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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.

EDITED BY
T. DAMS
the late K.E. HUNT
G.J. TYLER

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Discussion on papers by Dandekar, Baharsjah and Kim

W.G. Farmer

The discussion of the three Asian case study papers gave general recognition to the need to establish national balances between population and food supply in association with an appropriate balance between the agricultural and industrial sectors in the underdeveloped situation of these countries where the agricultural, industrial, and population growth rates are interlinked.

A minority were still concerned with the need for the population and food balance to be struck on a national and global basis. For the problem to be solved the national and local interest groups must perceive its nature and, once motivated, they will be in a position to respond to measures being taken to reach a balance. At the same time integrated programmes, first of population control linked with nutrition and health programmes and, second, of raising agricultural production with its impact on both the incomes and production of farmers, will be priority areas in attaining the simple balance between food and population.

The case studies made it apparent that in Asia there are immediate cost implications connected with raising agricultural production. Achieving self sufficiency will be characterised by increasing marginal costs as both the boundaries of cultivation are approached and cultivation is intensified. The state of development of the domestic agricultural industry and the range of innovations still to be taken up, will determine the extent to which achievement of balance can be based upon increased food production. This is directly linked to the nature of the internal balance between agricultural and industrial development, determined by the relative speeds of sectoral development resulting from, *inter alia* the respective choices of technology, inter-sectoral comparisons of wage rates and the income transfers involved. In the establishment of feed prices associated with the balances is, also, the possibility of foreign trade and its potential distorting effects.

In the discussion this was illustrated by the past dependence of the Republic of Korea upon food aid to sustain its industrial development during the mid-1960s and its subsequent trade-off decisions between self sufficiency, in the face of increased marginal costs of raising the domestic food output, and the importation of food-grains. Aid flows and the restriction of Korea's foreign markets had disrupted the pattern of trade based upon comparative advantage and led to a change of emphasis in the economy and of proportional factor use. The resulting agricultural/industrial balance has then directly affected the food/population balance. While it was noted that there is an obvious link between investment in industry for agriculture and increases in production, the impact of this will be delayed in comparison with direct investment in the sector.

The need was underlined to give emphasis to the greater involvement of local people in the execution of production projects, with a view to increasing their effectiveness by taking better account of local factors and by subsequently promoting a multiplier effect from direct government inputs. As part of the complex of issues affecting the raising of agricultural production the importance of institutional reforms was recognised as being a necessary factor in attaining this.

Consideration was also given to the effectiveness of methods of mobilising resources for stimulating food production by way, for example, of raising the yield of a land tax, and thereby redistributing farm income. However, while the connection between growth and social justice was established, it was agreed that policies to extend this should minimise the risk of creating production disincentives.

Policies aimed at raising the productivity of the agricultural sector in conjunction with industrial growth were discussed, covering in particular the development of simple small scale, labour-intensive industries producing simple agricultural equipment. Coupled to a pattern of small farm holdings using this technology there will be a direct influence upon the pattern of demand for consumer goods which will be different from the influence of alternative strategies. Raising the effective levels of production by improvements in harvesting, marketing and storage methods to reduce the incidence of food wastage was also considered. There was some discussion of the possibilities of influencing the growth of population. Consensus was reached on the need to make control measures effective by restructuring the environment of the target group, particularly that of the farmer so that the new social setting would reinforce the programme. Integrated programmes involving population control in which there is mutual reinforcement by the constituent parts are particularly appropriate.

The balance to be achieved between food and population will be found not when their respective rates of increase coincide, but when total food supply equates to the population's total food demands. The achievement of this balance is only one aspect of the problem of under development, and efforts will not be effective if they are directed solely to reaching this balance without regard to the rest of the complex of economic and social development.