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Food and Population: Priorities in Decision Making

Report of a Meeting
of the International
Conference of Agricultural
Economists, Nairobi, August 1976.

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The prospects of the food situation in the world: from the pessimistic standpoint

Joseph Klatzmann

It may seem rather paradoxical that I was asked to speak on the world food problem from the pessimistic standpoint, when various people consider me to be of the optimistic group. In fact, there is no contradiction. I am optimistic as far as natural resources and the possibilities of techniques are concerned. I am pessimistic as far as human behaviour is concerned.

Before going any further, one wonders about the real extent of the food problem in the world. Opinions vary in this respect. Certain experts accuse the FAO of voluntarily worsening the situation. I have recently read an article published in a very serious American review in which the author states that only seventy million people in the world are suffering from lack of food. We must not be too surprised to find such contradictory opinions. In fact, to appreciate the food situation of a country or of a certain group of people one has to compare consumptions which are not well known to needs which are no better known. The FAO evaluations often vary as well for the needs as for the appreciation of the food situation of some countries.

The problem stated

This is the reason why, disregarding the notion of needs, I have defined what I call the 'satisfactory' nutrition level – that which is abundant and varied enough to fulfil man's wants without affecting his health. I am not concerned if experts 'prove' that we can live very well with 1,600 calories daily. The important thing for me is that an individual who has got only 1,600 calories effectively suffers from hunger. On this basis, it can be considered that billions of people suffer from insufficient nutrition, hundreds of millions are hungry, while some hundreds of millions of people affect their health by an excess of nutrition.

Whatever some people say, the food problem in the world is just there. I want to remind you that the food is so unevenly distributed that the problem could really be dealt with by a better allocation. After all, the food production in the world at present corresponds closely to 2,400 calories per person daily, with an amount of protein which meets people's needs to a large extent and with twenty grams of animal protein. This production increases slightly faster than the population. It can even be noted that twenty million tons of cereals (less than two per cent of world production) are needed to increase the calories of the most underfed people from 1,500 to 2,000 per person daily, thus making the problem

of hunger disappear. To obtain these twenty million tons of cereals, those people who affect their health by an excessive consumption of animal fats must be prepared to reduce by a few kilos per person annually their consumption of meat which would still be excessive after this reduction. Everybody, the wealthiest as well as the poorest, will then benefit from better health.

But all these considerations regarding a better distribution are not practical. The only way of resolving the world food problem is, in fact, to increase production. I have calculated that, to make sure that the whole population in the world is provided with what I call satisfactory nutrition, the actual food resources should be increased by more than fifty per cent. I believe neither in a massive production of foods which are originally non-agricultural (including sea foods), nor in a significant extension of cultivated land. I have, however, come to the conclusion that it would be possible to increase food production by at least four times and this would allow a population of more than ten billion to have a satisfactory amount of food. With some precautions, this performance could be achieved without hazarding the future at the expense of pollution and destruction of natural resources.

Lastly, I hold today a point of view which I have already expressed several times: there is no obstacle which cannot be overcome technically to getting the agricultural potential of the world started; even the most traditional small scale agriculture can undergo evolution, if necessary means are used (such as extension services, financial assistance, etc.). Certainly progress cannot occur overnight everywhere. But a growth rate of four or five per cent per annum is certainly not impossible to achieve in countries where application of the techniques which are already known would enable the output per unit surface area to increase by twice or even three times.

However, despite these possibilities, the situation does not improve at all. During the development decade between 1960 and 1970, the production of food *per capita* has scarcely changed at all in the countries of the Third World, whether in Africa, Asia or Latin America. And if this is so for the average for an entire continent, it necessarily implies that the food resources per head in many countries have decreased, sometimes to a very large degree. Even if we take into account the unfavourable weather conditions of certain years, the analysis of the course of events ever since 1970 is not encouraging at all. There is no indication of improvement whatsoever. It is not worthwhile to mention again here figures which are already very well known.

Necessary conditions for solving the problem

If the agricultural potential of the world is so badly utilised, there must be some reason. Certain conditions ought to be fulfilled, and they are not. It is these conditions which I am going to mention now. And the conclusion will follow naturally thereafter. I will undoubtedly be blamed for not giving examples in my

exposé. But when what I am saying is applicable to twenty, sixty or hundred countries, why should I mention one rather than the other, why should I point out this one rather than the other one? I will also be told that I just restate things that everyone knows. But this reminder is necessary to justify my conclusion.

No agricultural progress can occur without important investments and consequently without financial and technical help from rich countries to poor countries. Undoubtedly, for a certain period of time, a huge sum of money would have to be spent yearly in order to be able to solve the food problem in the world fast enough. But this sum is relatively insignificant compared to military expenditure which amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars. One wonders if there are grounds these days to hope for a reduction of military expenditure in the world.

For sure, public opinion in rich countries is today aware of the food problem. But not to the extent of being prepared to pay the costs involved to solve this problem. What are the election chances of a political party which included in its programme a high increase of taxes to assist poor countries? Today's reality is rather a reduction in assistance, in terms of percentage of Net National Product. On the other hand, assistance from the rich countries can be accepted by the poor countries only if it is not involved with political pressures. A multilateral aid, granted by an international organisation, is in this case a necessary but unfortunately insufficient condition. But it would be entirely unrealistic to dare to hope that the rich, whoever they are, and the owners of raw materials will be prepared to grant disinterested aid. All the international meetings throw light on the national selfishness and the dependence of poor countries upon the few big powers. And this dependence can lead the poor countries to refuse, because of its origin, technical assistance which could have been useful to them.

Among the kinds of assistance which rich countries grant to the poor, the supply of food products can play an essential role. In the very short run, only this can withstand crisis situations. At the intermediate stage, it may help to achieve necessary investments. But I wonder if we can hope that the conditions will be realised which will make this assistance effective. Do the countries which receive food aid have the necessary equipment to keep the products without waste and to transport them quickly to where they are most needed? Do they have the indispensable administrative organisation so that the assistance can be utilised effectively? For their rich consumers should not derive benefits from low priced sale. The food aid should not restrain the growth of local production and it should not benefit speculators. When we think of the difficulties of distributing aid in the best equipped countries, in terms of both administration and infrastructure, one can imagine how the situation could be in most less favoured countries.

In many countries, it is the system of ownership which constitutes the main obstacle to agricultural development. Certainly, many agrarian reforms have already been realised. But how many of these reforms were successful and without secondary negative effects?

In agriculturally advanced countries, which must increase (or rather which ought to increase) their agricultural production in order to increase their food aid to the

poor countries, it is possible to define the types of agriculture which would limit the risks of pollution and exhaustion of natural resources. In particular, the farmers of these countries ought to give up specialisation and come back to a mixed agricultural system, combining plant and animal production. But who will find the economic incentives which will stimulate the farmers to take into consideration the long term interests against their immediate interests? And who will find the economic incentives to realise economies of energy which are possible in the agribusiness system? Certainly, it is not the ideas which are lacking in this realm. But which countries have been successful in taking effective measures, against the coalition of pressure groups?

The political will

I have already mentioned many conditions. But I have not yet reached the essential one, the condition which involves all the others – and this is the will. This one can produce wonders, provided that it is possessed at the same time by those who help and those who receive assistance. Thanks to this double will, we have seen some countries of the Third World succeed, in a few years, in building modern and effective armies. Would there still be insurmountable obstacles if this same will was applied to agricultural development?

But what does 'want' mean? Is there only one political leader of a country of the Third World who will say that he does not want to solve the food problem in his country? But if one really wants to do something, this means that he has made up his mind to carry out whatever is necessary to have his intentions fulfilled. As far as the food problem is concerned, this implies giving an effective priority to agriculture. There is no hope as long as the leaders of a country remain convinced that the secret of development lies in industrialisation – and more particularly in the creation of heavy industry. In such a context, it is not only regarding the distribution of investments that agriculture is in an unfavourable position. Being considered as an activity of secondary importance for the future of the country, it bears a not too high social status. The consequences of such a situation are more serious than one thinks.

In fact, there cannot be a true agricultural development without progress of the large mass of small and traditional farmers. It is not by just creating a modern sector that the problem can be solved in the long term. To make traditional agriculture undergo progress, the indispensable financial aid must be coupled with a considerable effort. Past experience shows that intensive extension service can achieve wonders, provided that the people involved are numerous, competent and dedicated. The basic extension worker who works directly with the peasants must possess numerous qualities. He does not have the right to make mistakes on the technical plan because any mistake that he makes would lead to a loss of faith in progress which is still fragile on the part of small farmers. Moreover, he must be a good psychologist, else his action might undergo the risk of being entirely

inefficient. How does one find such men who would dedicate themselves to agriculture, if their rewards and social status are much inferior to those of their friends who work in the central administration of the capital of the country? Certainly, a few good souls will be found, but there will never be enough good souls, in any country, to make the big mass of traditional agriculture progress.

I would be told that the declarations concerning the essential role of agriculture are not lacking in the countries of the Third World. But it is not the declarations which are involved. It is the efficient ways of handling matters on the part of those in charge which will show the essential role that agriculture plays in the economic future and independence of the country and which must convince the people involved that agriculture actually bears a high social status. In how many countries is it so, today, in the world? To believe that this place will be yielded to agriculture, in spirit and in the hearts, is to dream, is to believe in Utopia. But I am now going to reach the peak of Utopia: the existence of a world organisation which will be in charge of the resources in the world — an organisation which would be independent of all political pressure and which would have at its disposition all the means to apply its decisions.

In fact, various actions cannot be executed at the level of the countries themselves. Can we allow a country alone to make the decision of carrying out a big operation which involves ecological threats to the world at large? And how does one determine the priorities among large investments, which cannot be fulfilled all at the same time? By what means and where does one start? How does one best distribute the means of production which for some reason exist in insufficient quantities for certain periods of time? Contrary to what some people think, I am not suggesting the creation of a new world organisation, for it would be a 'caricature' of what I consider as desirable. I can only say that in the absence of such an organisation, the world resources will be misused.

If agricultural progress is not fast enough, can we hope to solve the world food problem by a decreased population growth in the poor countries? The fact is that unforeseen changes occur sometimes. Who had foreseen the high drop in birth rate in most wealthy countries? Who consequently is able to foresee what is likely to happen in the poor countries? In 1976, nobody knows for sure what the world population will be at the end of the century, the margin of error is equal to some hundred millions. However, we must not believe that a slow down of the population growth will allow us to solve the world food problem in the next decades. Most of the adults of the year 2000 have already been born. A high decrease in birth rates, towards the end of the century, would change the age pyramids but this would have a limited impact upon the world needs for food, the needs of young children for energy being much lower than those of adults. As regards a very important and very rapid decrease in birth rates, it does not seem possible and is especially not something to wish for. In fact, the rapid transition of a growth rate of three per cent, for instance, to a growth rate of zero, would completely transform the structure of the age pyramid, with unfavourable consequences which would still be very acute after half a century, if not a century. Thus, even

if we wish for a certain slow down of demographic growth in the countries of the Third World, the only way in which the world food problem can be solved is to increase resources of food and hence of agricultural production.

But if the military expenses do not decrease in the world, if the wealthy countries keep on cutting down their assistance to the poor, instead of increasing it, if there is absolutely no hope that food aid will be highly increased and utilised much more efficiently, if a sufficient priority is not granted to agriculture in the poor countries, if the desire of creating modern armies overrides that of improving agriculture, if the utilisation of resources is directed to meet the interests of the powerful and not towards a neutral end, how can we be optimistic? Of course, I am not now talking about the year 2050. I am convinced that, in the long run, humanity will eventually be able to solve the problem prior to a specific disaster. For the next decades alas, nothing allows us to hope for a significant improvement of the food situation in the world. Billions of people will still suffer from malnutrition and hundreds of millions from hunger. I can only wish for one thing, and that is that reality defies these pessimistic outlooks. I wish it will but I dare not hope for it.