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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 papers by Campbell and Klatzmann

I.I. May-Parker

I think that both speakers have looked at the same coin but from opposite sides and have come to almost the same conclusions. Before making a few points which have been insufficiently stressed there are two items I would like to make clear:

1. It is clear from the two major papers that when we are discussing increased food production and population control we are usually referring to the developing economies.
2. Agriculture in these economies should not be looked upon solely as a profession but also as a way of life for the majority of the people.

The variables required for increasing production which I feel have not been adequately stressed include the available techniques and institutions.

Both Campbell and Klatzmann seemed to have assumed that the available techniques for increasing production in developing countries already exist. Klatzmann says 'a growth rate of four to 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.' I do not agree with this. The techniques which are already available are not easily applicable in developing agricultures. The required techniques in most cases have not yet been developed. Often when known techniques have been applied they have failed. Why have farmers not taken up new techniques as fast as we expect? Do we recognise that techniques often call for other inputs which the farmers generally cannot afford and call for new methods of farming which might change the farmers' way of life? In order to increase production as envisaged by most optimists about developing agriculture we need to develop techniques which are suited to the large number of small farmers who make up much of the industry in the developing world.

Both Campbell and Klatzmann mentioned the part which institutions could play in creating grounds for optimism — or pessimism. In most developing economies farmers are still in the subsistence state or are just moving out of it. The institutions available to them do tend to be those which are suited to subsistence agriculture. Further, most of the new institutions that have been developed are replicas of those of the old colonial mother countries and not applicable in the developing countries, or are institutions set up to meet the needs of the mother countries. Any change in agricultural practice to promote food production should also lead to changes in the institutional pattern. I therefore disagree with Campbell when he says 'we should discount the immediate need for, and potential benefits

from, institutional structure that could cater for the small farmers.’

Among institutional variables which are not suited to the developing agriculture are the market delivery system for both inputs and outputs, particularly for food crops. This is very poor or is non-existent in traditional agriculture – farmers hardly purchase any inputs and most of their output is sold at the farmgate.