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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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Discussion on paper by Teixeira Filho

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In the opening of the discussion the basic message of the main paper was seen as a need for the community of scientists not to devote themselves exclusively to academic research but to pay increasing attention to practical and problem oriented research in developing countries. Mere spelling out of the activities required for the scientist in the farm sector was not enough. Rather, full attention needed to be paid to identifying the financial, technical, personnel and institutional constraints on the performance of agricultural scientists.

A further study area was suggested in addition to those in the main paper. This related to the behaviour of farm entrepreneurs and the situations which surround them. Without a continuous updating of the empirical evidence relating to the human factor, it would be difficult to develop the right type of technology at research stations and also to achieve the dissemination of knowledge about farm innovations. Hence a feedback system is needed that would lead towards the establishment of correct priorities in the research areas. Suitable attention to problems of different ecological areas were seen as best handled by rationalising the geographical dispersal of research institutions. The need for closer coordination among social and physical scientists on the one hand, and on the other, with both those and the extension agencies was stressed. Problems of storage and marketing and the updating of the technical capability of the rurally based human agents who supported farm production processes, also required close attention of policy makers.

The role of economic analysis was stressed in relation to the use of resources for production, consumption and investment for further production. Indian institutions for economic and social research greatly facilitated the planning for agricultural development. National sample surveys of consumer behaviour in both rural and urban areas and the national sample surveys of agricultural holdings carried out by the Indian Statistical Institute, and agro-economic research centres for the evaluation of agricultural development projects, etc., enabled the planning commission to carry out development programmes in India. Such economic analysis involves social value judgements about consumption and investment. A development project might generate large additional consumption by generating additional employment or it might generate more saving and investment by concentrating productive efforts in the hands of larger units of production. For an appropriate evaluation values would need to be assigned to consumption relative to investment.

Factors affecting agricultural production and its growth can broadly be classified

into five categories: (1) technological, (2) environmental, (3) social, (4) institutional, and (5) economic. Within the setting of these factors it would be desirable to carry out an appropriate programme of economic research. The crux would be to identify inhibiting factors and promoting factors in relation to growth of production. Some such factors may be related to psychological incentives and disincentives connected with institutional arrangements. Appropriate socio-economic research might lead to the removal of major disincentives. Studies relating to land tenure and supply response to price are examples. Some factors may be related to the effect of environmental conditions on cost of production. Appropriate surveys could help appropriate allocation of productive resources over a region according to the principles of comparative advantage.

There was also need for studies of the demographic and social conditions of people connected with farming, providing an evaluation of the status of each person in the household economy and his net contribution to the household enterprise; this would help in formulation of household-specific programmes including family size limitations. Other factors which help or hinder production relate to organisational and infrastructural facilities. A careful assessment of structures of such facilities can open up new dimensions of productive enterprise. Economic analysis can also help in indicating appropriate technologies and the appropriate mode of their implementation.

This emphasis on the importance of economic analysis appeared to gain some of its force from a belief that the main paper was perhaps unduly concerned with technical agricultural research. The neglect of welfare problems in the paper caused particular concern. Policies and programmes for agricultural development were seen as requiring the motivation of the objective of maximising agricultural surplus in conformity with a reasonable level of living for the farming community.

There was some question of the relevance of research programmes to the decision maker. How can priorities in designing a research programme be established, for example? The speaker stressed in reply that a centrally guided research programme had to be based on the fact that the objectives of agricultural research were strictly operational. Priorities had to be guided by the state of development of a particular economy. Overall, the discussion demonstrated more areas of agreement than disagreement with the paper.