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1988 World Food Conference: Proceedings.

Edited by John W. Helmuth and Stanley R. Johnson
Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1989, 2 volumes, 589 pages, \$34.95 each volume (hardcover)

Reviewed by Carl C. Mabbs-Zeno

The fourth World Food Conference brought together many of the best known researchers on international agricultural economics to consider the problems of food production and distribution. In contrast to the first two conferences in this series, held in 1974 and 1976, the theme this time reflected a consensus that global food production capacity was more than keeping pace with needs, even while hunger was increasing. In following this theme, most papers placed responsibility for problems in human organization, interpreted as government policy, rather than in resource endowment.

These proceedings are organized into two volumes, one on policy (fewer than 100 pages) and the other on issues. The initial policy statements by eminent political figures in agriculture undergird the emphasis on policy in the subsequent issues papers. The papers are brief, and most are focused and written well enough to stand alone in making a useful point. Together the set of papers provides an encyclopedia of the dominant views on global agriculture, written by some of their principal proponents. Like an encyclopedia, controversy is minimized by moving quickly to new topics, although that tendency is partially offset by publishing reactions from conference participants at the end of each group of 2-5 papers.

Following the diverse discussions by politicians that open the first volume, the issues section ranges from ethical reflections to implications of specific policy reforms to policy recommendations. Enhanced food security is probably the central goal underlying most of the presentations.

Among the common strands woven into many of the papers is the debate over importance of encouraging exports to enhance national economic development. Since all the authors are knowledgeable about the progress of this debate, they are aware that exports are increasingly seen as critical to growth and development. Several cite the World Bank's 1986 *World Development Report* as the document that finally establishes the link between trade and development. The agreement of these authors with the World Bank

may demonstrate where the mainstream lies, but it does not end the debate, and a few papers prepare us for the generation of problems that will follow from widespread application of free trade.

The contribution by M. Peter McPherson, who was administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development during 1981-87 and a deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury at the time of the conference, supports export orientation. Even though his article is more measured than some of his statements elsewhere, it contains signs of his glee at the emerging international policy consensus. Both McPherson and Secretary of Agriculture Clayton Yeutter (the other U.S. Government official represented in this volume and the former U.S. Trade Representative) are confident that the science of economics stands firmly behind their trade liberalization policies. Unfortunately for politicians, economics rarely embraces any policy without reservation.

The conventional alternative to export orientation, self-sufficiency, is treated sympathetically in a paper jointly authored by two officials of the Ministry of Agriculture in Indonesia and an official from Agriculture Canada. They separate different policies directed at self-sufficiency from the goal itself, and find that government investment in agriculture has an enviable record in assisting development. They join the consensus in decrying import restrictions, but laud self-sufficiency as an effective political and economic policy direction for developing nations.

Alex McCalla, chair of the Technical Advisory Committee, Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and a professor at the University of California at Davis, brings a nongovernmental viewpoint to the debate. His view is refreshing in its willingness to accept a complex and conditional answer to a question phrased in global dimensions. His analysis of marginal returns to increasing levels of self-sufficiency relies on the most fundamental economic traditions of seeking a policy balance within the available options. He is conditioned to avoid seeking a free lunch and, instead, shows us what tradeoffs are necessary in each of several types of developing economies.

This collection's summary statements on policy and issues belong in the university classroom. The most interesting papers for most researchers are likely those covering topics outside personal specialties because, with such brief treatment of any particular subject, there is little news for the specialist. By avoiding the most transitory issues, however, the volumes achieve a timelessness that is essential for pro-

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ceedings released well over a year after the conference. For a society geared to news bytes, these proceedings cover international food policy in a familiar format. Even if each paper is actually more than a

byte, the volumes basically offer light, but occasionally provocative, reading, much of which will appeal to agricultural economists from all branches and levels of the profession.

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