headquarters by a firm of professional

management consultants, as a result of which a number of changes are being introduced in order to make our administrative practices as modern and efficient as possible.

Food Aid as Investment

QUESTION: The EEC and others have expressed fear that food aid can hinder the development of the receiving countries, since it tends to reduce their own efforts towards helping themselves. Do you agree with this?

ANSWER: This is an old criticism. It is, of course, true that if you were to supply countries indefinitely with large quantities of food without payment and just leave it at that, there would indeed be little inducement for them to try and grow more themselves. But this is not at all the modern concept of food aid.

Food aid today is a form of investment. It is supplied to countries in order precisely to promote their economic and social development. This means that it goes to projects which will have some lasting effect on the countries' progress. These projects tend to be of a kind which would otherwise attract little capital investment — labour-intensive projects, for example, for such work as road-building or reafforestation. This can be seen very clearly in the policies and practices of the World Food Programme, which is a joint United Nations/FAO undertaking and the only channel for multi-lateral food aid. The Programme lays down very clearly the kinds of development projects which are to be assisted by its food supplies, and negotiates very carefully with governments as to how these supplies should be used. Among its criteria for agreeing to aid a project are whether or not the project is sufficiently large to make a sufficient impact and whether the country can continue a project after WFP aid has ceased. It is true that the Programme also

sends food to the victims of emergencies, but, apart from the fact that, on humanitarian grounds, it could scarcely do otherwise, these emergency operations are strictly limited in time.

Let me make it clear therefore that food aid is not charity. It is investment—investment in a country's human or material resources—and, as such, some return is expected on it in the form of economic or social progress.

Need to Reduce Waste

QUESTION: In addition to the introduction of modern methods of food processing, increased efforts must be made to reduce waste and to improve the methods for the conservation, distribution and marketing of food. Could you review the measures which FAO has taken in this respect?

ANSWER: Before attempting any such review, let me say that I fully agree with you about the need to reduce waste. For twenty years now, efforts have been concentrated on increasing food production. If the same amount of effort had been directed towards preventing the waste of food products at all stages right from the harvest through to final consumption in the home, I am sure that many of the recurring food shortages that have been experienced during the period could have been avoided and that hunger and malnutrition would have been much less critical.

In the course of these twenty years, FAO has been providing assistance and advice on all the matters you mention. The principal units concerned are the Agricultural Engineering Service which deals with the storage, handling, drying and processing of food crops; the Crop Protection Service which deals with fungicides, pesticides, rodent control and crop protection in general; and the Marketing Branch. Numerous bulletins and

publications have been issued on all these subjects, and technical officers and consultants have been provided for feasibility and preinvestment studies and for the management and operation of projects dealing with all these matters.

There are several important field projects going on at the moment. We are, for example, concerned with the development of storage structures, crop drying equipment and the application of crop protection methods in India with a view to the ultimate manufacture of the equipment that is needed. We have also set up integrated rice drying, storage, processing and marketing projects in the Philippines and West Pakistan, bearing in mind the need to improve the quality of the project so that surpluses may find ready export markets. Again, we are promoting simple, improved storage and crop protection equip-

ment methods at the farm and village level in Africa.

I should also like to recall that, in view of our concern about the whole problem of waste and everything related to it, I selected a "War on Waste" as one of the Five Areas of Concentration in our new strategy which I mentioned earlier. An Action Group made up of experts from different parts of the Organisation has been at work analysing the problems and devising possible solutions. The results of their work are contained in a paper which has already been distributed to Member Countries of FAO and organisations concerned with the matter, and which will be considered at the 15th Session of our Conference in November. Finally, since one of the prime essentials is simply to increase awareness in the developing countries of the problems involved, we are also making a

special effort to publicise the tragedy of food losses.

QUESTION: The efforts made by the developing nations to overcome the hunger problem are often considered to be too small. In what ways do you think these efforts could be increased?

ANSWER: It is difficult to comment on generalised criticisms such as this especially when they are unsupported by specific evidence. Broadly speaking, however, I would say that, while the developing countries have undoubtedly got to make tremendous efforts of their own to increase their agricultural production, they are already making much more intensive efforts than in the past. This is shown, for example, by the decision of the governments of many of the developing countries in the last decade to put agriculture at the top of their list of development priorities.

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I should just like to add two points. In the first place, as I stated earlier, the problem of hunger and malnutrition is essentially one of poverty. Thus, the increased efforts which the developing countries will have to make in the future must range not only over all the multiple aspects of agricultural production but over everything connected with economic development in general. Secondly, to maintain a balanced picture, I must remind you that, however great the efforts of the developing countries, they simply cannot do the job alone. They will need much more from developed countries in the way of technical assistance, foreign aid and, most important, the opportunity to expand their trade. This last means that the developed countries will have to adopt much more liberal trade policies to-

wards the developing countries than those at present in force.

QUESTION: Cooperation between the developed countries of East and West is at an early stage. What measures would you suggest for more effectively combining the aid efforts of all developed nations through FAO?

ANSWER: It is the policy of FAO to work as closely as possible with what you describe as the developed countries of both East and West — although I should add in this context that, among other countries, the Soviet Union has not so far become a member of the Organisation. The real answer to your question is that we must strive to make FAO as efficient an instrument as possible for the handling of aid so that the donor countries will want to cooperate with us and through us on a

large scale. I think I can say that we have made some progress in this direction. Early this year I signed agreements with Sweden and Denmark under which those countries are to finance increased programmes of agricultural aid to the developing countries through FAO. In addition, we have been increasing our cooperation with a number of bilateral agencies.

In the last resort, however, everything really depends on the political will of the donor countries. Assuming FAO to be as efficient an instrument as we are striving to make it, it is then for the developed countries to decide that they wish to make fuller use of it. Once that decision is made, by far the largest part of the problem of how to combine the aid efforts of all developed nations through FAO will have been solved.

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