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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 Mureithi and Otieno and by Essang

O.A. Hakim

Dr Hani Afffi in opening the discussion, doubted the practical ability of the land reforms advocated by the authors as a means of narrowing the gap between food demand and supply and solving the distribution problem and also the recommendation to increase employment by promoting crops (without specifying them) having a high labour requirement. He also wished to know more about the non-agricultural sources that were reported to contribute 40 per cent of rural incomes in 1969. He felt that both papers neglected demographic factors as important elements in the solution of the problem.

Dr Andah drew attention to the uncertainty attaching to the statistical data on food production, stressing the fact that the majority of food crops do not pass through any point where they are recorded. Consequently a check on absolute levels is lacking. He spoke of the place of export crops in the colonial era in African countries, the demand for such crops by the industries of mother countries, and the continuance of the emphasis on export crops after independence because of the compelling need for capital and foreign exchange. The consequent neglect of domestic food needs might, he suggested, be solved by some degree of regional specialisation, which would, at the same time, reduce interregional competition for certain resources. In the course of general discussion the marketing efficiency in Kenya was criticised, together with the marketing policy of the maize marketing board, the latter being seen as contributing to price rigidity to the point that prices failed to reflect the forces of supply and demand. In reply it was argued that, though the board's price policy needed revision, the board's original purpose when established was simply to build a maize reserve against disaster years.

The question of encouragement of small farms and its effect on productivity and on migration attracted extended discussion. It was noted that the ILO report of 1970 indicated higher productivity on large farms. Creating more small farms might then be expected to reduce productivity. Moreover there was a tendency for small farm promotion to have the effect of moving agriculture out of the commercial sector which was, in the long term, imprudent. On the other hand it was held that support for the creation of more small farms really stemmed from its contribution to solving the problem of migration; it was not envisaged that large farms would be abolished.

The speaker's view of both production increase and population reduction as contributing to a solution of the problem brought the comment that the data which had been tabled suggested that family planning could reduce the Kenya population by only 150,000 people. In reply it was argued that family planning could at least

be seen as an insurance against a marked increase in the population.

On a technical point coffee and tea were seen as perhaps the most significant labour intensive crops in Kenya. Was an argument for their promotion tantamount to the authors advocating the neglect of maize in Kenya notwithstanding the shortages which that country had suffered and the place of maize in the diet of the majority of the people?

The comment to the effect that too many African countries concentrated on industrialisation led to a general discussion on this issue. It was argued that, since this was not an unnatural tendency all things considered, it could be usefully channelled into the development of food processing industries. However this development was not without its problems. The local consumer was not accustomed to processed foods and price did not encourage their consumption locally. Relations with mother countries after independence did not encourage import substituting industries. A slightly contrary comment that the deficit on the Nigerian food balance reflected Nigerian demand consequent on high income after the discovery of oil brought the reply that food imports were high even before that point.

Various facets of the subject of migration were explored. Some saw the causal factor as primarily the higher incomes which could be got in the cities compared with the countryside. Others wished to stress either in addition to this, or possibly instead of it, the idea that it was the quality of life as a whole which attracted them. The private land ownership and the after effects of civil war which made movement across tribal lines less attractive were among the restraints on migration.